Memory

by kosiah

Summary

PREVIEW: 78
Dustil looked like he'd been through a war. Mekel felt like he'd just gotten back from one. "Had one kriff of a nightmare," Mekel told the unconscious man. But Telos didn't even twitch. His skin was mottled and purplish. Shiny with kolto. Waxen, like a burn victim. Memory was vague. Some kind of sick dream where they'd held skeins of power in their hands and burned ships from the sky. Couldn't be real. The Force was gone, now. The galaxy was as flat and blank as it ever was since that asshole Lin had taken Mekel's power away.

Mekel glanced outside again, trying to make sense of the scene at the bonfire. All of the Mandos had their armor on, but not one wore a helm. Most were bald--or nearly so. Milli had her hair shorn to the scalp. Someone else had died, if she'd cut her hair again. Next to her and just as skin-domed was her father, Canderous Ordo. And, as Mekel watched, a group of fricking Jedi walked in front of his view....
Maybe this wasn't Mandalorian heaven after all.
Chapter 1 / Cin Vhetin

The crowd cheered. The Republic Cross of Glory was warm and solid against the fabric of her robe, a just reward for all of Revan’s efforts. Standing by her side, Bastila smiled with exuberance at the crowd’s adulation. They’d done it. The Sith were shattered, the Star Forge destroyed. Revan glanced at Carth out of the corner of her eye and he flushed, ducking his head down and glancing back at her. There was a promise in his eyes, and she grinned back in happy agreement.

*We did it, Flyboy.*

The sun was warm. The sky of the Rakata homeworld was a piercingly pure blue. Even here on the temple steps, she could hear the roar of the ocean, not so very far away. *Sun and sand.* Surely, the Council would let them rest after this—at all that they’d been through.

*Now we live happily ever after,* Revan thought.

It was about damn time.

Master Vandar cleared his throat, hovering at the podium on his repulsor platform. Revan smiled at him too, only a little embarrassed that she’d let her mind wander past their moment of victory.

"Now, we have another tale to weave into the eternal fabric of our order," Master Vandar said. "The tale of Revan, the prodigal knight."

The crowd cheered again. So many shining faces smiling back at her—at all of them. Revan turned her head around to glance back at her companions. Even Canderous was grinning, sandwiched between Juhani and Jolee. Jolee caught her eye and winked. Juhani looked straight ahead, formal and reserved as she always was in public. The droids were polished and shining, and Zaalbar's normally tangled coat was brushed neatly for the occasion. He’d put a blue flower in his bandolier.

"I swore a life debt to you, Polla Revan," the Wookiee growled, his Shyriiwook edging almost to a whimper. "I had no choice."

Revan frowned. Zaalbar was usually more discreet. Why mention that now?

The crowd cheered again, and then Revan forgot. The rest of the day sailed by in a blur of accolades and festivities. They ate cake. There were toasts. Carth held her close and they danced through the white halls, spinning gracefully around the other—lesser—satellites. Words from the crowd around them were mere whispers, murmurs of polite conversation, echoing in the pale stone walls.

*Glory be to the Republic. All hail to Lord Revan, savior of the galaxy.*

XXX

Revan and Mission played a game of pazaak as they so often did in the storage room of the *Ebon Hawk*. Pazaak kept their minds off the hyperspace jump, which made them both sick every time.

"You're cheating," the young Twi'lek said, just like she always did.
"I am not!" Revan laughed and tucked the flipside back into her sleeve.

Mission giggled. "Polla, I taught you everything you know about pazaak, don't tell me you're not cheating!"

So good to hear Mission laugh again. Things at the end had been… a bit grim. Mission was wearing the Baragwin vest they'd bought off Suvam Tan on Yavin Station. Mission always wore that vest. Over the course of their journey, it had stopped everything: from vibroblades to blaster bolts. She'd said it was the first really nice thing she'd ever owned when she'd bought it with the credits they'd scavenged, on their stop at Suvam’s Emporium between Tatooine and Kashyyk.

"Don’t call me Polla." Revan had to keep reminding herself she was Revan. Was it fair she had to remind everyone else too?

"Seems to me if you don't remember being Revan, there's no problem." The Twi'lek shrugged and scrubbed at the front of her vest. There was a ragged and torn place there, where a dual-matrix vibroblade had finally made its mark on the near-impenetrable surface. "You know I can't fix this, right? Armor's busted for good."

"You're lucky to be alive," Revan reminded her.

"Yeah..." the Twi'lek frowned, a little frown, and her lekku twitched, uneasy. Her eyes were wide and guileless—a child's eyes—for all her protestations that she was grown up. "Should've run. Then my vest wouldn't be ruined. You know, I totally just saw that card flip? I really wish you wouldn't cheat.

"I wish you wouldn't—" There was a lump in her throat. Why? Revan rubbed her eyes, setting the cards down on the table. "I'm sorry. I don't feel like playing pazaak now."

"That's ok, I'll just..." Mission fiddled with the front of her vest, unsnapping the carbonite buckles one-by-one, and slipping out of it. Underneath she wore a simple gray jumpsuit. The front of it was stained with blood and worse; darker, where the dual-matrix vibroblade had gone in.

"Does it hurt?" Revan asked. It looked like it hurt. "I'm not much of a healer but one of the others—"

"Not anymore." The Twi'lek cut the cards efficiently and shuffled them again. She looked up again, eyes a little too bright. "It did, though."

"I'm sorry, Mission," Revan said quietly. She put her cards down on the table and walked away.

XxX

Jolee was waiting for her in the navigator's quarters, like always. "Something on your mind?"

She tried not to stare at the charred place, deep in his side. If he could ignore it, so could she.

*We'll be at Yavin soon and then we can heal you,* she promised—but silently, so he couldn't disagree and go off on some story about how some things never healed, and that's why you just had to do your best—your best to die from the consequences of your defeat—instead of what was necessary—or, what you had been told to do because it had to be done—

"Well?" The old padawan looked at her, up and down. "Out with it. Some of us don't have all day."

Revan took a deep breath. "The Jedi say anyone can be redeemed, right? No matter what they've
done?"

Jolee folded his arms, leaning back against the bulkhead. He snorted softly. "Jedi say a lot of things, kid."

"It's what Bastila always told me."

"Bastila might have had an ulterior motive with her redemption speechmaking." His eyebrows raised. "Needed what was locked in you to find the Star Maps, didn’t she? To stop Darth Malak? You know that now."

"I know what she did worked."

Jolee exhaled slowly, with a wince as if the wound in his side still gave him some trouble. Those warm brown eyes scanned her face as if looking for a reaction, eyebrows wrinkling with a heavy sigh like he hadn’t found it. “Sure did. Congratulations.”

As far as praise went, his seemed tepid. “You said Jedi always had another chance,” she reminded him. “When you told me about Nayama—you said she found her peace—"

Jolee shrugged. “Jedi say a lot things. I knew a Jedi once, swore to me that the sky was green. Turned out he was right—the sky was green. On Altair in springtime; but since we were on Kashyyyk that wasn't exactly helpful, knowing about Altair.” He rubbed his chin. "Come to think of it, I'm not sure knowing that would have been that much help, even on Altair. Did it matter that the sky was green, or was the real interesting thing there why the sky was green? Hell, on Kashyyyk, I could barely see the sky. All the trees, you know. You know what's the good thing about trees?" He snapped his fingers. "No sky."

"Jolee, I think I made a mistake."

The old man snorted. "Just the one?"

His insolence grated. “I don't know! I don't remember most of my life.”

“Oh, kid.” Jolee shook his head like she'd disappointed him again. “Some of that Jedi mumbo's not wrong. We all make choices. It's history that figures out which ones went Hutt-shaped and which worked out.” He shrugged. "Hell, maybe history will remember this pile of poodoo as somebody's victory." He chuckled, but the laughter didn't reach his eyes. “You want it to be yours? Congratulations, then, Revan. You won.”

She tried not to stare at his wound. At least the robes covered the worst of the damage. Like hers, they were laced with cortosis, strong enough to repel a glancing blow—but not the assault fueled by the dark side that had nearly cut him in half. "I was tired, Jolee. I was sick being the Jedi's pawn. We had the chance to change everything. Why didn't you understand?"

"Ah." He snorted, mouth twisting into a wry smile that looked a little more real than what had come before. "Maybe I did. Maybe I made my choice, and you made yours."

"I'm... sorry." Words were a weak panacea, but they were all she had.

"It's not me you should apologize to, kiddo. Doesn't really matter to me one way or the other now."

"Juhani?" Of course. The Cathar had been terrified of the dark side after her experience of its strength. She'd run from it, sheltered herself with Jedi meditations and platitudes. "I'll find her next."
Jolee shrugged. "I think you should talk to the others. They're the ones who have to live with this."

"I'm not ready." Besides, surely, they knew. Zaalbar’s life debt left him no choice. Canderous understood the virtue of sacrifice, and Carth—

_Carth said he'd save me._

He’d said more than that, too; but he’d been the one in danger—he’d been the one who needed saving. He'd been the one who came back—

“Revan?” Jolee’s hand was waving in her face. “Polla? Kid?” He snapped his fingers.

“Not Polla,” she said automatically.

“Right.” Jolee stroked his beard, frowning at her. “Don't go off on me again. You know how the dream ends.”

Revan blinked. _Dream? “What?”_

The old man shrugged. "None of us here are getting any younger. It's the ones who'll get older you need to talk to."

XXX

_Malach died, but she didn't want to think about that now._

Afterward, Revan ran through the long corridors of the Star Forge with Bastila at her side. One thing to win the war—quite another to survive it.

_How had they survived? A few red-robed acolytes tried to bow to Bastila— rather laughably ignoring their former master—until Revan's barrages of lightning crisped their ranks and set them alight._

_She held the Dark in her hand. Its fuel sang in her veins, made everything simple._

_Exhilarating. Magnificent._

_Bastila and Revan had slaughtered two entire packs of Sith acolytes, destroyed countless droids, and cut their way through three more squadrons of Malak's elite troopers to get back to the docks where the Ebon Hawk waited. No time for Bastila's battle meditation now—the Republic was throwing everything it had at the Star Forge._

_The Republic forces were suicidal and desperate. And they were winning._

_Alarms chimed warnings: "Hull breach on the Command Deck. Counting down until life support failure. Evacuate all levels. Evacuate all levels."_

_Bastila and Revan ran faster. The halls disappeared in a blur of black and gray duraplate—nothing familiar in them at all._

_Canderous was waiting at the entrance to the docking bay, shouldering his assault cannon and surrounded by a pile of dead Sith. He'd looked at them._

_Revan had nodded._

"It's done?" He didn't smile, but something in his eyes glinted. Acknowledgement of her victory,
"Not quite," Bastila murmured. Malak's apprentice stepped forward. Her fingers moved, and the assault cannon flew out of Canderous's hands. As if pushed, his knees bent. His armor creaked as her Force made him kneel, forcing him to the ground like a capital ship, caught in a gravity well.

Revan laughed, knocking Bastila off balance with a twist of her hand. They were out of time.

I can always find another Star Forge, she remembered thinking. There'd been other thoughts too—tangled ones, mixed with rage and fueled by the Force—but she didn't want to remember those.

And then, there he was. Running up the deck to them.

And then, everything changed—everything and nothing at all.

All hail Lord Revan, savior of the galaxy.

XXX

"Juhani...?" Revan peered into the room off the mechanic's quarters. White walls and empty shelves—the Cathar's few possessions were tucked into a crate on the floor. Juhani lived as simply as she could—ever since Korriban, preferring to spend as much of her time in meditation and contemplation of the Force as possible. Revan had always been torn between a strange mixture of envy and pity for the woman. What was it like, to live a life distilled to its essence? To forsake all attachments? To focus entirely on the purity of being a true Jedi? The Cathar seemed happy enough, but Revan knew that such a life would have driven her insane.

A form moved underneath the thermal blankets on the thin spacer's cot. "Go away," Juhani said flatly, voice muffled by the covers.

"I want to talk." Revan sat down on the edge of the bed cautiously. "I think we should."

A lightly furred arm reached up and pulled the blankets down again as Juhani shifted away from her, as far as the narrow cot would allow. "There's nothing to say. I believed in you. I thought you were stronger than I was."

"They used me!" Revan felt her voice crack. When Juhani had put aside her anger, it had stayed buried deep. But since discovering her life was a lie, Revan struggled constantly to keep hers at bay. "They used me just like they used you on Dantooine with that stupid test! They made you suffer for a stupid test! Are those the actions of a wise Council?"

The Cathar sat up, pulling back the blankets, and Revan recoiled, seeing what the lightsaber had done to her friend's face. Juhani's calm eyes were gone, replaced by a blackened ruin that extended from the top of her head halfway to her nose. One ear dropped raggedly across blasted bone. Another deep cut began at her breastbone and slashed across the front of her chest. She smelled like scorched hair and blood.

"It was only a test, Revan." Her lips pulled back from her small, pointed teeth. "We Jedi Knights were tested to assure we would not fall. Not like those who came before us."

"What they did to me wasn’t a test." I thought Polla Organa had a great destiny, and it turned out I’d just forgotten what a great murderer Darth Revan had been.

"I wish I'd killed you in that grove," the Cathar hissed. "You were weak then, and I could have so easily."
"Don't give into your emotions," Revan began. That was what Juhani always told her when she was afraid. What Bastila always said was important.

*Don't give into your emotions. Even when your dearest friend turns and cuts you down before you can beg her to stop.*

"That's a load of Gamorrean dung, coming from you." The ruined face twisted.

"I did the right thing. I was always going to do the right thing." Revan tried to explain. "I stopped Malak. I destroyed the Forge. You followed me for months, across five worlds. You never questioned anything we did before that. You never tried to stop me—before."

"Oh, I had questions," Juhani's laugh was garbled, as if something was stuck in her throat. "Just not for you."

"But you worshiped me." It was difficult to stare down your friend when the top of her head and her eyes were missing, but Revan did her best. "I was your hero—I could see it in your eyes—the way you watched me—even before either of us knew who I was. Why did you turn on me, when I needed you the most?"

Juhani growled, low in her throat. "It's always been about you, hasn't it? Are you still so blind?"

The Jedi turned away, pulling the covers over her head again. "Leave me in peace. I've earned it."

Revan got up from the bed. "When we land on Yavin Station, we'll find a medical droid to heal your wounds. Things will be better, then."

Faint hissing laughter was the only response, muffled by the blankets. "Stop fooling yourself," the Cathar hissed.

XXX

The galaxy came back by degrees, slipping past the old ghosts whether she willed it or not.

First, just voices in her head. No. Outside her head. Shadows. Zaalbar's grunts and roars; the assassin droid's terse translations; Canderous' graved responses.

"The wroshyr takes all beneath. Its shadow no longer a gift." Zaalbar barked the words like stones, reciting a poem for the dead.

"Translation." HK's transistors made an almost Human sigh. "Oh, woe is me. Were it not for my life debt I would gladly be crushed by a falling tree."

"She'll pull through. Revan's a warrior. Tough. Always was." The Mandalorian sounded calm. "Hey, Fur-sheb, get another crate of those tranks from the back. She's twitching again."

Zaalbar roared again, admitting his regret. Acknowledging his rage.

HK made a sighing noise with its circuits. "Translation: As long as she lives I must follow Lord Revan. Even if I am useless and no sentient meatbag has programmed me to do so."

Zaalbar's barking curse was untranslatable out of Kashyyyk context.

HK's gears whirred. "Implied Threat: The restraining bolt attached to my offensive capacitor does not restrict my ability to affect the ship's temperature and life support systems."

"Enough caterwauling. We're docking soon." the Mandalorian muttered. "Both of you'd better strap
Zaalbar groaned that he had an excellent sense of balance.

"Translation: Hairy Meatbag is more than capable of taking you in a fight, as his species possess superior strength and agility."

"That so?" Canderous sounded amused.

Zaalbar whined a protest.

"Translation—"

"Shut up, machine." A hand enfolded Revan's, warm and calloused as the world began to tilt. Something cool pressed into her shoulder, a faint sting, then release. "Get the rest of the tranks from the back, Fur-sheb. Republic better know what he's doing."

Zaalbar groaned his confidence in Carth.

"If you say so. Whatever it was that you said. I'm gonna give her another shot before we go shopping. Can't risk her waking up again."

Who?

Revan tried to open her eyes, but her head didn't seem to exist.

It felt like her entire body was frozen.

They're drugging me. The thought should have filled her with rage, but whatever was in the hypo just made Revan numb. The Force’s dark wellspring was a faint trickle beneath her frozen hands. A whisper at the back of her skull.

Fools. Drugging me because they're frightened.

Canderous’s voice continued, even as the press of another hypo stung Revan’s arm. "Blast. If Onasi's right, shouldn't she look better by now?"

Zaalbar growled again, his voice low and in pain. "No matter what she is, I must follow. I wish the gods would deliver me from this task."

"Translation: the hairy meatbag swears fealty, but begs for death. Since the Master is incapacitated, perhaps you should assist with disintegration?"

“Shut up, machine.”

The ship’s hull vibrated. Whirr of repulsors settling as the Ebon Hawk's landing gear opened—

XXX

Yavin Station hung like a tiny pearl above the moon-world, Yavin IV.

Revan ran through the vacant, oddly echoing halls of Suvam Tan’s orbital station looking for Mission. The girl loved coming to visit. Suvam was the best (by which Mission meant the richest) pazaak player she had ever known.

Where did she go?
"You're sure this will work?" the Human pilot asked Suvam Tan again. His furry eyes squinted at the metal collar suspiciously, as if Suvam Tan was trying to sell him a pile of bantha dung, instead of the ancient Sith artifact of great power the man claimed to so desperately need.

The Rodian rolled his eyes, exasperation warring with curiosity. He'd been astonished to see the Ebon Hawk's docking codes again. Apparently, the galaxy-wide report of its occupants' deaths had been false.

But Captain Onasi looked terrible. He had the expression on his face that Suvam Tan remembered all too well from first Sith war—the one against Exar Kun. Human eyes were difficult to read—so tiny under their heavy, furry brows; but Suvam thought that Captain Onasi's looked dead. His eyes were the eyes of a man who had lost everything but still kept going—an automaton on auto-pilot.

Because this automaton had once been hers, Suvam tried his best to be reassuring.

"The Sith made these restraining collars during the war to contain Jedi prisoners. You want something to block Force well, yes? Their engineers were very clever, back in their time."

"I hope so," the man muttered. He looked down at the collar in his hand and back up at the Rodian. "What about the rest?"

"The rest of your requests? Yes, I can give you false codes for your ship—and I have a friend in the Exchange who's quite clever with personal identities; but I must know. She's alive, too? Revan?"

The Human didn't answer with words, just looked down at him with those empty eyes again. The way his many-fingered hands tightened on that collar gave Suvam the answer he needed.

Trying not to look too astonished, he bowed his antennae. "I'm sure you're aware of the HoloNet broadcasts. They think she's dead—think all of you are dead. So happy the reports are wrong, but I am curious. Why are you here? Why not Coruscant? They had a memorial service there three standard days ago for the lost crew of the Ebon Hawk. But you're not lost at all! I'm sure your people would be happy to know that! Yes?"

"No. I mean, we have our reasons." The Human slipped the collar into his pocket, voice deepening with authoritative bravado, false as the idchips he'd asked for. "Never mind. Your friend in the Exchange—can they be trusted?"

"He's a personal colleague," Suvam told him, slightly offended. Lord Revan had been traveling under a smuggler's alias, and this man had been her personal pilot! Surely, he must know the rules of professional courtesy.

Carth snorted to himself before Suvam had a fair chance to answer. "So that means—no? Look, you can't tell the guy anything about us. Anything at all. Understand?"

Suvam laughed, swiveling his ear stalks as if that wasn't even more insulting. Humans! "I can throw him off the scent. But I should warn you: the Exchange's leaders were all very interested in the rebirth of Darth Revan and the... opportunities her reign might offer to citizens of free enterprise. Perhaps I could make some introductions?"

Captain Onasi's eyes narrowed. "How did your leaders know that she—she didn't—she's not... Darth. She's not Darth anything." He shook his head violently from side to side, looking quite addled. Perhaps Lord Revan had compelled him to lie.
Inwardly, Suvam cursed. He'd said too much, hit some kind of nerve. "I wouldn't know. I just make things and sell them," he offered weakly, shrugging like a naïf. "I have some of what you need now. My Exchange contact is on Korriban, but I can patch through your specifications for the identities.... It will take merely a few rotations of the moon. While we wait, perhaps the little Twi'lek and I could play cards? I have a nice Baragwin armband I've finished polishing. It will match her vest—if she'd like to see it. And there should be a matching pair of boots somewhere...." He let his voice trail off brightly.

Mission Vao was always fun, almost as much fun as Revan herself in either of her guises. Suvam Tan was looking forward to seeing the Vao child again. Last time she'd won more than her share. They were due a rematch, and he had some new cards for his deck: bought off an Iridin spacer... but the pilot's eyes were glassy and wet now, and his face was frozen in some kind of tragic mask.

"She—she's not—" Humans looked so clumsy when they were sad.

Again, Suvam cursed himself for saying the wrong thing.

"Oh," Suvam tried to sound comforting. War was terrible, even when it was profitable. "I'm so sorry for your loss. How many identities will you need?"

"Three citizens, from the same system—if you can. One Wookiee slave and two refit chips for the droids." Captain Onasi's professionalism seemed to falter, as his voice dipped in a grating cadence that made Suvam's ear stalks buzz. "It's me and Canderous and Zaalbar and... her. That's all. That's all that's left."

"Where is she? I'd like to see her again, Revan was kind to me." Suvam's voice trailed off. He wondered why one such as she would want a Force collar; but it seemed rude to ask.

"She's—Revan is hurt. Injured. You can't see her."

"I have some regenerative implants that might help? No charge. You were all a great help to me with those Mandalorians raiders. I haven't seen them since."

The pilot nodded slowly. "I appreciate that. Her... injuries aren't healing, not like they should." A muscle in his jaw ticced. "How did you know she—how do I know I can trust you?"

*You have already. Humans are foolishly rhetorical.* "She trusted me," Suvam pointed out, remembering her bright smile, the way she'd had about her—so like and yet so unlike that dark-furred Deralian. Strange, that the Dark Lady had assumed such a guise, but it had served her well—had it not? "The last time you came here Revan trusted me enough to tell me who she was. And you've trusted me already. Coming here like this."

The Human nodded, a savage jerk of his head. "We didn't have many options. If you can help her—" His expression was so nakedly torn between loss and hope it made Suvam wince to see it. Humans had such a twisted sense of affection. What a mess they made.

Suvam looked away, made himself busy; rummaging through a box of implants for the ones he needed. "With the kolto shortage, these Ithorian regenos have been quite popular," he said. "I'm sure it's a terrible tragedy for Manaan, but it's been very good for business."

"I'm sorry about that," the Human muttered inexplicably. "I was impatient. I needed to get to Korriban and look for my son. If I hadn't pushed her so hard... maybe... maybe things might have been different on Manaan." That muscle ticced in his jaw again. "Maybe a lot of things would have been different."
Suvam shrugged. It was a well-known fact on most known worlds that Humans were congenitally insane. If Captain Onasi wanted to take the blame for the kolto crises that had paralyzed half the galaxy, why would Suvam Tan argue the point?

XXX

Waking up was like clawing through a nest of eridu fiber into a world of gray shadows. The shadows were dim and strangely flat, as if the world had died when she'd been sleeping. It took Revan some time to make her eyes blink and let her vision to focus on what she finally recognized as the familiar durasteel Ebon Hawk’s ceiling.

A new shadow fell across her face then, and Carth's head appeared out the darkness, looking worriedly down at her: familiar brown eyes, his strong, stubbled jawline, that hair falling in his eyes that she always pushed away.

"Hello, beautiful." His smile was soft with a gentleness she hadn't seen in quite some time.

"Carth," Revan breathed. Her voice rasped. Something cold and heavy pressed down on her neck.

"Polla." His hands pressed hers down when she tried to move them until she made a noise of protest and then he let her go. He bent down, and his lips brushed her forehead. “Polla,” he repeated more firmly, as if daring her to be anyone else.

Revan moved her hands to the cold thing on her neck. Her head felt strangely heavy when she glanced down, automatically taking stock of her injuries. Wearing a bacta suit. Not as effective as the tank, but the only thing they had on the Hawk. They only had the one.

Were Mission and the Jedi already healed? Their injuries had been so much worse than hers.

"Where...?" Her voice trailed off, it was so hard to speak, and she wasn't sure where to begin. Where are we? Where are the others? What happened after the medal ceremony?

Too many questions. Overwhelming. She closed her eyes again.

"Polla." Carth's voice was gentle. "You need to get up now."

That name again. The fake one.

She kept her eyes shut. "There's no Polla, Carth. There never was." Polla Organa never existed. Deralia. My family… frack, my entire life. All a lie made up by Jedi to brainwash the Dark Lord of the Sith.

"Revan." Carth's voice hardened. "You can't sleep anymore. It's time to wake up."

"No." But she cracked one eye open to look up at him again. I'm glad you're not dead, she thought. She'd saved him from… dying.

"Polla." His hand touched her face, the only part of her exposed from the suit. "Revan." He took another breath. “Readings say you're good enough to walk again. Can't stay in a coma forever.”

That stupid lock of hair was falling over his eyes, just like it always did. She reached up a hand to smooth it back with her bacta-suited hand. He looked like he hadn’t shaved in weeks.

The Rakatan homeworld had been a tropical paradise. Carth's skin had been golden there, and he'd laughed as they ran through the sand looking for the hyperdrive. Things were so serious—things
were a catastrophe—but even so, they'd found a chance to sit on the beach, just for a little time, the afternoon before she and the other Jedi had left for the Sith temple.

A little time.

"I love you," she reminded him. "Sun and sand, remember?"

Carth blinked. "I-I me too."

It wasn't his most fervent declaration. Maybe he was just beside himself with worry. Maybe he'd resigned himself to her death.

**When did I get hurt? After the medal ceremony? During the dancing?**

Revan did her best to smile, to remind him. "We said when this is all over, we'd leave it all behind. Remember? Find something else to live for. Something besides the fracked-up war."

"Yes. And it *is* over." Carth twisted his head away from hers, catching her hand that reached for him and pressing it back down. His grip was so strong that she could feel the pressure of it even underneath the webbed layer of the bacta suit. "Do you… what do you remember?"

"You… came and rescued us," Revan said, remembering his face on the Star Forge docking bay. "In the Hawk? No—I—we had the *Hawk*. You came… how did you get there?"

His eyes were a piercing brown, the color of good Derran wheat, (which probably didn't even exist), and his mouth was set in the pinched expression she didn't like—the one he'd had far too often ever since the *Leviathan*. "What do you remember before that?"

Revan closed her eyes. "I saved you—" There was a metal weight on her neck, lumpy underneath the suit. Her muscles ached, and something was wrong with her legs. Or her spine. Something was really wrong—not just with his reaction. Revan reached for the Force only to find a cold and empty place where it should have been.

"Carth? I can't feel my legs." She tried to sit up, but the effort left her gasping and her legs were numb, with only small twinges of pain letting her know that the nerves weren't entirely dead. "I think something's wrong with me. Really wrong. I can't feel the Force!"

Around them, the *Hawk*'s engines purred. They were in hyperdrive, a part of her noted, even as her nerves jangled with useless adrenaline—a futile panic.

"Tell Bastila! Tell her I can't feel the Force! Jolee—Juhani—they have to help me!"

"Bastila," he repeated, drawing back. That frown on his face deepened. "Bastila’s dead, Revan."

"But she—" and then the world came rushing back; the stuff that in dreams had seemed so easy to deny: Revan had rescued Bastila, killed Malak (no need for details, the dead were dead); and then she'd rescued Carth by—she’d rescued Carth from—

"Oh, *Revan*. A darkly familiar chuckle—the one that had haunted her dreams since Korriban. *Her* bondmate’s eyes were luminescent with madness. "Why, that poor sad fool thinks he’s in love with you—"

"No." As if denial could make truth false.

Bastila's face, twisted with hate and fury. A bolt of lightning reaching out from her fingers toward Carth... fingers that had blackened with red fire as Revan's hand blasted her with the power of the Star Forge.

And then Bastila fell. Begged for mercy. Predictable mercy. Revan had none left.

There were lines in Carth's forehead she'd never noticed before, flecks of gray in the stubble along his jaw. He cleared his throat, staring at her. "You killed Bastila last, when she attacked me on the Star Forge. I thought you were going to kill me too, but you just—collapsed. I picked you up. The whole place was coming apart. The Fleet was hitting full out." His voice was hoarse as if he'd been ill. "You—you were so pale... I thought you were already dead."

"But I had already... I obliterated Malak. We won. I didn't need to kill anyone else." I didn't need to kill Bastila. The bond... that must be what knocked me out. Her death broke the bond.

But I was the master. I didn't need to kill her. It was a waste.

And now I'm free. Free of Bastila. Free of Malak. Funny, she'd dreamed of it already, being free from Bastila—but the woman’s death was... it was unfortunate.

Carth sounded tired, defeated. "I told you I'd save you, Revan, I always told you I'd save you. Even from yourself."

"But I saved you." She smiled to try and get that worried look off his face. " Didn't I save you?"

It had been the wrong thing to say, she could tell that instantly. His jaw stiffened and the warmth in those brown eyes iced over. "Sure," he muttered, a little unsteadily. "You... you saved me."

“I—” Rational thoughts were threatening to intrude, bearing with them the weight of everything she’d done. For a moment Revan wondered if she should pretend to be as nuts as that fake Deralian personality had been, back on Taris and the Endar Spire. “So, if I killed... Malak,” she mumbled. “So, the Republic—did they—”

“They won.” Carth’s mouth twitched and he let out a heavy sigh. “We won. Heavy losses, but we—the Republic won. The Sith Fleet—what was left of it—jumped out—those that didn’t surrender. Not just around Lehon. All the fronts in Republic space. We beat them back. Their surrenders say the Sith Empire’s in tatters now. Thanks to us. Without Malak commanding their fleet, they cracked. They’re gone—hopefully, gone for good. It’s on all the vids."

“We achieved the ends necessary, then.” Someone had said that to Revan before. “That’s... good. So, now, we—we’re....” Her mind splintered on the possibilities. None of them seemed like they would include a medal ceremony. More like a court martial, possibly an execution. I could go crazy. That might be the kindest option—for me, at least—but the others—

Carth reached out his hand, unsnapping the seals of the bacta suit that surrounded her. "We'll talk about it later. Right now, you're getting out of this suit. Then, we're going to Kashyyyyk. You remember that place? Lots of trees?” He tried for a comforting grin, but it came out like a rictus on his too-sensitive face.

When he tugged at the suit's legs, the entire thing unpeeled. Revan’s skin prickled in shock at the cold air. Carth glanced down once, and then turned away—but not fast enough for her to miss his grimace of—was it fear? Disgust? Pity?
Revan peered down at herself. Selkath-belly white skin, slick from the healing bacta oil. She was so thin that she could count every rib. She pulled the rest of the suit off herself, trembling a little with the effort, and shivered as the air hit exposed skin. Her fingers caught on the piece of heavy cold metal around her neck. The edges were sunk into her skin as if it had grown there.

"What's this thing on my neck?"

"Something we picked up from Suvam Tan. Heavy-duty neural disruptor. It blocks the Force."

"Why—?" Revan shivered again, remembering how it felt: the whisper and the rush as lightning and red fire leapt from her hands. The thrill of bending a mind beneath hers and feeling it obey; the exultation at making her enemies cower, lost in their own torments.

The pure, clean simplicity of victory, when the Force made you free.

_Free_? A small voice in her mind mocked. _Was that freedom you were giving Mission and Zaalbar when you bent his mind like a twig? When you gave him the order to—_

Her thoughts froze, holding back the rest behind a dam of ice.

Carth got up and turned away, facing the door. "I think you know why."

“Yes,” she nodded. “Good idea.”

"You can't get the collar off," he added, even as her fingers were fumbling to find the catch in the metal. "No one can. Med-droid says you've recovered enough to move around. Get dressed now. We’re all on the bridge when you're ready to talk." He seemed to hesitate. “Me, Canderous, and Zaalbar. You… you know the others aren’t—you know they… they didn’t—”

“Yes. They didn't make it. You told me before.” She nodded again, numbly. Revan sat up, looking down at her skin and her arms. Dark veins ran under the surface like traces of patterns in some long-forgotten tongue.

_Dark side corruption_, a cold voice whispered. _The price isn't so high—not when victory is assured by your strength—_

“Didn't… make it,” he echoed. “Yeah. I-I’ve had to tell you a few times. You kept… you kept waking up before. Screaming.”

“I’m sorry,” she offered. _The Dark is madness. Maybe I don’t have to pretend to be nuts. Maybe I am. Still._ Her hand went to the collar on her neck again, tugging at it. She hated the way it felt, like the edges we're burning her skin.

"I love you, Revan," her pilot muttered, staring at the door lock. He palmed it and the door opened. "I don't know what happened out there. One minute you were… you were fine."

_No, Flyboy. I hadn't been fine for a long time._ “I'm sorry,” she offered. “But we won. I stopped Malak.”

“Yeah.” He turned back toward her. “We won.” Muscles in his jaw worked. “I love you, but I'll stop you, if I have to. You… you need to know that.”

"I could stop you," she snapped back. _You're a fool to tell me your plans._

"Maybe. But you won't." The door slid shut behind him, leaving her alone.
There were no mirrors in the room, but a ship is made of metal, and Revan found a surface polished enough to hold a reflection.

She sat there for a long time staring at hers in the watery glow of the medical sensor's container module. Skin so white it looked gray, and yellow eyes that burned sadly out of a face mottled with the ravages of the dark side. The face that drove armies, the face under the mask. Staring at her face was like something from a dream, a dream she'd had with everything around it scrubbed away —

Her old face, back again like a bad ghost.

Her eyes had been green when Carth first admired them on Taris, but they weren't now—they were yellow as suns. Someone had lopped off her topknot and her hair grew in, uneven and matted. Grew in red, not black.

*I dyed it, every time the roots grew in I dyed it and I never thought about why.*

Eventually, Revan toddled over to the neatly folded clothes in a pile on the examination bench and pulled them on. Her old clothes from when she'd been a smuggler named Polla Organa were stacked rather prominently on top: the white jumpsuit, one of the vests—the red one, with the pockets she'd kept filled with mines, grenades—

Nothing in the pockets now. They'd left a Jedi robe for her too—stacked beneath her smuggler’s clothing like some kind of test—but she ignored that.

There were no weapons and no armor.

The door slid open under Revan’s shaking fingers and she made her way to the bridge. A few times she fell down on legs that barely seemed like legs anymore at all, but no one came to help her.

*Why would they? Dark Lords of the Sith should be able to handle themselves.*

Revan gritted her teeth and stumbled slowly down the hall. The world was muted and wrong without the Force. Gray and slow.

“Hello,” she said from the doorway of the cockpit. With all three of them—four—she noted, registering HK—and the Tee plugged into the comm board—the space was crowded, smelling like recycled air and Wookiee.

"Master?" HK's mechanical voice sounded almost concerned as he watched her from the weapons console on the side of the bridge. From the communications seat, Zaalbar grunted a terse acknowledgment and Canderous smiled at her, leaning against the wall. Revan thought she saw a true welcome in the mercenary’s smile, but even he didn't meet her eyes for long.

Revan leaned against the doorframe, hating her weakness. "I—need to sit down."

Hyperspace splashed across the cockpit window, the dizzying twist of stars making her as nauseous as it always did.

Carth was piloting—and didn't even glance back at her approach.

“I need to sit down,” she repeated.

“Did you want one of us to carry a chair to you, Lord Revan?” The smile on Canderous's face didn't shift, but the tone in his voice made her reconsider his welcome.
“No,” she muttered, staggering over to them.

It was Zaalbar who got up from his bench and helped her sit, steadying her shoulders with his great furry paws. The strength of them was enough to crush bones and tear limbs, but he was gentle and helped her to the bench to sit beside him.

"You should have killed me," she whispered to him in Shyriiwook, throat aching with the effort. "Why didn't you?"

"Warning: the Master is talking about ending her own life, as the composite suggested." HK's triangular head swiveled towards her, red eyes glinting. They'd managed to get a restraining bolt on him, and he'd been disarmed, but his voice dripped with the same malice it always had. "Recommendation: Allow her to continue her conquest of the galaxy, for her own health."

"Shut the hell up," she snapped.

The red eyes flashed once, but her droid complied. Beside him, T3 beeped a welcome, even-toned and dispassionate.

"I could not kill you, Polla Organa. My life debt would not allow it." Zaalbar looked at the floor mournfully.

"I made you do it," she whispered in Basic. His eyes were all one shade of brown, darker than his fur. It was hard to meet them, but his fur was warm against her side. "Mission was like a daughter to you."

"Enough." The Mandalorian's voice was cold. "Your Republic won—that was the objective—and it's done. S'cuy gar."

"S’cuy," Revan echoed. *We're still alive.* "That doesn't explain why you let me live," she repeated, this time to all of them.

"We have our own reasons," Canderous said. "As of now, they coincide. I swore I'd follow you into battle. The Wookiee has a life debt. Droids are programmed. And you know Republic—he's just soft."

"Frack off, Ordo." Carth's words had the lightness of ones that had been repeated before.

"Why, Carth?" Revan's eyes blurred. "Why did you come back for me?"

His back was straight facing away from her, the perfect soldier. "I saved the galaxy," he said, still not looking up from his controls. "Bastila's battle meditation will never be used against the Republic, the Star Forge is destroyed, and you're not Darth Revan. I won't ever let you be Darth Revan again."

"Are we going to Coruscant then? After Kashyyyk? I should go before the Senate and atone for my crimes." Even as she said the words—the right words—she realized she didn't mean them.

Realized she'd rather die.

*Or run.*

"Objection: Once you are restored, the pilot will take us to the Outer Rim. The Mandalorian has assured us that there are several planets capable of supporting organic life, where even sentients of our repute can disappear quite effectively. The meatbags argue about many of the details, Master;
but on a few points, they find accord. Preservation of your life and avoidance of the Republic are our primary objectives." The droid paused as if it was thinking. "Astonished Conclusion: For once, their assessments concur with my own. At least until your scrawny carapace restores itself."

"They think we're dead," Zaalbar growled. "We are heroes, but they also think we're dead. They must continue to think this."

Revan frowned. "Why?" Her temples hurt.

"I want them to remember you as a hero," Carth said quietly. "You deserve that… not—"

Revan could see the other options quite clearly in his expression: not being court-martialed, not spending the rest of your life in a stasis tank, or all of us lined up for some public fracking execution—

Did the Republic execute its prisoners? Would she be a Republic prisoner or a Jedi one?

The memories of a Deralian smuggler weren't much help. Polla Organa had never given the matter more thought than an imaginary boyfriend in a Corellian brig—just another fake memory that never happened.

Why would she? She's not real.

The ship was on autopilot now, she could tell by the hum of the turbines shifting with a precision that no pilot could match; but still Carth Onasi stared at those controls as if they were maneuvering through a nest of Sith fighters, Exchange booby traps, and asteroids all at once.

"Carth?" Revan cleared her throat.

"I'm flying the ship," he lied.

There was a silence, long enough to raise a sithspawned Rakata army, before Carth Onasi spoke again, still stubbornly refusing to glance in her direction.

"Damnit, the Republic owes you, Revan. And Bastila. You killed Malak, the disruptor shield went down, the Star Forge was destroyed." She couldn't see his face, but she recognized that hardness in his voice. My duracrete pilot. Nothing between you and the target. "We accomplished the objective. It… it doesn’t matter if we're traitors."

"You're not a traitor, Captain Onasi." He never could be. His love for the Republic was as much a part of him as the hollow at the base of his spine. That stupid jacket he wore too often, the one with the sleeve stitched back on.

Carth laughed. "Trust me—I don't like what the Council did to you either. I just wish… the others… if I hadn't run I know I could’ve convinced Mission to stay quiet." His head dropped, and he pretended to do something to the hyperspace calibrators, even though Revan could hear them, ticking as evenly as time. "I could have saved Mission. I should have."

The dark inevitability Revan had felt that day—and the strength that had fueled her victory—were gone with the Force. Now, she only felt sick.


Her mind froze on the motive—again retreating back to that foolish dream. All hail Lord Revan,
Even the slant of Carth's shoulders was an accusation.

Revan stared at them and didn't blink. "I dreamed about them. I dreamed about them a lot."

"We got that," Canderous leaned back in his chair. "You talk in your sleep."

"You cried." Carth cleared his throat. "Y-you cried in your sleep. You were… it wasn't you who did this. It was the Force. The dark side. Something evil. Things… happen in war. I know." He still wouldn't turn around. "I know," he repeated.

"Carth—" Revan began again.

Chimes and a beeping noise sounded from the commlinks.

Zaalbar pushed her gently to the side, as his hands swept over the keys.

"Tee's picking up inquiries from the Doshan orbital," he growled. "The Republic patrol stationed there wants to know our destination. This sector has been closed to casual travel since my people threw out those murdering Czerka slavers."

As quickly as the Wookiee spoke, HK translated. Carth had picked up a remarkable amount of Shyriiwook, but Canderous only knew a few words.

"This is it," Carth leaned over the nav-board. "Let's hope Suvam wasn't lying about those codes."

"Codes?" Revan echoed. "What codes?" She felt so useless. "Turn me in. I'll tell them you captured me alive. There's a way out for you."

"No." Carth was tapping at the keyboard rapidly, but then he glanced back, frowning.

"They want visual confirmation. Damn… Zaalbar?"

"I'll do it," the Wookiee growled. He leaned forward, so his face encompassed the entire viewscreen. Almost immediately he began barking a story to someone on the other end. Elaborate—and half of it seemed to rhyme. Listening made Revan's head spin.

"He's posing as a former slave named Dreeewwoowr that we're returning to his homeworld," Carth explained, as the roaring subsided and the commlink blinked shut. "We already got permission from Freyyrr to land there, but the Republic is being stodgy about access to the system. Kashyyyk is a protected world now. Closed to outsiders."

"Protected thanks to you, Polla Revan," Zaalbar murmured, his chin brushing the top of her head. "Even with pain, I do not forget."

She squeezed his arm in response. Basic was inadequate. "If Zaal's a former slave, who are we supposed to be? Noble citizens of the galaxy?"

Carth finally looked at her, a ghost of a smile on his face. "Right. You're Numu Ran, an aristo lady from Alderaan, and I'm Jadro Hin, your loyal protector. Canderous is our hired muscle, a Mandalorian named Emilio Irod. He has quite a reputation in the Core, but since he's reformed he's been fighting the slavers."

"For the right price," Canderous interjected.
"Of course." Despite the gravity—despite everything—Revan snorted. "I'm exactly like a noble lady from Alderaan. Except for the hair. And the accent. And the infamy."

Carth shrugged. "It was the best Suvam Tan could do at short notice. HK needs to keep out of sight, and Tee's been hardwired into the Hawk's console to keep tabs on the false registration programs we're broadcasting. Tee’s watching the net to see if anyone starts looking for our real selves. So far, everyone in the galaxy seems to think we're dead." He grimaced. "Hope it stays that way."

You trusted Suvam? You went to that Exchange rat? Something about that nagged at her, but now there was no time. "Some of the Jedi might know I'm not dead. From the Force. They did before, remember?"

Canderous snorted. "Blast your Force. There's a memorial statue being built of you and Bastila on the ruins of Dantooine. Master Vrook has been on broadcasts across the Core giving speeches about your case proving the purpose of the Jedi Order. Believe me, if they know you're alive—they'll never admit it. All those high and mighty Jedi, being wrong? You'd be an embarrassment."

"How long has it been?" Revan glanced down at the comm-link, but the date flashing there made no sense to her—it was written in CoruStan, and she'd lost track of time even before they crashed on the Rakatan planet.

"More than a month," Carth said. "Since we—since you killed Malak."

Malak. "And they made a... a statue of—us?" Revan's lips twisted. Then she frowned again, as the full translation of her new name hit home. "I'm called Numu? Bantha fodder, wasn't 'Polla Organa' bad enough?"

"Suvam Tan has a funny sense of humor. You'd know what Numu means on Alderaan wouldn't you?" Carth's mouth curved up a little.

"Numu means... Dark Lady. My parents took me to Alderaan once. I was—" her voice faltered. I was ten and we saw Uncle Boon and he gave me a doll and I-I was too old and Ma said not to be rude—" I still don't always know which memories are mine and which are the ones they implanted."

Carth shifted uncomfortably. "We've been trying to check on Revan's... your background. Most of the specifics from the wars are offline or classified, but we're trying to find out more."

"I just—I would like to know something about myself. Someday." Revan closed her eyes. "Turn me in and perhaps they'll tell us before they execute me or mindwipe me again. Isn't that safer for you?"

"We went through all of this when you slept," Canderous picked up a glass of something next to his console and took a swig. "I'm not gonna insult your intelligence. The three of us considered dumping you out of an airlock instead of waking you up."

Carth turned in his chair. From the sudden fury on his face, Revan suspected she wasn't supposed to hear about that.

"Of course you did." So why not? You still haven't explained why not—

"But we've earned our chance at a better life," the Mandalorian continued. "All of us—including you. We're taking it. Cin vhetin—clean like snow."
"Cin vhetin. A new day," Carth echoed the Mandalorian phrase. “For all of us, beautiful.” He turned to look—finally meeting her gaze.

His eyes were still the color of Deralian wheat—even if it didn't exist.

Deralia did. Revan had checked on that after they escaped the *Leviathan*. Farming planet. Maybe the wheat was real too, even if her memories were fake.

*My name is Polla Organa. I'm a registered smuggler from Deralia. I always knew I had a great destiny, and that I'd meet a handsome pilot somewhere along the way—*

A pathetically simple story. Sketch of a fool’s life, to net a Dark Lord of the Sith, trap a fallen Jedi by making her a common criminal—

*Hey! Registered smuggling’s not a crime! How many times had she said that to Carth? Lies upon lies. One of the Jedi who programmed me must’ve had a sick sense of humor. Smuggling’s not a crime, but taking over the galaxy?*

*I’d say that counts.*

"Don't be foolish, Polla Revan." Zaalbar's tone was the most sincere of the three. "We are deep-root grown, we four. Joy and pain."

"Helpful Suggestion: Master, I would assist in your quest for retribution if you could convince them to remove my restraining bolt."

Revan frowned. “How did they restrain you?”

"Response: They did not, could not do such a thing, Master. It was you who imposed these restrictions on me, shortly before docking on the Star Forge."

"Oh.” The rest of the memory asserted itself in images—even through the cold rage that had fueled her was gone. “I-I was afraid you'd kill Zaalbar while we dealt with Malak."

*Zaalbar was so close to breaking—breaking uselessly and I had already lost so many. Bastila said I was mawkishly sentimental.*

She reached for Zaalbar’s arm, and a moment later, almost hesitantly, the Wookiee put it around her shoulders.

Canderous drained his glass. "Whatever that shabuir Malak did to Bastila, he made her as dini’la as he was. Even you showed more sense! What kind of strategy did he have, wasting forces once we'd landed in his factory? Even *Darth Revan* couldn't have lived through a simple depressurization. And Bastila…” he shook his head. “When you were reprogramming HK, she asked me what she could do to make me follow her instead of you? Dark side made her stupid—and crazy. She’d have stabbed you in the back, first chance she got."

Revan winced, even if the words were true. “That… monster tortured her—he broke her. I-I should have stopped him on the *Leviathan*— I could have, if—”

“You tried.” Carth stood up and came over to her. His hand brushed her shoulder cautiously, and Zaalbar took his leave, heading for the pilot’s chair Carth had just vacated. “You and Bastila both did your best. The Jedi… they put you in an impossible situation.”

Revan closed her eyes. "My best. I destroyed the kolto on Manaan. I caused a civil war on
Kashyyyk. I killed our friends. I betrayed everyone."

I betrayed your Republic. How can you take my side, Carth?

"You saved my people from the Czerka," Zaalbar growled, glancing back. "Even if there was no life debt already between us, I would have sworn one to you again for that."

"Czerka." She tried to laugh. "Great. At least we got rid of them, right?"

“It wasn't you,” Carth said stubbornly. “The dark side took over. Like... like you were possessed. Bastila warned us it could happen to both of you... and it did. It wasn't you.” He stared down at her, expression as obstinate as a hessi in a mud-pond. “It wasn’t you."

Revan met his gaze. “You think it was the Force that did this?” She tried to keep her voice even, to curb the rising anger that threatened to swamp a more appropriate response. “You think cutting me off from the Force will cure me?”

Carth's jaw set. Revan saw his fingers twitch, his eyes dart toward the transparisteel viewport, and she knew that Carth wanted more than anything to just get up and go land the ship—and that he had no answers at all.

“I think this gives us time,” he muttered finally, staring at her. “Time to figure it out.” His mouth twitched like he was trying to smile. “Flying on the seat of our collective asses. Remember, beautiful?”

“That got us through Taris and Tatooine,” Revan said. “Kashyyyk. Didn't work so well after that.”

“Well, we're back on Kashyyyk.” His voice gentled. “Let's... let's try.”

"We're cleared for landing." The Wookiee interrupted, still tapping at the keys of the console. "As Mission would have said, they bought our story. Hook, line and tractor beam."

Revan nodded, not trusting her voice.

Carth put a cautious hand around her back. He smelled like spice and space oil, as comforting and familiar as Zaal. In the background, HK was translating Zaalbar's words for Canderous.

Carth’s other hand tightened on her arm and Revan lifted her chin, meeting his eyes.

"You saved my son and Yuthura Ban on Korriban," her lover said quietly, his eyes scanning her face. "And all those other kids. You did that even after you knew the truth about being Revan. You found Griff—worthless wretch that he is. You brought water to the Sand People on Tatooine and reconciled Bastila with her mother. On Taris, you gave that doc that rakghoul serum. And on Manaan, you saved those Selkath kids from the Sith. On Dantooine, you brought peace between two warring families." Lightly his finger traced her eyebrow. "You're still the woman I fell in love with."

Revan closed her eyes. Her hand went to the collar on her neck. Around it, her skin pulsed in protest and the weight of it burned.

XXX

Zaalbar was a fair pilot, skilled enough to navigate Kashyyyk's atmosphere and land them on his homeworld.
As the *Hawk* tilted groundside, Carth took Revan back to their cabin, setting her down gently on the bed, as if she was made of ferracrystal.

The small bunk looked strangely mundane—just the way she'd left it. Datapads lay scattered on the desk, a few scraps of plastifix still attached to the wall where a portrait of a woman’s imaginary family had once hung, a cracked lightsaber crystal lay on the nightstand. Carth’s faded orange jacket was slung over the only chair.

Their doubled reflection mocked her from the polished mirror by the sink: Carth’s handsome face taut with strain, her own yellowed eyes set in bruised shadows, her skin marked everywhere with the corruption of the Dark.

"Why do I still look like this?" she asked him. “I look like a Sith."

"We don't know. It's a little better than it was. Your hair’s coming in again. Coming in red. I ever tell you—I like redheads?" Carth's hand tightened on hers, as he stared steadily ahead, eyes meeting hers in the mirror. "I don't care what you look like, Polla."

*Not Polla—Revan.* But she didn't correct him.

"With the Force gone, I’m blind. I can't sense anything.” Her gut lurched as they banked into the landing.

Carth’s smile was a shadow of his careless pilot's grin—but it was steady and brave. "Welcome to the land of us mortals. Most of us get by just fine without the use of the Force. The Force didn't stop Calo Nord, did it? We used plasma grenades for that. Plasma and adhesive, nothing better in a tough fight." He nudged her, lightly. "Remember? I taught you that, soldier."

Revan forced herself to match his laugh. *Soldier.* He hadn't called her that since she'd cut her way past him on their stampede through the Vulkar base. "I used thermal detonators on Malak. And without the verpine shields, I'd have been dead a dozen times over."

"There's my Poll—there’s my Freckles." His lips brushed her hair, and his arms wrapped around, still staring at her in that mirror, a smile on his face now—sad, but real. “You did it, you know. You brought that kriffing bastard down.”

_That kriffing bastard._ Revan frowned. “Malak, you mean. I killed Malak. My old apprentice. Who was trying to kill me.”

"I-I know… it's okay." Carth hesitated. The expression on his face was painfully like it had been after Saul's death and Bastila's abduction, but even as she watched, his eyes locked with hers. “Did you… do you remember more about Malak?”

_Nothing, except what he said, there at the end._

"He was—important. He was my apprentice when we became Sith. We were Jedi together before. War heroes. Friends. Maybe more than friends. That's what the story says, isn't it?"

_He asked me to save him._

"Shhh," Carth's hand traced the back of her palm, running a finger down the web of dark lines that ran just beneath the skin. "We all have our pasts." His voice changed, just a little. Uncertainty in it now. "Were you… did you want to take him back?"

Revan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her body was so tired now, tired and weak as a two-
day-old gizka. "I don't know," she said honestly. She owed Carth Onasi that much. "I knew if he lived, he'd try and kill me again." Inevitable. "Leaving both him and Bastila both alive would have been like… harboring a nest of kinrath. Master and apprentice—they could have ended me if they worked together. And… I needed her more." *To win.*

**Win what?**

*I don’t know. I just needed her to win. To make it all new. To stop monsters, to stop from becoming a monster. Maybe all of this banthacrap just sounds better than the truth: I wasn’t thinking at all. I just had to kill him.*

"You go away from me when you talk like that." Carth pulled his hand away.

"I don't know myself." Like a bad dream. "I wonder if the old Revan ever did."

"What were your plans for the Sith?"

Revan opened her eyes again and looked at him. "I didn’t have plans. I just had to stop Malak." She frowned. "Jolee was smart, I always thought. He always said the Force was a… tool. A means to an end more than it was about good or evil."

*Always said that up until the end. In the end, he picked a side, and I killed him for it.*

"But why?" Carth repeated. He scanned her face as if he was desperate to find something familiar in it. "You're still you. I don't understand. How could—you were fine before you went into that temple. But when you came out—"

*No. I wasn't fine, even before the temple. I wasn't fine for a long time, Carth. Maybe never. How could I be fine, if I'm not even real?*

"I don't know." *I just had to kill Malak.* Revan took a deep breath. "I hated Malak. I-I hated the Jedi. What they did to me wasn't redemption. It was murder."

*The murder of a murderer. But when you're murdering a murderer to save the galaxy, aren't you doing the right thing?* Her thought felt like a question she'd asked before, like a place she'd been.

*You saw what Darth Revan did. All those kids on Korriban, the suffering on Taris. Manaan. Those fools in the Rakatan temple—you saw what she did!*

*What I did.*

*The Jedi did what was necessary to stop me—*

*They did it badly, a cold voice whispered in her mind. Incompetent fools. Children playing with permacrete—*

"I know." Carth sounded like he was trying. "Something I learned with Saul. You don't always get the chance to forgive your enemies; sometimes you need to just walk away. Call it a draw. Go live your life." His eyes searched hers. "I'd like us to have that chance."

*But you killed Saul. You got what you wanted. Are you talking about not getting to kill me? Are you humoring me before the next betrayal?*

Her muscles tensed, but because he expected it, Revan smiled back at him. "You want us to go live a life?"
"Would that be so bad?" He seemed serious.

"No." It would be wonderful. It was also impossible. That didn't stop Revan from wishing otherwise. "Thanks for the chance."

The soft mouth of his twitched, like she’d made him nervous again. "I said I'd save you, didn't I?"

But I saved you. I'm the one who saved you. Bastila was going to kill you. "Thank you," Revan said out loud. "Thank you for saving me, Carth."

He put his hand back on hers, squeezing her fingers. His eyes were direct, brows leveled like suddenly her face was the only thing in his targeting reticule. "Least I could do," Carth took a breath and let it out slowly, tension easing from his shoulders. "We have another shot. Let's make the most of it. Cin vhetin, like Canderous said. From here on out it’s a new day."

Cin vhetin. White snow, the voice in her head whispered. Everything before Clan no longer exists. A key phrase used in the Mando’ade adoption ceremony. Nhi solus tome. Nhi cin vhetin. Then, the response. Ni kyr'tayl gai sa'ad

“Revan?” Carth cleared his throat. His hands tightened on hers. “Polla? You okay?”

Can't quite see you as a Mandalorian, my love. But because Carth expected it, Revan nodded back at his Derra-wheat eyes and squeezed his hands back. “Elek. Cin vhetin, cyare.” Yes. A new page, beloved.

“Shah-ray,” he echoed her last word softly. “Right back at you.”

A/N 12/18 Much as I love them for sentimental reasons, I’m taking down the original author’s notes for the chapters. I think they might distract. Except this one. I’ve finally got this beast in four Word documents, so will attempt to do some major grammatical, spelling, and word tightening edits….

Yes, also another chapter is in the works. More than one…

A/N December 2016

Star Wars canon is a series of retcons and shaggy dog tales-and so is this sprawling, epic fanfiction.

I always avoided any kind of introduction to Memory because I liked giving the first chapter the chance to speak for itself. You're not supposed to know what kind of fiction it is: who is the OTP, whether anyone will die, or even who is still alive. If you've read this far, I will admit what you may or probably (depending on your level of Kotor fanaticism) have already realized: this fiction is based on the cut and unreleased female dark side ending to the game... with the obvious alternate universe twist that everyone does not explode with the Star Forge.

What if Carth saves Revan? What happens next? And what about those fake memories of hers? What about her real past? The tale began that simply: with the desire to answer those questions. When I started writing this ages ago, I was influenced by the game and other fictions; but Kotor2 wasn't released, there was no Wookieepedia, and information on Mandalorian culture was almost non-existent. Over the years, that changed considerably, but I have been happily surprised by how much of the new canon fits. As long as you're okay with female Revan. And if you're not, this is not the fiction you are looking for.
Because Star Wars itself is a world of retcons and shaggy dog stories, as time passed, it was fairly easy to incorporate the canon I wanted, explain the canon I had never quite bought into, and come up with a narrative and characters that I, at least, have become rather fond of.

However, if you've read this far, I encourage you to keep going. And I'd love to hear what you think, or even just that you're reading. This fiction would not exist without the early and recent encouragement of ether-fanfic; and several other Kotor writers and fans, most of which can be found in my favorites list. Thanks, all of you: friends, Sith Lords, and Wookiees alike. It has been a long decade-and-some, but I'm happy I found you, each and every one.
"You know that you’re dead, right?" Revan asked Jolee.

The old man had been raking his garden for what seemed like hours. Seemed was the operative word. Revan had learned that her dreams these days were liars. Time itself warped and shifted while she slept. She might have closed her eyes for five minutes—or an entire day. Within the dream, there was no way to tell.

"Yes, but you're the one who fell asleep in the grass again." Looking extremely alive, the old man bent over some plants in his garden, humming an old song under his breath. "If you have a rash when you wake up, don't say I didn't warn you."

In this dream, Revan was wearing padawan robes like the ones they'd given her on Dantooine. She raised her hand and felt that unfamiliar stiffness again: a mass of hair coiled in braids, pulled too tight against her scalp.

Revan tugged one braid free and began separating the strands. She'd done this before: unraveling her dream self's intricate nest of braids to pass the time until she woke up again.

"I'll be fine," she told him.

The old man chuckled. "You sure? Ordo set mines and a repulsor field to guard the camp perimeter, but those don't keep out stuff smaller than a tach. Plenty of kessla beetles and jrrysh snakes around these parts to sting all that speckled flesh of yours."

Hells. He was probably right. Revan tried to open her eyes and failed. This had happened before too. The dreams held her tighter than Carth’s arms when she kept slipping on the wroshyr-carved stairs.

"Why am I dreaming about your gardening?" It had been six weeks Standard since they'd landed on the Wookiee homeworld. Revan had long since written these dreams off as Force-fueled nightmares. At least this one seemed relatively benign compared to—to some of the others. At least it's not the white room, or the Star Forge again—or Juhani in the grove on Dantooine—

"Beats me, kid." Jolee shrugged. "Guilty conscience? I have to get the kell-peas staked before the rains come." He pulled a stake from the ground and waggled it in her direction. "Could help, you know."

But it's not real. Nonetheless, Revan stood up and took the stick he'd offered. "I don't know anything about farming."

Jolee snorted. "That so?"

"Are you saying that I'm going to keep dreaming about you?" Revan pushed the stick into the ground again next to the others already laid in a line, and Jolee bent down, picking up one of the vines trailing across the forest floor, and began wrapping it between two of the stakes.

"Long as you're here, guess we’re here together." Jolee got up from the ground, brushing off the
dirt from his knees. "Garden's really gone to hell since I left. When you wake up, do some real weeding, why doncha? Think I left my gloves in the crate under the cot—if the tach didn't get them. Those damn things are worse than cannock."

"Okay." Despite herself, Revan laughed. "Am I really having a dream about weeding?"

Jolee shrugged. "If you don't like it, wake up. Come to think of it, maybe you should do that anyway. Considering how little you're wearing, I wouldn't be surprised if you get bit in some unmentionable places. Might be painful. Nasty rash might scare that pilot. And I'm not around to heal."

Even in the dream, her skin itched. Jolee—or her subconscious—wasn't wrong. Sleeping outside in the Shadowlands wasn't wise. As for the pilot—

*Earth's already terrified.* She'd seen it on his face. Fear of her—and for her. They shared a bed and a hut in the Shadowlands, but little else, these days.

"Are you real, Jolee?"

"Depends on what you mean." Jolee returned to his gardening. "Remember that test the old coot gave you in the tomb? What did he say at the end?"

"True Sith never die. I suppose the Order have some similar myth?"

"You saw Ajunta Pall for yourself, kid."

"He vanished in a glow of light." Revan tied off the vine she'd taken to plant and bent down to pick up another stake. In the dream, her bones didn't ache. "After thanking me for saving him. Remember?"

"I remember." Jolee pulled out a pair of clippers from a pocket in his coverall and started clipping the branches from his vine, stripping the leaves until only the heart of the stem remained. "Want me to go away? Thank you for saving me?"

"No," Revan muttered. Her attempt at levity faded. When he died, Jolee hadn't vanished in a pillar of light—he'd just fallen—like any other corpse. One of a hundred she'd killed that morning. "I miss you."

"Ach!" That noise he made in the back of his throat used to drive her nuts on the *Hawk*. Now it made Revan's eyes prickle with an entirely useless emotion. "Fine. Here." Jolee tossed something back to her—not peas at all—but a fibrous plant of some kind. Leaves, stem, and root.

Revan caught it automatically. *Eri—"Eridu?" Strange. "This doesn't grow on Kashyyyk."*

"Huh." Jolee's eyebrows waggled at her like they did when he was trying to make some incredibly obvious point. For once, Revan had no idea what he was trying to say. "Never had you pegged for much of a botanist. How about that?"

"How about… wait—what?" The stalks melted away in her hand, insubstantial as ghosts. Revan's neck hurt suddenly, a sharp ache underneath the collar's weight—real life intruding on their fragile peace. "I miss the Force."

"Don't say that to Carth again, he's finally starting to look happy. Young love! It's a wonderful thing."
Was he? To Revan, he only looked worried. She hadn't bounced back as they'd expected. She, once the strongest of all of them, could now barely climb one set of ladders to Rwookrorro without being winded.

"You see Carth too? You see all of us? You—am I going crazy or are you really here, Jolee?"

The old man sighed, putting down his trowel and sifter, abandoning his garden. "You're not going to rest until we have a chat about the metaphysical poodoo, are you? The Force is in all things, and I am part of the Force. There is no death, there is the Force? Did they ever teach you anything at the Dantooine Enclave? You went there twice. Bacca spit, I'd think you would have learned the Code, at least."

"Through the Force, my chains are broken." She raised an eyebrow at him.

The old Jedi shrugged back. "Sure. Guess that's true too, as far as it goes."

"Why you? Not that I'm not happy to see you; but why you?"

"Is there someone you'd rather see?" Jolee's image flickered for a moment, changing into something—someone—else. Someone impossibly tall and broad-shouldered; with a corona of curly hair outlined against the sunlight slanting through the trees.

Revan closed her eyes, turned her head away. Her hands went to her face, rubbing her eyes so hard that the dreamworld dissolved into black and white stars.

"No," she said, squeezing her dream eyes tightly closed. "There's no one else."

There was a long silence. Her dream heartbeat thudded in her chest, all too real.

"Ahem! Then pay attention!" the voice was so clearly Jolee's again that Revan opened her eyes. "I think that I'm the only one who didn't mind dying. I was an old man, with an old man's aches, and an old man's life. The others… they had plans. Juhani wanted to settle down with her mate. Bastila wanted to help her mother—and the galaxy. And Mission…" he chuckled. "You know that kid. She wanted to take on at least two or three worlds before she karked. You put an end to all that."

"I know." Revan should have controlled Bastila on that Temple roof. Jolee and Juhani should have just kept quiet. And if Mission had only run when Carth did—

But you killed them. Six weeks of dreams and isolation had given her time to acknowledge that. Blaming the Dark won't bring them back. Blaming them is even worse.

Making an excuse to Jolee was pointless but Revan did it anyway. "I couldn't just let Bastila go. I needed her to defeat Malak. We were out of time. If you had just understood—all you had to do was follow."

"What I understood that day was that you had to be stopped," Jolee said flatly. "I knew you were too strong for me to kill, but that didn't matter. Sometimes the thing that's your big sacrifice is only a small step towards winning the war. Sometimes it's useless. But stopping the Star Forge was important. And we did."

"You mean I did," Revan said dully. "Just not the way it should have happened."

In her good dreams, it happened differently. In her good dreams, everyone lived.
Jolee snorted. "Fine. You did. You saved the galaxy! Congratulations! Do you want a medal? You haven't had the medal dream in nearly a week. I'm still trying to decide if that's a sign of your late-blooming maturity or just apathetic depression. Hey, I've got an idea. Continue on this path, and I'll let you know."

"I hate you, old man," Revan said, staring up at the trees above. Big blue butterflies flew through them, not indigenous to Kashyyyk. On Deralia there were butterflies like that, she thought. She remembered them. Blue butterflies like flowers. And—eridu. Stalks of it, ready for harvest. Maybe.

Revan frowned. Somewhere far off, a child's voice sang a scrap of doggerel, familiar, like a memory.

"Hear that?" Jolee made an exaggerated gesture, cocking his hand to his ear. "Nice song. Might as well hear it through before you go. No matter what, you're going to have one hell of a rash when you wake up."

XXX

"You're sure about this?" Carth didn't sound sure.

It was near dusk in the Shadowlands and the night-blooming flowers whispered on dangling vines, rustling as they passed through the branches. A few tach hopped by, but nothing bigger.

"I'm sure," Revan said, trying to sound like she meant it. She was freezing. At least the immune suppressors had kicked in and her rash was better.

Temperature dropped in the forests at night. Revan turned up the controls on her body armor for the third time since this hike had begun. She felt like hell. This path they had once covered in an hour's time was taking four times that now—and all because of her.

Zaalbar took a step towards her again, hands outstretched to help.

"No!" she growled. "I can walk fine!"

Around them, their Wookiee escort grumbled impatiently. They'd reached the former Czerka perimeter. The electro-mag field that had once blocked the path—the one Jolee could deactivate with a simple wave of his hand—had been blasted to pieces by well-placed bowcaster bolts months ago. Moss grew over the shattered remains, the forest taking back all that Czerka Industries had tried to destroy.

"You're doing great, beautiful." Carth was a lousy actor. She pretended not to need the arm he offered and stumbled on ahead.

Somewhere off in the distance, the underbrush rustled menacingly. Kinrath, probably. They'd brought plenty of anti-venom, but they were nearly out of med-packs. Revan hoped they wouldn't need the few they had left. She hadn't heard much about the outside world, but she'd heard enough to know that kolto shortages were reaching a real crisis point on the Rim—and the supplies Czerka had left on Kashyyyk when they fled weren't theirs to take.

"Remember. My people escort to the grove, Savior Polla Revan." Freyyrr growled at her, his lips curling up to show teeth. "But we will not enter. It is a dark place. A place of nightmares."

"I know," she barked back. "My nightmares are not yours."
The Wookiee chieftain nodded. "May you weave your lost ones into the dreams of your enemy."

"Thank you." It was polite to acknowledge his blessing, even if Revan wasn't sure which enemies she had left. In her dreams they were all faceless and voiceless—and the only sentients who fought her were her friends.

Are the Jedi against me now? Does it matter?

The Wookiees loved her, former Dark Lord and all. Most of them didn't even know what the Sith were; although several had offered cures for Revan's strange skin affliction. Zaalbar hadn't mentioned Mission to them—and Revan wasn't sure if they'd care, even if he had. A Twi'lek was no true child of the forest and there had been many Twi'leks slavers working with Czerka in the bad old days.

Now, Zaal blazed the trail ahead, hiding whatever thoughts he had under that thick mat of hair.

Canderous was deep in conversation with one of the hunters near the front of the pack, with HK at his side.

"Translation:" HK purred, in Shyriiwook, "The Mandalorian agrees that those of his kind who hunted in your forests deserve swift and untimely deaths. But he is atypical, and lately, has shown tendencies towards sentiment. Interjection: Since you both share an unreasonable fondness for all this fetid and disgusting organic material, you will not find his statements offensive. Suggestion: Find a common target to exterminate together as an expression of your new alliance."

"There are some Trandoshans," Eooowweeer suggested. "Three days walking, towards the third pole. Scavenger camp. Tell the Mandalorian to bring back three heads, and six choobs, to prove his sincerity."

"Translation: The Wookiee has a target—"

"HK!" Revan called out. "No targets. No assassinations. No death. That's an order."

"Reluctant Compliance," the droid sighed. "As programmed, Shadow of my former Master."

Carth nudged her elbow. "Sure you don't want a weapon?"

Revan laughed. "To protect me from HK?" The persona the Jedi had put in her mind still felt naked without a blaster—and even more naked without her saber, but still—

"I don't want to kill anything, Carth. Not even a tach."

"You've been training with Zaalbar," he pointed out.

Not so much lately. She was constantly exhausted. "Wooden sticks only, and he beats me every time. Want to see my bruises again?"

"You're pushing yourself too hard." Carth wasn't even trying to hide the worry in his voice.

Not so much lately. "You said I look better." Revan tried to ignore the chills that ran up and down her spine and the cold sweat pooling at the backs of her knees.

"You're not quite as pale," he agreed, a faint smile on his face. "And I like the orange and purple bruise on your thigh. Looks like a map of Telos, if you get the right angle."

She shoved him, hard as she could in the side. He barely flinched. "Oh yeah? What angle is that?"
"Maybe I'll show you later." His body armor clanked against hers, awkwardly. In better times, it might have been cute.

He didn't need to say it out loud for Revan to know: Carth hated this expedition deep into the wroshyr forest, and Revan hadn't even told him about their true purpose.

For the past few weeks, her pilot had been spending a lot of time in the Hawk’s cockpit, plugged into the remnants of the old Czerka grid. Searching for Dustil, his son, Revan hoped. He’d *said* he was checking the feeds for rumors of the Star Forge crew, but she assumed there was more to it than that.

What was there to say about the dead heroes of the Star Forge? The Republic Senate had named holidays for all of them, even Tee and HK. When Carth told her that, they’d both started to laugh at the same time—trailing off awkwardly, as if they’d both realized how little the honor mattered now.

“They wouldn’t name holidays after us if we were alive,” she’d joked. And then watched Carth’s easy smile fade, a ray of sun vanishing behind a cloud.

“We are alive,” he’d said. “Keep believing in that.”

“I know,” she’d muttered. “This place is way too dull for an afterlife.”

As her body failed, sometimes Revan wondered why her companions still fought so hard to keep her. Something was missing. Like that scrap of stupid song that kept ringing in her head, little more than a child's rhyme.

*You’re going on an expedition into the Shadowlands for the sake of a song you heard in a dream,* her inner voice reminded her. *And it wasn’t even good.*

*That’s not the only reason.*

*Say the other reason out loud. I dare you. Zaal already thinks you’re madclaw. Canderous too. And Carth’s delusional, but he's not blind. That poor sad fool thinks he's in love with a fracking nutjob*

-Shut up,” she snapped out loud, garnering a concerned growl from the Wookiee and a shrug from the Mandalorian.

"Hey, Freckles?" Carth moved up to walk beside her again. His elbow nudged hers, his voice carefully kind. "We're close."

"Yeah.” She smiled at the poor sad fool’s face and caught his hand with her own. "Thanks for humoring me, Flyboy.”

"We all needed the exercise.” He slipped a hand around her waist—more supportive than affectionate. "You especially. You've been sleeping too much lately.”

"I'm doing a lot of gardening—” but of course, that had been in dreams. Jolee had asked her to weed his garden in real-time; but in truth, she couldn’t even find where it began. The jungle had overtaken everything. "I mean, I might take it up. When I’m feeling better.”

Carth shot her a puzzled look. "Sure.”

The path under their feet had changed from a muddy track to paved stone. The night sounds around
them stilled. Even without the Force, Revan imagined she felt something. An ominous presence, lurking just ahead through the trees. Maybe it was the shadows—or just the memory of being here before.

When they’d come to this place before, after the failure on Tatooine, she’d known instantly that this artifact would not be closed and dead. Why? Had the Dark Lord of the Sith already known what the Jedi would do to her? Had she left the Kashyyyk avatar to greet her mindwiped self? To restore her memories?

Or was the Kashyyyk computer simply a reprogrammed Rakatan guard dog, meant to lock this piece of the Star Map away from all prying eyes except Revan’s?

*It doesn’t matter.* Revan fought back a yawn.

"Here," Freyyrr barked to his men. Something off to their left roared, breaking the silence. There was a long pause and then Freyyrr and several other Wookiees split away from their group, melting into the trees. A few heartbeats later, Revan heard the chuk-chuk of bowcasters and the sounds of a rousing fight. Whatever beast they'd found roared in pain.

She shivered, almost in sympathy.

"Tell me again," Canderous grunted. "We're not here to hunt, so why did we come here at night?" Formerly so up for adventure, the Mandalorian hadn't wanted to come on this expedition at all—had muttered something about dar'jett osik and told her some things were best left alone.

"The Wookiees were busy this morning when I asked," Revan said. "They chose the time—not me."

"You want to join the fun, Ordo?" Carth said. "Go ahead—I got this."

"We are all protecting Polla Revan," Zaalbar corrected him. "We all must stay with her."

"Translation: Oh, wise Mandalorian! You are welcome to take the most skilled and expert sniper in our party, your humble assassin droid, with you to dispatch whatever organics you—"

"Shut up, HK," Revan snapped. She motioned to Canderous, no need to voice further command. He shrugged off his cannon and took point—suddenly all business.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Revan," Carth muttered in her ear.

"Go niner," she murmured.

"Right." He moved to the right, hands falling to the holsters of his blasters.

Without asking, Zaal took the threes and HK circled back, guarding their retreat. It was a formation they'd used so many times before, with the Jedi in this center, ready to react to anything from any approach. Only now, it felt like they were guarding her, and not just part of her squad.

Together they approached the ancient computer console, its tangled cables braided and buried like roots. To their right, the petals of the Star Map were closed and black. HK shone a light from his sensor on the screen and Revan blinked at its sudden sharpness, piercing the gloom.

Zaalbar groaned. "They found a katarn," he said, nodding in the direction the hunters had gone. Almost simultaneously, the beast howled—the cry breaking off mid-screech as it died.
The Wookiees roared in triumph, and then began the songs of celebration for a good hunt.

"Their battle hymns sound like dewbacks in heat," Canderous muttered. "But maybe they'll attract more game."

Revan walked to the computer, staring at the platform where the hologram of the Rakata had once greeted her, a little less than a year ago. The first of the Star Maps to have opened for her. She'd come here with Bastila and Jolee—

_Bastila hacked her way through the walls of kinrath willingly enough but screamed every time she saw a bug too small to kill with a saber._ Revan smiled a little at the memory. That Bastila had her issues, but she'd been a friend.

_A friend that lied to you,_ her inner voice mocked. _Remember how pale she got when you mentioned Revan to that computer? How quickly she tried to change the subject?_

_You were blind not to notice._

Behind her, Canderous sniffed. "This hunk of metal is it? Doesn't look like much."

"Not so scary, huh, Ordo?" Carth's jibe sounded forced.

"I’ve seen worse," the warrior admitted.

Revan ignored them both. She put her hands flat on the console. "Computer. Acknowledge and verify my identity."

Nothing happened.

Behind her, Zaalbar growled. "Eoossigrrrw told me the dark machine has been dead since you left."

"No," Revan said. "I had a dream about it. _Revan_ was here before us. She... I... set a password—I think. I think it’s a password."

"You remember a password now, but you didn't before?" Carth's armored hand leaned against her waist. Holding her upright? Or holding her back? "You remember more from when you were Revan?"

_Yes, Carth, and now I'm going to take over the galaxy. But you may need to hold me up to do it. Not sure how much longer I can stand._ "I think so. I think the password was supposed to be a joke."

"A joke?" Carth laughed, hesitantly as if he was trying to find this funny. _One of your jokes? Bet the one you told in Dreshdae to those Sith was only the beginning of your repertoire._

"That joke was funny," Canderous said. _Although, if the Mandalorian had just shot them both it would have been more realistic._

"It's a song," Revan snapped. _This joke's a song. I think I... made it up. I'm hoping I was very young when I did._

"Have we made this hunt only for your song?" Zaalbar whined. _Your voice lacks the strength to carry through the forest._

"It's for the computer," Revan told him. _Be quiet. All of you._ _This is a fool's errand. I've lost_
whatever part of my mind was left. I’m probably delirious.

"Go ahead, beautiful. Sing for us." Carth patted her arm reassuringly.

"Observation: Your voice cannot be more atonal than the Wookiee caterwauling half a kilometer to the north, Master."

Revan closed her eyes, trying to shut them all out.

"Computer," she said, pressing her hands harder on the console as she began to sing.

"The Jedi are good, but they wear ugly hoods."

"The Sith are mean, but their armor gleams."

"When I grow up, I want to be—"

"The Ruler of the Galaxy."

Carth coughed, his hand going from hers to her forehead. "That’s… uh, is there another verse, beautiful?" He turned toward Canderous. "She’s pretty warm again, I think the fever’s back up."

The Mandalorian spat on the ground. "Told you this little nature hike was a bad idea—"

"This is a bad place," Zaalbar agreed, voice tapering to a whine.

"Be quiet," Revan snapped. "All of you!" There is another verse, but I thought it was only this one that would activate—

Suddenly, lights sparked against the base of the plinth and a holographic image flickered to life on the holo-stand. The familiar, bulbous Rakata hologram stared back at her, unblinking and expressionless.

And not real. Not real, but maybe close enough—

"Identity confirmed. Accessing files," the computer said. "How may I serve you, Revan, Lord of the Sith and Conqueror of the Republic?"

"By not calling her that," Carth muttered.

Revan ignored him, addressing the machine. "The Jedi wiped my mind. Did I anticipate this?"

"My circuits are not telepathic. However, there are several files relating to Revan Starfire’s life history accessible only using this password. They appear to be personal in nature. They do not pertain to the Star Forge, the Force, or the histories that were shared with you from my vault of knowledge."

Revan frowned. Revan … Starfire? She’d heard the surname before, of course, but it had never seemed to belong to her. Nothing about these fracking Sith had—not until it all became so fracking obvious—not until Korriban, when robed assholes started calling her by name and trying to kill her.

Revan Starfire, Lord of the Sith.

The fracking ten-meter-high statue in the Dreshdae City Square on Korriban hadn’t
even looked like Revan.

"Are there other passwords? Other areas of your databanks restricted?"

"Would you know if there were, regardless of what I disclose?"

"I don't—" Maybe the woman she'd been once had enjoyed these kinds of mind games, but this Revan hated them. "Can you restore my memories?"

"No. I can show you recordings shared with me and encoded under this passcode."

This passcode. Machines were so specific. Revan frowned. "Are there are others… other passcodes that I set? About me?"

"Yes."

"W-why did I partition the data?" Her voice shook. It was so cold here. Carth moved up behind her again and Revan resisted the urge to push him away.

"I cannot say. There are several subdirectories."

"Can you list them?"

"Some of them." Was it her imagination, or did the computer sound amused?

"Such as…?"

"For example, you partitioned a portion of my files to be accessible by someone named 'Malak' using the password "Loverboy."

Carth's hand retreated again and she heard him mutter softly under his breath.

Loverboy. He's jealous of a dead man. The thought made Revan sad. The term had no relation at all to the madman who had tried to kill her. Those crazed red eyes, that maniacal laugh—

XXX

Her nemesis was broad-shouldered. Impossibly tall. The overlights gleamed on the bald pate of his skull, the blocks of corruption that made a mask of his skin. The cold metal of the plate where his mouth should have been glittered like it had been freshly polished.

"Red," the madman had murmured. "My Starfire. I knew you'd come."

Red. A red haze tinged Revan’s vision. Rage at Malak’s… impudence. Fury at his presumption of familiarity flared like a sun inside of her, eclipsing reason, overriding any vague ideas of strategy she’d had.

Her blade ignited, and she was already in the air, using the Force to propel herself toward him, spinning the double-hilt hard to drive him back—

The madman nearly knocked it out of her hand, and then—

XXX

Revan gritted her teeth, forcing her thoughts back to the present, to the Rakatan image blinking in
front of her. "Download all the files that relate to her—to my—life" Maybe they could crack into them later.

As an academic exercise, perhaps. But you’re not just here to access the computer. You’re here for Zaalbar. Keep that in mind.

"They are yours to do with as you wish, but I would caution you against sharing too much with your companions. Knowledge can be dangerous."

"So I’ve learned," she muttered. "Is the information marked in any way?"

"It is tagged as 'hazardous to sentient life'."

She nodded. "At this time, I do not wish to access any of the data that is marked 'hazardous to sentient life.' Please download all information—all of the non-hazardous information—pertaining to my personal life into this HK droid's receptacle."

"Objection! Master!" It was impossible for a droid to really be offended, but HK did a good job of sounding like he was. "Declaration of Purpose: I am a highly-advanced assassination droid, fluent in seventeen-hundred sixty-two ways of ending sentience for most bipedal life forms. I have an additional two hundred forty options for the tri-and quad-legged species that are original—not just variations on the bipedal theme. In addition, I am fluent in several thou—"

"Comply, HK," she snapped. "Partition it away from his central memory core," she added. "Accessible only to my voice-print."

Carth coughed. "Revan, he can imitate your voice."

"He was doing it for weeks on the kriffing ship," Canderous added. His own voice shifted, into a terrible parody of HK’s. "This is Lord Revan. Please release my faithful droid’s restraining bolt, and give him that Aratech rifle you so cruelly plucked from his arms on Lehon—"

"Lehon?" Revan frowned.

Zaalbar shrugged.

"Master, Lehon is the world where you reclaimed your true—"

That blasted Rakatan planet has a fricking name? "Shut up!" she snapped.

Creaking, as if his joints suddenly needed an oil bath, HK glided forward, until he was standing next to her in front of the console.

A violet beam of light shot forth from the platform, playing over the HK’s body.

"Observation: An unusual feeling," the droid commented. "Gratitude, Master: Although your attempts to partition were laughably easy to circumvent, your harmless meatbag data is encrypted. Happiness: I am spared the sordid details of your sloppy, viscera-filled life."

"It’s fine," she muttered. "There’s another verse to the song. I think it decrypts it. We’ll deal with it later."

"Can’t wait," Carth said behind her. "We done here?" Bitterness in his voice.

Damn him. "Not quite. Computer: you said before that you were tied to the Force. Can you use it to
assess my physical condition?"

Whorls of light flickered around her. "Affirmative. A disruptor field emanates from that metal ring around your neck. I would advise removing it as soon as possible."

"Why?"

"If you do not remove the neural disruptor, your lifespan will be drastically shortened."

She'd known. Somehow, she'd known. Revan swallowed hard. "How—how long have I got?"

"My estimation, based on body mass and metabolism—another three of your standard months."

The men cursed softly behind her. Revan just nodded. I knew it, I just didn’t know how long—

Longer than she’d expected.

"Computer, is there another way to remove the affinity to the Force from my body without shortening my lifespan?"

"Certainly, Lord Revan. Removal of all cognitive function would effectively curb your Force affinity. A respiration unit would be advised, however; and additional nutritive and evacuatory systems would be needed to sustain life. I am quite capable of performing the initial neural disengagement. A simple electrical shock, given enough voltage, will stop your cardiac function long enough for your higher brain function to cease. Would you like me to perform this operation at this time?"

"No!" Her voice rang across the clearing, with a vehemence that surprised her. "Can you… what happens if you just take the collar off?"

"Hypothetically, if I possessed appendages and the energies required for such a task, your natural lifespan would be restored." It paused. "More or less."

"More or less?" Carth snapped. "What does that mean?"

"I am only authorized to respond to questions from Lord Revan," the hologram said. "This message is a courtesy warning. Further communication with this terminal by unauthorized personnel will result in their disintegration."

"Hypothetically?" She put her arm back, warning Carth to stay quiet. "Can you do it or not?"

"Are you capable of installing appendages directly into my console, or transmitting my consciousness into a mobile core?"

"Not…” she'd wondered. "Maybe later?"

"Then maybe later, I will be capable of performing complex neuro-molecular surgery."

Carth looked like he wanted to say something again. Revan put a warning hand on his armored arm.

"Computer, can you analyze the Force patterns within me?"
"Clarify."

"Can you tell if they are… from the dark or the light?"

"You were always confusing in your distinctions, Lord Revan. There is no dark or light. The Force is power. Power has no coloration—only the capacity to enact change on a galactic scale. You were fashioned for this purpose."

"That's what I used to believe," she said softly. "But I killed people. People I loved when they stood in my way."

The computer purred, eerily like HK. "You achieved the ends required. Sacrifice is a part of leadership."

"But I… lost control," she said softly in Rakata. "Please continue our discussion in this tongue."

"As you wish," the ancient computer clicked, in the language of its builders.

"What are you doing?" hissed Carth behind her.

"The files I am accessing are untranslatable," she said in Basic. "Give me a few millis."

Carth was silent, but she felt his disapproval like a laser on the back of her neck.

I used to be such a good liar. Polla was a good liar. Revan must have been too. What's happened to me?

The Rakatan consonants felt uncomfortably familiar. "Computer, I have... concerns that I will enjoy the Force and I do not wish to have it rule me. Do you have any suggestions?"

"The Jedi order practice several levels of discipline to combat this effect. Their work in this field is far more advanced than anything my people ever achieved, even though it is based on rudimentary tenets, almost comical in their simplicity. There is no passion, there is peace—"

"I know the code, cease repeating it. Please."

"As you wish."

"Computer. When I first came here, why did you speak to me?"

"You were the first subject I had seen a thousand standard rotations that exhibited the proper characteristics."

"What were those characteristics?"

"Error. I am not able to access that file. It is possible that it was locked by a previous user or has been corrupted. However, I have holographic recordings of our first and some subsequent meetings. Would you like to access them?"

Revan took a deep breath. Not in front of Carth. Not now. "Download them into this droid. Locked by me?"

"I cannot say. Hypothesis. Since the information you sought was hazardous to sentient life and not part of my agricultural installation, I assume it was locked approximately one
thousand of your standard years ago."

Revan frowned. "Why would you assume that?"

"Your old persona was most interested in those files."

"Show me."

"Error: the information may be corrupted or incomplete."

May be corrupted? Or, maybe you're just an evil sithspawned computer and I should stop asking nicely.

"A thousand years ago was the age of the Sith. Do you have information about the Sith Empire?"

"Clarify."

"No, anything—everything—you have on the Sith and the Jedi, please. Download it now into the droid."

"Your requests are imprecise. You are deviating from the pattern in memory. Additionally, some of this information falls under the category of hazardous—and you have already requested a denial of access to such files—"

Revan closed her eyes. Breathe deeply, Bastila had said, let your mind be an empty cup and feel the Force flow within and around. See it in all things. Like an echo, someone else's voice saying the same thing, years ago, to a much smaller Revan.

The child's voice haunted her again:

"When I grow up, I want to be,"

"The Ruler of the Galaxy."

I was for a few years, little girl, and it sucked like a space privy.

"I don't want to see any of the hazardous information. Computer: delete all files marked as hazardous... no—wait. Who marked them as hazardous?"

"That information is not available. Those files are not accessible to be deleted."

"Can you overwrite the files with something else?"

"Possible. There is a risk of corruption. Minor. The odds are three thousand and twenty-one against."

"Corruption would entail what?"

"It is difficult to predict. In the most probable circumstance, the data would be inaccessible to future users, but the overwriting information would remain intact."

Behind her, Carth shifted impatiently. "Fine," Revan said. In pazaak, I'd be a fool not to take those odds. "Download the information I requested into the droid, except what is marked hazardous. Keep the hazardous information—until you overwrite it with this."
She pulled the triangular device out from her pocket. It shimmered in the dim light.

She'd found it yesterday, in one of the boxes from the Hawk, a box filled with Mission's possessions. When she’d switched it on, she’d expected to see some long-dead Sith Lord—

Revan’s eyes blinked, suddenly prickling with tears. *Clever girl picked my pocket back on Korriban.*

The thought made her less sad this time around.

"Ah," the Rakatan said. "Have I displeased you in some way?"

"No."

"But you wish to replace my consciousness? With… this… primitive object?" It sounded almost offended. But why would a computer even care?

"I do." *Primitive? I hope not.*

"Place the holocron on the console," the computer sighed, still speaking Rakatan.

"Speak Standard now," Revan told it.

"Place the holocron on the console," the computer repeated in Basic.

"What is that?" Carth's breath was warm on her neck.

"It's a holocron from the Sith tombs on Korriban. Holocrons are receptacles for recording information, as you know. But sometimes…"

"What are you doing?" He sounded suspicious, of course.

"Holocrons can record entire lives—even sentient personalities. I thought I'd given this one to Uthar for prestige—I had so much useless stuff to give him I never noticed it was missing until I found it in the storage room."

Blue light played over the holocron and the Rakatan's presence shifted and blurred, shrinking and growing lekku.

"Hello!" A familiar voice sang out. "This is Mission Vao and this is my life!"

"No." Even through the body armor, Revan felt Carth's hand lock around her forearm, pulling it back. "Revan. What have you done?"

"I’m helping." And trying to ignore the strength of his grip. Trying not to think of the six ways she could break free from him, even in her weakened state.

Mission's voice rattled on. "I hope Polla doesn't get mad when she finds out I swiped this magic Sith artifact; but I figured—maybe if Griff saw what things were like for me, then maybe he’d turn over a new leaf. I'm gonna send it to him—soon as we get done saving the entire galaxy. Hi, Griff! This holocron may have, like all the bad stuff that happened in my life? All the old stuff? But by the time you're seeing this, we'll all be famous!" She paused, spreading her hands open like a grass priest bestowing a blessing. "I wanted you to know that I forgive you, bantha-brain brother. Even if you are an asshole."
"Is it alive?" Canderous asked. "Or a clever recording?"

"I don't know," Revan said. "It's a holocron. It can… learn things. It… it recognized me before."

XXX

The halls of the Ebon Hawk echoed with memories, and few places more than the room at the end of the hall, little more than an afterthought of the ship’s design—the small cube of a spacer’s bunk that Mission Vao had claimed for her own. The door was open and the Twi’lek’s possessions half-sorted, as if one of Revan’s companions had already begun the task of sorting through the Twi’lek’s things, before abandoning the job half-done.

Revan owed them all to see it through. She sat down on the bed and began lifting things out of the open storage crate next to it. The crate was filled with things that made her heart ache. The Baragwin vest (unscathed—for in reality, the Twi’lek hadn’t been wearing it the day she died), a cache of choca-bars. What looked like a datapad diary. Clothes too practically standard for a quest like theirs—and a few dresses that would have given Carth apoplexy, if he’d seen them on the kid. A pair of high-heeled pink boots. An unopened bottle of firewhiskey. A stack of slicing spikes and a few datacards pinched from places they’d infiltrated, tied together with a lekku ribbon like souvenirs—

Near the bottom of the pile of treasures, Revan’s fingers closed on something sharp and cold. She drew it out, wincing, as the edges cut her fingers. She recognized it instantly—although, in the madness that had been their time on Korriban, she hadn’t even known it was gone.

An ancient Sith holocron, glittering and inscribed with silver runes.

The holocron from Tulak Hord’s tomb. Clever girl must’ve picked my pocket back on Korriban. The thought made her eyes well with pointless tears, blurring her vision until she wiped them away.

Revan set the triangular prism on top of a stack of neatly-folded shirts. Its faceted edges glittered in the dim light. She stared at it for a long time before she picked it up and pressed the center at the base. The library on Korriban had been full of holocrons much like this one—all essentially delivering the same message. Sith Lords hissing promises of greatness. Mad apprentices announcing their manifestos. Power, vengeance, and renown. At the time, Revan had felt almost smug in her ability to scoff at them. At the time, she had thought she had already seen the worst the Force could bring—and then turned her back on it—secure in the Light.

She had been wrong. She would be wrong now too, in thinking this would be more of the same.

"Hello!" A familiar voice sang out. "This is Mission Vao and this is my life! I hope Polla doesn’t get mad when she finds—uh, oh. Hey! Polla?" The transparent blue Twi’lek who had materialized above Revan’s head blinked, her eyes widening as if she was taking in their surroundings. "You loser! Are you snooping in my room? Is that my stuff? I told you that crate was private!"

Revan froze, staring back at the translucent blue figure blinking back at her. “Mission?”

"Polla?” Mission’s voice demanded again. "Hey! Are you crying? What are you doing in my room? Are you mad about me taking the holocron? Because if you are, I gotta remind you that you said I could take what I wanted as long as it didn’t hurt anybody else….”

"Hello, Mission.” Revan swallowed. “No, I’m not mad.”
The holocron had a switch on its base. She turned it off and the ghost vanished.

XXX

In the now, the men were still staring at her. “I don’t know,” Revan repeated to Carth. “She can’t be alive, exactly. But I found the holocron in her room. It... spoke to me.”

“It can recognize things?” Carth’s voice was dark with suspicion. “Is it sentient?”

Canderous shifted uneasily. “What is its purpose? A memorial for the dead? Have you made ones for the others?”

“No.” She swallowed. “I didn't make this. Mission did it herself.”

"... we must be totally rich now too, so I bet you'll hit me up for cash. Wow, sure feels funny having my mind probed like this. It's like an evil Jedi thing to do, huh?" The image of Mission giggled. "Tickles, you know?" Mission's voice trailed off—and then the figure got up from its cross-legged position on the platform.

"Hey! Where are we? I don't remember the ship landing. Is that Big Z over there?"

Zaalbar was muttering something to himself that sounded like a string of prayers.

I hope they're prayers.

"What have you done?" Carth asked. He still had hold of one of her hands—her right one. Even when Revan was disarmed, he wasn't taking any chances. "That can't be... it's not really her?"

"No," Revan whispered, staring at the hologram. "It's like a composite. It has... some of her memories. The basic outline of her personality, and her reactions. But—she can access the nets. It’s not her, just the closest we can get. I did it for Zaalbar."

"I don't think you've thought this through." Carth frowned.

Zaalbar and Mission were jabbering so fast in Shyriiwook that Revan could hardly follow them. She watched as the ghostly image of the Twi'lek's face changed—from joy to disbelief—and then realized exactly what the Wookiee was telling the holocron.

Oh, come on, Zaal—would a lie have hurt?

"You killed me, Polla? You had Big Z kill me and then you went all Dark Sith Lord again?" The voice sounded exactly like Mission. "No way! It just doesn't sound like you."

"Mission," Revan's voice was strained, even in her own ears. "You're not... just you. You have information. Can you access it?"

The girl's face went blank for a moment. "Sure. Wow... there's a lot here."

"Is there anything that you would deem hazardous to sentient life?"

"There's a bunch of stuff that was overwritten by me, but I can still see some of the directories. Nope... nothing live. Although I don't know what the classification hazardous really means. Like does bio-seeding count? Genetic reshaping? Locations of more Rakatan replicators?"
None of that sounded great, but none of it sounded like an immediate threat either. "I guess that stuff is okay," Revan nodded. "We can go over it later."

"Aww, Polla!"

"What is it?"

"I always wondered about whether you and Malak… I mean there were all these jokes about you two back when you know… but… uh, there's some holos here and they're pretty gross."

"Delete them," Revan muttered. "Delete everything about Malak from your core."

"Everything?" The computer that now sounded like Mission paused. "You sure about that?"

Revan glanced back at Carth. "Yes. Absolutely."

"Okay! Done! Easy"

Just like that. Revan took a deep breath. "Mission, I—I'm so sorry."

"I don't remember you killing me, so it's okay, sis! You don't mind me calling you that, do you? I always thought of you that way... but you were always so, save-the-galaxy superwoman about things that I didn't want to make you mad or something."

"I thought of you that way too," Revan said. She wiped her eyes free of tears. "Your... predecessor had an open feed into the nets, but it was one-way. He could see everything but could send nothing out. Tee-Three is going to set up a remote link through the Hawk's circuits. As much as I can Mission, I want to give you the world. All of them."

"Again," Carth muttered. "I don't think you've thought this through."

"That would be great, Polla!" Mission turned back to Zaalbar. The Wookiee seemed torn between outrage and joy.

Revan glanced at the other two men and the droid. "We should leave them," she said softly. "It's getting late and I... I want to answer some questions about myself too."

Carter had that line between his brows that meant trouble. "Whatever answers you find, I want to be there when you find them. I want to know everything about you."

Flicker of anger that Revan bit back. "I don't know everything about you."

He smiled painfully at her. "Only because you never ask. You used to ask me lots of things."

*I used to be a smuggler from Deralia too.* She stared at him. "Wasn't sure you still wanted me to know."

His brown eyes softened, and that line on his brow lifted. "Always, Freckles. Told you before."

_Freckles._ There’d been a time when the name had confused her. When Revan had looked at the dots on her skin and wondered if she was losing her mind. Looking at Carth instead had helped. It did now, too.

Canderous coughed. "I don't need to know everything, Revan, just so we're clear. But we need to talk about what the computer said. About you dying."
"I know. But first, let's see if I deserve to live."

"You should already know we think you do," Carth muttered. "That’s why we’re here."

Revan twisted her mouth. "I'll let you decide, Carth. How's that?"

"Seriously, Polla Revan?" Mission's hologram interrupted. "Geez! Don't be so dramatic."

"She is still madclaw, Mission," Zaalbar groaned. "New roots take time to grow."

"I’m not," Revan muttered, eyeing the HK with some trepidation. She might have erased Malak from the main banks of the Rakatan computer, but she’d downloaded her personal files first.

_I need to know_, she reminded herself. Even if she was no longer sure why.

XXX

Winter nights in Dreshdae were cold, even more so now that the city was half-deserted, and its warming arrays switched off to conserve power. Very few of the city’s survivors ventured out at night—indeed, fewer every day as weakness succumbed to strength.

Next to the ruins of the Korriban Academy, the age-old struggle of the Sith still played out, even when all other Sith lessons had stopped.

The woman stood in the deserted, dusty square, hooded and cloaked against the chill, staring up at the ten-meter-high statue of Lord Revan Starfire, the fallen Sith Lord.

_By all rights Malak’s statue should be here too_, she thought.

A petty part of her was glad it was otherwise. They had not died together, Revan and Malak. The woman had felt his passing like a scream in her own soul when the Star Forge burned. Whereas Revan had flickered out of the Force weeks later, guttering like a dying ember—all of her strength reduced to a whisper of pain before its end.

_Died of her injuries, no doubt._ It gave the woman some satisfaction to imagine those injuries.

The statue’s likeness was terrible—its face stylized beyond any possible resemblance to any woman, living or dead. The woman was glad of that too, although it scarcely mattered now.

"Have you packed your things already?" Husky voice behind her, accent flat as permafrost. "I found us a ship. Not much of one, but it’ll get us off this rock."

"Good." The woman turned around, producing a smile for the heart-shaped face, the yellow-brown eyes that always softened like snow when they met her own. "Yes, I’ve packed my things." She reached out a hand, tracing the side around the ear where her friend’s scalp had been clipped short.

A dark tail of hair was gathered at the top of her friend’s skull, base wrapped with red cloth, the strands almost black in this light. Freshly dyed to cover the gray that had aged the fallen Jedi beyond her years before. Her friend looked younger now—and nearly beautiful.

"What have you done to your hair?" the woman asked her.

"Deralian top knot," her friend said. "I used to wear it like this—before. It’s been years since I have. You might not remember."

_Revan_ had worn her hair like that. The woman did not like the association, even if the style was
quite flattering to her friend’s heavy cheeks; her wide mouth and soft eyes. “Deralian,” she echoed, telling the truth that would not offend. “It suits you. You look beautiful.”

The compliment garnered a smile. "Some pathetic hopeful already asked me if I was imitating her." Beya Organa’s voice hardened, even as the smile she gave back was soft and foolishly vulnerable. "We should probably leave before the port authorities discover the body."

“Why would it matter?” They were Sith.

“IT was the hopeful’s ship.” The Deralian shrugged. “What little government remains on this planet still takes a dim view of theft....”

XXX
Chapter 3 / Sleeping with Fish

Revan sat cross-legged in front of the portable console screen, trying to scan each page as it scrolled. It was hard because she kept dozing off. A cup of the local tea made from drwiooorr bark sat beside her, untouched and already tepid.

Across the room, Carth leaned against a crate, surrounded by stacks of printed-out plimsi. Her judge and would-be executioner looked almost as exhausted as she felt. They had spent hours reviewing the data downloaded from HK's link to the Rakatan computer; finding most of it locked with additional passcodes.

What they had been able to unlock seemed to be records of Revan’s childhood—but nothing more recent than that. *A childish song unlocks my childhood.* Revan supposed that made some kind of sense; although it was a piece of sentiment she hadn't expected from the woman.

*From me,* she corrected herself. *That woman is me. Revan is me.*

*But why would I want to remember old times on Dantooine?*

The plimsi in front of her now was a list of lightsaber forms, and the dates when each padawan had mastered each one. Revan Starfire had been an indifferent pupil, according to the lists, but her marks always improved when she sparred with Padawan Malak D'Reev—

*D'Reev.*

Abruptly, the temperature of the room seemed to drop, and Revan reached for her tea.

“You okay, beautiful?” Carth gave her another strained smile.

“Yes—just—hessi walking over my grave.” She smiled back.

*Hessi.* Another fake memory. Polla had been a tweezer champion, racing Dancer the fake hessi while, (according to this record), Padawan Starfire was mastering the Soresu form of Jedi combat.

Revan remembered Soresu; mainly because the woman who thought she was Polla Organa had never needed to master it at all.

Xxx

“Padawan Organa.” The green Twi'lek folded his arms. “A Makakshi extension is not the response to every attack. We practice the forms in triads for a reason.”

“But I won.” Polla thought she was doing pretty good for someone who’d only been officially studying lightsaber technique for a week.

“Makakshi,” Master Vrook scoffed from the sidelines. No one had invited him, but he'd come anyway—glowering from the sidelines like he was waiting for Polla to fail. “I would hardly consider what that one does to be true Makakshi—she is far too reckless. Already relying upon the Force and not her training—”
“But I won!” Polla Organa flipped her topknot out of her eyes and twirled the double-hilted training saber they’d given her. Across the training floor, her opponent—some Togruta kid who only came up to her shoulders—clambered painfully to his feet. “I won the duel.” She smiled at the Togruta kid. “Nice job there, Shiron.”

“Uh, you too.” The kid’s eyes dropped to the floor.

Polla still felt naked without a blaster, but that summer she’d spent training with vibroblades in survival camp when she was fifteen was paying off. This saber fighting wasn’t child’s play, exactly—but it wasn’t that bad. Easier than running the Defalli asteroid field with a squad of DefSec on your tail.

“Makakshi is a poor defense against sustained blaster fire.” Master Vrook’s lips thinned with disapproval. “To deflect ranged assault, the padawan will need Soresu, which is a Jedi’s primary defensive form.”

“We’ve got all the time in the galaxy to learn that one,” Polla pointed out. “Anyway, when am I gonna have a whole Sith base shooting at me again?”

Taris had been one thing, but hadn’t Bastila said that they were safe now?

“A Jedi is always prepared,” Vrook snapped.

“So’s a registered smuggler, Master—” Now both masters and the other padawan were staring at her. “Besides, Knight Belaya told me combat training takes years. I think I’m doing great for a novice!”

The silence went on long enough that Polla crossed the training ground and patted the Togruta kid on the back. “You want to go again?” she asked him.

“No, thank you.” The kid backed away toward the door.

“If, as you said, there was an entire Sith base firing at you right now, what would you do?” Vrook’s voice was flat.

“Stay behind Bastila.” It had been cool the way The Jedi had deflected the blaster bolts with her blades—even reflecting some back at the shooters—but there was no way Polla was gonna try a stunt like that herself—not yet, anyway. “What the hell else would I—”

Vrook’s arm moved, rising from his belt in a gesture Polla knew all too well, even if he seemed to be moving so slow as to be underwater.

Time elongated. Everything had slowed—the blaster sounds were stretched-out and low; light-beams arcing toward her in lines of red.

Polla’s saber was blazing and lit, catching the plasma bolts in a fan before she even had time to close her mouth. It was only then that she realized Vrook hadn’t been moving slowly at all—and that neither had she.

The bolts she’d parried left marks of char on the stone wall directly above the Jedi master’s head.

I could have killed him, was her first thought, which was foolish, since he’d nearly killed her.

“You asshole!”
“Soresu.” Master Vrook lowered the hold-out Polla hadn’t seen him pull. “Her form is acceptable.”

“Hey! That was cheating!” He could have killed her. But Polla was yelling at empty air because Master Vrook was already walking away. She had to settle for telling his retreating back to get bent in Ryl-sign.

“I’m not sure our friend Vrook ever had an affection for ronto,” Zhar’s amusement was plain—and as much a part of his personality as Vrook’s disdain.

“He tried to kill me!” Polla glared at him. “What the hell was that?”

“You were never in danger. On the contrary,” Zhar said. “I believe Vrook had faith in your ability that I lacked.”

“He has a funny way of showing it! What the hell is this place?”

“A refuge. In kinder times, Padawan Organa, we trained kindly. But the war—and your bond with Bastila—require expedition.” The lines around his smile deepened. "You are both sorely needed for what lies ahead. You must be as prepared to defend her life as she is yours." His head tilted. "Isn't there a part of you that always wanted it to be thus? You will see far more of the galaxy as a Jedi padawan than you ever did as a smuggler."

“I don’t know about that. I saw plenty before.” Mostly spaceports. “Let me guess. You need to stop that asshole who keeps blowing up planets and you think Bastila can do it.” She would never forget the sound of Mission screaming when Taris died—the way it seemed to echo in her head until it was louder than anything she’d ever heard.

“Yes.” The corner of Zhar's eyes crinkled. “You grasp the objective.”

“Yeah, well... I could’ve killed Master Vrook! His fired live bolts and I—” she gestured with the hilt she’d deactivated—pointing to the marks on the stone. “I could’ve killed him!”

Zhar shook his head, a funny smile on his face. “I don't think so.”

Xxx

“Soresu,” Revan muttered. “How the frack could I have been so blind?”

They were all smug bastards, weren't they? Probably went off and had a laugh about their mindwiped experiment doing their fracking bidding!

She exhaled sharply—but her anger felt muffled without the Force to fuel it. There was no point to anger. Not now.

“Beautiful?” Carth looked up from across the room. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about my training.” The tea was getting cold without the Force to keep it warm. A thousand things she’d begun to do as easy as breathing, after Dantooine, but now—

Should they have told me who I was? What would I have done?

Oh, by the way, you're Revan the Betrayer, who took her apprentice to the Unknown Reaches and came back at the head of the Imperial Sith Fleet—but before you betrayed us, we were all pals? Oh, and we need you to track your old pal Malak down and kill him.
“You’re the only one he’ll let close enough.

“Revan?” Carth lowered his voice. “Polla?”

Revan remembered the way the other padawan learners had the tendency to stop speaking when she came into a room, the constant disapproval of Master Vrook Lamar contrasted with the delighted approval from Master Zhar Lestin—

**Master assigned to Padawan Starfire, RSY 9-1154: Zhar Lestin.**

*That space-slug!*

“Remember Zhar Lestin?” she said. “That asshole was my master when I was a kid.”

“No, uh…” Carth cleared his throat. “This section here says Vrook Lamar was.”

“Well Lestin was when I was six,” she snapped. “Maybe I had more than one.”

“You weren't in the Jedi when you were six.” He sounded genuinely confused. “You weren't in the Jedi until 9-154. You were ten years old. It's noted right here—”

“I wasn’t ten in 9-154!” *I was four. No, wait. Deralian to CoruStan. I was… if I’m thirty Deralian, that’s twenty-eight Coru, so….*

It was at that point that Revan realized she had no idea when her real name day was—and then a millisecond later she saw it stamped at the top of a medical record for Padawan Revan Starfire, aged eleven.

The date had passed again, around the time they'd left Manaan.

*Revan Starfire was born five years earlier than they made Polla Organa. Why would the Jedi make me younger?*

Xxx

The birds sang high above in the treetops, and in the distance, Zaalbar could hear the bark of kath. But few forest-dwellers came to this dark place. Even the insects seemed to avoid it.

*A bad place to leave a cub’s ghost.*

**“Wish I could come with you now, Big Z.”** The ghost’s voice sounded wistful.

Under Freyyr’s command, the tribe were in the process of wiring sensors for the Mission-ghost to see more of the forests. Given time, Zaalbar thought they could construct a portable receiver for her that could be wired to the *Ebon Hawk*. Grarwbaar had been assigned to the task. The youngster was quite clever with the engineering of dead metal things. Carth had also engaged in the enterprise.

It would be good when the ghost could journey with them. Even if there was no smell or substance —her voice was a comfort to Zaalbar, like the carving of a tree for the cub he had lost.

“I wish so too, Mission. But you do not have to answer my father’s questions,” he reminded her. “If you prefer to ask questions instead, the Elders have much they can teach, and we will return to you once Polla Revan has been saved.”

Like Zaalbar’s real cub, this simulacrum was easily distracted.
“Naw, it's fun talking to your dad!” she chirped. “Freyyrr’s a real curious guy. This installation doesn't remember designing you guys to be so curious, but I guess that's part of the fun, right? Has Freyyrr ever talked to you about wanting an ocean? Because it's really easier to just find a beach planet than to make one—and I keep telling him that, but he keeps asking!”

Oh, no. Zaalbar had a pretty good idea which inlet his father was pruning with these inquiries.

“Do not help him with any invasions of Trandosha,” he told the Mission-computer’s voice. “At least until I return.”

“If you give me a little more time to set up my remote link, I could help more—”

“Polla Revan is out of time.” Zaalbar had to keep reminding her. Perhaps, no longer being flesh, his cub had forgotten how breakable it was.

“According to the scan my predecessor conducted, I think she’ll have a system failure in a month,” Mission-ghost said. “That Rakatan construct was a little optimistic—I mean, he really, really wants her to live—and so do I! And not just because we were friends before she made you do the... thing.” The holographic image drew a hand across her throat and made choking noises. “But that's why you guys have to help her as fast as possible—”

Mission’s death was not like that, Zaalbar thought. But he didn’t want to remember how it truly happened, so instead he just nodded.

Xxx

“Hey.” Revan tried for a cheerful tone, ignoring the black spots on the edges of her vision. “Captain Obvious. What are you looking at?”

Carth gave an exasperated groan and pushed his console to the side. “Nothing that helps now. You okay?”

Revan glanced up from her own screen, rubbing her eyes. Had he noticed she’d fallen asleep? "Not really. She got up carefully and sat down next to him on the bench. “What’d you find?”

Carth frowned. "Just a lot they don't say. You were born on Hoth, and your surname is Starfire. But there's almost nothing here on your parents, except that your father was a veteran of the Exar Kun wars and your mother was a botanist. A botanist on Hoth... what did she study? Ice lichen? After they died, your mother's sister raised you. She was a swoop jockey, mixed up in the Exchange. Died on Telos."

"Maybe she taught me to race," Revan tried to smile. "Remember? The announcer on Taris did say I was a natural."

"Uh huh. Right before you crashed the bike." Carth's eyebrows raised. "Funny, we were at the same place at the same time. You were seven and I was thirteen. I guess it would have been strange if we'd met then."

"I was seven," Revan echoed, reaching for a memory that had never been. A picture of herself at a birthday party at seven, surrounded by loving parents and grandparents on Deralia.

All a lie. Fake Polla Organa's memory—not mine. Not even the date is real.
"Your aunt got into some bad business. I remember seeing the feeds. They didn't release your name to the press, but there was a picture on the nets. Red-haired girl, crying in the ashes. You were the only survivor of a huge explosion. Illegal stim lab in Ciras City."

"I was seven," Revan had just read the same reports. "Only seven, but I guess I knew the basics about pressurized tanks. The Jedi heard me scream half a planet away when all of those people died."

"You think that you did it on purpose?" The easy smile on his face faded.

"The Jedi thought I didn't mean to kill them—or, not all of them." She rubbed her temples, trying to smile. "Maybe just Aunt Yancy."

"No." Carth shook his head. "It was an accident. Had to be. You wouldn't do it on purpose!"

*Of course not, Carth. Sith Lords don't kill people.* She did not roll her eyes, but her smile was forced. "Jedi had quite a debate about that. Council archives, at the time. You want to watch?"

Revan had dozed off, watching it. It was harder and harder to stay focused, or even care.

*Must be what dying feels like, not caring. All and all, it's not so bad.*

"It wasn't you. We don't know—there must have been a reason. Kids don't just kill people!"

"But I do know." She felt numb. "I was a mass murderer at seven." *Polla the fake was two.* "The lab was on the twelfth floor of an office building. There was a child crèche on the ground level. Luckily it wasn't during working hours, but still, two hundred people died. Fifty of them were younger than I was. How did I survive?"

His voice sounded haunted. "I remember the holos. You'd found an air pocket or something. They dug you out from the rubble."

"I was hiding." Her head hurt. "I think."

Carth frowned. "You remember?"

"Not… clearly. I think so. I'd never… felt anyone die before." Revan looked down at her hands. The dark lines mocked her. "I remember screaming."

*One long scream as all the lights go out—*

The rest was a blank. She couldn't remember what this Aunt Yancy had even looked like.

"You were just a kid." Carth's voice was insistent. "It wasn't your fault."

Revan shook her head from side to side. "The records say there was a fire in my mother’s lab. An unexplained fire."

*My mother. Ma.*

The smiling face she remembered wasn't even real.

Xxx

"Happy birthday, my big girl! You're seven now!"

"Is there cake, Ma?" Seven-year-old Polla Organa closed her eyes and hoped they'd finally gotten
"Do you remember how they died?" Carth's voice was soft. "Your parents?"

They didn't. Their names are Molla and Jasp Organa and they didn't die because they never existed.

"The Council records say they went away and never came back. Research expedition. Ice caves, maybe. Lots of ice caves on Hoth."

Ice. An entire planet's worth.

"I'm going to scan the feed from the Jedi Council," Carth said.

Revan shivered. "You do that." She tossed the plimsi stack she'd been reading over to him. "Scan away. I can take only so much debate about my dark side potential before I even had my permanent teeth."

"You were just a kid!" Her lover paused. "There's a vid here—" Hesitantly, he put his arm around her. "We can watch it together, okay? I'm here."

"Okay." Blind hope in his voice.

Revan closed her eyes, trying to remember the Jedi meditations she'd learned as Polla.

There is only the Force. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no death.

XXX

She raised the mask to her face, felt the weight of it cold on her lips. Familiar weight now. Comforting, substantial. Holograph, a map of stars. Points of light on a grid. Her mind recognized the map of the galaxy, smuggler's memories tracing the hyperspace routes between; but this map was... larger, this map was... detailed, this map was something more.

Behind the map, a vast viewscreen. Larger than any ship she'd ever seen. The real stars, beyond. And ships too, moving like sleepy thranta in flight, swarmed by a thousand tiny fighters, breaking apart like broken toys.

One-by-one, the lights began to go out. Almost in the same millisecond, but frozen, into one long, agonizing scream-

Cold. Be cold as Hoth, she reminded herself. All just points of light. They wink out like stars before a rising sun, but that's all they are. Points of light.

Somewhere, a man was laughing.

Be cold, she reminded herself again.

"Do you feel this, Red?" The voice shook through her skull. "Can you see?"

XXX

Revan jerked awake with a jolt. "Carth?" Her head was on his lap and he'd put on a privacy visor: either to keep from disturbing her, or because he was hiding information.
Carth looked down at her, face a blank oval with the visor, and then pulled it off, revealing the familiar warm eyes, and a mouth twisted with worry. “You were having another nightmare.”

"Don’t humor me. I know you've got some plan to save me. Do me the courtesy of keeping me in the loop.”

"We're… working on it." His voice was wary. "I'd take the Force collar off now if I could—you know that."

I do. "Who can? Suvam Tan?"

"No. It's a Force lock. Only someone trained in the Force can remove it. The Rodian didn't tell me it would kill you. It's not supposed to be killing you. I-I didn't think it could hurt you."

A slow lingering death seems appropriate, doesn't it? Revan felt that end coming now, weaker every day.

His lap was warm, but she made herself leave it, sitting up, back as straight as she could make it. "It's okay, Flyboy. You'd all be free without me. That's for the best."

"Don't even think like that! Ordo and I were up half the night scanning feeds. We just need to find one Force user to help us get that collar off! Trust me, we didn't keep you alive this long just to throw it all away."

Death here is a kindness compared to an execution, or a stasis tank. "Throw it all away on a lingering painful death, that would be, wouldn't it?"

"On any kind of death." Carth leaned over and took her hand, squeezing it hard. "We believe in hope, remember?"

Right. We believe in hope. Hope, and mercy, and love. His words on the Star Forge. "You could take me to Coruscant," Revan offered. “Plenty of Force users there."

Carth's expression darkened. "I finished the transcript. Did you know that the vote to burn Force sensitivity out of your mind at age seven was two hundred and one Council members wanting you brain-dead, twenty-three abstaining, and only one Council member opposed?"

"Then why am I alive?"

"They needed a consensus to act, and they couldn't reach one. That's the only reason. You spent three years being 'reconditioned'—whatever that means—before they admitted you to the Academy. You were ten years old, older than most of the other beginning students."

"Most. But not all of them." Something tugged at her mind, like a whisper.

Not all of them. I was paired with Padawan D'Reev.

"No," Carth cleared his throat. "Malak was twelve. You were paired together, in your apprentice training. Another three hundred-odd files here reference that. Most are locked."

Padawan D'Reev is Malak. But a part of her had… known that all along.

Revan and Malak. Revan Starfire and Malak D'Reev.

Revan stared the screen in front of them. Letters and images blurred. Angrily she punched in a query. Her laughter was bitter, like the taste of ashes in the back of her throat. "All two hundred
and one of those Council members died, Carth. Most of them… about five years ago in the war."

"Lots of people died in the war." His eyes were bleak. He was thinking of Morgana again, maybe. Morgana his wife.

"A capital ship under my command exploded. Equipment malfunction. Seventy-five members of the Jedi Council were aboard."

"You don't know."

"I can't remember, but I know. I know what it feels like, to want revenge. And I read these files before, remember? I must have left them here for a reason. I'm the one who put them there." She leaned forward, reaching for the tea. "Maybe I… maybe I wanted myself to know what a real monster looks like."

"That wasn't you." His voice was tight. "The Jedi did something to your mind. They trained you. They did this."

She laughed. "Maybe they did something to yours—to make you this naive."

"Revan!" Carth grabbed her other hand. He leaned forward, and his stubble scraped her cheek as he pressed her forehead to hers. "This isn't you. I love you. And I know you. You're still you—no matter what happened before."

*I don't remember what happened before. You mean after, Carth. What happened after I knew who I was—*

She'd give anything to be just Polla now. Polla Organa, the Deralian smuggler who never had to think beyond her next run.

"Say… we do save my life. We just need one Force user?" Revan pulled back, pulled her hands away, reaching for the tea she didn't want to have something to do with her hands—only to realize stupidly it wasn't going to levitate into her hands from a meter away. "One Force user who won't try to kill me or turn me in. How hard can that be?"

*Pretty hard. I killed what had to be most of the Sith. The Jedi shattered my identity and programmed this shell in its place—this shell who served her purpose.*

*Who killed Bastila Shan.*

Carth looked away. "We found a… a rumor last night. On Manaan, there's a Jedi—maybe not exactly a Jedi, but someone who might help. Someone who wouldn't betray you to the Jedi Council or the Republic. We think."

Revan had to laugh. "Convenient. I'm banned from Manaan. And they scan everything: retinas, brainwaves, handprints. We're all banned from the planet. You too, Carth. And Zaalbar. You were both with me when I killed their god. Maybe Canderous could get in, but not in the Ebon Hawk. Even if we forge false landing codes, she's still a conspicuous ship."

"We're… working on all of that." His smile was strained, creasing lines in his face she didn't remember before Korriban. "I've seen worse odds with you."

Hard to meet his eyes. Revan bent back to their screen, pulling up a random holo from the decoded archives on the central viewscreen so that neither of them needed to talk.
Two children faced each other across a training mat. The girl was slight and red-haired, the boy broad-shouldered and tall, his face framed by a cap of curly hair that kept falling in his eyes—

Revan heard herself gasp.

"Is that—?" Carth sounded as startled as she was.

"Yes." Like a kick in the guts, she just knew.

Even half grown, Malak loomed over her younger self, the planes of his face still soft and young; a pleased smile stretching across his perfectly unremarkable mouth.

"You're looking at me again. We're supposed to be concentrating." The smile changed to a mock scowl, but his boy's expression was amused.

"You've grown, I was just noticing." Child-Revan ducked her head.

"My mother was a heavy-worlder. Of course, I've grown. You've grown yourself. You're not quite as scrawny as you used to be." The boy got up, stretching lazily, tugging at the belt on his robe.

"Scrawny?" the girl snorted. "I grew two centimeters last month. And I made First in Makakshi Class last week."

"First in a class full of five-year-olds?" He was taunting her, even though his voice was perfectly even. "I thought for sure by now you'd be promoted. Jedi Knight at least."

"And leave you behind?" She smiled at him. "You know what they say. The more gargantuan they are, the longer it takes them to learn the forms...."

The boy sighed. "Seriously, if you want to be a padawan like me, you've got to focus. Master Shandar told me the masters say you don't try. What if they send you away?"

"They won't send me away. I asked, last month. They said no. Something about untrained Force users being a danger to themselves." Revan scowled. "I hated it here when you were gone on that mission. I hate everything about this place except you."

The boy's face turned serious. "You don't hate. Remember. You're too young to understand why yet—but you will."

"Oh yeah? When you were twelve like me, you were crying for your mother!"

"I'm not twelve now."

Revan walked over to him. Her head came up to his chest.
"No," she said. "You're not. And I'll be thirteen next month."

XXX

"Polla Organa had just turned eight," Revan felt nauseous.

"Pol—beautiful—" Carth took her hand and squeezed it.

He still did that, called her by that false name. Sometimes Revan didn't notice. Now wasn't one of those times.

“Nice save,” she muttered.

XXX

Malak looked down at her, one eyebrow raised. "You're still too young for this—and for me."

"Only right now." Revan looked up at him. She crooked one hand—

XXX

*Using her hand as a focus—she was afraid before. Now she isn't.*

“She was afraid before,” she told Carth. “I. I was afraid before.”

“What?” His voice was soft.

“I was afraid to use the Force. Before. But then he—”

"Then he was there. Malak. You two were close." Carth swallowed. "We... we knew that."

XXX

"Quiet. I need to concentrate." Behind Revan, the pile of stones she’d been afraid to balance all day spun into an intricate pattern.

"Not bad," Malak said. "Can you hold them still?"

"But they want to move."

"It's relative." He smiled down at her. "They're in the Force either way—just slow them down."

Above their heads, the stones all froze, hanging in mid-air.

"Good job. For a novice."

"Novice, huh?" Revan's eyes narrowed. She put her hand on Malak's arm. "We've had enough practice. You want to go to Spacer's Cantina with me."

Malak's eyes glazed a little. "Enough practice, we'll go to Spacer's—hey!" His heavy arm reached out with Force-enhanced speed and twisted hers behind her back, pinning her between him and the wall.
It hurt. Revan gasped. The stones clattered behind them.

"Don't do that Rev," Malak snapped. "To anyone, especially not me."

Xxx

It hurt, but the girl had a gobsmacked expression that Revan recognized.

_I remember looking at Therion like that. Maybe that's one mercy in this fracked galaxy. Therion D'Cainen isn't real._

Xxx

"Do what?" Revan batted her lashes, looking up sideways at Malak. She tossed her hair back —

Xxx

Like Seriina _Starr and Thanto Moons in those_ holo-vids we used to watch on Derra City— “Is there an actress called Seriina Starr?” Revan asked Carth.

He put his hand on her forehead. “You're burning up!”

“Seriina's not real” she whispered. “Maybe I'm not either.”

Xxx

Malak's lip curled in disgust and he dropped her arm immediately: crossing his arms and turning his back.

"Sometimes I worry about you," he muttered, staring at the wall. "I thought maybe, with me being away, you'd grow up a little, take things more seriously."

"I am serious. I don't want to be a Jedi. Would you still like me, if I left the Order? Other people leave all the time. They go on and have lives and be whatever they want. Why can't I? We'd—still be friends, wouldn't we?"

"Probably not. You'd be a cantina waitress, or a swoop mechanic and I'd be off saving the galaxy. We'd have nothing in common."

"Hey! I'd be a fighter pilot, or an Admiral... or something."

Malak turned around to look at her. "Rev, you can't shoot or fly your way past level one in the fighter sims. Face it, there's one talent you have and that's the Force."

"I'm sick of it!" She kicked one of the stones. "It's too strong. It's stupid!"

"It's why we're Jedi," he argued back. "It's all that we are. You have to let it in. Learn control."

"You can't hide from destiny, child." Master Vandar's voice broke in, interrupting them. The cam drew back, outlining the short Jedi Master in the doorway "Padawan D'Reev is right. The Force has some purpose with you. Accept this, and your training will begin."
Revan scowled. "I accept it all the time, but all you do is say that I don't!"

The Jedi closed his eyes for a moment, wrinkling his ears. "Patience."

"When is Vrook coming back?" The girl's voice whined. "I miss Vrook."

"Master Vrook has important work to do on behalf of the Council. You know this."

I missed Vrook?

Revan heard herself snort incredulously.

"Seriina Starr is real," Carth said out of the blue. "I remember thinking she was the hottest thing since turbo engines when I was a kid. But that was three or four faces ago. That woman has had more cosmet surgery than a Coruscanti senator."

"What?" Revan held onto his hand, but the world was slipping away—

Revan wasn't supposed to be angry, but she was. Master Vandar pretended to be nice; but he was the one in charge—the one who told Jedi to come and go on Dantooine. He was the one who kept sending them away from her.

"You've sent Vrook away just like you sent Malak. You send everyone away from me!"

"Revan," Malak's voice sounded so young. "Show respect."

She glared at both of them and lifted her hand. The stones rose again and began to spin, so fast they were almost a blur. "You want me to control the Force? Fine! It's easy!"

Master Vandar drew his lightsaber.

Revan raised an eyebrow in surprise, took a step backward.

"Keep the stones spinning," the old Jedi said, and advanced.

"I'm unarmed," She wanted to cower behind Malak, but he stood there, just watching.

"Do you really think I'll hurt you?" Vandar's ears twitched, and his eyes were half-lidded. Deceptively sleepy.

"This is a test?" Her voice came out in an alarmed squeak. The stones scattered across the floor.

Vandar stopped his advance and looked up at her, his lightsaber burning between them. "Try closing your eyes, Novice Starfire," he said quietly. "And make the stones spin again."

His eyes were half-lidded and calm.

Revan swallowed hard and nodded.
“Just a kid,” Carth said. He put his arm around her again. “You were just a kid. What is that?”

Revan thought of Vrook shooting at her with those damned plasma bolts.

“Training.”

She felt the whir of electrical energy brush against her arm and her cheek—so close that one twitch would send her into the blade’s path.

Revan blinked. I felt. I knew that one twitch would send me into his blade, but I knew he’d never hurt me—

Xxx

"Open your hands," Vandar said. The girl on the vid brought them forward, palms up in front of her.

Xxx

I did. I brought them forward, palms up in front of me—my eyes were closed—

Her fingers closed around something smooth and round—training stave. The lightsaber hummed close to her ear and she smelled the scorch of her own hair. Her hands closed over the object in her hands she instinctively reached for the end of it—searching for the hilt. It wasn’t there. The sharp blade cut her fingers she ran her hand back up to the center, recognized the balance for what it was.

She’d never trained with a double-bladed staff before. The weight was different. The stances—she kept both hands on the pommel and tilted it up towards the sound of Vandar's saber coming towards her. It clashed, particle energy meeting cortosis.

Somewhere, not with her eyes, she felt the stones still spinning.

"Keep your eyes closed," Master Vandar intoned, and Revan did, reaching out somehow with a sense that had nothing to do with her eyes, seeing the room, and Malak and the old Jedi levitating before her, lightsaber held close against the back of her neck.

"Block," Vandar said quietly, and even without seeing, she felt his yellow blade swung forward. Vibroblade met particle with a hiss and a clash of metal. Revan shifted her stance to a defensive one.

Again and again, the yellow blade hissed, and again, and again, her vibroblade met it.

"Malak," Vandar said, quietly. An entire command was in her friend's name.

Xxx

My friend. My friend who would never hurt me.

“Revan?”

Presumably, the concern in Carth's voice was because her eyes were closed. Revan didn't know how to tell him it didn't matter. She didn't have to see this part.

She hadn’t before—that has been the point of the exercise.
Revan could hear the reluctance in Malak’s steps as he came forward, the snap-hiss when his blue lightsaber ignited. The stones faltered. Revan’s hands shook. Malak was stronger than she was, and Vandar’s attacks had not stopped.

She closed her eyes more tightly, willing herself not to open them, feeling him looming on her flank. The stones spun raggedly now.

She spun to meet the hiss of his first cut, one edge of her sword catching his strike a hairsbreadth from her shoulder. She slanted the blade and met Vandar’s thrust with the other end. She was sweating now, and every muscle was tensed.

“Relax,” Malak murmured. “Don’t be afraid.” His voice was gentle, as his blade bore down again and again. She blocked it, again and again, and Vandar’s too—for hours it seemed—until the effort itself became a dance.

The stones spun evenly again, and Revan moved in a place that was a balance of motion and stillness. She could see, somehow, where the attacks would fall and how to counter them. Her breathing was smooth and even and controlled.

Eventually, after what seemed like days—or years—the attacks stopped.

"Open your eyes, Padawan Starfire."

Revan did, blinking a little at the sudden brightness. Her vibroblade was loose in her hands.

Master Vandar looked up at her, his kind face smiling.

Sunlight streamed in from a window. Her mind felt as blank and new as an ice pond.

The old Jedi chuckled. "You may let the stones go now, padawan."

"Oh." Revan’s voice felt hoarse. Her mouth was very dry and suddenly she trembled, muscles aching with an exhaustion that caught her completely by surprise. The stones clattered to the floor. Her vibroblade followed, milliseconds after. She wiped her hands on her robe.

"The double-blade suits you,” Malak said and caught her in a clumsy hug. He smelled like sweat and boy and Revan burrowed her face in his chest.

"Yes," Master Vandar said. "It does. Out of fashion, but I’ll tell Zhar to give you a hilt for one. You know that you must set the crystal alone.

Revan nodded. Her thoughts were jumbled. She was excited, and so very tired. Had she wanted to leave the order? Never feel the Force again? She felt it around her now, singing to her. The rest of it—even Malak and her promotion to padawan—seemed secondary compared to that song.

"You did very well," her best friend whispered. His hands released her, and she took a step back, staring up at him.

"Every test is different," Vandar added. "Young Malak needed to learn the art of diplomacy. You needed to learn to trust what you feared. Do you understand?"

"I will try to understand, Master Vandar.” Revan bent her head.

"An honest answer," the old Jedi chuckled and bowed to her. She returned the bow, blushing a
little. Padawan! Her! Revan, the hopeless case of the Academy! She struggled to keep the excitement from showing on her face.

Vandar laughed and waved his hand. "Go! Wash up. Nourish yourself! When you are ready, go to Zhar and begin the next step in your journey."

"Yes, Master Vandar." Revan bowed again and went to the door. Malak started to follow her.

"Young Malak, a word." Vandar said.

Her best friend stopped.

XXX

"Revan?" Someone's hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake. Carth's worried voice. "You fell asleep."

It took a second for everything to come back—the image was so vivid in her mind. That moment when she stopped fighting the Jedi, and the joy she'd felt at their acceptance, the pride she'd felt at making Malak happy; and the way the Force had welcomed her, like an old friend. It was disorienting because the image was still frozen on the console in front of her: Malak and Vandar in the room, her vibrosword on the floor, stones scattered carelessly around it in a pattern like stars.

Revan looked up slowly and found Carth watching her, his eyes earnest and a little sad. "I remember it," she said, surprised to find it true. "Malak, and Vandar. My padawan test."

"You weren't such a bad kid." Carth reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Though I can't say I approve of Jedi training methods, they could have killed you!"

She tried to match the smile on his face. "About the only thing I knew was that they wouldn't kill me, Carth. Jedi don't kill their students. I could have been hurt, accidentally, but they'd never—Malak and Vandar—would never—" She swallowed hard, remembering Malak's face on the Star Forge when he came at her—nothing left in those eyes but hate. "It was only a test."

"There's a more on the vid," Carth said.

"There is?" Revan frowned and tapped the screen. The images moved again, Malak and Vandar, talking alone in that empty room.

XXX

"I know what you're going to say, Master." Malak looked down at the floor.

XXX

It was strange seeing such a chastised expression on such a large face, especially next to the tiny Jedi.

XXX

"I must still say it," Vandar replied. "You shouldn't have given her instruction. That peace was something Revan needed to find within herself, not from you."

"But you made her a padawan anyway. What do you want from me, Master? You sent me away, giving me a lecture about not becoming too close. You bring me back and instruct me
to stay with her. How can you say we're linked and then stop me from helping? She was so close to breaking! I know that you felt it, just as I did!"

"With great power must come great control, padawan. You both have such potential, but Revan is… a special case. You've never been told how she came to the Order."

"She told me," Malak's voice was angry. "What of it. She made a fire when she was seven, it burned out of control. She didn't know any better. No one was hurt."

"That's what she told you?" Master Vandar's face was expressionless, and he began to tell Malak the truth.

XXX

Blast you, Vandar! "Did he die on the Star Forge assault? I remember… he commed the ship—the fool thought we were on his side at first—"

“He was on the Wayland Destiny with Admiral Dodonna. Yes.” Carth’s hands tightened hard on hers. “Vandar died.” He held her as if she might break. His voice hesitated. "You're remembering now."

"A little. Pieces. I was just a kid.” Revan Starfire was just a kid once. Then she grew up—

"You really wanted to pilot a fighter?” Carth laughed. "You're the worst gunner I've ever seen. That time we let you man the turrets on the jump to Dantooine? If Zaalbar hadn't taken over, we'd be space dust."

"I know." Revan grimaced. "I thought I knew how to handle myself. I remembered doing it before."

"I think we've seen enough for now.” Carth stroked her hair, pulling her close. "You know, your hair's growing in. I ever tell you that I like redheads?"

Revan blinked, suddenly remembering the feeling of seeing her hair fall out, strands covering her dark-spotted hands.

XXX

The Dark side's price isn't so high, she'd thought, coolly amused. She turned her head and looked—down—


XXX

"You mentioned it, Flyboy.” Revan tried to match Carth’s tone, banish the ghosts from her past. All she could see of the man in her memory were those burning yellow eyes. "So—Manaan. You're saying we need to go to Manaan. And get them to let us into Ahto City, which will be impossible."

"We're working on it, I told you."

"You haven't told me anything."
"Well, it's—" her pilot seemed to hesitate. "We still have some details to iron out. "And you... you need to preserve your strength."

"There's something in your plan I won't like," she guessed. "Or you think I won't like." Revan gestured at the vid screen. "What aren't you telling me? I know you've restricted my net access."

Carth still hesitated. "Do you trust me?"

"Obviously." This time she couldn't cover her yawn.

"As soon as it's finalized, I'll tell you." Carth's hand brushed against her cheek and his arms tightened around her.

"You don't want to upset me," Revan closed her eyes again, exhausted. "That's why you're blocking my access to the nets. You don't want to upset me about what they're saying—especially when I'm on my deathbed."

"No!" He was overdoing the outrage. "First of all, you just need rest. You're not dying. And when we know for sure—I promise I'll tell you."

"You'd better." She was drained as if reading a few archive records had taken all of her strength. "I'll know if you're lying."

"You can still tell when I'm lying?" He sounded surprised. "I thought that was a Force trick you did."

Revan snorted indelicately. "You're holding onto me so tight I can't breathe, flyboy. Yeah, I can tell."

XXX

"Did you tell her?" Canderous asked as Carth cracked open the pantry in the Hawk's small galley. They'd started making ship rations for Revan again, after a dinner cooked from Kashyykyk's local flora left her sick and covered in hives.

"We agreed not to give her details." Carth gritted his teeth and popped open a bulb of nutra-milk, slipping in the sedatives that the Mandalorian had assured him were safe. "But I told her we were going to Manaan."

Canderous scoffed. "Fur-sheb owes me a hundred credits. He said you wouldn't crack."

"That's all I said. I didn't say... who. Or-or what—what's going on there."

"There's another vid on the wide-bands." Canderous shrugged. "From Telos. Even worse than the first one."

"The vids don't matter. She's worse. We're running out of time." The recordings that he and Revan had watched today haunted Carth. That confidant red-headed kid with the galaxy at her feet bore little resemblance to the dying woman in the next room from him, but in her childish face he saw too much of the woman he'd fallen in love with.

He saw Polla's bravery. Her pride. And more than a little of her fire.

*That bastard Malak. They grew up together. I knew—there were rumors about them in Fleet—and I knew when I saw him on Leviathan. That's when I knew that Saul hadn't lied. All in Malak's laugh.*
The way Revan froze, the way she looked at him like she was waking up from a dream.

Revan Starfire and Malak D’Reev. They were the best of the Jedi. The worst. And she was in love with him.

Over the last few months, Carth had begun to understand how much love and hate could stand as sides of the same coin. He wondered if that had been what had shifted D’Reev to the Dark in the first place. Maybe that was how it began for Jedi just like it did for grunts. You love someone so much, you’ll do anything—anything—to save them.

Revan and Malak been just kids in those vids, but what they’d become was all there, laid out like a bad map of the galaxy. They’d been kids with power. Kids who could float rocks. Kids who moved so fast that the recording only showed a blur. Even as kids, Carth didn’t think he could have taken either of them in a melee.

Just kids? Just kids like Dustil was, on Korriban.

Mission had sworn she’d gotten Carth’s son on that damn ship away from Dreshdae. But there was no word of Dustil or any of the other Sith students anywhere now… just that damned woman Yuthura Ban, telling her story on the vids.

That damned woman might know something about Dustil too.

“Onasi?” Canderous’s voice nudged him back to the present. “You’re running on empty. You want me to take the food to her?”

“No, I got it.” Carth forced his thoughts back in line like good soldiers. “Revan’s weak,” he said slowly. “But she’s better. Her mind… she’s not raving anymore. She’s sleeping better too.”

“She’s not fighting the tranq as much,” Canderous agreed. “Could be tolerance. Or, she’s getting weaker—”

“Polla’s better,” Carth insisted. All that they’d been through, it had to count for something. He’d make it count. “Her mind’s better. She’s more… she’s snapping out of it. What she did with the computer in the Shadowlands… I think it gave her some peace.” Her and Zaalbar, at least. Canderous refused to speak about it the copy of Mission Vao. And Carth… Carth was trying to pretend that his comm-link flashing with messages from a dead Twi’lek kid was normal. The recording of Mission barraged him with questions he couldn’t answer—just like the girl had herself.

Why is Big Z so sad? Why won’t Canderous answer my pings? When are you guys gonna give me a mobile receiver so I can come with you?

Why are the Trandoshans such sniveling cowards that they have to hunt in packs? Why doesn’t anyone hunt them in packs?

Why did you put a Force collar on Polla Revan in the first place?

Why did she make Big Z kill me?

“So… the Telosian vid,” Canderous changed the subject so abruptly that Carth knew the man was reserving judgment on Revan’s improvement. “You gotta see it. With a stiff drink, first.”

“Not sure I feel like watching anything about Telos.”
“Oh, it’s not about Telos.” Canderous chuckled. “Think that’s where the producers were from—or something. Hate to knock your pride, but you’re hardly in it at all, Republic.”

“Good,” Carth muttered. “Less of a hyper-loop wreck, then?”

Canderous shook his head. “Hah! No.”

XXX

“You woke me up for this?” Revan fought back a yawn. “This is the ship we're taking to Manaan?”

The ship in front of them had been a Czerka supply carrier once. Now, all insignia had been stripped from its dull metal hull. It was too big to be graceful, and too clunky to be more than pirate-bait in open space--built on the cheap and meant to be one in a line of carriers with an escort train. Polla Organa’s fictional father would have called it a piece of corporate Kuati space-junk, and Revan herself couldn't disagree.

She yawned again. “We could have modified the Hawk.”

“Too conspicuous,” Zaalbar growled.

"Well," Canderous added dubiously, "I guess it’ll fly. Where’s the cannon?"

"It’s a Czerka freighter," Revan shrugged. "Doesn't have any."

Carth’s easy smile faded slightly. He and Zaalbar was covered in oil and singed fur. "She’s faster than she looks. We made some modifications to her hypercore. She’ll move, if she needs to."

"If we're going to Manaan in a freighter, shouldn't we have cargo?" Revan's head pounded, and she wanted to sit down. It was a week later, and she felt weaker than ever. The walk up the platforms to the docking bays had left her winded. She tugged at the neck of her vest and pushed her visor up again, hiding her eyes from the glare.

Canderous noticed her swaying a little and reached out an arm to steady her.

Revan took it, trying not to feel ashamed of the weakness, trying to match their enthusiasm for her supposed rescue. They worked so hard on this. They hated to disappoint them by dying.

"We do," Zaalbar said. "Tach glands and kinrath venom. One of the Czerka stores wasn't looted."

"Ah," Revan nodded and then translated the Wookiee's words for Canderous. "Might as well make a profit while we're at it. We're short on credits. I looked."

They all glared at her.

"A joke," she said. "Really!" She hadn't really looked. She'd been much too tired.

Zaalbar's nose wrinkled as he yowled. "My people will have to establish exports if we want any dealings with outsiders, Polla Revan. But they have not reached for that branch. They help us now only because I asked."

Revan was suddenly ashamed of her carelessness. "I'm sorry, Zaalbar, this is a big risk for you. Are you sure you want to mix Kashyyyk diplomatic affairs with my problems?"

Zaalbar groaned back at her. "There is no choice. The Mission-ghost and I have been over several
scenarios. This one has the only chance of success."

"We still don't know how the three of us will be able to get through security. And you still haven't
told me who this mysterious Force-user is. And you're still blocking my access to the nets too.
Why?"

Canderous sighed. "They have reasons, Revan."

She frowned. It nagged at her that she wasn't fighting harder, that they were getting away with
whatever it was, but a part of her just didn't give a frack. "Where's HK?"

"Loading the rest of the cargo."

"Yeah, I bet. He's going to be busy all morning until we leave, then hypno-sleep for me, so I don't
get sick when we jump… then, when we're landing on Manaan, perhaps you'll tell me the rest of
your plan—when it's too late for me to stop it? What could there possibly be that you don't want
me to know? You're not going to turn me into the authorities, are you?"

"I'm a warrior," Canderous shrugged. "I don't make these plans up, I just execute them."

"Nice choice of words," Revan muttered. "Execute. I love Manaan's prison, I got to spend so much
time there. That smell: salt water and fish breath. I can hardly wait."

"Trust us, beautiful," Carth said. "We'll tell you everything when we dock on Manaan. Want the
grand tour of the ship? We've given you the captain's quarters."

Revan walked over to him and took his arm. Politely, he didn't seem to notice how heavily she was
leaning on him, or the pallor in her face.

She had to admit that the quarters were nice enough; although she wouldn't be awake long enough
to enjoy them.

XXX

"I should come with you, there's no telling what trouble you'll get into on your own." Bastila glared
at her.

"I told you already, no. Place is crawling with Sith and you're a target." Polla snapped the buckles
of her Republic jumpsuit in place and strapped the lightsaber to her thigh. Frowning, she added a
blaster to her belt.

"You look like a Jedi in a really poor disguise," Bastila said. "Do you think anyone will be fooled
by that silly costume?"

"Probably not, but I'm no one. You, on the other hand, have the fate of the galaxy in your hands.
That's why you're staying on the ship. Guard the others. I'm only bringing HK. You and Mission
nearly died on Kashyyyk. We can't lose you, Bastila. You're too important."

"Just who do you think is in charge here, you or me?"

"Let the kid go, Bastila." Jolee leaned against the doorway, eyebrows raised. Polla wondered how
long he'd been standing there. "She's right, no one will recognize her. You're way too visible. And
Polla's proven herself. Let her get the lay of the docks then and report in. We'll know what to
expect soon enough."
Bastila scowled and began to argue.

Polla Organa shrugged and walked away from them both. She tilted her head at HK and he followed her down the deck, clutching his blaster in his hands. She tried to ignore the hopeful bloodthirsty gleam in his metal eyes.

**Come alone, the datapad had said.**

Perhaps there was a clue—or at least a good business opp. She couldn't afford to pass it up.

Later, when Carth and Jolee had to bail her out of the Ahto jail for insulting a Sith (who'd started it), Polla Organa decided that she hated Manaan. Between the Republic, the Sith, the sanctimonious Selkath, and a guild of mysterious assassins trying to recruit her—not to mention the smell—it was a fracking pest-hole. Polla could tell that much after only four hours.

Five days later, after she'd managed to send a man to his death, destroy the one source of the healing herb kolto in the entire galaxy, and wipe out an entire Sith Embassy, her opinion of the planet had not improved.

Shattered, they set a course for Korriban but were caught in Saul Karath's web instead.

And then everything she'd believed turned into a lie.

XXX

For some reason, Revan woke up smiling. All things considered, things could be worse. And here was Carth, carefully dabbing her arm in the place where the wake-up stim had pressed.

Carth looked adorable in his pilot's jumper, face freshly shaved, hair combed back. He had a pile of black clothes with him. She reached for them. The way the fabric shimmered in her hands, reminded her of something that she couldn't quite place. It didn't matter. It would be soft on her skin and Revan was sure this would be a good day. How could it not be? Here she was on Manaan, about to be cured. Her brave companions had a top-secret plan to save her! Why worry?

She giggled.

"Um," her lover said. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" she said brightly. Everything was crisp and clean, especially around the edges.

She slipped out of the blankets and examined the clothing he'd brought more closely. What a funny joke this was, her robes from the Star Forge! Well, they were really nice after all, even if they hung a bit loosely now. Maybe she could find a belt or something… she slipped them on over her head.

"Nice." She nodded her approval. "That will be all, Carth. Leave me. I need to fix my hair."

She looked around for a mirror but there were none.

"I need a mirror," she added, a little impatiently. He should anticipate these things.

"Um," he said again. "I think I gave you too much stim."

"Stim?" She blinked.

"Sit down, Revan. I need to tell you the rest of it."
She frowned at him. "Oh, I think I understand. We're on Manaan. Some Force user is going to take off this collar, so I don't die. You figured out a way to get us past security. We have cargo to trade, so the venture will be profitable. And, if none of that works, I still have a secret connection here with an ancient order of assassins called the Genoharadan. They owe me. What else would I need to know?"

She beamed at him. His eyes were golden-brown, and that worry line between his eyebrows was really charming.

"Um..." he said. "Wait. Secret order of who?"

Revan put a finger to her lips. "Shush," she said. "It's a secret! I wasn't supposed to tell." She shrugged, laughing because it was funny. "But you know what? The Rodian, whatshisname, said no one would believe me anyway."

"Definitely too much stim," Carth muttered. He sat down on the bed and took her hands. "Listen, beautiful, here's the plan..."

It was probably the stims, but Revan thought the plan sounded pretty good. She only balked when he urged her to wear her lightsaber. Carth had to call Canderous in, and they convinced her to carry a vibroblade at least because really, it wouldn't be appropriate for them not to be armed on a planet full of fish pacifists.

She sat on the bed, swinging her legs back and forth while the men whispered furiously amongst themselves for a while. The edges of the happy feeling wore a little thin, but Revan still felt pretty good. She didn't even protest when they sprayed white make-up on her face and drew Sith tattoos with a tiny brush.

Canderous was really good at details, she thought, admiring herself in the mirror she'd insisted upon having. And her hair was growing in, which was a relief. Her eyes blinked back at her hazily—yellow Sith eyes, with only a trace of green.

XXX

Alarms went off as they approached the Customs gate. But the Selkath behind the desk didn't even look surprised.

"Name?" He sounded bored.

"Darth Revan Starfire, Dark Lord of the Sith," Revan said.

"Right," the Selkath muttered. "We never should have released those identity prints to the nets. But who knew they'd be so easy to duplicate?" He gave her a patient look, waving a flipper. "It's a formality, Lord Revan, but could I see your identity chips and the names under which you and companions are traveling?"

"Oh, that," Revan shrugged. "Numu—something? I think my slaves have the chips somewhere."

The Selkath glanced at Carth and Zaalbar, his gills fading green with a hint of surprise. Carth was wearing a Mandalorian battlesuit and helmet, and Zaalbar was wearing a blaster. "That's odd," the Selkath official muttered to himself. "I'm getting a match for you both as well."

"Lord Revan is very thorough." The helmet distorted Carth's voice; made it into a stranger's.

"More than most contenders," the Selkath murmured. "Where did you find the Wookiee?"
"We have a life debt," Revan was beginning to tire of this pointless delay. "Can we go now?"

"Certainly," the Selkath said. "Welcome to Manaan. Enjoy your stay. The Sith Embassy is—"

If she'd actually had the Force, he would have been fried. Revan tried to convey the threat with her eyes. "I know where it is," she snapped. "Don't mock me, fish breath."

"Wouldn't dream of it," The Selkath became suddenly busy with something on his desk.
The Telosian Version

Chapter 4 / The Telosian Version

The floors of the Ahto City Promenade were polished to a serpent’s sheen, waxed and slippery. Ceega-gulls circled overhead like greedy beggars, swooping in and out of Carth’s line of sight.

_They’re just birds, Onasi._ Carth was so on edge that he had to remind himself not to duck, grab Revan, and roll for cover.

They’d made it through Customs, but that was only the first hurdle ahead. At least Revan seemed oblivious to the minefield they were strolling through. She was even humming softly under her breath.

Carth kept a firm grip on her arm, keeping her walking in a straight line. Ordo’s armor felt too loose, and he hated the lack of peripheral vision the helm gave him. Printed readouts from the suit scrolled across his vision in Mandalorian, which he only half understood. He should have asked Ordo how to turn them off.

Revan's arm felt like a twig in the glove’s sensors. He was glad Revan hadn't seen herself before they painted her face. Block patterns had formed where the dark lines of Force energy merged, like blood clotting under cold, gray skin.

If it weren’t for the flashes of Polla’s old humor and grace, Carth might have believed the woman he loved was gone forever. But then, she’d turn to look at him, or say something, and he’d see her again: his fearless smuggler, his Jedi hero. Polla—

_Revan,_ Carth reminded himself. _It's just a name._

If only that were true.

“What kind of birds are those?” Revan tugged on his arm, full of unnatural energy. She was actually laughing.

“Ceega gulls,” he muttered. “We had them on Telos.”

“Oh.” She nodded, her eyes skittering across the platform to focus on something else. Her head turned, and she took three more steps forward dragging him along behind.

_I didn't save you to die like this,_ Carth told the back of her head silently. _Damn Canderous and his stims._ Although Carth had to admit they’d had little choice. _At least she's not in pain, she was screaming in her sleep these last few weeks, screaming in her sleep all the way from Kashyyyk to Manaan._

When he and Canderous hadn't been catching up on the galaxy’s reports of their demise, (Zaalbar had lost interest after the first vid), Carth had spent the trip reviewing the Jedi’s data and the holos from her files—those they’d already seen.

The rest were locked. In the weeks it took to reach Manaan Carth had tried hundreds of passwords, phrases—even songs—hoping to hit on the right one that could unlock the files she'd downloaded into her assassin droid. No doubt HK would rat him out—if Revan lived long enough to care.
As much as he'd told her the past didn't matter—it did. The destruction of Telos, Morgana’s death, every friend he'd lost in the war against the Sith stood between them like ghosts—and had, ever since Saul’s cracked voice had whispered the truth of her identity in his ear.

On Korriban, Carth had convinced himself Saul was wrong: that his girl wasn't Revan—that she’d been Polla—Polla Organa—who’d saved Dustil and all those other kids too. That she was the same hero he'd followed since Taris. The woman he loved. He’d convinced himself that the Jedi had saved her. Hell, at the time he’d thought he’d convinced her too.

On Lehon, he'd learned he'd been tragically wrong.

On the Star Forge, Carth had planned on shooting her. Point blank, from a distance, before she had a chance to blink. So, he’d hitched a ride with the Republic’s last demo crew, then ran down the Star Forge decks looking for the _Hawk_, so he could do what he’d lacked the guts to do before. He knew the station would blow—knew it in his bones the second he saw the battle in the skies.

He knew she wouldn’t leave the station on another ship. There was none better than their _Hawk_. She loved it as much as he did.

_Make an end_, he’d told himself.

He'd run through echoing plats, stepping over the bodies of dead or dying sents, circling an endless curve of hangar bays. And then, there she was.

Revan’s eyes were just as yellow and crazed as every other Sith they’d killed. And she was almost… glowing, as if the energy of that Force-damned place was _in_ her. Cast in her shadow, Bastila was a stooped and broken thing already—but she too shone with that same dark corona, her glittering face tinged with a scarlet glow.

He’d known then he was too late. A blaster wouldn't stop either of them. Maybe nothing short of the station’s explosion could stop them.

_Time_, Carth had thought. _I need to buy time. Let the demo team set their charges, blow the core._

He’d said the first words that sprang to mind. Sure, they'd been true, but that didn't matter. Truth or lies were all the same in the end. _I love you. I always said I’d save you, Revan. Even from yourself. I know you’re still in there, Freckles. I’m not giving up_ —

Carth had never expected to live, but Revan had killed Bastila and saved him. When he picked up her broken body, he’d thought she was dead too.

Of course, he couldn't tell her that, not now. Maybe not ever.

Right now, she looked half out of her mind, stumbling over the salt-sprayed deck plates of the promenade.

"We're not really going to the Sith Embassy," he reminded her, as Revan turned down the main hall, forcing him to follow.

"I know!" Polla's bright smile in that ravaged face. The face paint made her look inhuman. Under the red visor, her eyes were colorless and blank. She was breathing too hard as if stims were the only thing keeping her upright.

C Barth patted her back, lowering his voice. "Just keep walking, beautiful, you're doing fine."
“I am walking,” she said. “Can’t you tell I’m walking?”

“Yes. Just… keep doing it.”

Zaalbar groaned his concern, and Revan just laughed.

Canderous had already debarked and registered himself as the official owner of the freighter. The plan was, they’d meet him at the Dunkside Cantina, and then check into their hotel. Send Zaalbar into the Republic Embassy to look for Ban. Rare as Wookiees were, he was the least recognizable of all them. To most sents, Wookiees looked alike.

Carth tried to ignore the twist of apprehension in his gut at being this close a Fleet outpost. Apprehension—and regret. He’d never rejoin the Fleet. They’d won, but everything he’d worked for his entire life was gone.

Zaalbar growled over Revan's head at him. "People are staring," the Wookiee chuffed.

"We expected that." Carth pulled his attention back to their surroundings. Smell of salt air and fish; the sound of the waves below them. Republic soldiers, Selkath, random travelers from other worlds. Even without kolto, Manaan hadn't changed.

And there. Sith. Three Imperial grunts in uniform walked past them, close enough to kill.

One turned her head their way—and laughed.

"Hey!" Revan called out. She stopped walking. “Hey! You! Ensign!"

Damn. Way too much stim, it's made her stupid.

The Sith ignored her, but she didn't let it go. Revan twisted her arm from Carth’s grasp in one smooth movement and ran up to them, a little clumsy on her feet; but still moving with the arrogance and grace that was so unmistakably her own.

"What do you want?" The female soldier looked at her disdainfully.

"That should be, what do you want, my Lord?" Revan told her. “Show some respect.”

The woman sneered. "Right. My Lord. Darth Revan. How can I be of assistance? You should really get back to the Embassy and join the other hopefuls."

"I want to ask a question," Revan said.

Zaalbar groaned softly. "This could go very badly, friend Carth."

"I know," Carth sighed. He felt frozen. They couldn't draw weapons. She didn't have the Force.

There's nothing they can do to her, he reminded himself. And nothing you can do to them. Just hope that she doesn't try and do something —

"Ask away," the Sith said coldly. One of her companions whispered something in her ear and she laughed.

"How many Darth Revan pretenders are there on Manaan?" Revan’s voice was breezy, almost professional. “Right now?”

"Today?" The Sith snickered. "Fifteen. Fifteen still alive, unless Lystria makes it."
“She should,” the oldest Imperial muttered. “They put her in a bacta tank. Burns looked worse than they were. Tio always pulls back.”

“Sixteen, then.” The woman peered at Revan's face. "Sixteen pretenders. Seventeen with you. And you are… impressive. Not that many actually went out and had surgery. And it's interesting; you're not going for the sweet Polla Deralian thing. Where'd you get the Wookie? Everyone has a Mandalorian, but I've never seen anyone with a Wookie.”

"He's not a Mandalorian," Revan said gravely. "That's Carth Onasi, my true love."

"Dressed as a Mandalorian?" One of the male soldiers coughed. “Not very believable.”

Carth winced inside his battle suit.

"Enough small talk." There was an edge in Revan’s voice as bright as a vibroblade. "You might only be field personnel, but I’m sure you know how to pay attention—where's Yuthura Ban?"

"Who?" The Sith woman looked confused.

"Twi'lek? Purple lekku? Jedi or something?" Revan sounded impatient. "Probably here to help save the kolto?"

"The Sith will save the kolto," the other male soldier said. "That is if you idiots ever stop this game." He was older than his companions and had the look of a veteran. The bars on his uniform were faded, as if some had been removed and replaced. Demotions in Imperial ranks were as common as executions, and Carth doubted this old man had always been a lieutenant. From his stance alone, Carth thought at least a commodore. Maybe higher. "Trust me, I knew the real Darth Revan, and none of you measure up."

"You did?" Revan's voice was too curious. "Tell me, what was she like?"

"Numu," Carth hissed desperately. She didn't even look at him.

"She was a true Sith," the man instinctively straightened his shoulders, standing at attention. "I was there when she killed the Mandalore in single combat. Revan toyed with him for hours, up until the end, never even using the Force; making him think he could win. Then, at the very end, she blasted him with the power of the dark side."

"Should have just used thermal detonators," Revan muttered. "I'm—sorry I don't remember. You were with the Republic back then? And you went over to the Sith? Did she make you?"

The man looked startled. “I followed her. She… she saved us.”

“Saved?” Revan scoffed.

"Enough of this," the woman broke in. "Come with us to the Embassy. Then we'll see how much of the power you have."

There was a light in Revan’s eyes now that made Carth’s hackles rise. “Oh?” she murmured. “Do you truly want to see?"

"Numu," Carth walked over and grabbed Revan's arm. "We need to be going. Now."

"How much power she has?" A metallic voice hissed behind them. "Nothing. She is nothing.”

Zaalbar growled uneasily, and they all turned to look. Carth knew it wasn't him, couldn't be—but
his breath still caught in his throat; his hand still went instinctively to his blaster.

A hulking hairless man stood before them, clad in red body armor. He was heavily muscled and flanked by two female acolytes in Dark Jedi robes. The Manaan sun glinted on his metal jaw and put the patterns on his hairless skull in sharp relief.

Amusement sparkled in cold black eyes—eyes rimmed with yellow. Darth Malak laughed. "Power? Her? You're wasting your time, currying her favor, Lieutenant Wu. Not a speck of Force to be found. She wouldn't last through one round of the games."

Revan's hand clutched at Carth's, and he heard her gasp.

"I killed you," Revan muttered. She dropped Carth's hand and stood there, staring up at the apparition from her past. Her voice was shaking. "I'm sorry, Mal," she whispered. "I'm sorry I had to kill you."

"This is dull," said the Sith woman rolled her eyes. "I'm going to the cantina. If I wanted to watch a tearful reunion of the Dark Lord and her old apprentice, I'd view the Coruscanti Underground vid again."

"Numu!" Carth hissed. "Polla!"

"Mal?" Revan repeated, ignoring him. Her voice was soft, almost—hopeful. "Malak?"

The tall figure laughed, and the image shimmered, dissolving into a young fair-haired man dressed in a plain black robe. "Guess again, fool."

_Holo-mask._ Carth blinked. The man's new face was still familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen it before—not until Revan spoke.

"Kel?" Revan shook her head, sounding confused. "Wait. Kel Algwinn?"

Then Carth got it. _One of the kids from the Academy._ There'd been so many; every face a blur except for Dustil's. But Revan had known them all, talked to them all, tried to understand what made them join the Sith.

"I see my reputation precedes me." The young man sounded pleased. "It will be Darth Kel, soon enough, when I've finished eliminating all of these petty pretenders." He laughed. "You will be even easier than most."

"But you left the Sith!" Revan took another step closer. "We talked. You had doubts—and you left. Didn't you go to the Jedi? You said you were going to the Jedi—"

Kel's face was expressionless, but his hands curled into fists.

Zaalbar groaned. "This is dangerous. We need to go."

"Not yet," Revan barked back quickly.

Kel Algwinn’s laughter was too loud. It set Carth’s nerves jangling. "You knew me at the Academy? Which one are you, really? Natalia? Reeni? Or a new pathetic hopeful? Don’t you know what the other Revan pretenders will do to a null?"

"Why did you go back?" Revan continued, stubborn and stumped as a losing gunner. "I thought you'd go to the Jedi. And why the hell —" she took a deep breath. "Why disguise yourself to look
like Malak?"

"You're asking *me*?" Kel's voice was incredulous. "I just use a holo-field, you've had surgery to look like Darth Revan! Bad surgery. I met Revan when she was on Korriban. I knew her. You can't fool *me.* " His hand reached out and cupped her chin, forcing her forward.

Carth bit his lip and willed himself not to interfere. Not yet. They could—there still had to be a way out of this.

“Do not shed your moss, Polla Revan. He is just a cub.” Zaalbar's moan was a better warning than any Carth could give out loud, but Revan didn’t even try and look back to them.

"What's this, make-up? Painted-on Sith tattoos?" Kel laughed, dropping his hand back. "No Force and painted-on tattoos and you expect people to believe you're Revan? Pathetic! You're bantha fodder."

Revan's head dropped, and she stared at her hands. "I thought I'd saved you, Kel Algwynn."

"Tell me your real name." There was that peculiar emphasis in those words that Carth had heard before. Compulsion. The words weren't directed at him, but Carth still bit down hard on his tongue.

*Name. Name. Captain Carth Tibberus Onasi, reassigned to Jedi Command—*

The Sith were all around them. Three soldiers at their back; Kel and the acolytes at their front. On Manaan any sign of aggression would mean, at the very least, a night in jail. They had no time for that. She had no time for that.

"My name is Polla Organa." Revan said. Her hand rubbed her head like it hurt. A pale mottled hand, striped with dark lines. "I mean…no. It’s not. They…they told me it’s Revan. Revan Starfire… I-I don’t...." Her hand dropped, and her body straightened again. Her mouth tightened, jaw setting stubbornly, voice turning arctic. “I don’t fricking know.”

Carth grabbed her hand again. "Numu," he said feeling hopeless. "We need to go. Emilio is waiting for us, remember?"

“Tell me your name,” the Sithkid repeated, and Carth heard Zaalbar groaning his own in Shyriiwook, heard himself mumbling ‘Onasi’ through his clamped-down teeth.

But no one was looking at them—just at her.

“Revan,” his girl muttered again, her eyes locked to the Sith’s. “I'm Revan. I’m here for Yuthura Ban. Fetch her.”

“Hrm.” The old lieutenant frowned, tiling his head for a closer look. “Jokasta. Did they ever find the *Bright*?”

“The Darkstar’s ship?” One of the red-robed Sith scoffed. “Docked a week ago. This isn't her.”

“Yes, but if there's one copy, maybe there’s more.”


Revan pulled away from Carth, her expression twisting into a scowl. "You dare?" she said to Kel.
"You dare use mind tricks on me?"

Kel chuckled. "Oh, you are good." His hand twitched and the visor flew of her face, clattered across the floor.

Revan's eyes flashed yellow, and then narrowed. "You pathetic cringing fool."

One of the red-robed Sith stepped back too. The other one made a noise that could have been surprise.

Revan’s hand closed on the hilt of her vibroblade. Her stance shifted, so subtly Carth wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t seen it so many times before. Her feet stepped apart, knees slightly bent, now. One hand curved. If she’d had the Force none of the scum in front of them would have stood a chance.

But the dumb kid just laughed. “Pity you don't have the power to back up your act. I almost want to leave you alive... maybe keep you as a pet. Would like that? Being my pet?"

“Draech chich'n'ya.” Revan muttered and lifted her fist. “Die, imbecile.” Carth half-expected to see Kel fall, clutching his throat, but the kid just shook his head.

“Your Ancient Sith’s not bad.” Kel Algwinn smiled. “Almost a shame to see you die for assaulting me... but maybe if you beg, I could be merciful.” His hand clenched.

Revan collapsed instantly.

An alarm went off somewhere above them. Carth dove to the ground, trying to shield her even as he felt the wash of dark energy strike as Kel lashed out. Beneath him, he heard the ugly sound of Revan’s strangled breaths.

Carth rolled off of her, blasters drawn before he could think. *Shouldn't have even brought weapons. Should've waited for the stim to wear of before I did anything—*

His first volley was deflected by three sabers, one bolt hissing dangerously close to them.

Zaalbar roared in outrage. Something about being a Kashyyyk sovereign citizen and demanding his rights.

If anyone besides Carth understood, that might have been useful. *Translators. They'll have a universal translator somewhere—*

"Aggression will not be tolerated in Ahto City," a disembodied voice chimed. "The citizen Numu Ran of Alderaan has initiated an act of violence against citizen Kel Algwinn, formerly of Korriban. Both parties: please remain where you are. Cease hostilities. The authorities have been notified."

Revan's eyes were clenched shut. Tears ran down her face and she was still choking. The Sith laughed somewhere above them. Carth pulled her onto his lap, as if he could shelter her with his arms. Frantic readouts scanned across his suit's visor, indicating her status. He didn’t need to read Mandalorian runes to know that everything in the redline was very bad.

Carth leveled his blaster at Algwinn’s head. “Let her go!”

“How much is she paying you, Mandalorian?” the kid chuckled “Brave man. I’ll double it.”

Carth’s second shot froze mid-air, and his third one was deflected by a red blade. The Sith kid
laughed—but in Carth’s arms, Revan was breathing again.

At least Carth had been a distraction. The second shot sank into the wall, as the Sith it had been targeted for stepped neatly aside.

"This is really not good," Zaalbar groaned sadly above them.

"I fracking hate Manaan," Revan whispered, gasping for breath.

XXX

There'd been the press of Carth's armored arms around her. There'd been that feeling, that sickly helpless feeling, while Revan choked for breath—and then the stasis field. The Selkath took no chances. Mobile stasis units for crowd control, on them in seconds.

*Probably saved my life.*

Revan came awake again aching and painfully sober, surrounded by the yellow hum of an energy shield.

*What the hell did Canderous give me?*

She'd been stupid with stims, crazy stupid—as if all of this was some kind of game. A very bad game, where one of her few triumphs in the war of dark against light hadn't been a triumph at all.

*I thought I saved Kel.*

*I saved no one. Not him, not Bastila, not Malak. All I've done is ruin lives. Kel made me so angry I could almost taste what it would be like to strike him down. If I'd had the Force, he'd be dead now.*

Her robes were gone. And her sword. Revan was wearing a simple gray prisoner's jumpsuit, the standard on half a hundred worlds. The cheap cloth did nothing to shield her from the cold metal floor of the cell.

Revan wrapped her arms around herself and closed her eyes again, cursing softly.

"Freckles?" Carth’s voice. Somewhere close.

“Flyboy?” She blinked, as the containment field resolved itself, the yellow shimmer separating them. Familiar.

*A cell in the Ahto City prison. You've been here before.*

“We’ve been in worse spots,” her pilot whispered from his own cell. “Remember?”

*Maybe. But this one we earned. I tried to Force choke Kel Algwinn and you shot at him. Her eyes took in the rest of the room. Zaalbar wasn’t in it. She hoped that meant he’d been smart enough to walk away. "What the hell did Canderous give me?" Revan whispered. "Are you nuts? You set me up to face the Sith stimed?"*

"It was only supposed to bring you out of hypnosleep," Carth said. "Are you—are you okay?"

*No. My head hurts. Kel was strong, he hurt me badly.*

"You tried," Revan told Carth. "Maybe... I’ll tell them you're just a merc. Get you out of this."
Her lover shook his head stubbornly. "Don't talk like that! We're fine. Emilio will be here soon. They let Dreewwooowr go, and you didn't hurt anyone. There'll be a fine, that's all. Don't worry. Please!"

The hope in his voice. Those stupid fake names. Hope for her. Why couldn't he understand?

There were two Selkath guards halfway across the room, by a closed door, both seemingly ignoring them.

"Guard?" Revan called to them. "Guards? Hey! Tell Roland Wann at the Republic Embassy that you have Revan Starfire who was known as Polla Organa to him in custody. I'm sure he'd be interested. Perhaps the Jedi on Manaan would like to see the Dark Lord of Sith pay her dues. There'd be a reward."

"Numu," Carth hissed.

Why did he even bother? The game was up, the cards were dealt.

The fatter Selkath looked at her. His gills flapped. It took some moments for Revan to realize he was laughing. Frowning, she repeated the words more slowly, in Selk. "I killed your god," she added. "The Progenitor? I poisoned her water, and I lied to your judges about it. I blamed it on the Sith."

The Selkath laughed more, in that watery chuckling whisper that they used for mirth. "You've seen too many holovids. Poor, deluded creature. The Sith are bad enough with their games of succession, but you—"

"She’s crazy." Carth interrupted. "We… we’re actors, but she cracked. I just need to get her some help. There’s a… a healer here. We—we just need to see her. Yuthura Ban?"

"I’m not insane." Revan cut him off. Succession? Games? "Call Wann. Trust me. He’ll want to talk." The man hates my guts. That can’t have changed.

"Actors." The Selkath burbled. "You need to see how it’s done. Want to watch one of the vids? See a real Revan act?"

"Vids?" Revan asked, at the same time that Carth shook his head at her.

The Selkath flapped his gills. "Oh, ho, ho, vids. Yes, vids. We've got the Telosian right here. Jmar, put it on for the lady. Maybe it will shut her up."

The other Selkath guard gurgled, almost a giggle. "Can I forward to the interesting part?" he asked.

"No," the other guard shrugged his thumbed flippers, and adjusted his belt over his belly. "Make her watch the whole thing."

Jmar shrugged and walked behind the guard's console, punched in a few buttons. A holo shimmered to life in front of her.

To her right, Carth muttered something that sounded like a prayer.

XXX

Carth only watched her.

He'd seen the vid before, back on Kashyyyk. This one, and more than a dozen others in the weeks
from Kashyyyk to Manaan, while Revan slept in her drugged and screaming sleep.

The Telosian one wasn’t the worst, but it deviated from reality pretty fast, and he wondered how she’d react—even as he wondered what in nine Mandalorian hells was taking Canderous and Zaalbar so long to get them out of here.

What if they can’t?

Carth couldn’t—wouldn’t think like that.

XXX

"You be good to my daughter," Helena Shan said, coughing piteously in the smoky Dantooine bar. Revan's face was smooth and expressionless but her green eyes gleamed as if struck by some deep emotion.

"As if she'd listen to me," she said finally, after a long silence.

"I can tell she cares for you," Helena said.

In the background, Mission Vao giggled and covered her mouth with a delicate blue hand.

Bastila's haughty chin trembled, and Revan ran to her suddenly, the smooth mask of her face changing to something like joy.

"I can die happy," Helena Shan whispered, "knowing my daughter has someone like you to protect her."

"I love her," Revan whispered joyfully.

The two women embraced.

XXX

"What?" the real Revan whispered.

Their jailers had washed the make-up off her face while she was unconscious. Her skin was gray and black now in the harsh prison light. Sith tattoos had formed like nebulae around her eyes and forehead, black rays radiating like a dark sun across her face. The shadows made hollows in her cheeks, made her face into a skull.

"Polla." Cath started, wishing he could say more. Wishing there was something to say.

A line furrowed between her arched brows as she stared past him. "What the hell is this?" she spat at the Selkath jailers.

"The Telosian version," one of them said.

"Bastila and I—" On the screen, the two women embraced in the dim light of the smoky cantina. Revan was taller, and her head bent in a graceful arch as she pulled the smaller woman against her. They kissed, lightly, and then with increasing passion.

"If you don't like the Telosian, we have the Coruscanti Underground version," one of the jailers offered, his voder translating the Selk a beat after his burblings. "Not that I care what you like. Look at that Revan—she has beauty, passion, and power. What were you thinking, trying to
compare yourself to *that*?"

"I don’t compare myself with that," Revan rubbed her head as if it hurt.

The med sensors on their ship said it wouldn’t be long now before her body gave out—maybe a few days left.

*It can’t end like this.* "May we request an arbiter?” Carth asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"One will be appointed by the Court,” the smaller Selkath said.

"But I can request the appointment," Carth said. “Right?”

On screen, Bastila and Revan were still kissing.

"You may request any sentient on the planet within a ten-kilometer radius; but the arbiter must agree to the appointment."

“Well, I want Yuthura Ban. She's a Twi’lek Jedi with the Republic Embassy looking into the kolto restoration. Ask her if she'll come and speak with us about being our arbiter."

Revan glanced at him. At the gap in her jumpsuit, the metal collar glinted. The flesh around it was red and inflamed. "Too late," she muttered. “Just make them turn this vid off."

Carth tried to smile comfortingly. "We've been in worse spots, beautiful."

Revan stared at him, her eyes as blank as yellow coins. Her face was as pale as ice scarred by those terrible lines. As he watched, her eyes closed, even as her lips pulled into a half-smile. “I don’t know, Flyboy. This feels pretty bad.”

"We'll see if she's willing to meet with you," the Selkath gurgled, coolly.

XXX

**Bastila and Revan writhed in agony, entwined together in one tank. Across from them, Carth Onasi's chin was set defiantly.**

*I'll never betray the Republic, Saul!*

**The two women screamed as lightning lanced through them, outlining their bodies clad only in the briefest undergarments. They clasped each other, as if their Force bond could ease their agony.**

XXX

"I refuse to watch any more of this," Revan muttered, closing her eyes again. Her head hurt so much.

Hours seemed to pass, marked only by the ragged sound of her breathing and the pounding in her head.

Dimly, she heard the lines of dialogue, words she'd never said to a Bastila that never existed.

*We should have bombed Telos more. Definitely too many scriptwriters survived.*

Revan winced, thinking of Carth and his lost wife, his shattered world. She couldn’t look at him.
Looking at him and still seeing that dumb hope was too difficult. He'd infected her with it, before she remembered that between happily ever after and the present lay the terrible gap of her past.

XXX

"I love you, Revan. You cannot deny the bond between us. Join me, and we can harness the power of the Star Forge."

"Follow me back into the Light, Bastila, for the sake of the love we share." The actor with her face parroted the words earnestly.

XXX

Revan mumbled through gritted teeth, half to herself. "What I actually said was, 'You were weak Bastila, I always knew you'd fall to the Dark Side.'" She didn't care if the Selkath heard her, obviously it made no difference.

"Shhh, beautiful. It will be fine." Carth's words were a meaningless comfort. She wouldn't look at him.

XXX

"The Jedi Council used you, Revan. You were a pawn in their plans to get the Star Forge, just as they used me for my Battle Meditation. Malak taught me the truth, taught me to embrace my hate and my anger. You are stronger than I thought possible, after what they did to you."

XXX

Those words were almost too familiar. Too close to what Bastila had actually said. Bile in the back of her throat.

XXX

"Don't do this kid," Jolee said sadly. "Love can only lead to the dark side."

XXX

Revan frowned. “Jolee would never say that.”

"Don't do this, kid."

How was it, really?

XXX

The sun shone high in the sky, beating down on the ancient stones of the temple summit. Revan was terrified. Furious. Desperate. They’d come all this way, sacrificed everything—only to be stuck here, on top of the Temple roof, with Bastila Shan between them and the planetary shields.

“Jolee, can't you see that an alliance is the only way to stop Malak?” She pleaded with him, despite the scorn in Bastila's eyes.

"Don't do this, kid."
"Time to die, old man." Bastila moved in for the kill and Revan lashed out—not sure who she was fighting anymore. Just a blur of saber blades and then he was dead. Juhani fell snarling and she couldn't remember cutting her down.

Maybe she hadn’t killed them at all. Maybe it was Bastila—

No. That’s a lie. A lie I’d tell myself.

XXX

"Prove yourself," Bastila hissed. "If you want me to follow you, earn the title of the Dark Lord."

"I have, I've beaten you." Revan sneered at her, exulting in it. I wanted to beat you for so long, even before I knew what you did.

"Prove yourself," Bastila taunted her again. "They are lackeys of the Order, those that twisted you, trapped you, broke you. Are you still so broken Revan?"

That look in Jolee's eyes. Juhani's absolute trust slowly changing to something almost like fear.

They fell like a harvest of Deralian ferra grass, easily and softly under the hiss of her blade. They fell with their mouths open, still telling her it was not too late.

XXX

"Please," Revan begged. "I've heard enough. Turn off the vid."

The Selkath jailers chuckled, gurgling and mirthful.

XXX

After what seemed like another century, the outer door opened and there was Zaalbar and Canderous. The Mandalorian was dressed in an ordinary mechanic's jumpsuit, and beside him HK stood, seemingly unarmed.

The jailers stopped the vid abruptly. "I'm sorry," one of the Selkath said. "No visitors until after the trial."

Canderous ignored them, walking past them and standing in front of Revan's cell. "You look worse. What the hell did you do?"

"Acted like a stimmed-out fool," she said, peering up at him. He looked completely ordinary. She'd never thought anyone could dismiss Canderous without a second glance, but in this disguise, he was just one more middle-aged man in a spaceport. She wondered how he’d felt about that—if he would even care. “What the hell did you give me?”

"Nothing you hadn’t had before. Tolerance must be down." He frowned, switching to Mandalorian. "Not gonna sugarcoat this. The fish won't let you go until the trial, but your fine has been paid."

"So, the trial will only be a formality?" Carth asked in the same language. "Then we'll be free to go?"

Canderous snorted. "No. The Sith Embassy paid the fine. Wookiee and I got there too late. You’re Sith Embassy property now. After the trial, they’re gonna take you. Some di’kut named Darth Algwin’s claimed possession.” He raised a weathered eyebrow.
Carth blanched, his jaw tightening. "Oh."

"Remember the good old days?" Revan said. "When there was no one left alive in the Sith Embassy?" She tried to grin, but it wasn't working.

"That's the spirit," Canderous said. "I found Yuthura."

"And?" Revan swallowed hard.

"Finding Yuthura seems to be a popular thing to do for Revan Starfire and her henchmen. She... told me to get lost."

"Where is she staying?" Carth asked.

"The Republic Embassy—like we thought."

"You went there? All of you?"

"Of course not," Zaalbar snarled at her. "We left HK in the ship. As an emissary from Kashyyyk I was welcome."

"This is touching," the fat Selkath broke in. Despite their earlier protest, the guards had made no move to evict the visitors. "Who are you all really? Actors?"

"Was Mandalorian they were speaking," his friend noted.

"Maybe a Mandalorian production?" His friend burbled. "How about that?"

"I'm just another Sith pretender," Revan told them in Selk. She turned back to Canderous, switching back to Mandalorian. "Tell Yuthura her friend needs her. She’ll know what it means."

"Oh, I did," Canderous snorted. "But Ban told her story to the vids, and that's what every single version of Revan has said. Right before they tried to kill her for being a traitor to the Sith."

"Observation: Master, surely you can see that violence is our best option at the moment."

Revan winced, wishing her droid had chosen any of the thousands of other languages he knew to say that. But he'd used Selk.

"You'd better keep that droid contained," one of the guards said warningly.

"No, HK," Revan said. She was so tired. "Carth asked you to send a message to Yuthura Ban, too," she said to the guards. "Did you send it?"

"Of course," the Selkath said. "And she's agreed to be your arbiter. When she arrives, the trial will begin."

Revan didn't want to allow herself to hope. *Hope is fleeting. Hope is a weakness.*

XXX

*Time.* The man paced the training floor slowly.

His opponent charged too quickly forward and the man-made time slow enough that he merely walked away.
Time is interminable. A march of days.

His opponent took the man’s turned back as an invitation, and dove, blade outstretched too far.

Time is a scream in vacuum. Time is a waste: with each day bringing another set of hopefuls just like this one. Time is the smell of salt and mist, and dreams of water.

There was nothing good to eat on this blasted fish world.

The man cut off his opponent’s saber arm. Then both legs. The pretender could have survived quite long without either—but the man took the head next.

Time was interminable, but at least the games kept it busy.

The man deactivated his saber, crushing his dead opponent’s holo-projector with his free hand. The Force sang high and sweet, as pure as the blood in his veins.

The image of Malak’s headless body froze and fizzled, replaced by the corpse of a gray-skinned, scarred veteran. Female. Davad rolled her head back toward the torso with his boot.

The late and unlamented Darth Shadowspear hadn’t even lasted one round—having the misfortune to draw his number for her first battle.

Darth Shadowspear. The man tried to remember who she had been once in the Order and failed. Some knight, no doubt.

Time is an end for us all, eventually.

“One of the Malaks caused another incident on the Main Promenade.” The flat Deralian voice interrupted his reverie, and Davad Arkan turned to the door, unsurprised. He’d caught Beya’s scent in the hall. Scorched earth and metal—tinged with a fragrance that was new. Something her vanity now allowed.

Davad man folded his arms, yawning. “Again?”

“There’s a court appearance scheduled. Something about an unregistered Revan null.” Beya’s twisted smile was as dark as her dyed hair. “The Malak claimed salvage-rights to the null and her companion.” Her lip curled as she stared down at the body on the floor. “You seem to like killing the Malaks. I thought you might enjoy punishing his presumption.”

“Which Malak?” Iko was too powerful to waste on games. And Phillyp had been a friend, once. Some loyalties were worth maintaining—or at least the pretense. But the others—


“Children are the future, I was told.” The man leaned against the wall. “But that one is annoying.” Bragged once too often about his friendship with Revan on Korriban. “You’ve convinced me. I’ll kill him.”

“When he returns with the null.” Beya twisted the strands of her topknot. “I want the null. They say she’s had surgery. Interesting surgery. A dark Revan, not the usual smuggler trash.”

“You think another messy execution will win your true love back to your bed?” The man chuckled. “Oh, Beya. Sheris hates the sight of blood.”

“Mind your own business, Arkan,” the Deralian snapped. “And remember our deal.”
“Sheris spent the night in *his* rooms again,” he told her, smiling. “Did you know?”

The pulse of anger through the Force implied she had not. “How do *you* know?” Beya’s fury crested like a dark wave, breaking on Davad Arkan’s shields. Her rage smelled like choca and cream, like a warm fire after a long hunt. Like the pure Force itself. Like lust and life and the scream of a beast rising to hunt. “How do you always know?”

Davad shrugged. Truthfully, he would rather *not* know, but he did not have that luxury.

*Time is a shackle that cannot be unlocked. A bond that cannot be broken.*

“I could tell you, Organa. But then I’d have to kill you.”

“Kill the Malak. And the null, if it means that much to you. She’s even got a Wookiee. I know you enjoy a bit of a chase.”

“The null has a Wookiee?” Davad frowned. That was actually quite odd. “Where would a null get a Wookiee?”

“I don’t care!” Her eyes glittered, and she reached down and plucked the broken holo-mask from the corpse. “Is that Knight Sirra? I didn't know she was one of us.”

Davad shrugged. “Darth Shadowspear, she called herself.” But his thoughts whirled. *A Wookiee? On Manaan?* Since their world had won protected status, most of the beasts had returned to Kashyyyk. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen—

Davad closed his eyes, and expanded his senses, searching for the elusive scent.

Familiar musk cut through the smell of rotting fish and salt and rain like a beskad blade—and not—not alone. Tagged to it was another trace, even closer to his heart.

_Sweet, like wine and wind. Faint, sickly and hollow, but there—there_—

The Beastlord’s eyes snapped open. “Oh, no,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Beya asked.

*Time is a bolt in flight from a primitive’s bowcaster.* Davad was gone before Beya Organa had the chance to blink.

**XXX**

“Malak’s gone and you’re still crazy, Arkan!” Beya stared through the open door, calling after him. She _could_ pull on the Force to follow nearly as fast; to see what had the Onderonite so interested, but that would mean showing him that she cared.

*And I don’t*, she reminded herself. *The games are an acceptable diversion—for now, but I truly don’t give a damn.*

_Sheris always seeks the highest point. At least she tied herself to the other one. Davad would have killed her long ago, otherwise_*—

She glanced down at the remains of Knight Dishander Sirra, an Althiran from the Tanaab Enclave, who had been (briefly) a decent enough friend, before the war made alliances more important than friendship, and then power more important than anything.
“May you have an hour in the grass before the devil knows you're dead.” Beya murmured the words of the old Deralian proverb automatically. Then she walked to the comm-link set into the wall, summoning a cleaning droid to dispose of the body.

XXX

The judicial chamber was just as Revan remembered. Bright light, too bright, streamed in from the ceiling, making patterns of rainbows on the floor. A salty smell like brine and fish, and the five judges of the Selkath court. She'd known their names once, but she couldn't remember them now.

Zaalbar and Canderous were detained outside. HK had been sent back to the freighter with strict instructions to prep the ship for departure.

Two hooded brown-robed figures conferred with one of judges on the far side of the room. On the other side stood Kel Algwinn, dressed in a formal Sith military uniform. He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow and looking bored.

"You look even less like Revan than ever," Kel said in a pleasant tone. The sneer on his lips belied the politeness.

Revan pulled her own hood over her head, trying to sink into her robes. They'd been returned to her, and Carth has his armor back. Next to her, he squeezed her hand again.

"A reminder," one of the judges said. "The use of the Force will not be tolerated in these proceedings."

"I wish to pay my fine," Revan said.

The judge waved his hand. "It's already paid," he said.

"Then why am I on trial?" Revan asked. Make him admit it. The two hooded figures hadn't moved. They had their backs to her. Why two? Yuthura came? Who else?

"We need to make sure you understand the grievous nature of your actions."

"I object." The Selkath who had been conferring with the Jedi looked up, his voice whistling like water over rocks. "The defendant has an arbiter. Do not be swayed by her words. Only the arbiter should speak."

"I demand the right to confer with my counsel," Revan said, forcing herself to ignore the chills racing up her spine.

The two hooded figures had finally turned around. A man and a woman, but the man's face was hidden in shadow. The light glared in her eyes and from this distance she couldn't make out his features.

"Accepted. Please confer."

“I am your counsel.” The woman walked over to her, her face calm and serene. Revan remembered that day in the tomb, the Twi'lek's face as she pled for her life. Yuthura had changed since then: now her skin gleamed with health, and the dark Sith lines around her face had faded to nothing. If she had any reaction to seeing Revan, it didn't show on her face.

"The Jedi do not reject any who call on their aid," Yuthura continued, in her smooth voice. "But I must warn you, I have little sympathy for the pretenders."
"I wish to confer in private." Revan answered, meeting violet eyes that stared back at her with no sign of recognition. "Manaan statutes allow that, don’t they?"

The judges murmured. "An escort will take you to one of the private chambers," one of them agreed. "You and the Mandalorian."

_They mean Carth._ She turned a little and looked at him. They’d taken his helmet off in the jail, dressed him back in the battle armor. He stood there, head held up, looking grim, but when her eyes met his, he gave her a faint smile.

"The Sith have their own means of justice. Since this woman is obviously a Sith citizen, I object." Kel sounded almost amused.

"Overruled." The Selkath gurgled.

The guards escorted them and Yuthura to a small chamber. A small chamber with very bright lights. Revan winced and rubbed her eyes, sinking into a chair. Yuthura sat down easily and looked at them both.

"I commend your surgeon," the Twi'lek said. "The resemblance is remarkable. But you can't expect to fool those of us that really knew her. Those of us that felt her die. What do you want of me? Are you actors from one of the vids? Mixed up with the Sith?"

"It might be helpful if you told the judges that," Carth began cautiously.

"I need a friend," Revan said, staring hard at the Twi'lek's face.

"I'd say you do!" Yuthura laughed. "But I don't make friends easily."

"I remember that." Revan pulled at the neck of her robe, exposing the metal collar that bit into her collarbone. "Do you know what this is?"

"It looks like some kind of neural disrupter," the Twi'lek shrugged. "Why are you wearing it?"

"My friends were afraid I'd kill them—or myself." Revan bit her lip. "Turns out, it's killing me. It's Force-locked. Only a Force user can take it off. And you're the only one I trust."

_The only one I trust who I didn't already kill._

"You really expect me to believe you're Revan?" Yuthura sounded incredulous, almost angry. "You don't understand, do you? Those of us whose lives she touched, we felt her die. Revan's gone, you can't be her."

"I didn't die at the Star Forge—Carth came for me. Bastila tried to hurt him. I killed her, and we escaped."

"I understand that you're a confused young woman," Yuthura's voice was gentle. "Perhaps you think you're Revan, but you must accept that the truth. Revan suffered, Revan fell, and now she's at peace. I'll tell the judges you're a danger to yourself—then, perhaps we can convince them not to release you to the Sith. If you seek clemency, I may be able to find a counselor for you. Possibly, even a relocation to a less dangerous world."

"There's no clemency in the Republic, Yuthura." Revan rubbed her forehead. "Not for me."

The Twi'lek looked helplessly at Carth. "You seem sane enough, why do you let her persist in
these delusions?"

"Yuthura," Carth said. "We met. On Korriban do you remember?"

Yuthura’s face darkened. "I try not to think about those times." She shrugged. "But I recognize the face, of course. Carth Onasi, Republic pilot. You're actors, I assume."

"You—you were one of my son's instructors," Carth said quietly.

Yuthura frowned. "Yes. Of course. I did teach Carth Onasi's son. You've done your research, Mandalorian."

"I'm not a Mandalorian." Carth sounded pained. "Do you know what... what happened to Dustil?"

"I do." Her eyes narrowed. "You... I sense genuine concern."

"He's my son," Carth said. "Of course, I—where is he?"

Yuthura frowned. "We left Dreshdae—caught a Czerka freighter. Dustil, and I—and some of the others Revan had saved. After that, he—" She shook her head, and a faint shadow crossed her face. "The two of you wouldn't last two minutes in the Sith compound. If you want me to save you, tell me the truth. Who are you really? Alderaanian actors? Your papers are from Alderaan, but your identity prints have been tampered. It's a lot of work, disguising yourselves as dead heroes of the Republic. Is this some kind of trick? Are you after credits?"

There had to be some way to convince her. "Look in my mind," Revan urged. "Look in Carth's. I remember your gifts. You can see for yourself—"

"The Force isn’t some kind of magic trick! I can’t read a null’s thoughts—only sense intent. I believe that you think you're Revan," Yuthura gave her a placating smile. "But I felt her die, and she is truly dead."

"Wait! You felt her die?" Carth broke in excitedly. "Six weeks after we blew the Forge you felt Revan die, right? Six weeks after the Star Forge, we put the collar around her neck. It cut her off from the Force. That was what you felt, not Revan's death, just the severing of her ties to the Force."

The Twi'lek's head tails twitched uneasily. "Six weeks, yes. We think the Hawk was lost somewhere in space. She must have touched your life too for you to know that much."

"Yuthura—" Revan's voice broke and she wiped at the tears in her eyes angrily. "Yuthura, I fell. Look at me." She pulled back the hood, letting the Twi'lek see it all: her ravaged face, and her Sith-yellow eyes.

"We felt her fall, and we mourned. Then later, we felt her die," Yuthura whispered.

"I deserved to die, but I didn’t."

"Polla—" Carth grabbed her hand and held it so tightly she felt her bones give. "Don’t say that."

Yuthura watched them, frowning. "If Revan were alive, it might be best if that fact was not known. There are those, even on the Council and in the Order who... might not be pleased."

"That's why we came to you," Carth muttered.

"You can't be her," the Twi'lek said, but there was an edge of doubt in her voice now. "May I touch
the collar?"

Revan nodded. "Of course."

The woman's cool hand pressed against Revan's skin, tracing the place where it had grown around the metal.

"This thing is an abomination," she said finally. "No simple disruptor. I can feel the damage it's causing. But if you... if you were my old friend..." the Twi'lek frowned thoughtfully, "—and I took off the collar, all of those who felt you die would feel you live again. Sith and Jedi both. What would you do then?"

"I don't know," Revan kept her voice sincere. "It's been a long time since I had a life to choose, if I ever did." She felt laughter freeze her throat. "The Jedi say there is always a choice."

"Revan made great choices, important choices, but she had little control over the hand that was dealt her. It is one of the things that makes her story so sad." Yuthura grimaced. "If I take this off, Kel Algwin will know who you are. Vrook Lamar will know as well."

"Vrook is here?"

*Master Vrook, Revan’s old master. Revan’s old master who hated me.*

"He came with me, yes." Yuthura nodded. "More than anyone, he took the news of Revan's fall hard. Every Revan pretender is like a vibroblade in his heart, but when he can, he looks at each and every one."

"Why?" Revan frowned, trying to sort through the pieces of her shattered memories. *Vrook trained me. The Council sent him away. He came back. He'd—they'd argued about something. What? Vrook was proud of me and he loved me very much. Why?"

"Who is Vrook to me?"

"It's fairly well-known," Yuthura said. "Although he's never admitted it publicly. It's something one of the pretenders would know, I'm surprised you'd ask."

"Well I don't. I don't know. The things I remember are fragments, pieces, nothing. Just tell me!"

"He's your uncle," Carth muttered.

Revan shot him an astonished glance.

"The vids," her lover said. "The Council votes. His was the only dissenting opinion. I wondered about that. I remembered how he treated you on Dantooine. I ran a search."

Yuthura regarded their exchange, her face expressionless. "I must be mad," the Twi'lek said, finally. "I believe you, friend."

"Perhaps you should wait," Carth urged. "Take the collar off after the trial."

"No," Revan said. "Please. Take it off now."

Carth reached for her hand. "Don't do anything stupid, beautiful."

"I won't. But if they release me to the Sith without any Force, Kel will kill us."
"Kel's strong now," Yuthura broke in. "Much stronger than he ever was on Korriban. When he fell, he fell far. It may be madness, but I agree. You gave me a choice once, not so long ago." Her t’chin crooked. "I owe you the same."

Yuthura’s hands reached out and touched the collar. With a snap, it fell open. Revan tugged it off her neck, feeling the skin rip and tear.

"You're bleeding," Carth’s pressed the folds of her robe against the wound. It didn’t matter. Revan shook him away, staring at the metal ring in her hands. She dropped it on the table, shivering.

A wave of nausea hit her gut and her head spun.

Then, abruptly everything snapped into focus. A warm bath of energy embraced her. Revan felt the world shift, felt the Force shimmer and tremble around her.

"Here—" Yuthura leaned over and put her hands on Revan’s neck. She felt the familiar warm burn of healing as the wounds closed. Then the Twi’lek’s violet eyes blinked back tears. "It is you," she said softly. "Oh, my friend. It is truly you."

Revan sank back in her chair and closed her eyes. She struggled to calm herself, dull the aching in her head. She tried to reach for the Force, but it danced away from her, slippery as a tissnek eel. She took a deep breath, and then another.

"Don't draw on it, not yet." Yuthura’s voice floated above her, a ball of purple and white light. "Your control is gone completely. You will have to work very hard to regain it."

"But I will," Revan whispered. She opened her eyes and looked down at her hands. The same gray flesh striated with black mocked her.

"It takes time," Yuthura said, seeing her expression. "Time for the marks to fade."

A warning bell chimed, and the door slid open. "The prosecution requests that the trial begin now," the Selkath guard said. "Further delay will not be tolerated."

"I'm ready." Revan took Carth's hand and stood up slowly, wincing at the stiffness in her body. The Selkath guard noticed nothing. Revan leaned on Carth’s arm. Yuthura strode on her other side, glancing at her occasionally as if she couldn't quite believe what she saw.

Revan pulled the hood back over her face.

"Let me do the talking," Yuthura said gently. "Just breathe, my friend. Stay calm."

A whisper of Selkath voices when she entered the chambers again. One of them looked agitated and she felt the unease from him, even half a room away. Force sensitive, Revan thought. Every Force sensitive person on the planet felt that. I only hope most don't know what they felt.

The Force sang to her like her mother's lullaby, warm and safe. Beckoning and alluring and so beautiful.

Stay calm. She clung to Carth, feeling the press of two Force-trained minds on her own like a vise. Her walls did not falter.

Kel's face was empty, but again his hands betrayed him. They were clenched into fists. Across the room the other man— my uncle, my old Master— Vrook was a still statue in a brown robe. His
hood was thrown back, and his eyes glinted dark in his weathered face.

Revan looked away quickly, staring at the ground.

"We will begin," the agitated judge said. "The defense may speak first."

"My client is unhinged and delusional," Yuthura murmured. "She's part of an Alderaanian theatre troupe. Their ship was wrecked on Kashyykk, where she suffered injuries severe enough to affect her mind. Although she raised her hand as if to strike the worthy Kel Algwinn, I will attest that she has no real Force affinity. I humbly request that you release her to my custody. I will ensure she poses no danger to herself, or anyone else."

Revan counted the tiles on the floor. They depicted a mosaic on the floor of a great shark surrounded by a myriad of swimming Selkath. She'd never noticed it before. That's their god. The one I killed.

The judges deliberated with a clapping of fins and gurgles, their words too soft and swift for her to catch. An undercurrent of tension wavered like lines drawn in the sand between Kel and Vrook. She couldn't begin to guess their thoughts.

"You raise interesting points," one of Selkath said finally. "And your story checks with the data we have compiled. We will now hear the prosecution."

Kel raised his head. On Korriban, he'd been young and soft—a nerf calf in a herd of malraas. He had changed since. His features were etched now with a trace of darkness and set into a cold, hard mask.

"I wish to withdraw charges. I agree with the Jedi." His lip twisted a little and he looked at Yuthura with loathing. "The woman Numu Ran poses no real threat. As recompense for her injuries I would offer her hospitality in the Sith Embassy, under my own personal guard. Her... person and her companions would be quite safe there, that I can assure her." He glanced at Revan quickly, and then looked away again.

The judges conferred. "Most unusual," one of them hissed.

"Let the Sith sort it out themselves," another gurgled.

"The Jedi Yuthura claims the woman is no Sith," another, more agitated Selkath broke in. "How can we release a citizen of Alderaan to a hostile environment?"

"The fine is non-refundable," one of the judges reminded Kel.

"I don't care about the fine. And you misunderstand. Numu Ran is free to go where she wants. I would be honored if she would come with me. It's a request, nothing more." Kel looked at her again and bowed his head slightly.

"If there are no charges the case is dismissed." The Selkath waved his flippers formally and the other judges echoed the gesture. "You are both free to go, but please understand that more infractions of Manaan laws will result in permanent exile from the planet, at the very least."

"I understand," Revan said quietly, and Carth nodded his head.

Xxx

Sheris was with him when they both felt it: an echo in the Force that grew louder and louder. Like a
stone cast into a small pond, Revan Starfire returned to the Force with a splash before sinking beneath still water, leaving only reverberations from all who had felt her return. Ripples of emotion tangled in her wake, encompassing the entire planet: joy, fear, regret, anger—

_Hate_. Hatred welled up in Sheri's Darkstar's breast like a fine ice wine, leaving her gasping and stunned with its raw vehemence.

The man stopped walking when they felt it, forcing Sheri's, whose arm he held, to stop too. “Oh!” the Gamemaster said. Then he began to laugh.

Sheris did not laugh. They were in the medbay and there was a woman with her face floating in the kolto tanks. Normally, Lady Sheris Darkstar would have barely noticed the sight of another injured Pretender, but now she paused, staring carefully at the freckled arms, the mass of red hair streaming in a cloud around the woman’s delicate face.

The face was beautiful but flawed. The nose ran slightly too long, the chin too pronounced, and the eyes were set wide enough apart as to make the face’s features permanently startled—even in repose.

Sheris thought her former face had been more beautiful, but it was gone forever now. The woman in the kolto tank had used a clever surgeon to make a stolen face, but she was still nothing.

Sheris Darkstar was not nothing. A millisecond ago she had been the most powerful woman on this planet—even if no one knew why.

“Oh,” she echoed the Gamemaster. “I thought she had died.”

Her companion chuckled, following her glance. “Well, that’s Lystria,” the man chuckled beneath his mask. “Not—”

“I know,” Sheris said fiercely. “That's Lystria, but if Revan’s alive then you are just as much of a liar about her as Beya is!”

“Neither of us claimed we had killed her.” The Gamemaster’s voice always sounded so young when she'd confused him. “I thought she was dead too.” He sighed, the visor turning it to a rasp. “She's supposed to be dead.”

“She will be soon,” Sheris assured him. “Beya promised to kill her for me before. I shall hold her to it.”

The Gamemaster nodded, and Sheris saw her own face—her own and no one else’s—at blur in the reflection of his mask. “And if she does not, Lady Darkstar?”

“I’ll issue a challenge,” Sheris nodded, a faint smile playing across her face. “Against her.”

“I would hate to see you sacrifice yourself.” His hand brushed a red curl back behind her ear. She watched the reflection, distorted and curved in the mirror of his visor. “You are no duelist, Sheris, and Darth Organa—”

“Beya will not hurt me,” she told him. “That is the difference between us. She’ll yield.”

And then Beya would kill Revan and all would be right again. After all, it was Sheris's face now—and all the Pretenders would answer to her in the end.

Everyone would.
Revan kept her head down, not daring to look back at Kel or Vrook. Flanked by the others, she began walking out of the judicial chamber, trying to keep herself from breaking into a run.

"Thanks," she muttered to Yuthura.

"Don't thank me yet," the Twi'lek said at her side. "Walk a little faster if you can."

"They're following us," Carth said. "Not doing anything, just following. Both of them, Kel and Vrook."

"They're afraid, I think." Revan tried to walk faster, ignoring the ache in her disused muscles. "Afraid and... and hopeful. Expectant. The hope is the worst."

Across the courtyard, Zaalbar and Canderous were talking to a small Rodian.

_Oh no. Not that small Rodian. Not now!_

Zaalbar roared a pleased hello. "You move better, Polla Revan! Are you cured?"

"Start walking with us," Carth whispered. "We're being followed."

"It is always good to see old friends," the Rodian said brightly.

Revan stopped dead and looked at him. "Hulas." She nodded. "My apologies, we're in a hurry." A hint of the Force around the little assassin. _Just enough to tell who I am_. Revan wondered why she'd never noticed it before.

"Ah now," Hulas said. "I see you have more friends now."

He looked back to where Vrook and Kel stood, almost side-by-side. They weren't speaking to each other, only watching with expressionless faces. Their intensity made the hairs on her arms prickle.

"I don't want to interrupt," the Rodian continued. "But we have some unfinished business. Two out of the three contracts were fulfilled. My thanks. Rulan Prolik won't amount to much stuck on Kashyyyk... I'll withdraw that one. I owe you for your work. Here." He pressed a datapad into her hand. "Good luck, Lord Revan."

"Who are you?" Carth interrupted. He put his arm around Revan defensively, as if she still needed his protection.

_She knows,_ the Rodian chuckled. "Read the datapad, it's important. Clever of you to fake your death. You even fooled us. The Jedi believe in the Force—but pardon, Lord Revan—I'd say luck has been on your side."

"Thanks," Revan told him, and pulled away, pocketing the datapad. She began walking again with her companions trailing behind her like a herd of confused trawler deer. _Thanks for nothing. I'll be damned if I get tangled up with you Genoharadan again._

"Who was that?" Carth demanded again, close at her side.

"Former business partner," she said from the corner of her mouth. "Later, Carth, later. We need to get off this planet." Revan felt that very strongly suddenly. Like a voice inside her skull.

"I'll try and delay them, Vrook and Kel both," Yuthura murmured. "May the Force keep you safe,
my friend."

The Twi'lek turned back and walked quickly to where the two men were standing. Revan walked faster in the opposite direction.

I need to run. I need to leave—

"No cameras in the landing bay," Canderous reminded her. "If either side tries any tricks it will be there."

"I know." Revan sighed. Please let us get off Manaan without killing anyone.

—Revan

The thought broke through her panic like a spark in her mind. Familiar as an uncle's kiss on her forehead. Vrook's thoughts pierced her defensives as gently as a hug. She hadn't known he could do that—hadn't known any Jedi could do that, except for her and Bastila.

But then—she hadn't known much about the Jedi at all.

Let me go, please, she thought back at him.

If Vrook had any response it was only that feeling again. Warmth. A welcoming. Approval. Peace. It seemed to radiate out from him, calming the… the other. The fear.

Run. You need to leave. But the thought was weaker now, an afterthought. Easy to ignore. It didn't even feel like her own.

I need to run, she noted. But I'm not afraid.

"Yuthura's not having much luck," Revan said out loud. "At least not with Vrook. Start running."

"What, no let's stay and save the kolto, redeem the Sith, and do some favors for the Republic?" Canderous asked, breaking into a light jog. Beside her, Carth's armor creaked. Mandalorian armor wasn't built for speed.

The docking bay doors were ahead of them. Revan didn't dare look behind. "Run faster," she whispered, pulling at the Force a little to speed their steps, and stop the ache in her unused muscles, the stitch in her side." Her fear fed her power and she felt it flex sluggishly, just another muscle rusty from disuse.

The bays to Dock 1290 slid open, and there she was: their freighter, engines humming. The docking ramp lay down like a welcome. Carth had named her, Revan noticing the Aurebesh on the side of the hull. The Lady's Luck.

Pray I have some.

"Cameras deactivated." The disembodied voice spoke. "We hope you had a pleasant stay on Manaan."

"Thank the Force," Revan said, running up the ramp with Carth and Canderous on her heels. Zaalbar was already inside barking out commands to HK. The ship was huge, but the bridge was right off of the cargo hold, next to the ramp. Huge and clumsy. She'd been too out of it to notice before.

Hope she flies better than she looks.
"Pleased Assessment: Master, you look restored. But we have a problem," her droid said flatly. "We are accused of breaking the Manaan law regarding the import of prohibited substances from proscribed worlds. The hangar doors are locked. We do not have permission to leave."
"Thank the Force," Revan gasped, running up the ramp with Carth and Canderous on her heels. Zaalbar was already inside, barking out commands to HK. Their ship was huge, but the bridge was right off of the cargo hold, next to the ramp.

"Pleased Assessment: Master, you look restored. But we have a problem," HK said. "We do not have permission to leave. We have been accused of breaking the Manaan law regarding the import of prohibited substances from proscribed worlds."

Not that easy. Of course not.

"When did you learn this?" Carth asked angrily.

"Approximately fifteen standard minutes ago. Suggestion: we could attempt departure, but the planet's defense systems are well-designed. Any craft attempting to leave orbit without permission can be vaporized. The odds of survival, especially for meatbags, are very low. Recommendation: a ground invasion would be far more efficient."

"What was it?" Zaalbar growled. "The tach?"

"Supposition: Probable. The Selkath Authority requests that we dispatch ourselves to either the Sith or Republic Embassies. Either will do, but they would prefer not to have to go through the trouble of another trial for us on Manaan. Did the first one not go well, Master?"

"They must know who I am." Revan stared at the control panel hopelessly. "What now?"

"Suggestion: Reclaim your rightful place as ruler of the Sith. The Republic will not offer the same benefits."

"Thanks, HK. Now shut up." Carth hissed.

"I have an idea," Zaalbar held up his paw. "We stall."

"Stall for time?" Revan had thought of that too, although delaying for what she wasn't sure. "How much do you think they'll give us?"

The Wookiee groaned. "Kashyyyk has valuable resources, valuable to both governments. We're here under diplomatic treaty. That will make them reluctant to force the issue."

"For a little while," Carth frowned at Zaalbar, shaking his head. "Kashyyyk has no armies, minimal planetary defenses… if either side decided to waltz in and occupy it, your people would be trapped like tach in a net."

Carth's Shyriiwook had improved a great deal since their early days on Taris. Quickly, Revan translated for Canderous.

"My people have been working on improving our protection, thanks to you, Polla Revan," Zaalbar
added. "The Mission-computer has been a great help."

Revan frowned. "It has?"

Zaalbar nodded. "Mission-computer found the codes to activate a few of the old Czerka orbitals, and we are rebuilding the equatorial cannon rings. If Czerka, or any other infidels invade Kashyyyk again, they will not find us easy targets."

"That computer..." Revan's voice trailed off. That computer is dangerous.

So why did you install Mission Vao's personality in its circuits? Why did you give Freyyrr and Zaalbar free access?

Zaalbar missed her.

You could have just isolated the holocron for him. Instead you gave it the Kashyyyk computer's processors. You gave it wideband access to the holo-nets.

I owed her—I owed them. Mission and Zaalbar both. I can't help her, but it does help him. The computer will help the Wookiees now, and Zaalbar has his friend back—

“Polla?” Carth touched her arm. “You okay?”

Revan. She wasn't going to correct him again. "Okay," she agreed, looking up at Zaalbar. “Stall for time with the Manaan Port Authority. Warn Freyyrr. Send a transmission. Try to be subtle because I'm sure they're scanning everything we send out. How much time should I ask the Selkath for?"

"You're either the Dark Lord of the Sith or the savior of the galaxy," Canderous shrugged. "Don't ask. Tell."

Zaalbar nodded his shaggy head and began scratching out commands to be sent on the screen in front of him.

"Incoming Transmission," HK whirred. "Requesting a visual response from the human female known as Numu Ran."

"Who is requesting?" Revan frowned.

"Declarative: Selkath Authority is forwarding the request on behalf of a Master Vrook Lamar."

"Activate visual." My uncle. She wasn't sure what to feel.

The holo-image shimmered on the console in front of them. The old man stared at her, his mouth set in a grim line. "We need to talk."

Revan pushed back her hood and stared at him. "So, talk."

His jaw tightened. "I'd rather do this in person. May I come aboard?"

"Are you the one who stopped us from leaving?" Carth interrupted.

Vrook frowned. "No. Please let me come aboard."

Revan glared at him. “Give me one good reason.”
“I can give you a dozen. Or more. But we must do this in person. This comm is most certainly monitored.”

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were—or who I was?” Revan demanded. “Before? On Dantooine? Why did you let them do this to me?”

“Numu,” Carth nudged her. Was he going to use that stupid fake name every time he wanted her to shut up?

Vrook’s voice was flat. “I won't discuss this over a comm.”

Revan gritted her teeth. "Open the hatch, HK."

"Polite Request: Permission to eliminate the Jedi Master, if he acts in an aggressive manner?" Did the HK sound hopeful? Was the predatory glee in its eyes only her imagination?

"Yes," Revan said. "I mean, maybe. No. I-I don't know."

“It's okay,” Carth leaned over, lips brushing her ear. She fought back the urge to push him away.

HK pulled the lever to unseal their outer bay. Revan heard the creak of the landing ramp lowering and footsteps walking slowly up its plank. Her head turned to the doorway.

At a close distance Master Vrook Lamar looked much like she remembered him from Dantooine. Brown robes, a receding hairline, and surprisingly dark brows above eyes that were deep enough to look black in their ship’s dimmed lights. Strangely, he was smiling. Without his disapproving glare, he looked almost kindly, like one of Polla Organa’s old astrophysics professors, or a particularly benevolent Exchange boss.

The kindness startled her.

"Sit down," Revan told him, gesturing to the bench by the wall. "Uncle Vrook."

He walked to the bench. "You remember." His voice was softer than she’d ever heard it, almost gentle.

"Not much. If I asked what happened to Revan, and what the Jedi did to make me Polla Organa—would you tell me?"

The old Jedi looked up at her, now standing over him. “You may wish to discuss this alone."

"We're not leaving her," Carth muttered. Behind him, Zaalbar groaned a similar affirmation.

“They're staying,” Revan snapped, almost at the same time.

“As you wish.” Vrook folded his hands neatly on his lap. There was an awkward silence before he took a breath and spoke again.

"I’m curious about your part in this, Captain Onasi. The reports I read say you were rescued on the Rakatan homeworld and then joined a demolitions crew to go to the Star Forge. The Fleet could have used you in air assaults against the station. But I was told you turned your back on Dodonna’s orders. Why?"

“You know why.” Carth’s voice was low. He’d stood up too, and now he hovered behind Revan in a way that made her think he was barely holding back from putting himself between her and the
Jedi. “I went after her.”

Vrook frowned. “Of your own volition?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Revan glared at her uncle. "Carth saved me. Saved me from myself and from you.” Bile rose in her throat, welling up like some long-denied anger. “The Council sent me off to die! You lied to me—”

"Polla," Carth said. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it hard. “Don’t—”

She blinked and took a deep breath. Don’t call me Polla, Carth. "What do you want, old man? Why are you here?"

Vrook's lips thinned. "I felt you fall twice, and I felt you die twice. Believe it or not, I'm pleased to see you alive… niece." There was a slight hesitation on the last word, as if it shamed him.

"That's nice," Revan said, trying to regain her composure. "It's nice to see you too. I think you're the only family I have now? I wouldn't know for sure, since all my memories are lies."

"That's—right." Vrook said. He sighed heavily. "I also came with a warning. Your life is in danger."

"No kidding." Revan tried to pull away from Carth, but his hand refused to let go of hers. “That's why we were going to leave.”

“We’re not here to meet with the Sith,” Carth added. “We just needed someone to remove the Force collar. Let us go on our way and you’ll… you’ll never hear from any of us again.”

Her uncle raised an eyebrow. "You overestimate my influence. There are few Jedi on Manaan. The Republic Embassy barely tolerates our presence. The Sith Embassy, on the other hand—”

“Yeah.” Canderous hadn't bothered to get up from his chair. Now, he propped his legs up on the navboard and leaned back. “We know. Lotta Sith here. Got their hospitality offer already.”

“Some may be very interested in your return,” Vrook told Revan. “But whatever they may promise, you cannot trust—”

“I'm not here to meet the fracking Sith!” she snapped. “We just want to leave. Like Carth said.”

Vrook sighed. “That may be difficult. We tried to hide that you’d killed Bastila as well as Malak. We… we wanted you to be a hero. The Republic needed its victory and you deserved the honor. You still deserve the honor, Revan.”

"Easier was when I was dead," Revan felt her eyebrow lift, like she was matching his expression from the moment before. "A live Revan is harder, right?"

The old Jedi sighed. "It was difficult already. Some of those whose lives you touched felt your fall. Those of us who knew Bastila sensed her death. Look at the Sith here on Manaan. They knew you fell. Otherwise, why would there be so many pretenders?"

"I don't know, my pretty face?" Revan grimaced. "I'm hardly the first Jedi to fall."

“You were never given a true chance to atone.” The lines made grooves along his mouth.

Try as she could, Revan couldn't see any resemblance between them. Or I don't want to see. I still deny who I am—
“Bastila told me about Ulic Qel-Droma. He had the Force stripped away from him. Is that what you mean by atonement?” She wouldn't look at Carth, who had tried to do the same her and almost killed her.

Vrook raised an eyebrow. "No. Did Padawan Shan explain how Ulic died? A sniper's blaster, from a soldier whose family he'd slaughtered."

"Perhaps that's the end I deserve. What do you think?"

“I think,” her uncle said roughly, “that you should heed the lesson. Ulic Qel-Droma returned from the Dark, but there were still those who could not forget his past. What the Jedi offer is different —”

“You're saying I should watch for snipers?” She raised her left eyebrow back at him, feeling the right one struggle not to go up too. “That's why we were just going to leave.”

"I'm saying you have another choice—now. Would you be redeemed, Revan?” Her uncle hesitated, placing a peculiar emphasis on the word. “Would you… take that option if it was offered?”

**Option? Which option? Having the Force stripped from me? Being assassinated like Ulic?**

“I don't understand,” she told him. The rest was better left unsaid. Revan had no idea what she was supposed to feel. “I understand what the Sith want with me, but why would you—or any Jedi—think I deserved a second chance?”

The man in front of her was a complete stranger. She didn't even know which side of her family he was related to.

"Because your intentions were good.” Vrook sighed heavily. “They were good the first time too. That was the real tragedy.”

"What were they—the first time?” He knew, Revan realized. Vrook knew everything about her. About her past, about her mistakes. *Everything.*

Her uncle folded his hands on his lap, almost primly. "You had a chance—or thought you did—to stop the Mandalore before he began the assault on Republic space."

"You mean, I had a chance to kill the Mandalore."

"I… suppose.” He hesitated. “Yes.”

Canderous muttered something in the background. Revan glanced over at him. "Do you know about this?”

The Mandalorian shrugged. "No. But if you have a chance to kill your enemies you should take it."

"So, I didn't kill the Fett Mand'alor and he slaughtered millions and I felt bad about it? So bad, that *after* I stopped him, I took over the ancient Sith Empire, to right my wrongs?” Revan kept her voice light and even.

Vrook shrugged. "That is a simplistic, but accurate, summation."

"I was barely more than a child, I was…” she reached for an agreement and realized she had no real idea when the Mandalorian wars had started. Or how old she was supposed to be. “I was...
twenty-three? Why didn't the Council stop me? Why didn't anyone stop me?"

Vrook stared at her. "You were twenty-five when it all began. And the Council tried." His voice hardened. "Hindsight makes strategists of us all, but at the time your conviction was… convincing."

Revan stared at the gray wall above her uncle’s head. Twenty-five. Her mind stuttered on the conversion from Deralian to Standard orbits. Polla Organa thought she was twenty-five three years ago. She was trying to get a permanent slot on the Corellian run. Got those crates of weapons off Balmorra and past the Janisiv Line—

What she remembered of the Mandalorian wars was the mess they’d made of shipping lanes, and the opportunities the various blockades had created for profit. But the woman in her memories had never gone close to the frontlines, never risked running black market goods through an active combat zone.

Never been real.

“Why?” she asked. “Did you believe in me?”

“At first, I believed you possessed the ability to curtail the Mandalorian threat.”

“And then?”

Master Vrook didn't answer her, just stared at his hands for an uncomfortably long time, before looking at the men sitting next to them. "Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi fought in the wars. Have you spoken to them about the woman you were?"

Of course, I have, fool. The vitriol welled up from that dark place, the one Revan could never quite control. “Neither of them knew me personally,” she said, surprised at how light her words sounded.

“But they knew of you.” Her uncle seemed to be going somewhere with this.

"You were a hero," Carth said. "You and Malak were heroes. The Jedi knights all wore masks, but we always knew when Knight Revan Starfire was directing the battles. We… we always won when you—you were in command. Saul… he spoke so highly of you."

Saul spoke so highly of me. Revan didn't want to think about Admiral Saul Karath and the Leviathan.

She turned her head to change the subject. “Canderous?”

"You were the most formidable foe we had ever faced. The rest of the Republic armies would cower behind women and children, hide in cities full of civilians as if they expected us not to strike. You met us face on and you bested us. You beat us gloriously, Revan. I've told you this before." Canderous rubbed the scar above his eye absently.

He had—they both had, but it still didn't make any sense. "I still don’t understand. What made me so special?"

Vrook looked startled. “You don’t—?"

"It wasn't just… you," Carth interrupted. "It was Malak too. He was a Senator's son, and you… you built your own reputation. By the time they put you in command of the Fleet, the entire Republic had heard of your tactics, your charisma, and your vision. You were a legend. No one was happy
about the wars in the Outer Rim. Refugees were streaming into Core worlds with stories of the Mandalorian atrocities—"

"Atrocities," Canderous frowned with just a spark of their old disagreement. "It was war, that was all. Atrocities happen on all sides."

"They mean more to the refugees, to people like Juhani—or Mission—the people who get hurt," Revan said, half-under her breath.

xxx

"I know you won't kill me, Polla. You're not Revan, you're not really Revan—"

XX

Revan glanced at the Wookiee.

Zaalbar stood, a silent sentinel in the back of the room, monitoring the comm links. His voice was low, a soft growl. "Don't do this, Polla Revan. It makes you unhappy and the dead are dead."

"If you have a chance to kill your enemies you should take it," she said, echoing Canderous. "Juhani and Jolee thought that was true. And they tried." She looked at her uncle. "Is that what you think too? Is that why you’re here, Uncle Vrook?"

He lifted his head. "You're not my enemy."

She smiled, mirthless. "How can you be sure?"

"I sense no darkness in you."

She scowled. "You sense light?"

Vrook sighed. "No. You always had the potential for great good or great harm. That hasn't changed. Some in the Order who think that makes you a threat. I’m not one of them. I was never one of them."

Soresu, Revan thought, remembering the time on Dantooine, when Vrook had fired live plasma bolts at Padawan Organa, seemingly confident she wouldn't die—or kill him. Now she wondered if that hadn't been a test for them both. "You were hard on me, when I was Polla. I thought you hated me."

"I hated what they'd done to you!" The old Jedi's face twisted, then smoothed as he regained composure. "Vandar and the rest of the Council thought we needed to know the source of Malak’s strength. The answers we required were locked inside your mind, but their method of extraction gave you no choice."

"what would a choice have been? Me saying 'yes, please take away my memories, and then I’ll lead us to Malak’s Fleet as a nice thank you?'"

"Yes," he said levelly, ignoring her sarcasm.

"And if I refused?"

There was a long pause.

"I was told you did refuse," he muttered finally. "You did not… or could not… agree to the
procedure. But by the time they thought to consult me, the issue of consent had already been resolved.”


“It was done to save her, as well.” Vrook stared at her calmly, but Revan had to note he hadn’t answered her question. “I was not on the Ascendant when you were captured. I didn’t know the woman you… became until we met on Dantooine.” He exhaled. “I confess I’m not sure I know the woman you are now, but I am honored to meet her.”

_Honored._ The word was like gall caught in Revan's throat. _Honored to meet the woman I am now._ 

*My fracking uncle doesn't think I'm Revan, but he still thinks I have to deal with her banthashit.*

My banthashit. She shivered. "The Council sent me back to face the same power that turned me before. Alone. Did they think I'd changed? I felt it on Dantooine, at the first Star Map, something —" She closed her eyes. "The Council must have known that I'd fall, but they thought they could learn the location of the Star Forge, drive a wedge in—and if I killed Malak for them too, then they'd have a chance—"

"No." Vrook was stubborn as a ronto. "It wasn't like that. The Council had faith in you, Revan. And they had faith in Bastila, too.”

"Bastila...."

xxx

_"Sometimes I think the Council has sent me on a fool's mission. Sometimes I doubt their wisdom. Does it frighten you, Polla, to hear I have doubts?"_ The dark-haired woman laughed nervously.

_"I'd think you were scarier if you didn't." Polla cracked her knuckles. "Jedi are still sentients, aren't they? They didn't replace your brain with a droid's?"

"No." Bastila frowned. "Jedi don't have that kind of power."

XXX

Revan shook her head, opening her eyes again. "The Fleet just needed coordinates. It didn't matter what happened to us after that. Especially once Malak had Bastila.”

Zaalbar groaned. “This trail leads into kinrath webs, Polla Revan. Do not entangle yourself.”

“The Council had faith in you,” Vrook said. “It was not entirely misplaced.”

“Sure. I only killed _half_ of my companions.”

“Objection! Master, your calculations are once again inefficient and error-prone. You only slaughtered _four_, and that is counting the Jedi who entrapped you—’’

_and with you and T3 we were ten._ It had been comical, once, the way the HK counted himself and the astromech as sentient members of the crew. It wasn't now, not when a part of her still wished she could trade his life and the T3’s for the others.

_You can't._

"I will help.” Vrook stared at his hands. "I can mediate between you and the Jedi Council—’’
Revan scoffed. “You think I should talk to them?”

“Redemption is a personal choice.” Again, the Jedi Master gave the word the strange emphasis. “I want my niece to find her own path back. Whether or not that includes redemption—”

“You don't think I'm redeemed now?”

The light made his cheeks hollow, made shadows appear beneath his eyes. “I think there are many paths back from darkness. Redemption is but one. But if you choose to another, I cannot protect—”

The comm link chimed. Zaalbar growled, interrupting them. "A request to come aboard. A Sith, Kel Algwinn."

"No." Carth said instantly.

Revan laughed harshly. "Let him come." Maybe Vrook can work on redeeming him.

Zaalbar muttered something disapproving but punched in the access codes.

Revan stood up again, arms crossed, trying not to shiver.

Kel came up the ramp and into the room. He was pale-haired, with a round face and brown skin. His eyes were muddy and yellow.

At least he's not disguised as Malak again. I don't think I could stand that.

Kel looked like he was trying to look unimpressed—and failing badly. "I felt you die, Lord Revan."

"You almost killed me."

"Ban—my old teacher… she—healed you somehow? You had no Force in you, and then, in the courtroom I felt your power return—how is this possible?"

"The Force is magic. What do you want?"

"What do I want? Only to serve you, Lord Revan." His voice was sincere, but something glittered in his eyes. Greed maybe. Expectation.

Vrook coughed, and Kel’s lip curled. He turned, as if he'd just noticed the Jedi was sitting there.

"You're listening to more lies from the Council?" His young voice was high with scorn.

"I'm trying to get off this planet, actually. Someone seems to have told the Selkath authorities that we can't leave. Was it you?"

"No. Why would you want to leave?" Kel sounded incredulous.

"Maybe I just hate Manaan."

"Let me help you, Darth Revan. Together, we can restore the kolto and then the Sith will control the planet." The words fell out of his mouth with all the urgency and righteousness of the very young.

"Sounds great. Let me think. No." Revan took a deep breath. "Why did you go back to the Sith?"
"How can you ask me that!" He stared at her in disbelief. "We were on Coruscant, when I felt you… become our true Master again. The others all seemed to forget we owed you our lives."

"Others?" Carth interjected casually, looking up from his net feed.

Kel sneered. "My companions from Korriban. All cowards, just like your son. They went running to the Jedi Council like frightened children, while I left on the next freighter for Manaan."

"Why Manaan?" Revan asked.

"Because… the Games were here."

Games?

"Did my son come with you?" Carth’s voice sounded friendly, completely relaxed.

"No," Kel sneered down at him. "Dustil was too much of a coward, just like Jin and Thalia May. None of them would have lasted as long as I have."

"Then he’s—they’re still on Coru, huh?" Carth’s gaze had turned to Vrook again, but the man only shook his head.

"I left Coruscant after the Star Forge battle to come here," Vrook said. "There were rumors that Revan was here—"

"Only her pretenders!" Kel scoffed. "We should all revel in the greatness of the real thing." That cocksure smile on his young face was all wrong. "I can feel your power, Master. We all can."

"All the other coreslime Sith on this planet, huh?" Revan’s sympathy toward this kid was fraying fast. "Maybe you should remind them what happened the last time they welcomed me into the Sith Embassy—"

"Hey." Carth wrapped his arms around her waist, whispering in her ear. "Easy, Freckles."

Freckles. It was better than Legs, which had been Carth’s first idea for a nickname, but not by much. Still, the old endearment made something catch in Revan’s throat.

"Go on," she urged Kel. "You came to Manaan. Then what happened?"

When the boy smiled his round face looked like a bilious moon. "A few weeks later I felt you—die, or so I thought. But even dead, you had already shown us the true path of the Sith. Dark always triumphs in the end—just like you did, Lord Revan."

Dark always triumphs in the end. A dark chuckle whispered in her head like the clasp of a cold hand. Do you see that now, 'Freckles?' There is no other way—

"I always triumph," she mumbled.

"What was that, beautiful?" Carth’s voice was laced with concern.

"Nothing." Revan turned away from them all, suddenly struggling for control

Red.

Static electricity whispered against her skin as if the air around her was charged with it. Something flickered in her hands: energy, power, the Force… building up like a charge.
Do you feel this, Red?

Her fear only served to ignite the sparks. Energy crackled along her arms until Revan threw her hands at the wall.

Obligingly, the durasteel blew open. Twisted metal fell into the next room. Burned circuitry smoldered.

Behind her, there was dead silence, but she could feel Carth's horror like a turbolaser pointed at her back.

Revan heard herself laugh. "It's my fault, Kel? Bastila said the same fracking thing. And Malak blamed me with his dying breath." She turned back to face them all. "Find a new excuse."

"Revan." Vrook sighed and stood. Flames gutted in the hole in the wall. Her uncle waved a hand, quieting them. "Your control is gone. I can help."

“With more Soresu?”

By his horrified expression, her words had scored a hit.

Carth stepped forward, hesitant, to inspect the damage. "Just the cargo-lift off that door," he said. "Nothing major, beautiful, it's fine." His voice was steady and calm. A perfect lie.

“A display like that might impress losers like Lystria,” Kel chimed in. “But not the Gamemaster, or Lady Beya—”

“Beya Organa is here?” Vrook’s voice sharpened and his head turned back toward the Sithkid.

Kel sneered. “A recent arrival. She came with Malak’s old cast-off.”

Beya Organa. The Sith the Jedi chose for my fake cousin. Revan wasn't in the mood for reunions—or for more mentions off Malak. “So?” She turned toward the kid too, rolling her eyes. “I’m not here to impress Sith assholes—”

The comm link chimed again and Zaalbar whined, bending his head over the terminal. "They're wondering about the explosion. And Yuthura Ban requests permission to board."

Revan snorted. "It's a party. Pity we don't have anything festive to share with our guests. Unless maybe they'd like some nice tach glands?"

"I need a drink," Canderous muttered. He got up and brushed past her, rolling with his warrior's swagger, disappearing down the hall.

"Tell Port Authority we had an equipment malfunction," Revan told Zaalbar.

"Yes, Polla Revan, and Yuthura's boarding now."

"Thanks, Zaal." Revan rubbed her temple.

“Hey.” Carth grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “Easy.”

“Easy?” she scoffed. Revan wished she was somewhere else.

Anywhere.
Anywhere, ‘Freckles?’ a voice murmured in her head. Boreal and clipped—like frozen metal. Anywhere at all?

The world cracked and changed.

XXX

Red lights flashed. Somewhere back the way they come, an alarm was chiming, notes on a scale, up and down.

The Sith Lord’s brows were shot with gray and thinning. Dark lines curved on his hairless skull. Above the silver plate that covered the lower half of his face, and below his thin nose, Polla caught a glimpse of rotted teeth. The flesh around the metal was brown with decay.

He stank, like something rotting and stale.

“Hello, Red,” his boreal voice said.

With no surprise, she heard the snap-hiss of his saber igniting. The corner of her eye flickered with the addition of a red plasma blade to the flashing red lights above their heads.

Behind her, Bastila’s voice was low, almost strangled. “You need to understand, Carth.”

“I understand, all right.” Her lover’s voice cracked. “Always knew it was... something. But she—does she—”

“No time.” Bastila was holding her saber too, but close to her own side. Too close and at a bad angle.

Watch out, you’re gonna gut yourself with that thing, Polla thought, and fidgeted, feeling the other woman’s arms suddenly as if they were her own, automatically adjusting Bastila’s defensive posture.


“You always presumed.” His words came out in a mocking hiss. “One thing that has not changed.”

“Lot’s changed now. You know we killed Saul? Your torturing admiral? We wiped out everyone on your bridge too. Looted your armory. There’s no one left to fly your ship.”


The Force flared around Polla, flashing everything through a blue haze—heightening her senses until the world became a fever-dream. She was acutely aware of everything in that moment—the scratch of cloth on her skin, the ebb and flow of breath in her lungs, the stink of the half-dead man in front of her.

“You could surrender,” she added, staring up at him. Her saber was a reassuring beam of gold in her right hand. “Then I’d kill you faster.”

“I knelt to your victory a long time ago.” The blistering suns of his eyes narrowed, and amusement coated the Sith’s words with a sickly condescension that made Polla want to jam her saber up his ass. “Tell me...” Darth Malak rasped through a mechanical speaker, “is it vengeance you seek at our reunion, Red?”
Red?

Polla’s hands were suddenly too heavy. The hilt in her hands—now doubled, now in Bastila’s too—felt off.

The world wavered and shook.

“Reunion?” She tried to laugh. “What do you mean, ’reunion?’”

Behind them, Polla heard a clattering noise. She’d let Bastila’s saber fall from her other set of hands. Her own left hand reached back and called the other saber to it, so now she was holding two.

The other woman struggled for mastery, but the time when she could control the Force between them had died with that damned Selkath god. Bastila’s words and warnings were an inconsequential shriek at the edge of Revan’s senses. Not worth hearing.

Do your job, she thought through the bond. Give me the strength to win this!

Malak’s mocking laughter echoed in the metal hall. "Can this be true? You still haven't realized? You still don't know?"

Polla stared at that terrible face until the features shifted. Malak’s visage blurred, became young and unscarred. The prosthesis replacing his jaw vanished. Without it, his jaw was angled, his lips full, mouth wide. He had a cleft in his chin. A smile tugged at his mouth.

“Know what?”

“This.” He stepped forward. Brown curls fell in his eyes, and she stepped forward too and pushed them back. His hair was firesilk in her fingers. He smiled at her. His teeth were perfect, even and white. Her hand slid to the warm back of his neck as if it belonged there.

Red lights flickered against his pale skin. His chest was hairless and muscular. Her hand curved on his hard bicep, and then she ran her fingers down his bare chest and he sighed.

“Revan,” the Dark Lord of the Sith whispered, hot against her ear. “I knew you’d come.”

“I can’t stay for long,” Polla heard her own voice say. “They complained I set a poor example for the padawans, always sneaking out of the Temple—”

“But you’ll come back tonight?”

She smiled up at him and nodded. “Of course, Mal.”

Xxx


“Oh, Revan.” Those glittering yellow eyes looked amused, squinting down at her. Malak smiled. “I knew you'd come back to me.”

"Revan? What do you mean?” Polla tried to back away from the Sith, heart pounding. Her hands were sweaty on the pommel of her saber.

Red lights flashed. The docking bay doors were locked. Darth Malak had frozen Carth with the Force, knocked him down, and now Bastila only looked at her. Something terrible lurked in her
bondmate’s eyes. Something Polla didn’t want to understand.

And Malak laughed.

He'd never laughed; everything with Malak was always so serious, always so earnest, always so important.

"Ask the Jedi," he said, gesturing to Bastila. “Perhaps the Hope of the Republic can explain it to us both.”

I don't want to know. Polla swallowed hard and took a step back. Carth looks like a shot trawler deer. I used to shoot trawlers with my father and cousins on Deralia—and then sometimes I’d think about the stars that I’d find.

I was going to be Polla Organa, explorer of the galaxy. I was going to be Polla Organa, Hero Jedi, but I’m—I’m not.

Something bitter rolled in her throat. "Bastila? Is it true?"

"Yes." One word and the Jedi destroyed her.

The Force can do terrible things to a mind.

"It can't be true. I'm Polla Organa!"

But it was.

Xxx

His face was so open and warm. She’d dreamed of the day when he’d look at her like this. Sand. There was sand in her hair and her eyes felt gritty with it.

She pulled his cloak over them both and kissed him again. The waves lapped softly on the shore. Where were they? It didn’t matter. He was here, looking at her like that, just as she’d always wanted.

If his features blurred and changed, one moment Malak’s and one moment Carth’s, what did it matter?

XXX

She was seven, and her mother and father and grandparents beamed at her. Presents and a cake. A new hessi pony outside. On Deralia, everyone rode as soon as they could walk. A farmer's life. Her new pony had a black and blue striped coat.

Xxx

She was seven and she was crouched in a doorway, surrounded by shattered stones. Death screamed in her mind. She shut it out.

XXX

Malak came at her suddenly, twisting his blade in an intricate pattern. They were practicing. He said she needed to learn how to beat someone stronger and faster than her and she laughed.

"Let me know when you find someone like that," she said cockily. But he was: stronger, and faster;
and the lights were red, and the docking bays were locked. He’d sealed them alone in this room and his blade was red, not blue, and she countered it—backing up—desperately reaching for the Force, with an anger and a loss that she couldn’t comprehend.

Malak fell back, laughing. "Oh, I've missed you, Red."

XXX

Red.

Sand, Endless sand. She was lost. Her expedition scooter was broken. Lost on Mandalore, of all places. Tents ahead—a tribe of nomads. Revan’s jaw tightened.

Mal and Vrook will find me eventually; but I'll die without water first.

She squared her shoulders and headed for the tents, trying to ignore the nausea in her gut.

We aren’t supposed to make contact with the nomadic clans; but—I’ll convince them I’m harmless.

After all, that is my mission.

XXX

Zaalbar’s ancestral sword flashed in the sun and Mission fell. A deep thrust, into the ribs and up to the heart. Blood stained the sand, washed into the waves on the shore.

XXX

She tore across the coast, perched precariously on top of her hessi. Her topknot swung over her eyes and she clutched the pony's mane tight. Dancer's eight legs sliced through the ferra grass. She was racing with her cousin Sara, and she was winning. She always won.

Polla Organa, the fastest tweener racer on all of Deralia.

XXX

"Riding a swoop bike can’t be all that different than racing a pony or piloting a fast ship," Polla had said carelessly, shrugging off Carth's concern. "I was the tweener champion on Deralia."

XXX

"You set me on this path, Revan. I wonder if our positions were reversed and I had been saved by the Council, would I have done things differently?"

"Probably, Mal, you always were weak." She staggered a little. She was more injured than she wanted him to see.

His dying eyes glittered. "Save me," he whispered. "I remember how it was between us. I know what there is between us, even if you do not. I know what we must reclaim. Save me, Revan. Save me, Red."

"No." She raised her hand and took the last bit of life from his body, drinking it greedily, like a glass of cool wine. And then he died.

Then he died, but she didn't want to think about that now.
“Mullime,” Carth murmured. His back was a warm anchor against the terrors of the night. “You know you say it in your sleep?”

Mal. Mallie. Malak. Mal, I’m—I’m—

Red.

There were voices behind her, quiet ones. And the clink of glasses, quiet conversations.

—murmur of quiet conversations in white rooms—

Red?

A chill wracked her body and Revan shivered. To her surprise, she was sitting up in a chair, one of the wroshyr-bark blankets Zaal had brought wrapped around her.

The world resolved into hard edges—familiar ones. They were sitting in the ship’s mess hall on one of soft platforms the Wookiees had installed there.

Carth’s breath was warm in her ear. "Freckles?" he said. "Here." His fingers pressed something hard and smooth and curved in her hand. Revan took it automatically, her mind still half-fixed on that yellow grass below a red sun.

Deralia, a world she’d never even seen. A world of eridu fields and—

—sand, endless sand.


Revan looked down at her hand. White skin stippled with dark lines, now holding a glass of dark liquid.

"Mandalorian brandy," Carth’s mouth twitched endearingly. "Ordo's secret stash. Come back to me." He pulled at her arm.

“What happened?” Her voice felt strange and flat in her own ears.

“You… blanked out.” He hesitated. “It's happened before. Your uncle said your vitals are fine. More than fine. You're okay, just… it's just like you're dreaming sitting up.”

“It’s happened before?” Why don’t I remember?

Carth nodded. “Happened a lot on Kashyyyk. The med-scanner on the Hawk said you were okay—just… your conscious mind was asleep.” He patted her hand in a gesture that seemed designed to be futile. “Everyone dreams, beautiful. You just do it sitting up sometimes.” He smiled at her.

For some reason that made her shiver. “Did I say anything? Do anything?”
She looked over her shoulder. The room was empty, but voices murmured from down the hall.

"No. You just sat there." Carth’s concerned smile creased the lines on either side or his mouth. "You… you used to do it when we first met too. Bastila said it was the head injury. She called it a fugue."


Revan folded her hands on her lap and took a deep breath. "Where are the others?"

"In the rec room. Vrook said to give you time. He said you needed time to get used to the Force again."

Revan took another deep breath. "Right. Are they all still here?"

"Yeah." Carth snorted. "Two Jedi and a Sithkid. Yuthura's managed to keep Kel on a leash. I'm not sure how. And your uncle is being very quiet."

"They're talking about me?"

Carth looked worried. "No. I don't think any of them know what to say about you. Yuthura wants the Sith to work with the Jedi to fix the kolto. Vrook doesn't think it’s possible. and Kel keeps taunting the Jedi, telling Vrook that the Sith will fix the oceans first." Carth’s worried look deepened. "There’s… a lot more Sith here than we thought, beautiful. From the way the nets spun it, we expected to just find a bunch of kids playing dress-up in the Sith Embassy—kids like Kel—but he says there's others here. High-ranking Sith—even some of Malak’s officers."

_My fault!_ "Those stupid fish are going to drive their own planet into a bloody civil war," Revan wished she wasn't thinking the fish deserved it.


Revan blinked. _Dustil._ Thinking about Dustil was preferable to thinking about why her mind was hell-bent on reliving the worst day of her life. "Has Kel said anything more about Dustil? Yuthura said they were all on Coruscant together before."

"No." His brow furrowed. "I've been trying to bring it up."

"Maybe he went to Telos when Kel came here? Have you looked?"

"Yeah. When we were still on Kashyyyk—and all the way here." Carth shook his head slowly and squeezed her hand. "If Kel felt you die, Dustil would’ve too. Maybe he’d think I died—but now…"

Carth frowned. "I don't know what Dustil will think now. Maybe he’ll know you're alive? Or—or he’ll hear you are. Then maybe he'll look for me?"

"Maybe." It seemed like a long shot, but Revan wasn't going to say that, not out loud. _If Kel is any indication, maybe Dustil won't be the loving son you dream about, Carth._

The boy on Korriban hadn't been a loving son. Polla had come pretty damn close to gutting him, in fact.

"Not your fault!" Carth nuzzled her ear. He smelled like brandy. "The fate of the galaxy is not something that rests with one person."

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"That's not what the Council taught Bastila," Revan muttered. "Or what they taught me."

Not what they taught us, Red, the voice corrected her. Like a threat.

It didn't sound like Bastila at all.

Xxx

There was an irony, Davad thought, in wearing a Darth Malak holo-mask to pass unremarked in the Ahto City’s spaceport.

He could have easily wrapped himself in Force-weaves and dispensed with the need for a facade, but if he had to uncloak or could not evade the Selkath’s cursed stun-nets, he would be exposed. And that would not do.

Better not to draw attention—especially since she had suddenly been revived, her Force presence louder than any shallow imitation the Games had tried to manifest.

Revan.

Davad circled around the edge of the Czerka freighter, ducking beneath one of its flap-like wings while he watched the door to the hangar bay carefully. Kel Algwin, Yuthura Ban, Vrook Lamar… he had permitted them all to live—and go to her. A gift. Their loyalty to her was as obvious as a blood-trail to a drexl. And she would need allies, he suspected.

For there would be others seeking her soon. Some with intentions… less benign.

His comm crackled suddenly, and Davad cursed, answering it.

A blue-white image of a man resolved. Armored, casually leaning against a wall. “There's no need to ask where you are,” the man chuckled.

“I was merely following Algwin,” Davad lied. “I'm thinking of killing him.”

“And her?”

You're enjoying this too much, Davad thought, trying to summon the elemental fear that had started to work so well on Revan on the promenade. RUN! He thought at her again. LEAVE MANAAN!

But her mind was clear and closed to him now—a stranger’s. Just as it had been on Korriban. “No plans,” he lied. “What do you think we should do?”

The man shrugged. “I think that depends on her, don’t you?”

XXX

Carth had to believe in her. They’d come too far to give up. He tightened his arms and Polla leaned into him.

He’d taken off his armor, and he could feel her skin’s warmth through the thin layers of fabric separating them, the hard curve of her ribs under his hands and the steady beat of her heart against his chest.

His hand tightened on her darkened hand. Her poor skin was scarred with what the Force had done to it, the softness of her burned away by the Dark.
Revan hadn't looked any different on that last day, coming down to the shore with Bastila close at her heels.

Carth's first thought had been a happy one. She'd done it; she'd saved Bastila from Malak. He'd known she would. Only when she got closer did he see the blank expression in her eyes and that frozen smile, that was almost a smirk.

"Wait. Wait a minute. Where are the others? Juhani and Jolee Bindo?"

"They didn't make it." Her voice was empty, and her green eyes burned with something he didn't want to understand.

There was no expression on that beautiful face. No expression at all. No tone in her voice. It was her dead voice—frozen—the one he'd heard before. Over the commlink giving orders to the Fleet. So long ago.

"I'm going to make an end," she'd said that day. Not a threat or a boast or an oath. Just a fact.

Bastila had laughed, brittle as ferraglass, and told them the truth. Began describing the deaths of their companions in lurid detail—until Revan silenced her with a raise of her hand.

"It's true," Revan said, damning them all. "I've reclaimed my title as the Dark Lord of the Sith." Her voice was as dead and as empty as her eyes. Power crackled around her clenched fist. The air on the beach tinged sharp with ozone. like the calm before a storm.

Her green eyes met his and then narrowed like she was calculating an equation. Sparks burned in her gaze. Her eyes were turning yellow, just like nearly every Sith they'd met. Her expression was cold, light years away from the woman she'd been the night before.

Nothing of his Freckles at all.

In that moment, Carth knew she'd kill him. Can't stop her dead, he'd thought. As a soldier, he knew when to call a retreat. He forced his thoughts into the right channels. Live to fight another day. Need to contact Fleet. Get reinforcements—

"Mission!" He thought he remembered calling her name, her and Zaalbar, Canderous too—Carth thought he remembered barking orders at everyone to just cut and run. Carth thought he remembered the sound of Bastila's hysterical laughter.

Carth thought the kid would be right behind him when he ran. He thought Revan would go after him before she'd go after the kid. What had Saul said to him, there at the end?

"We kill what we love, Carth." That wheezing gasp, almost a laugh. "Think… when you… look… look at her—"

Carth should have remembered Revan loved Mission too. He had thought Mission was right behind him when he turned and ran. He never would have just run if he'd thought—

—but that little Twi'lek stayed. For all the good it did.
Carth heard the Hawk's engines; he saw the trail of ion smoke as their ship lifted to the sky. He ran back to the beach, hoping against hope that maybe this was all a bad dream, but there was only Mission's body on the beach, her blood staining the sand, back bent like a broken toy.

A few hours later a Republic reconnaissance team found him, homing in on the distress beacon he'd salvaged from one of the wrecks.

The sky above was no longer blue. It had begun to burn. His rescuers had been called to help hold the Star Forge, escort the last of the demolition teams to the reactor cores to set their charges.

Carth went with them. Offered to help, but that was a lie. He lost the team somewhere—no, he... he cut and ran and left them fighting the droids and Dark Jedi—left them for dead and ran. The Forge was a maze of echoing platforms built by alien hands. Bodies were everywhere.

Carth didn't know where he was going, or what he'd do when he got there. He only knew he'd find her again. Logic said she'd win. Logic said the bank of hangar bays closest to the pinnacle of the Forge were the only ones not destroyed and that she'd come to them.

Canderous's head turned, as Carth came running up.

“You.” Darth Revan said flatly. Her face was terrible. Her Sith face. Changed utterly. Yellow eyes. Dark lines etched the contours of her cheeks, rayed around her eyes like some black sun.

Bastila laughed when Carth ran up to them, and somewhere Canderous was asking a question; his tone deferential, maybe even frightened, if the Mandalorian could ever show fear.

But Carth only saw her. He was out of ammunition and they were out of time. All he had left were empty words. "It's not too late. I came back for you. I told you I would. I won't let you do this."

The Ebon Hawk waited, ramp down. Bodies lay all around them. Explosions and smoke. The Republic fleet was throwing everything it had, ramming ships into the Star Forge now that the shields were down.

With a mechanic's certainly Carth knew it was over. The platform rocked as the station's stabilizers failed. The air was thin and Carth heard the warning whine of depressurization locks.

Only a little field between them and the stars. And it wouldn't hold much longer.

"Kill him.” Bastila smiled. "The poor sad fool thinks he's in love with you, Revan."

Revan didn't move, didn't react. She just stood there. Waiting for what?

Bastila raised her hand and Carth felt a bolt of pain shoot through him. White-hot death jolted his core. His knees buckled, and he felt the wall next to him slam into his side as he struggled not to fall.

Freckles, he thought oddly, even if the name now bore no relation to the damned madwoman in front of him. What are we gonna do if she kills me—

Then, Revan's voice crying out. "No!"

Bastila begged for her life.

And then, Revan's voice, again. "No."

Carth heard a crackling noise, smelled burning metal and flesh. The pain stopped.
His eyes opened, staring at the ground in front of him. There was... there was almost nothing left of the former padawan. An arm made of ash. Scraps of black robe, A Human-shaped pile dust.

The station tilted again, and the arm crumpled to nothing.

Carth scrambled to his feet—and almost tripped over Revan’s unconscious body. At the time, he’d thought she was dead. Revan had fallen in a heap next to him on the cold metal ground.

Everything in Carth’s body hurt. But he bent down and picked her up. She seemed to weigh almost nothing, as if the Force had burned all of her away—or the stims Carth had taken earlier were still active.

He looked warily at Canderous, realizing too late that with the woman in his arms he’d have a hell of a time drawing his blaster.

But the Mandalorian just nodded, as if none of this was a surprise. “Whole place is about to blow.” He paused. “Zaalbar’s already on the ship.”

Carth nodded back. In his arms, the fallen Jedi moaned. She was breathing. She was alive, he’d saved her.

Xxx

Saved her for what?

Now, Revan looked up at him, sipping her brandy. Those dark lines on her pale face. Her color was better now at least. A hint of rose in her cheeks again, as if the time unconscious had helped her recover.

“What are you thinking about, Flyboy?” Her smile was faint—distracted—but there.

“I was remembering the Star Forge.”

“Having second thoughts about saving me?”

“Of course not.”

She grimaced. “I can tell when you're lying, Carth. Don't forget that.”

Can you? ”I'm not lying,” he lied. ”Let's join the others. Relax. You deserve it.”

”I'm sure it will be very restful, spending time with Kel and Vrook. Waiting to see what the Republic and the Sith are going to do. You made me want to live again, Carth. Damn you.”

He didn't know what to say. “Want me to take it back, Freckles?”

Her mouth twitched, just like he knew it would. “No.” She shook her head, seeming to hesitate. “With the Force back, I... I feel better.”

“Good. It's gonna be okay. We've been in worse spots, right?” He smiled at her and poured himself another glass of brandy, draining it all in one gulp and reaching for the second bottle.

XXX

Carth was drunk. The brandy flushed his face and husked his voice to an appealing rasp. His hand kept stroking her back in a gesture that would have been irritating had it also not been so
unconscious. He was calling her 'Freckles.' His guard was down. A part of Revan thought he needed to let off steam. Another part of her thought he was engaging in a pointless risk when they were surrounded by enemies.

Carth was sprawled by her side on the synthfoam couch, talking in a slurred voice to Yuthura about Dustil. Canderous was telling a war story to Kel, and Vrook sat alone, arms folded across his chest, a barely touched glass of brandy next to him on the servomech table.

Revan’s eyes met his gaze and her uncle smiled at her, nodding slightly. She smiled back to put him at ease, although she didn't trust him. Zaalbar had muttered something in disgust hours ago and left to check the nets. Revan had locked HK in the supply closet, just in case. She didn't trust herself, how could she trust her loyal assassin droid?

Assassin….

She frowned, glancing warily at the others; but for once, no one seemed to be paying her any mind.

The datapad Hulas had given her when they fled the courtyard was still in the pocket of her robe. She pulled it out.

The message was short and written in an archaic form of Rodian.

A contract was negotiated. Three weeks later, upon news of your demise, it was cancelled by default. I expect it will be reactivated.

The down payment came from Coruscant, through a Republic envoy. I regret that circumstances will almost certainly put us at odds; but as payment for your past services, I feel obliged to deliver a warning.

They won't let you leave Manaan. Not breathing.

Try Docking Bay 56.

"Should I even be surprised?" Revan laughed at loud. Everyone looked at her.

"I have enemies," she intoned darkly, and handed the datapad to Carth. He blinked at it, blurrily.

"What's this?" he said.

"Later, I'll tell you later."

He frowned at the datapad again and she hastily punched in a code, erasing the message. She was sure Carth couldn't read it, but less sure of the others.

"I told you as much," Vrook said, from his seat in the corner.

"You didn't tell me who." Revan glared at him. "Should I guess? Were you afraid I'd run back to the Sith if I knew the Republic wanted me dead?"

Kel lifted his head from across the room. "The Sith are your only choice," he slurred. "Join us, lead us back to greatness again."

"You weren't that great." The brandy hadn’t made her feel anything but tired. "Ever."

"We are now." He managed to yawn, which made him look even younger.
"I'm sorry, my friend," Yuthura said. Her purple head tails twisted, a sign of agitation.

*Yuthura.* Carth had monopolized her company all night with his concern about Dustil. Revan had barely spoken to her at all.

*She says she's my friend. Maybe it's time for her to prove it.*

"Yuthura," Revan smiled at her. "I have a favor to ask…"

"Of course," the woman said. "Anything."
Yuthura followed Revan down the hallway. The ship was huge, an old Czerka freighter with several wide doors opening to empty cargo bays. As they rounded a corner, the sound of other voices stopped. The lights were dim and flickering.

Despite herself, the Twi'lek felt a pang of unease. She'd been trapped in ships like this before, branded and sold when she was no more than a child. The hallway twisted, serrated dark corusteel under her feet. The metal echoed with their footsteps. The woman she still considered her first real friend—brief as their encounter had been—turned back and looked at her, with a face covered in shadows.

"In here," Revan said, and tapped the access panel of a door. Inside: a large messy room. A portable datapad sat on a table covered with plimsi and scribbled notes. Beside a narrow bed, someone had put up a folding cot. Both sleeping areas were unmade, and the room smelled stale, like a sickroom. Her friend wrinkled her nose, looking around as if noticing the mess for the first time. "I'm sorry," Revan said. "I—was unconscious during the trip here, I didn't realize it looked so bad." She tried for a smile. "Carth's not much of a cleaner, I guess."

Yuthura shrugged and sat down on the cot, hiding her distaste and unease behind an unnatural calm. It was all she could do. The room, the ship—none of it bothered her half as much as this feeling she had in the pit of her stomach.

Fear. Fear of her friend.

"What is it that you need?" She warmed her voice to sound as comforting as she could. It was the voice she'd used with her students on Korriban when she wanted them to tell her something important.

"Tell me about the kolto." Revan said. Her voice was flat and uninterested, as if that wasn't what she wanted to ask at all. She sat down heavily on the other bed, her back ramrod straight, and her eyes half-closed.

"The kolto." Yuthura frowned. "We do what we can, to heal the ocean, help it cleanse itself since the water was poisoned. The Selkath scientists believe there was some connection between the firaxa sharks and kolto production. The sharks are almost extinct now, but we've been trying to raise a few in captivity."

"The water's poisoned—I know." Revan rubbed her eyes and looked away. "Do you—need my help?"

"Your help?" Yuthura shifted uncomfortably. "It will take years. Years of focus and healing before kolto production resumes—if it ever does. This is not your task."

"It's my fault, did you know that?"

Yuthura winced. "That is the rumor," she admitted. "But surely, you know that. You've seen the vids—you know what people think."
"I saw part of one, in jail here on Manaan. I think Carth and the others saw more. They didn't want me to know about my... fame when I was dying," Revan scowled. "The one I saw was terrible. It had actors looking like me and Bastila. We were friends, good friends, but we were never—involved."

"Oh." Yuthura looked at her friend awkwardly. "The Telosian one. There are others. The Official Coruscanti version is really the most—accurate."

She stared at the floor feeling a twinge of guilt. She still couldn't believe they'd published that interview. She felt a pang of relief that Revan hadn't seen it. Seeing her alive again, those words the reporter had tricked her into saying felt like a betrayal of the trust they'd shared.

\textit{The Council told me what to say—or at least, what not to say—but I made a fool of myself all on my own.}

"Carth was very mysterious about you when he brought me here," Revan continued. "He made it sound like you weren't a Jedi or a Sith. But here you are, dressed in Padawan robes, staying at the Republic Embassy. So, \textit{are} you with them now?"

There was something clipped and cold in her voice; something that made Yuthura's hackles rise.

She kept her face serene with an effort. \textit{I don't believe in the Order's platitudes. But I also don't trust myself. How can I say that to her?}

"The Jedi have a saying, that every path has its own turning," Yuthura stared at her hands. "I was on Coruscant. We all were on Coruscant. All that you saved from the Sith Academy. The Order gave us shelter and counsel. And then—we felt a disturbance in the Force. Your fall. You saved us—but then the Dark Side still claimed you. We felt it. You and Knight Shan both."

"I think we all had a... crises of faith. Kel ran offworld. Thalia, Udoo, and Ophine threw themselves on the mercy of the Council. Dustil, Mekel and I left the Jedi and made our way into the Coruscanti Underground. We stayed together at first, trying to make sense of what happened. Dustil and Mekel were the last of my students, and I felt a responsibility to keep them safe. We had a quiet existence, for a brief time. It was a month before reporters found us.

Then—there were the interviews. All the media coverage. I found the attention — overwhelming. The Jedi came to us again and offered us peace."

"Dustil’s on Coruscant." Revan interrupted, as if the rest of Yuthura’s narrative had gone completely over her head. "We need to find him. For Carth. Where is he now?"

"Now? I don't know. The Underground still—I assume. He was when I left—when I left him."

\textit{Why should I feel guilty? He had the same offer I did.}

\textbf{XXX}

\textit{There was always something to watch in the Coruscanti Underground. People's lives unfolded all around them: going to work and to school, raising their families, doing their jobs. Normal lives—like the ones they so desperately wanted.}

\textit{They were at a sidewalk cafe, sitting at a small table. Dustil was arguing again, while Mekel only stared at the ground.}

\textit{Mekel rarely spoke, not since Korriban. Whatever had changed him—and only part of it was on}
"Yuthura's conscience—he didn’t want to share."

At least, not with her.

"I can't believe you want to go back to the Jedi. After what they did." Dustil scowled, his shoulders hunched over the table.

Yuthura put her caff bulb down. “The Jedi are not merely one entity. I’ve been offered the chance to do good. You could come with me—both of you could come with me.” She tried to catch Mekel’s gaze, but the boy just stared into space, his eyes slightly unfocused.

“I’d rather go back to the Sith,” Dustil muttered. “If Revan hadn’t killed them all.”

“I don’t understand.” Much as she had tried. “Revan touched all of our lives; but your anger seems personal. Do you blame the Jedi for her death?”

“Not hers,” he muttered. “I don’t give a frack about Revan.”

“Then what is it?” The obvious answer was too obvious. “I know your father was part of the Star Forge crew, but he was a soldier. You can’t blame the Jedi for his death.”

"We agreed not to talk about our pasts," Mekel interrupted. “Leave him the frack alone.”

“We need to talk about this,” Yuthura insisted.

“No,” Dustil snapped. “We don’t. We’re out. Have fun being a good little Jedi. We’re out of here.”

He and Mekel stood up from the table, almost simultaneously. The two boys walked away, down the crowded street. Two more lost faces in the Coruscanti crowd.

Yuthura did not follow.

XXX

They didn't even have any credits. They just vanished—and I just let them go.

She took a deep breath, struggling for serenity. It evaded her. She struggled to feel nothing instead—that old feeling that she’d learned so long ago in the slaver pens. That was much easier.

"Coruscant." Revan said, almost dreamily, obviously lost in her own thoughts. "It's supposed to be the jewel of the Republic. A world of sky canyons, teeming with every race in the known galaxy. The Senate is there. The Jedi Council. Merchant fleets of Empire stretching towards the stars. The Underground is full of color and life and the chatter of a thousand languages and cultures. I read that once, on a holocard. I always wanted to see it."

"You lived there." Yuthura said. "I guess you don't—"

"Remember? You'd guess right. I don't remember anything about Coruscant." Revan's voice was pained. "Except a feeling I had once, that I wanted to see it burn. But Polla Organa wanted to go there her entire life. Dustil's there… so maybe we’ll go."

"You can't." Yuthura said bluntly. "It's not safe. Worse than Manaan."

Revan raised her eyebrows. "Why is that?" There was a hard edge in her voice, suddenly, as if the earlier carelessness had all been an act.
Yuthura's skin prickled. The words came out of her mouth, awkward and stammering. "I-I'm not sure. I only know that the Jedi Council knows the truth about your fall. Some members of the Senate do too. A few Senators interviewed me, after the holovid came out. The questions they asked were innocuous enough, but I sensed… hatred. They were glad you were dead."

"So?" Revan frowned. "A few sents hate me. Out of trillions." She laughed. "It's funny how quickly you get used to that."

"Senators are powerful," Yuthura warned her. "And it's not just them. The vids have made you famous in Core Space—especially on Coruscant. I don't think you realize how famous. The vids made you a hero. If the truth came out, those trillions would tear you apart."

Revan didn't look concerned. "Is that all?" Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you sure there isn't something more?"

Yuthura wondered if the woman realized she was pushing—not just with her question—but also with the Force. Revan's mind pushed against Yuthura's, pressing, prying, reaching. It felt as slimy as a Hutt's tentacle, picking through her thoughts, poking them, prodding them. The Twi'lek was angry suddenly; very angry with her friend and she stood up quickly, backing away towards the door.

"Stop it!" she said, rubbing her temples, trying not to lash out. "It's only a feeling I had. Nothing more."

"You don't know anything more, it's true." Revan settled back down on the bed and closed her eyes. Her face looked detached, maybe a little sad. "I'm sorry."

"Saying you're sorry doesn't fix this!" Yuthura's temper flared.

"I didn't mean to press so hard," Revan whispered, almost to herself. "But I had to know if you were holding anything back. I have to know everything. I'm flying blind through a minefield."

What do you say to the Dark Lord of the Sith? I hardly knew what to say to you on Dreshdae, when I had no idea what you were. You bristled with the Force, told me obvious lies—always, with that cruel half-smile on your face. You asked me to let you into the Academy and I did. I never knew whether I should just eliminate you or follow you.

I knew you were important. You helped me with Uthar. Then you dragged my darkest secrets and shame out of me as if it was idle chatter in some spacer cantina.

You had slaves, even a little Twi'lek girl—as little as I was once—but you treated them like friends. I saw the stricken look on your face in the dueling room. I saw the terror in your eyes when you knelt before Uthar, reciting the Sith Code. I saw the anger in your face when you spared my life. I sensed your guilt when you finally told me who you really were.

What do I say to you now?

"You should leave Manaan," Yuthura stared at her hands. They were smooth and pale now. Not like they had been. Not like Revan's were now. Her face in the mirror was beautiful again, the Twi'lek reminded herself. No trace of the monster she'd been. Numb, feel nothing. It's easier. "Leave Manaan, but don't go to Coruscant. Leave Republic space. Perhaps in time, things will—change." Perhaps in time, you will learn temperance. Patience. I cannot help you. I have no lessons to teach someone like you.

"So, I've been told." Revan flopped on the bed. Her voice was strained. "I—don't trust very many
people. But I trusted you—I do trust you. I need your help."

"Of course."

I still only half believed you when I took the collar off—but then—there you were again. The Force rippled around you Revan, it burns around you. It's terrifying. I joined the Jedi to avoid losing control. I joined the Jedi because I was afraid of becoming—what you became. Again. Afraid of becoming a monster again.

Revan's eyes were half-lidded, and a muscle twitched in her hollow cheek. "I know you're afraid of me, it's—that's fine. I can feel it, and I don't—hold it against you."

"What do you want me to do?" Yuthura frowned, and her head-tails flushed.

"Search my mind with the Force. You're the only one I trust who can. Tell me the truth. I—dream things and I remember things; but they're all in pieces. I want to know what being Revan means. What I've done. I remember how to be Revan—what I don't know is why to be her. Or—why not." Revan scrunched her eyes shut. Her voice was hesitant. "I don't want to kill my friends—more of my friends."

_I'd almost rather you asked me to join you again for the glory of the Sith. Or tried to kill me. It would be easier to resist than do this task out of kindness._

Revan's yellow eyes blinked suddenly. Her face twisted, and her voice was low, oddly gentle. "I wouldn't kill you, Yuthura," she said. "I don't want to… kill anyone ever again. Please?"

_One of the first things taught in the Order is to help, when at all possible. No cause is too small, or too great. With the Force comes responsibility; with power comes an obligation to help others in need. You couldn't refuse Carth's request for arbitration when you thought they were Alderaanian actors. How can you refuse her now?_

"I will try." Yuthura took a deep breath, and tried to focus, closing her eyes and letting the Force channel through her, reaching for Revan's mind like the clasp of a hand.

The Force surged around them, the jagged edges of Revan's uncontrolled power meeting her own energies, smaller and cool and contained.

She brushed her mind against the girl's.

_You still think of her as a girl even after all that you know. Easier perhaps, than thinking the truth. She's—she's a monster._

_I can hear you._

Revan's mind was a maelstrom, and it took all of the Twi'lek's efforts not to be sucked into its wake. Images flashed through her mind and she tried not to look at them too closely. She felt like she was spying on ghosts.

_Yellow plain and a red sun. The Dark Lord Malak's face—and then Carth's. A dead little Twi'lek under an alien sun; clash of sabers, and pain. Sand, endless sand and something twisting in her gut like knives. Racing a strange, striped animal across a grassy plain. Fleets of ships moving between the stars like dancers, and worlds burning beneath. Malak's face, younger, before the prosthesis. Bastila's—afraid. A strange man dressed like a spacer—dark hair pulled in a top knot, mouth like a knife. The ground rushing past, on a swoop bike; a sharp bank and the black flatness of a canyon wall. A white room, and the murmur of soft conversation. And sand, endless sand._
But there were holes in the fabric. Gaping ones, like wounds. Dark places, where the Jedi’s mindwipe had burned away everything.

_I hate them. Hate is dangerous, hate is—power. Hate and fear. Sometimes power is necessary. Because the weak—they just die. The weak die screaming._

Yuthura shuddered, opening her eyes.

Revan's face was untroubled, almost luminescent in the dim glow of the room's light bars. The dark bars around her face—did they look less dark now? Were they fading? The light wasn't good, and Yuthura wasn’t sure. Her own Sith brands had taken months to fade. She looked at her own hands suddenly, to reassure herself—they were still pale and unmarked. Revan's eyes were closed, and her chest rose and fell evenly. She looked asleep, and asleep she looked almost—innocent.

Then her eyes opened, and the illusion shattered. The Sith mask was more than the lines of her face—it was in her expression. "Well?" she asked.

"I don't think your memories will—ever come back completely." _Be honest with her, you owe her that. Besides, she'll know if you aren't._ "There are gaps there, places where there's just—nothing._

_Places where they burned my mind. Where they burned away everything I was, and the weak fool's mind they implanted couldn't fill the emptiness._

The thought was so vitriolic it made Yuthura gasp.

Revan sat up, pulling the blankets around herself. Her thin shoulders shrugged. "Sorry," she said out loud. "I—am trying."

"I know that," Yuthura said softly. _You are trying, but is it enough?_ The thought made both of them shiver.

"I just want to know—I should know, know who I am, know what I've done, I don't even know how what happened—in the Mandalorian Wars, or how Malak and I became Sith. Shouldn't I know? Shouldn't I know about my own life?"

"Have you... looked on the nets?"

Revan scowled. "When I found out who I really was—yes. After Malak took Bastila. There wasn't much. I looked on the way to Korriban."

She closed her eyes and recited the words like a schoolgirl learning a lesson by route. "Revan and Malak defied the Council, engaging the Mando’ade on their own terms. They chased the last stragglers of the Mandalorian fleet all the way back to the Outer Rim. They returned to Republic Space with an even larger fleet. They invaded Republic protectorates on the Outer Rim. Telos. Endar. Ossus. Yu-Phaedra. Echanis, Arkania, Donovia. Malak replaced Revan as the Dark Lord of the Sith, continued their reign of terror, and so on." Her voice dropped to a whisper, and her eyes opened. "There was nothing about me in those facts."

"There's... a lot more about you nets now."

"That's why Carth restricted my access, I assume. More what? Tales of the evil Dark Lord? A fable about her brave redemption before her noble death?"

"Sort of. Some of it may answer some of your questions. Even if most of it is—tailored for a
specific response."

Hesitantly someone knocked at the door. "Polla?" Carth Onasi’s voice, sounding worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Come in, Carth."

Yuthura wondered if Revan knew how her face looked, how it brightened at the sound of his voice. Like a flower turning towards the sun. The darkness around her seemed to fade a little, replaced by something that almost looked like hope.

*Can hope save her? Oh, I hope—if anything can—it could.*

Yuthura had given up on hope long ago, when she'd been younger than—that child's name—Mission Vao. What was left after was something else: an acceptance, so close to the Jedi discipline and yet so far. Sometimes she thought she still tilted on the edge of a precipice—balanced between dark and light, poised to fall either way.

Revan's lover came in, glancing at the disorder, almost embarrassed. "Sorry," he muttered to Yuthura. "We didn't clean up much in here."

"It's fine, Carth. Yuthura doesn't care. Stop calling me Polla."

"Sorry... old habits." He smiled at Yuthura and went to Revan, putting his arms around her protectively. "Thank you for saving her." His Human eyes were golden brown and long-lashed; but Yuthura thought he seemed nervous.

"I should say the same to you, I think." she answered, trying to keep her tone light.

"Yuthura says I should watch the holovid. About my life," Revan said softly, looking up at him. "Have you seen it?"

Carth's face darkened for a moment and he swallowed hard. "Vids," he repeated. Almost gingerly he lifted a hand from around Revan's waist and pushed back his hair nervously. His other hand pulled her closer in an unconscious shielding gesture. "You mean the Official Version, don't you?"

"Of course," Yuthura said, meeting his eyes.

I can understand why he doesn't want her to see, but it's wrong to hide her past from her. Cruel. Perhaps even selfish.

"Let's watch it now," Revan said.

"N-now?" His voice cracked. "It's almost twenty hours of footage, beautiful. We don't have time for this now. It's late, we need to sleep. Tomorrow, we need to figure out a plan. Zaalbar's stalling for time with the Selkath, like we discussed. But we're still trapped."

"We'll watch some of it now," Revan repeated stubbornly. "And you'll unlock my net access. I have a plan—which I'll tell you about. Later." Her eyes flickered towards Yuthura.

The Twi'lek nodded understandingly. "I agree," she said gently. "It's best if I don't know. It's late. Perhaps I should go."

"No," Revan said. "Stay. I need an objective opinion about what the rest of the galaxy believes."

Yuthura wondered if Revan knew about the edge of Force compulsion in her words. She decided it would be best not to tell her.
Best for me. I will not fall again, I will not. I'll help save the kolto, and then I'll—do something else. Soon Revan will go, she'll go away, and I won't have to think about her any more. My first friend. My first friend the monster.

"We can watch Episode One, I guess." Carth sighed. "You're right—you should know." He laughed. "I read they're teaching it in schools now. You have a right to know what every eight-year old child in the galaxy knows—about your own past."

He got up from her, and went to the console, tapping in a brief command. "It came out while we were on Kashyyyk," he told her. "You were so weak. I didn't want to upset you."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Well…" Carth grimaced and switched on the particle screen. An image flickered to life around him, a black veil of space, scattered with a thousand shining suns. His body flickered into shadow, lit by the stars as he made his way back to the bed. "Sort of."

XXX


A narrator's voice, and white letters against the black screen.

For more than three thousand years…

The Republic has stood as a glorious beacon of light amidst the darkness of the galaxy. From ages past to the present days: in times of tyranny and of suffering; heroes have been born from the fabric of everyday life, chosen to take their place among the pantheon of noble sentients who protect and guide us. Courageous men and women: who, against all odds, overcome obstacles, and rise above the petty differences of worlds to fight injustice across the galaxy. To fight for our Republic.

Over the ages, many of these heroes have come from the Jedi Order.

XXX

"Unsurprisingly, many of the villains come from the Jedi Order too," Revan commented.

XXX

For those born with the Force, life is never easy, or simple. Sacrifice, discipline, and control are taught to every Force-sensitive child. These virtues are a shield against the Dark Side. For as the Force is life—as it sings through all living things—it is also darkness. Many Jedi struggle and many have fallen. For every hero who wielded the Force for good, there is another who fell into temptation.

The lure of the Dark Side is powerful, but the Jedi believe that even the darkest soul can be redeemed.

This is the story of one woman's noble crusade, to end tyranny and save the Republic. This is the story of one woman's fall. This is the story of her final redemption. This is the story of Revan Starfire.
There is no death; there is only the Force.

The narrator's voice was female. The words scrolled in stark Basic text, across a backdrop of stars. The music was stirring, a variation on the Republic anthem.

XXX

Revan burrowed her head into Carth's chest, turning around so that his body was wrapped around hers. She watched the vid out of the corners of her eyes.

XXX

The stars dissolved into a young woman's face. An earnest face; black hair, wide cheekbones, and a calm, smooth mouth. Her eyes were a piercing shade of bluish green and she wore a simple Jedi Knight's robe. She was no one that Revan recognized. Behind her, white steps led up to a gleaming building, whose archways seemed to encompass the entire sky.

"Coruscant", the woman said. "The Jedi Temple. For thousands of years, the Order has gathered in this holy place of refuge. It is here that the Jedi train the Knights of our Order."

"My name is Karolla Edwa, and I am a Jedi Knight. I was on the Star Forge, and I was the last person to see Revan Starfire and Bastila Shan alive."

XXX

"You were?" Revan muttered in disbelief. Then she frowned—because actually, the woman’s face was familiar.

XXX

"You made it!" The same voice, now girlish and full of exuberant glee. The Jedi’s companions — young cannon fodder sent by the Council to die— smiled at them gratefully. "Quick! we have to break through to the Command center before those bastards know we're here!"

From deep under the hood of her robes, Revan eyed the Jedi cautiously, aware of Bastila at her flank. Canderous was at their backs, a silent presence in thick armor, awaiting command. The Force swirled around them like a song.

She opened her mouth to say something appropriate —more Jedi could be useful— but then the hangar doors hissed open and a flock of Sith poured out, moving in precise formation towards them.

"Damn," the young woman swore. "They're on to us! Don't worry; we'll hold them off. You go—go defeat Malak! We'll hold them off here."

"Okay," Revan said. Just one word, as much a command to Bastila and Canderous as it was an agreement with the Jedi. "Good luck," she added smiling faintly.

Then she ran, Bastila and Canderous at her heels.

Malak was the key. Nothing else mattered.

XXX

“We held them off,” the woman continued. “My companions died. Revan and Bastila and the Mandalorian—
“He has a name,” Revan muttered.

“— went into the Star Forge alone. Their mission was to defeat Malak and lower the final defense shields around the station’s core power converter.”

“I was the last one to see them alive. I waited as long as I could in the hanger, but someone had to carry the tale back to the Republic. Although they succeeded in their mission, they never made it back.”

"Defense shields?" Revan turned her head around and looked at Carth. "What defense shields?"

"There were several teams of demolitions experts—and Jedi," he said. "I came up with one of the last. One of the teams must have succeeded setting their charges—or the Star Forge would have never been destroyed."

"Nice of them to give me the credit," Revan whispered, acid welling in her throat. "So, how exactly did I save anyone?"

Her lover’s hand tightened on her arm. "You stopped Malak. And Bastila. And I stopped you."

"But we all would have died anyway," Revan said darkly. "The Star Forge blew up?"

“You—” Carth stammered out excuses. Revan closed her eyes.

*I'm no hero. All I saw was Malak. All I thought about was killing him. Everything I did... I did for him. To kill him.*

*Why?*

*Because I hated him.*

*Why?*

*He tried to kill me.* All that was left was emotion. So dark that she could taste it in her mouth, like ashes.

*Ashes from the fire singed her face, but she barely blinked. There was sand and pain. Her mouth was so dry. She'd bitten her tongue somehow. Warm, calloused hands forced a strip of hard leather between her teeth, wiped the blood from her lips.*

*"Breathe,“ a woman's voice said. In Mandalorian.*

Carth's arms hugged her close. “Are you okay?”

“Should I be?” She tried to catch Yuthura’s eye, but the Twi’lek was staring intently at the screen.
A simple garden. Green, sculpted bushes, low white benches and a vast soft lawn surrounded by high white walls.

“Here in this place of contemplation and meditation, Revan Starfire was given her first task on her journey to Knighthood. She and her loyal companion, Padawan Malak D'Reev, were sent to the Outer Rim, to study the Mandalorian threat. Even then, nine standard years before the date of this broadcast, the Jedi had heard rumors of a force gathering under the Fett Mandalore. Even then, the civilized galaxy shared a concern that Mandalorian aggression might extend into Republic space.”

“But at the time, Revan and Malak’s mission was a peaceful one. They were accompanied by their Master, the Jedi Vrook Lamar, whose insights into the Mandalorian mind would prove invaluable. The Jedi believed that through understanding, they could convince the Mandalore to cease his hostilities.”

Vrook's face appeared on the particle beam screen, looking as lined and careworn as it always had, as long as she could—or couldn't remember.

“This is the tale of Revan Starfire,” he said roughly. “The tale of Revan, the Prodigal Knight.”

Music surged, and his face faded back to a backdrop of stars. White words against the blackness of space.

_The Tale of Revan, The Prodigal Knight_

_Episode One: The Mandalorian Wars_

In slightly different text, smaller down, as if it had been added later, more words scrolled hastily across the screen.

_This version is authorized by the Coruscant Galactic Senate, The Republic Fleet and the Jedi Council. All other versions of this story are unauthorized and should not be taken as fact. All footage is real. All interviews were used with the full consent of the parties involved._

_Produced by Senator Malachi D'Reev_

Revan blinked. _Malak's father, I guess_. Nothing in her mind. No memory, not even a trace of one. She wondered if she'd liked him.

_XX_

“Who was Revan Starfire? Like most of our Order, her origins were unimportant. She was trained from a young age at the Jedi Academy on Dantooine. The masters there taught her well. She was an excellent student, the embodiment of all things the Jedi strive to achieve.”

Blurry footage, a young girl, perhaps ten years old—

_XX_

—_Eleven, Red_ — her mind whispered, almost mocking.
—with short red hair and a freckled, round face. She was sitting on a stone floor, legs crossed, wearing plain white robes. A Togruta woman, dressed in Jedi robes, sat across from her.

"You are traveling in the wilderness, and you come across a man who is being attacked by a group of wild beasts. He pleads for your help and offers you a reward. What do you do?"

"I kill the beasts or scare them away and save the man," the childish voice said. A lilting voice, that sounded nothing like what Revan thought she sounded now. "B-but I don't need the reward," the girl added hastily. "The Jedi care not for such things." She raised her small chin a little, and grinned. One of her front teeth was crooked.

"The same scenario," the woman's voice said sternly. "Only now, instead of wild beasts, bandits attack the man."

"I'd definitely scare them away somehow," the child's eyes were wide and earnest. "Killing people is bad. Every life is part of the Force." She looked upset at the question. Her pointed chin trembled.

Cut to a smoky cantina. A Durosian woman, golden skinned and voluptuous, balanced a tray of drinks with a dancer's grace. She looked straight at the holocam, a weary expression in her orange eyes.

She set the tray down and folded her nine-fingered hands. "I knew Revan. We were children together. There was something special about her that we all felt, even then. Myself—I left the Order when I was thirteen. The ways of the Jedi are not for everyone, and it is a hard path. I feel honored to have known her."

"Nothing," Revan muttered. "No memory, no name.

"That's Jrii Vail. They brought her to Coruscant, for these interviews." Yuthura glanced back at her. "I heard that she runs a casino there, now—in the Duros Sector. You made her famous."

"Well, I guess that's one good deed."

Carth stroked her hair.

"Some people are meant for small lives, others never have that luxury." Jrii Vail shrugged. "Duros lies on the outer edges of Core space. Refugees came to our world, we heard stories; from Cathar, from Eos, from Ssyyir. Our planet was one of the first in the Independent Consortium to ask the Republic for assistance, against what we thought would be the worst threat to the Republic's peace since Exar Kun."

"But—before that—" the Durosian smiled "—before that, Revan and I were only children—much like any other children. Revan was from Hoth, and some of the others teased her about it. It's a backwater place, and she was surprisingly ignorant about so many things."
“She and Malak were older than the rest of us, and they were fast friends. He was very kind to her.”

Choppy footage of a red-haired girl and a tall boy with curly brown hair sitting industriously at a table, surrounded by old datapads and bound books. They wore simple white training tunics. The girl's lips moved—there was no sound with this vid—and the boy's face broke out in an expression of laughter, lips curving up into a wide-open smile.

An old Fosh clad in a brown knight's robe made shushing gestures at them, shaking a pinioned hand in mock sternness. The two children covered their mouths to hide their giggles.

"There were thirty of us Novices. Eventually, ten made the rank of Padawan. Malak was the first one, and we were all very happy for him. But none more so than Revan."

The brown-haired boy, back turned from the cameras, was standing before a workbench. His broad shoulders hunched over, completely absorbed in his task. Rough blue crystals and smooth metal tools aligned in a neat row along the edge of the table. He turned around, his face serene but proud. He held the silver handle of a lightsaber in one hand and activated it. The blade lit with a hiss, and a girl's voice cheered happily from off-screen.

A second later, a blur of white robes and red hair, and the child Revan was hugging him fiercely, arms around his waist. Her head came up to his chest, and he raised the hand holding the blade awkwardly out of her way.

She seemed blissfully oblivious to any danger. "I knew you'd do it on the first try! I knew it! I knew it!" She let him go and jumped up and down, laughing.

"Calm down," he said. "It's just a lightsaber, it's not like I saved the world or anything."

"We'll do that later." Child Revan grinned at him, teeth flashing. The crooked one had been straightened.

XXX

"That has to be fake," Revan snapped.

"I don't know." Yuthura spoke. Revan looked up startled from the nest of Carth's arms. She'd almost forgotten the Twi'lek was still here. "The Enclaves record everything about their charges. The Council showed me some of the footage from my own training. Some of it was—surprising."

Revan remembered the holos she'd found, archived in that ancient computer. "They aren't showing everything," she muttered.

"Of course not." Yuthura was scared of her; it hurt how scared she was, even though the Twi'lek hid it well. She thinks I'm a monster. "This is the story they wanted to tell. They—made you a hero." The Twi'lek woman hesitated. "There are worse things."

"That's true." She'd seen them.

Carth murmured something soothing in her ear. Revan leaned back against him. Absently, she reached for the packet of nutra-bread on the low table beside the bed and crunched one. It tasted awful, but it was a familiar awful taste.

XXX
The two children, older now and dressed in Padawan beige, were fencing in a small round training room.

Yellow blade met blue in a clash of sparks. Blue bent back yellow. Malak's greater height and strength gave him an obvious advantage over his smaller and younger opponent. He pressed the advantage, and the young girl twisted her hands, trying to bring the other edge of her saber up to block. There was an intense scowl on her face—not anger—just desperate concentration. Her knees bent and shook.

Malak looked serene and expressionless, forcing his advantage. Suddenly Revan sank to her knees, deactivating her blade and rolling with Cathar-like grace away from him. She raised up a hand and he fell back—pushed back by some unseen force.

A tiny, wizened figure clad in master's brown appeared. Master Vandar shook his head. Even with no sound, his chastisement was obvious.

The red-haired girl got to her feet and bent her fragile neck in acquiescence, nodding quiet agreement.

"Even the most gifted must learn," Jrrí's voice continued. "The Jedi are taught to rely on their bodies' strengths and weaknesses. Revan was no different than any other student. Heroes are not born—they are made. And Revan's journey had only just begun."

Fade out again: the veil of stars. Vrook's voice, detached and remote, took over the narration.

"Nine years ago, we set out for Mandalore: Revan and Malak and me. I was their guide and advisor, but the real responsibilities were theirs."

"Some question the Order—the seeming folly of sending only two Padawans on a mission of such strategic import; but at the time, the possible Mandalorian threat was only one of many potential flashpoints in the galaxy. There were rumors of the Sith rising on the other side of the Rim. There was the slave rebellion on Sleheyron, and a million oppressed people on that planet, who needed to be saved from the lash. There were the ecological crises on Thantos, and the pirate trade in the Degoban sector. Famine on Setooine, and a civil war on Wayland."

"The Order sent Jedi to all of these troubles, and a hundred more. As we have done for millennia—making our quiet way through the galaxy, helping those in need."

"We landed on the capital planet of the Malachor system. The natives call it simply, Mandalore. Its Republic classification is Malachor IV."

A small world rose, dappled green and yellow, slashed by an expanse of blue.

"The Mandalorians have an ancient culture, as one of the nine humanoid species of the known worlds. A century ago, they were nearly crushed by the Sith threat. They are warlike; but the Republic is full of histories and cultures of warlike peoples, who have learned to live in harmony with their neighbors. History has shown that even the most violent species eventually reach the age of reason and enlightenment. Nine years ago, we hoped this would be Mandalore's time. Our mission was to bring a promise of hope into a dark place. The Malachor system has always been resource-poor. Its people were ravaged by the predations of the Sith and the Krath—misled and misguided by the Dark Side of the Force, and the beings that wield it."

"The Mandalorians were desperate and suffering. We came with trade goods and offers of aid for their starving people. We came among them to show them the way to the light—"
"Has Canderous seen this?" Revan asked.

"Oh yes," Carth said. "On the way to Manaan. I learned some new phrases. 'Ucah'alla y nik,' and 'Rysya Mandalore phar ech na' Republik infi'. Also, we need a new video deck in the rec room. I never knew a vibrosword could go through circuitry like that."

"At least I'm not the only one, breaking consoles and blowing holes in walls," Revan said. "'Ucah'alla y nik: my enemies are weak diseased man-whores.' 'Rysya Mandalore phar ech na' Republik infi': The Republic ants will be crushed beneath His feet.' For a Mandalorian, the suggestion of aid instead of conquest is an insult. Canderous taught me that." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

*And I guess I'd learned it already.*

Her mind was a perfect blank. Only the edges of those memories, *walking towards the round tents, and then—some time later, that pain, that terrible ripping pain.* Was I injured? Was I captured? Vrook said I had a chance to kill the Mandalore—before the invasion. Was I injured trying?

Progressively:

"Revan and Malak were promising young charges, and it was delight to counsel them. We landed on Chardon, the only spaceport on Malachor IV, in the province of the Rialis clan."

On screen, a holostill of a dusty spaceport. Only a few ships lay in the docks. A pale-yellow sun shone down from an icy blue sky. The buildings were made of yellow clay, with rounded sides and circular, arched doorways.

"At the time, there were five ruling Mandalorian clans: Rialis, Ordo, Lin, Weis, and Zal. In addition, the under-clans, too numerous to list.

"We landed posing as simple traders, with a shipment of droid parts and kolto for trade. A Jedi Knight's training must teach them self-reliance, and I instructed Malak and Revan to separate. Malak, I sent north to speak to the head of clan Zal. Revan, I sent west, to speak to clan Lin. Each was equipped with a land scooter and goods we had for barter."

Progressively:

Tents ahead, a tribe of nomads. Her jaw tightened, they wouldn't be friendly. Malak and Vrook will find me, but I'll die without water long before they do…. *She squared her shoulders and headed for the tents, trying to ignore the twisting nausea in her gut.* Perhaps I can convince them that I am harmless.

After all, that is my mission.

Progressively:

"I—think something went wrong," Revan said.

Carth still smelled like brandy. "Do you remember something about this?"

"No."

Progressively:
An archaic-looking holostill.

A red-haired woman, little more than a girl, surrounded by a group of hooded figures clad in gray and yellow loose robes. All of them had swords belted at their waists, except for Revan, who had one clasped in her hand. She was smiling at the camera, teeth white in a sunburned face, dressed identically to the others. Her hair was long, coiled in tight braids around her head and she looked like she was laughing. The other faces were indistinct shadows, blurred by the sun and exposure. The robes were loose, and it was hard to tell, but some of them seemed to be women.

XXX

Revan closed her eyes. Do Mandalorian women fight like men do? I should know this, but I can't remember. Yuthura said there are holes in my mind. Places where nothing will come back. It feels like that—this emptiness. I should remember this, I should remember something, anything. Did this really happen? Is this picture the lie, or is the lie in my memories?

When I was twenty-two, I piloted my first load of illegal spice from Deralia to Duros. My first smuggling job and my first solo. In Duros I got drunk and slept with some naval cadet. He had yellow hair and he gave me a necklace. It had green stones—pretty—but the clasp broke and I lost it on Irid'tu'al.

I can't fly a ship. I get sick during hyperspace—and I always have. When I was twenty-three, I wanted to become a Jedi Knight. I'd been training to be one for most of my life. The Force sang to me sweeter than any mother's song.

What did the Jedi do to me?

"Nothing," she said out loud, her voice hollow. "I remember nothing."

"Shhh, beautiful, it's fine, it will be fine." Carth murmured. He was good at soothing her. He could gentle a wild hessi with that voice.

You've never even seen a wild hessi, Revan’s mind mocked. They're from Deralia.

XXX

"Revan was charismatic and kind. She made excellent connections with the Lin tribe. They seemed amenable to trade."

The screen showed what appeared to be stock footage of an agricultural, arid world. A train of dewbacks. A sunset. The music was soft.

“The Mandalorian year is two standard years long. We came to them at the time of mid-summer; a time of peace. We stayed with them through their winter. Malak too, had great success with Clan Zal, and the three of us left Mandalore with our assignment completed."

“I promoted them both to Knighthood before we left the port. It was a simple ceremony. The Jedi Order does not believe in the outward trappings of rank—only in the mastery of the Force."

A map of the Rim was imposed over the desert scene, facing into a cityscape touched by silver clouds.

"On the way home, we stopped for supplies on Eos. It was there that we learned how much we had been misled. It was there when the Basilisk war droids fell like rain from the sky. And with that savage rain they brought fire and death and destruction."
A man's face filtered through a scratchy, two-dimensional holo transmission. Malak's face, browned from the sun. His curly hair was shaved close to his skull. Even in the poor recording, the expression in his eyes was horrified and bleak.

"The Mandalore lied," he said, voice flat and controlled. "They've blasted the shipyards, there's no way to get off-planet. We're trapped here, and the people are dying. The war droids sliced through the planet's defense systems, took out the orbital satellites. They've landed in Harborton. They're picking off soldiers on the streets. The Mando'ade shoot them down from the sky and then fight them with swords."

"Please!" Revan's face appeared on the screen, right under Malak's. Her head was almost level with his shoulders.

Malak's arms wrapped around her. His expression changed—serenity gone—he now looked almost defiant. They were both dressed in ragged clothing, and Revan's hair was a tangled snarl of dust and grime.

"You have to help! We've taken refuge in an orphanage. The Mandalorians won't kill children, but they've wiped out all the military force on this planet. They're raiding: taking supplies, weapons, raw metals—everything they can find. He won't stop with Eos. You have to believe me—believe us —" Her face was so earnest and young. Both of their faces were. On the screen Revan gulped and continued speaking, words coming out in a rush. "Our reports were wrong," she said. "They lied to us. Cassus Fett lied to us. They don't want trade, they want conquest. This—this death is their honor. You have to stop them. Please!"

"If you don't want to help us, help Malachor," Malak whispered, his young voice breaking. There were tears in his eyes. "We're trapped here. Please."

Vrook's voice in the background. "My students speak the truth," he said quietly. "I believe the Mandalore is a threat to us all. A threat to the Republic. We'll report again in a few days, if we can. May the Force keep you."

"May it keep us," Revan whispered to the transmitter's blurred lens, tears streaming down her young face. "May it keep us all safe."

The transmission ended, panning to shots of war droids falling out of the sky and burning ships. Vrook's narration began again, calm and detached amidst the carnage. The music started, soft and ponderous, then building.

"That broadcast was sent to the Jedi Council. It was then transmitted by an anonymous source in wideband across every sector of the net. Our identities were never revealed to the public. Until now. Nonetheless, our desperate cry became a catalyst for war. Their faces, Revan and Malak's, became the call of a generation; a desperate plea from two young Republic citizens caught in the Mandalorian net.

"Anonymous, they began a revolution. Infamous, they would be ended by one."

"The Mandalorians swept Eos clean in a matter of months. The war moved on to other worlds. Sssyrin, and Besh suffered similar fates. We managed to get passage to the Core worlds on a refugee ship, a converted freighter sent on a benevolent mission from Deralia."

"We made our way back to Coruscant, amidst a tide of wretched survivors from a thousand distant skies. I myself had become convinced, just as surely as Revan and Malak, that the Republic needed to take immediate action. It was I who encouraged my young charges to seek an audience with the
 Council and the Senate in the Audience Chamber. Malak was a Senator's son; I was a member of the Jedi Council, and our request was granted."

"The footage that follows is famous; but it has never before been released in its entirety to the public. Revan Starfire and Malak D'Reev pleaded for the lives of the people of the Core worlds; speaking with great eloquence about the Mandalorian threat. At the time, as we all know, their request was officially denied. It is hard to say now, looking back on the events that were to follow, if immediate military action would have made a difference. There is no blame, for the Senate, the Fleet or the Council, for not heeding the warnings of the young Jedi. History is a cruel mistress, and sometimes all we can do is learn from our mistakes. Like Revan did herself, at the very end."

The image panned to a vast room full of floating platforms, all occupied by sentients from a thousand different worlds.

The two of them looked very small, but when Revan began to speak, the camera panned to a close-up of their faces.

XXX

My face. And Malak’s.

It was hard to focus on what the woman she had been was actually saying. A long stream of technical jargon, military terms. Lists of troop movements. Lectures about responsibility.

"What a Jedi he was," Carth muttered acidly. "Malak. Worrying about the people of Malachor when your own lives were in such danger."

"I don't remember," she admitted. "I don't remember any of this."

Carth hugged her. "I do. I remember the rumors about the Jedi coup that was coming to save us all. The next day I signed up for another tour of duty." He sighed. "Morgana and I... argued about it, Dustil was so young and—"

I still need to tell him about Dustil. What was I thinking? But I can't. Not in front of Yuthura.

The door slid open. Vrook's face, her uncle's real face peered into the dimly-lit room. Canderous looming behind him. The music from the vid built to an ominous crescendo, as images of ravaged worlds panned across the screen. Vrook and Canderous' faces were blue and orange behind the light, dappled with the images from the vid.

Canderous frowned and stepped forward quickly to the console, tapping it once.

The recording stopped.

The Mandalorian muttered something under his breath, glancing back at Vrook again.

"I'd almost forgotten," he said gruffly. "How angry I got the first time I saw that vid. Is this what you've been doing all this time? The Sith kid's passed out on the couch. You'd think they'd teach them to hold their liquor. Zaalbar went to bed ages ago." Canderous looked at Carth. "And I thought we agreed not to show her this osik."

"I insisted," Revan said. "Yuthura thought I should know what happened. Or, what the Jedi say happened."

She pulled away from Carth's arms and got to her feet stiffly, staring angrily at the man who had
been her uncle, her Master, and probably—if the vid was at all true—her friend.

"I thought you'd already seen that," Vrook said, running a tired hand over his thinning hair. "Everyone in the galaxy has seen it."

"My friends didn't let me," she said. "Maybe they didn't want me to know that I didn't save the galaxy by defeating Malak. *That* honor belongs to a crack team of demolitions experts. Where are they? Where's the vid about *their* lives?"

"They died," Vrook said. His eyes were hooded and dark and his voice was pained. "But you did save us. Captain Onasi transmitted the location of the Star Forge to the fleet as soon as you found the last Star Map. And then you took down the gravity well generator, so we could bring the Fleet into orbit."

"Then Carth saved the galaxy," Revan said. "I didn't order him to transmit those coordinates. I didn't even know until after he'd done it. I took down the disrupter fields because I needed to get to the Star Forge. I needed to get to the Star Forge, because I needed to kill Malak. It was that—*simple*." She clenched her fists. "What I *don't* know, what I still don't know, after watching hours of your patriotic drivel is—why. What happened? *What happened to me and Malak?*"

"I—I wasn't with you when it happened." He looked away from her. "No one knows."

"But you know something, something you don't want me to know. What is it?"

*I know, Red. I know everything.*

Revan jumped up, whirling around, reaching for a weapon that wasn't there, trying to face a dead man. From the expressions on everyone's faces, no one else had heard anything. They all looked at her warily. Canderous' hand was halfway to his blaster and Yuthura was standing up, her hand almost raised in a gesture that Revan knew only too well.

*I'm losing my mind.* "There's something you're not telling me," she insisted, her eyes on Vrook again.

Experimentally, she *pushed* at him, moving closer. Her uncle did not move, but his face paled. But his Force walls held, a solid barrier that her ragged efforts could not breech.

"It's for your own good," he said flatly. "And the galaxy's."

"I could make you tell me," she said, wondering if it were true.

Vrook met her eyes squarely. "I'd die first, Revan. Kill me if you must."

Her breath caught in her throat. All their eyes on her, all movements still. No one breathed.

"No," she whispered.

"Revan." Carth stood up, touched her arm. She let him, let him pull her back, into a rough embrace.

"I think we'll be going now," Canderous muttered. "All of us." Under his breath he muttered in Mandalorian. "I'm gonna dump the Sith kid out on the hanger deck, he can find his own way home."

"No. We'll take Kel," Vrook said in Basic. "But I agree—it's time for us to go." Her uncle's voice was calm, as if nothing had happened. "Good-bye, Revan."
Yuthura got up and glanced back at her. Her voice was cool and remote. “Good-bye, my friend.”

Revan pulled herself free from Carth and walked to the fresher, not even watching them leave. Murmur of Carth’s voice, as he said polite nothings. Then the doors hissed shut, leaving her and them alone.

“You okay?” her lover asked.

She snorted. “Great. How about you?”

Carth came up behind her, kissing the back of her neck. “Long day. Do you want—do you want to be alone?”

Revan turned around. Her hands reached out for him, caught his arms, and pushed him forward. "No."

His hands wrapped behind her waist—gingerly—as if he was afraid she might break.

That was no good. She shoved him, harder, backwards until they landed on top of the narrow bed. She could feel his heart racing against her chest; smell his skin through the thin fabric of her robe, as she pulled at his shirt. "No," she said again. "Please—stay."

XXX

Some time later, they huddled together. He handed her a bottle of water and she drank it greedily. Cool water down her throat, the pulse his heart beat against her ear.

"So, beautiful," he whispered softly. "You said you had a plan to get us off this watery rock?"

Revan smiled sleepily. "I think there’s a ship. We just need to get to it. Tomorrow—we’ll try."

"If they let us leave," he reminded her. "I'm not sure they'll let us leave this hangar unless we go to one of the Embassies."

"I haven't worked out that part," she said. "But we need to go to Coruscant. Yuthura said Dustil was there when she left."

I learned more from what I saw in her mind. Two kids, no credits, Coruscanti Underground. That can't be good—can it?

Not if the infamous Underground was anything like Polla's memories of Nar Shaddaa.

And Dustil isn't the only reason we need to go to Coruscant. If someone's trying to kill me, I want to know who. Even if it's the whole damned Council and Senate combined.

"Dustil?" Carth rolled away from her, sitting up. "Why didn’t you tell me this before?"

“I wanted to wait until we were alone.”

“It’s—no.” he frowned at her. “It’s too dangerous for you on Coruscant.”

“I want to help you find your son.” She tried to make that sound reasonable, like the real reason.

“We’ll see.” His mind sounded like he was already a thousand light years away, in hyperspace towards Coruscant. “I promised I’d take you away from all this.”
Revan laughed. "Do you want to take me away from all this because you love me, or because you want to keep the galaxy safe from my evil dominion?"

Carth snorted, turning towards her again. "When you put it like that, it sounds insane. But I-I worry."

"I know." There was nothing more she could say.

He pushed her back down on the bed, rolling on top of her, as if he could pin her there forever. "Your evil dominion? I worry more that some fanatic will put a blaster beam in your eye or poison your food. But no—I don't worry about you taking over the Core worlds. Whoever the Revan was that tried to do that, she's dead now, and so are her reasons." He sighed, resting his face close to hers. His breath tickled her ear. "I just want us all to be safe."

"Me too," Revan whispered. "All of us. And Dustil."

Carth nuzzled her neck. "We'll talk about it," he mumbled. "In the morning."

"Carth?"

"Mmmm? Damnit, woman, let me get some sleep!"

"Is the rest of the holovid as bad as that?"

"Oh no," he muttered. "We're not watching more of it, not now."

"No, but is it?"

"It's... well—wait until you get to the part where everyone starts talking about how in love we were and how sad it is that we died. It's a bit... melodramatic."

"They talk about us?" She smiled at him, his face a shadow in the darkness.

"Um, our sad and tragic fate—yes."

"Let's keep the fate, and lose the tragic and sad," Revan whispered, closing her eyes.

XXX

He couldn't sleep, so he watched her instead—the relief that she was no longer dying mixing with his confusion about what her survival would mean.

When her breath was even, he got up and took a few stims.

She was dreaming, muttering something in a language he didn't know. She did that a lot—she always had, ever since Taris. It didn't bother him anymore, it was just another thing about her. Like her arched eyebrows or the way she never closed the fresher door, the lost green of her eyes.

Since he couldn't sleep, he did what he always did: scan the nets for further news of his son—this time focusing on Coruscant. There was nothing new.

But Revan had seemed so sure. And he thought she'd been hiding something.

Now you're paranoid, Onasi? How long have you been sleeping with the Dark Lord of the Sith—and now you're worried?
He couldn’t sleep, so he watched her. Scanned the nets again, for news of Dustil. The same searches, entered in every index he could think of. Cross referencing.

His commlink beeped softly a few hours later—by his chronometer it was just before dawn, local time.

He got up carefully from the bed and went to the other side of the room to take the call, wondering if Canderous had trouble getting rid of Kel and the Jedi after all.

The call wasn't what he expected, but he had to go. He had no choice.

"I'll be right back, Polla," he said in a whisper. She murmured in her sleep, twitched a graceful leg across the covers, as if reaching for him. She was still so thin, but still—she was still beautiful.

"I'll be right back, right back." His words felt like an apology. She'll sleep for a few more hours, she won't even know you left.

Carth ran out of the room and off the ship. The escort was waiting for him right outside.
Chapter 7 / A Game of Chess

“I'll be at the Republic Embassy, Father—waiting for you.” Dustil's voice cracked.

The holo-image was remarkably clear, one of the pre-recorded ones. His son's hair was longer, flattened from the rain. There was a trace of a man's beard on his face that Carth hadn't noticed on Korriban.

"I'll be right back, right back." His words had felt like an apology.

She'll sleep for a few more hours, she won't even know you left. You'll come back with Dustil, she'll be so happy.

When he stepped outside the hanger, a small escort of Republic soldiers were already waiting. Four of them. One coughed, and Carth realized that although he'd thrown on his battered jacket, he'd forgotten his shirt.

At least I remembered pants and shoes. Where is he? Where's Dustil?

"You're to come with us," one of them said.

None of them called him by name, or saluted—even though, from the ensign's bars on their uniforms, he outranked them. Maybe they don't know who I am?

Carth buckled his jacket as they walked. They passed through Ahto Central and the night sky was clear and bright. It was a clear night, on the edge of Manaan winter. A backdrop of stars and the sound of the waves brushing softly against the platform. Almost no one was out this late. A faint cusp of dawn in the sky.

I hope he's ok—he looked so thin and frightened.

What had Yuthura said? He'd been so drunk, babbling to her about Morgana and Dustil—and all the while he'd never asked her where his son was now. But Polla had asked, and Polla had found out. And now she wanted to go there, that crazy woman wanted to go charging off to Coruscant to rescue Dustil.

Thank god we don't have to, since he's here. Why didn't Yuthura know he was here? Or Vrook?

Maybe he's scared. Scared of the Jedi and the Sith. Maybe he's in trouble, he looked like he was in trouble.

The night guard at the Republic Embassy desk didn't even blink, just waved them through.

It was warm inside after the brisk night air. The soldiers led him down a hall past the submersible docks to a green door. The door was closed. Carth pulled it open eagerly. The man inside looked up from a desk and smiled at him politely.

Carth froze. Something— wait.

Dustil's hair was wet. It was raining. But it's not raining. Not now. He's—not here. That means—
"Captain Onasi." Roland Wann looked up, his dark skin glowing faintly blue from the light of his console. "Please sit down." He gestured to a simple chair on the side of the room. Carth ignored it.

"Where the hell is my son?" His hands went to his belt automatically. He wasn't wearing one. Great. No shirt, no belt, no weapons, and no son.

Revan would kill him. Or kill someone.

He'd never like Wann, never trusted him. The man was the worst kind of bureaucrat: officious, sniveling, and devious. He remembered the groveling tone in the man's voice when he'd begged Revan to spare Sunry, told her to lie to the Selkath judges about the kolto factory. She had lied—at first. Until she lost patience with the whole thing. She'd managed to tarnish the reputations of both the Republic and the Sith. Carth supposed Wann had caught flack for that. The man had no reason to like Revan—or him.

Wann shrugged. "Dustil's on Coruscant," he said pleasantly. "Or so I was told. He sent the transmission from there. I knew if I just told you, you'd do something rash. Try to escape. Or—she would." His face twisted. "You were a war hero. Why would you throw it all away on a Sith traitor? I thought you were different than Admiral Karath."

Carth reminded himself that he was unarmed, and that trying to throttle the Republic Ambassador wouldn't help Revan—or any of them—get off this damn planet. He took a deep breath. "That's none of your business."

"The Republic is my business." The Ambassador sighed. "Listen to the rest of the transmission. It's why I brought you here. You want to see Dustil, you can. We've got a diplomatic cruiser ready to go. Class 920. Fastest ships in the fleet. You could be there in a week."

Carth tried to keep his voice steady. "You'd let us all go?"

Wann laughed. "You... all? No. The offer's for you, Captain—only you. Listen to the holo. Your son needs you. It's very touching."

Carth gritted his teeth and sat down slowly. "Play it."

Wann leaned forward and tapped a viewscreen on his desk. The holographic lights ignited, showing the same image of Dustil, wet with rain.

The time stamp shone clearly on the right-hand corner of the small particle screen. Dated four hours ago.

"Father?" Dustil's voice cracked. "I'll be at the Republic Embassy waiting for you. On Coruscant. I came here after Korriban. I keep thinking, maybe you got off the Star Forge, maybe you're okay. I don't know what I'll do if you're dead. We're here. It's nuts, and everyone keeps talking about you being a hero. I—I'm proud of you. Father. I really hope you're not dead."

His son glanced over his shoulder nervously.

"I'll check the Embassy every day if you want to send word.... I don't want to lose you again. I—I have to go now. I hope this message finds you .... I hope you're okay."

The transmission faded out.

"How did you find me? How did he?" Carth asked, choking down the lump in his throat. Dustil looked so alone and frightened.
"Why is he frightened, what's happened?"

"How did I find you?" Wann coughed. "I was—uh, informed of your miraculous resurrection yesterday afternoon. Then I watched the court transcripts. You were unmistakable, but she looks bad. If you hadn't been with her, I don't know if I would have believed my eyes."

"As for your son, I suppose he found you the same way my sources did. Through the Force. The Jedi on Manaan are practically up in arms. You're lucky the Selkath have such strict restrictions about violence. But I wouldn't expect that to hold. The Force won't help when the rest of the Selkath figure out Revan's here." He chuckled. "If I were you, I'd get on that ship. Your Sith lover's as good as dead. Then again, she looks half-dead anyway. It's hard to understand why a man like you would throw everything away—for a schutta like that."

Carth got up from the chair slowly. "Thanks for the message, Wann." His hand fell uselessly to where his blaster should have been. "And frack you too."

Roland Wann sighed and shook his head. "I'd hoped you'd just go," he said. "It offends me to do this to a hero of the Republic." He picked up a small cylindrical object from his desk.

Carth ducked his head, and lunged straight at him— throttling him isn't such a bad idea after all—I —was so fracking stupid —

The energy bolt caught him squarely in the chest. As his breath choked and his limbs froze, Carth felt a moment's relief as he realized the blast was only a stun.

I'll be right back Polla, right back, don't kill anyone—

The blackness took him.

XXX

The chair he sat in was like a burnished throne. It glowed on the marble floor with a faint fluorescent hum. The table in front of him was covered with ancient tomes and artifacts. On the table's only tidy corner sat a small and expensive console; its black surface lacquered with rich patterns, cut in an inlay of red and green stones. The console had been a gift from some long-dead associate, whose name was not important for anyone to remember.

The news of Revan Starfire's death had been expected. When it came, although not in the manner arranged; he'd gone ahead with the rest of his plan. Her tale, written into the annals of history as the redeemed, but tragically lost, Jedi could only serve to support his own plans. Plans for the future. He was an old man, but a powerful one, and his family had risen far—in part because they had always arranged the road ahead: one generation onto the next.

Dead, Revan served him far better than his own son ever could. His son had been such a disappointment in the end. The old man would not make those mistakes again.

But Revan alive…. Frowning, the old man made a steeple of his fingers and spoke softly to the console, willing it to repeat the recording.

The transmission flickered in front of him again. He smiled. His editors had done an excellent job with the eight-month old tape. The time stamp was perfect. It didn't matter that he didn't actually have the boy. Now that he had the man—she would come. Of that he was certain. Even a mindwipe couldn't entirely erase certain personality traits. She had always been a romantic fool—strangely at odds with the rest of her character. When she came, came on his terms, it would be easy to trap her, and finish this.
The boy's voice crackled again, and he watched the original recording again, a pleased smile on his craggy face.

“Father? I'll be at the Republic Embassy waiting for you. On Coruscant. I came here after Korriban. I keep thinking, maybe you got off the Star Forge, maybe you're okay. I don't know what I'll do if you're dead. We're here. It's nuts, and everyone keeps talking about you being a hero. I—I'm proud of you. Father. I really hope you're not dead.”

“I'll go the Embassy every day if you want to send word. And I'll wait there—until you come for me. I don't want to lose you again. I hope this message finds you on Yavin Station. Mission told me about Yavin and if you're still alive you'll go there, I think. She said she would, so—she said it was a safe place. I—I've got to go now. Kel's acting really weird. The Council wants us to speak to the reporters. We—I—refused... but sometimes I think they're following us.”

The boy glanced warily over his shoulder again.

“Please come, Father. Please. I hope you're not dead.”

The boy had been right, he was being followed. The transmission had been intercepted and sold. It never made it into the official holovid—there were legal restrictions about consent, and Dustil had proven to be remarkably elusive—but in the end this had proved for the best.

All in all, a remarkable stroke of luck.

Idly, the old man wondered what was on Yavin, and why the boy thought the Hawk would go there. The message had never reached its intended destination, of course—caught instead by the greedy reporter's blind feed.

He whispered another command to the console.

The image changed to the Manaan courtroom footage. His agents had informed an hour after the trial, and he'd had the transcript in his hands an hour after that. She was changed; haggard, with only a trace of the beauty he remembered in her Sith-marked face. But it was her—there was no question. You didn't need a thing like the Force to tell, not if you knew her as well as he did. He'd known her for most of her life. He'd had little choice.

_I was far too indulgent. I won't make the same mistakes again._

He wondered how she _would_ manage to leave Manaan. If he gave her any easy options, she might become suspicious. He hoped she'd make a mess of it—too much to hope that she'd fail—but a mess could prove very useful later.

_I made you a hero. I can unmake you just as easily._

He thought he'd covered every trace that he could, but there were always uncertainties. Her fool uncle for one; although the velvet-gloved threat to expose the Council's lies in the redemption story was still a crude, yet effective, tool.

He'd given her no easy options; but in the games he'd played since childhood he'd learned to never underestimate a worthy foe. She'd find a way. Hopefully, an extremely messy way. _Darth Revan reborn._

He looked forward to meeting Captain Onasi.

Footsteps shuffled on the stair and there was a knock at the door.
"Come in," the old man said.

The droid shuffled in, red lights gleaming like the coals of its eyes. She'd made it for him long ago.

"Master. He is awake and crying."

The old man shrugged. "It won't kill him. Is there anything else?"

The droid clucked softly, its internal processors checking the nets, and the old man's own private transmission feeds. "Captain Onasi’s ship left Manaan thirteen minutes ago. Estimated time of arrival is ten Coruscanti days, four hours."

The old man smiled. "Good," he said simply. "Pour me a glass of brandy and leave me, HK."

"Affirmation: As you wish."

XXX

"Carth?"

"Red? Let me sleep."

Strong arms curled around her, crushing her close. She could hear her own heartbeat twinned to his—safe and warm, against the smooth feel of his nearly hairless skin. He smelled like spice and space oil. Familiar as sleep. She burrowed her face into his arm.

"Don't leave me." she mumbled.

"I won't."

"Good." Revan felt herself smile. Her hand reached to touch his face, fingers resting on cold, curved metal where there should have been skin.

She froze. Her eyes snapped open.

"What's wrong? You've gone all cold." Malak looked down at her—now with an unmarked face, a smile tugging at his mouth. A lock of curling brown hair fell across his forehead. His hair was longer than she'd seen it before—falling around his broad face, almost to his chin.

Revan closed her eyes and willed herself to wake up. "You're not really here. This is a dream, I'm sleeping. You're not here."

He chuckled. "Wake up then. Leave me. You always do."

Revan tried. She willed her body to get up, her eyes to open, all of this to go away.

"This was our room," he said softly. "You don't remember, but I do. I remember everything."

In the dream her eyes opened. Her hair was long and loose, soft on her shoulders. Malak lay beside her, leaning on a cloud of white pillows. The brown Knight's robe belted carelessly around his waist revealed more than it concealed, and she looked away fast. They were on a round, white bed. She looked down at herself. She was naked. Her own robe lay discarded on the floor, atop a thick white carpet. She dove for it hastily and tied it tightly around herself, looking around frantically for her pants.

Or a weapon.
"This was our room," Malak said, ignoring her panic. "On Coruscant. There's a balcony. You always liked the balcony. We practiced the speech we gave to the Senate there. Do you want to see?"

"No," Revan said. "I want to leave."

"Then wake up." His voice was taunting.

"I can't."

"You could, if you wanted. What is it you want to ask me?"

The walls were lined with white eridu silk and there was almost no furniture. *Nothing to throw at him, except a pillow.* Everything was a blinding snowy white. *This is a dream, he can't hurt you.* The carpet under her bare feet was thick and soft. The air smelled like flowers and spice. She took a deep breath.

"What happened to us?"

"We disagreed." Malak shrugged and got up from the bed. He threw open the curtains and stared out of the window. The morning light etched his heavy features in silver. "You shouldn't worry about that now—it's not the right question."

Revan bit her lip. "What is the right question?"

"Why do you think my father would make you a hero? You did kill me, after all."

"I don't remember your father," she said. "Perhaps he didn't like you. Many people aren't fond of the Sith. I've noticed this."

Malak laughed. "Ah, but I was his heir. Heir to all his fortunes—and his Senate seat. Do you remember what I told you about Coruscanti inheritance laws? They'd all have to accept me."

"I expect they'd just have had you killed." She remembered HK's gruesome story. Assassination was a popular game among the Coruscanti elite.

"If they could. You were the only one I ever let close enough."

"I-I'm sorry I don't remember that. Us. This." She paced the room with her back to the wall, looking for a door. There was no door. She eyed the balcony. Ferraglass doors swung open. The wind blew the white curtains inward. Malak turned his back to her and walked through them.

Trepidation in her throat, she followed him.

Coruscant spun beneath: a whirl of speeders and lights and smaller, lesser buildings. They were in the clouds, so high above the ground that it made her dizzy to look down. Lights twinkled like a million tiny smiles. The wind whipped her hair back and tugged at her robe.

Dawn was breaking, a muted white sun shining through endless cloudbanks. Above them, orbitals glided lazily through the clouds like great silver whales. Across from them, loomed a gleaming, domed edifice made of metal and glass. Looking across, she realized they were in one of many towers—but this one was the highest.

"I never liked you in brown," Malak said softly. "Black and red were your colors."

“So, you’re saying us being Sith was a fashion choice?” She refused to show fear. This was only a
dream.

“No.” His hand brushed her hair back. Warm. Alive. It felt eerily real.

“I thought Jedi lived at the Temple. Why are we here?” She could see the Temple to the left of them below; white, arching spires rising up behind the Senate dome.

“We were a special case.” His finger traced her nose, and then dropped back to his side. “After Mandalore, we lived here.”

Revan tried not to shiver, tried to react. "Why did you fire on my ship?"

"You remember that, Red? Of all your memories of us, that would be the one I'd rather forget."

“Bastila remembered. I had—dreams. Maybe they were hers. It was confusing.”

A rage so sweet that it burned like brandy in the back of her throat. Blood in her nose and mouth, filling her mask; and then cold air on her face. Large blue eyes, young eyes, looking into hers with an expression of fear—and a terrible fascination. Something enveloped her like a blanket, or like chains. She tried to slip away in darkness, but the voice kept screaming: "Malachor—Mal—I—"

"I fired on your ship because I couldn't kill you in any other way," Malak's voice was polite, almost deferential. "You were the one that taught me sometimes an honorable fight isn't the path to victory. Remember Malachor? The Mandalore?"

"No! Just tell me! What happened to us?"

"Why are you so concerned—afraid of making the same mistakes again?" His teeth flashed in a cold smile. Perfect teeth in a perfect mouth.

Revan looked down at her hands. "Yes," she muttered.

"I wouldn't worry. Flyboy's gone."

"Gone?" Revan panicked. "What do you mean ‘gone?’ What did you do?" She raised her hand, and clenched her fist, noticing for the first time that there was no whisper in her mind here, no rush of power. No Force.

His smile changed, became something dark and cold. “Do you really miss him?”

Revan rushed him blindly, kicking and slashing with her hands, trying to force him back inside. He ignored the blows and caught her around her waist. She twisted, trying to throw his larger mass as she'd been taught—but her body felt strangely heavy and unbalanced—and he was stronger, so much stronger.

"Stop it," Malak said. He held her so tightly that she became uncomfortably aware again that his robe wasn't really covering anything at all. Her head butted against his smooth chest and he'd pinned her legs against the wall, preventing the obvious. "I didn't hurt him. I just thought you’d want to know."

"Where is he?" Revan went limp in his arms, hoping he'd relax his grip. He didn't.

"I think he's bait. Bait for you. That's what I would have done."

"Who?" She hissed. "Who took him?"
Malak buried his face in her hair. "Men," he whispered. "Men that work for my father. My father won't be pleased that you've returned. You're a threat to him in ways you can't even imagine."

"Why? Because I killed you?"

Malak chuckled, and carried her off of the balcony, back into the bedroom. He dumped her unceremoniously on the bed and turned away, adjusting his robe. When he turned back, it was his Sith face that stared into hers. Metal jaw, the Force’s dark designs gleaming like oil on his bare skull. Eyes like black pits, lined with yellow.

"No." His plain brown robe shifted, and now he wore red armor again, and a long black cape. He looked just as he had when she'd killed him. Revan's breath sounded high and hollow in her ears. Her vision narrowed, read-outs dancing in her peripherals, and she realized that a mask covered her face. She looked down to find herself dressed in Darth Revan's robes.

Her gloved hand reached up and traced the metal of the Mandalore’s mask.

"My father found us useful like this—at first," Malak said. "But you and he had many disagreements." He sighed. The sound echoed strangely through the metal plate that covered his jaw.

XXX

At first it was just a little injury. A little cut that never healed. That they couldn't heal. Not anymore.

This price isn't so high, she'd thought, coolly amused, staring at the hanks of red brittle hair that fell out in her hands. Not compared to what’s at stake. Not compared to what we must do.

Gray walls around her, and the whining overdrive of the ship’s engines as they shot into hyperspace. Bile in her throat and she retched, as she always did when they made the jump.

Some things never change, do they? Other things, other things change a lot.

XXX

"They'll take your lover to Coruscant. All things are on Coruscant; but some part of you… some part of you already knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes." Her voice hissed through her mask and she felt a sad sense of inevitability.

Malak looked at her again. "I'd hoped you'd let me sleep, just hold you, pretend things were—as they were. Once. But you were never content—you never stopped reaching, always climbing. Is this the me you want? The one you can hate?" Red light hissed in his hand, and his lightsaber sprang to life. Its red light reflected dully in the white, white room.

Revan rolled off the bed, and ducked, her legs were half-caught in her heavy robes, and her own saber's hilt was cold in her hand. She crouched, activating it, hissing. The double blade in her hands was yellow, and she held it ready and unwavering.

"Hate is so easy." He circled her, moving quick for all his bulk, looking for an opening. “It’s cheap."

She spat at him, breath sharp through her mask and tried to counter. Her feet stumbled, caught in the soft carpet, and her robes were heavy and awkward—and then she slipped, almost falling on
Hiss of air and his blade was so close to her face that she could feel the cold charge of it through the metal. The world disappeared into a red, humming light. The mask was clumsy on her face. Panicked, Revan stabbed out blindly, twisting her blades—and then heard his grunt of pain.

He moaned, almost a whimpering sound. There was a smell of burned flesh. Then Malak laughed. The red light vanished. Revan stepped forward, deactivating her own saber, and pushing the mask from her face. Malak was on his knees, kneeling on the rug in front of her, a great burn cut deep into his side. "It's not too late," he whispered, almost theatrically. "You were always stronger than I was. I thought what the Jedi did to you would make you weak, but you are stronger, stronger than you ever were when you were the Dark Lord."

"Shut up," Revan whispered. There were tears on her cheeks. Her vision blurred with them.

Somewhere a child's piping voice sang.

*The Jedi are good but they wear ugly hoods.*

*The Sith are mean, but their armor gleams.*

*When I grow up, I want to be,*

*The Ruler of the Galaxy.*

"You'll go to Coruscant. It's a trap, but you'll go anyway. You always did try to rescue people. It's a shame you weren't better at it."

"At least I didn't give up," she whispered. "And start carpet-bombing planets."

Malak chuckled. Then he stood up, the burn in his side was gone, his armor smooth and gleaming again. "I need to go. I'll see you later. Remember, Red. You need my help."

"Go?" Revan said incredulously. "You need to go? Isn't this my dream? What do you mean you need to go?"

His laughter echoed through the metal plate. "You should talk to that Cathar again. She's right about you. I think she understood Revan the best, knew you for what you really are." He considered, raising his hand to his silver chin in a mock gesture of deep thought.

"Wait!" she called out. "Malak! I don’t understand! What do you mean, Carth’s gone? What’s on Coruscant? How — how are you even here?"

"Thank you for the evening." Malak bowed, sweeping his hands. His cloak swirled behind him as he walked to the wall. A door slid open at his approach and he walked through it. Then it slid shut behind him seamlessly, leaving no trace behind.

Revan darted after him, but she was too late. Her fists beat helplessly on the soft white walls for a very long time. Eventually, she sank to the floor in a nest of black and red cloth and stared up at the cool white room that she didn't remember.

"I'll find you, Carth," she whispered softly. "I promise. As soon as I wake up."

XXX

"Captain Onasi, this is an honor."
Carth opened his eyes. It wasn’t an honor at all. Cold metal bit into his wrists and ankles. He was strapped to a cold metal platform. Gray corusteel ceiling, the hum of hyperdrive.

A ship. Wann said Coruscant. Damnit to hell. What will Revan do when I don't come back? What will they all do? What will they think? Why?

The face staring back at him was the face of a career Republic soldier—sergeant stripes on her shoulder, cropped dark hair stippled with gray, leathery skin burned under unfamiliar suns. Her long nose sniffed disdainfully, despite her polite words.

He'd never seen her before.

"You have me at a disadvantage," he said slowly. His tongue felt thick in his mouth. Whatever type of stunner Wann had used it had left him feeling tranced. The beginnings of a headache throbbed in his skull.

The sergeant laughed. "I'd hope so! We heard so much about your accomplishments that we had to make sure. I apologize for the restraints. Don’t worry, it won’t be for much longer."

"Wann said... you're taking me to Coruscant. Am I under arrest?"

The woman snorted. "Arrest? You? Oh, no, not at all. You're a hero!" Her blue eyes were serious. "You're confused," she added, almost gently. "Because of that woman. That Force can do terrible things to a mind. We're going to get you well."

"Y-you've made a mistake," Carth stammered. "She's not—Revan's redeemed. Ask Yuthura Ban, ask Master Vrook. She's not a Sith now. And I saved her. I have her under control."

The sergeant stepped forward. She was holding something small and cylindrical in her hand. She pushed it into his arm. Cold press of a hypo.

"It's terrible, what she did to you." The woman's voice was painfully earnest. "But you're going to get better now."

Whatever the drug was, it worked fast. Too fast. Carth felt himself sinking. The sergeant shone a bright light in his eyes. It reflected off her long nose and her white teeth.

The fractals felt like they were splintering, deep in his brain.

"Now," she said brightly. "I'm going to ask you a few questions. Don't be frightened, it's just a debriefing. You'll be fine. You'll be just fine."

I'll be right back Polla, right back, he promised her.

XXX

Zaalbar looked apprehensively at the sleeping figure on the bed. She was such a small thing and yet, she had done so much harm. He and Canderous had flipped a coin for this assignment—dark humor—but that was the only kind they had left.

Carth was gone. Just gone. And one of them had to tell her.

The ship's readouts indicated Carth had left seven hours ago. He'd never been gone from Polla-Revan's side for that long before—not even on Kashyyyk. The fact that this was Manaan, and technically, the man shouldn't have even been allowed to leave the hanger, boded poorly. Either
Carth was dead, in trouble—or just not coming back.

Someone had to tell her. They'd thought about just sending HK to do it; but they weren't completely sure Revan should have the access codes to her personal killing machine. Not yet.

Not until they knew what she'd do.

Asleep, she looked barely older than Mission, burrowed under the sheets like a treesloth in moss. Wookiees age slowly, and to Zaalbar the shorter-lived races all seemed very young until suddenly they were very old. He'd thought of Polla like another cub: another Mission Vao. He wondered if she'd ever noticed. Probably not. She had certain blind spots about things. It couldn't be easy to be her. Greatness was never easy. It drove many to madness and madclaw.

He'd been there himself.

Poor Mission. The ghost in the machine was a kindness and a curse—his hairless cub and not. But her presence was still a comfort. And useful. Right now, Mission-ghost was searching the nets for any sign of the pilot. They coded their transmissions in an archaic version of Shyriiwook that most infidels would not know. Even Polla-Revan didn't know that language—it had been dead for hundreds of years, a casualty of the Desh Wars, long before his own first birth.

The Mission-ghost reported no news of Carth. And Revan's rebirth was only whispers on the wind. But the whispers would grow, he knew. They'd burn like fire through dead wood. They would reach the ears of their enemies before the time was right.

They had to get lost again, the three of them, and fast.

"Polla Organa," He shook her small shoulder carefully. "Wake her up slowly, and maybe she won't bite you.

She groaned in her sleep, and then sat up.

"Zaalbar." Her eyes blinked open, yellow as an owl's. "It's Hangar 56."

Zaalbar backed away, ready to run. He had a stun grenade in the pouch in his belt, just in case they had to drug her again. Her bare skin was mottled and unpleasantly hairless. She frowned at him and then looked down at herself. "Oh," she said, and leaned over and picked up a robe from the floor wrapping it tightly. "Hangar 56," she repeated in clipped Shyriiwook. "Carth has been kidnapped. There's a ship in Hangar 56 that can take us to Coruscant. Or, it might be a trap. Will they let you leave? Diplomatic immunity or something to check it out?"

"I do not know," he groaned. "Who has taken Carth? How many were they? Did they injure you?"

He caught no scent of them. It was possible that she was having a fit of madness.

"What? No. We just have to leave, as soon as possible. Take guns, and mines and grenades, lots of them." She stood up, still muttering to herself in soft growls.

He watched in amazement, as she pulled a packing crate out from under the bed, still talking to herself in his language. "I swore I'd never use a saber again, but I can't fight very well now—I need the advantage. Where is it, where's my saber? Thermals. Good. Permacrete—nice. Plasma… okay. It'll work. Where the hell did I put that belt?"

She bent farther under the bed searching. "Zaalbar, where the hell is my saber? Where did you hide it? I can make you tell me, but it would be faster if you just handed it over. Now. Go get Canderous and HK. We'll have our war council in here, while I use the fresher. And get me something to eat,
I'm starving. Force knows when we'll get the chance to eat again, better pack the nutrameat too—might be no supplies on that ship."

"How do you know? Did Carth say something to you?" This wasn't how Zaalbar had imagined this conversation at all. But it was good to see her so active, she almost looked like the old Polla now, strapping grenades around the belt on her shoulder.

"Malak told me," she said flatly. "In a dream. We don't have much time. Get the others. And get my damn lightsaber. I know you've stashed it somewhere. You fracking well tried to make me carry it when we first landed on this awful planet."

"I follow you, Polla Organa," Zaalbar said formally and ran off to get the others. As he ran, he spoke softly to his communicator. He suspected they'd need the Mission-ghost's help for this one: whether Polla Revan was madclaw or spirit-touched or just delusional, it made no difference.

XXX

Docking Bay 56. What would be there? An escape… or a trap?

They hadn't let Zaalbar leave. No matter. They wouldn't let any of them leave without a Republic or a Sith escort.

The apologetic and slimly polite Selkath that gurgled this information at her looked almost frightened when he said it, but that was a small comfort.

"Fine," Revan snapped. "Then I need to see Kel Algwinn. He left my ship with some Jedi last night. Perhaps he's in their compound now—or back at the Sith Embassy. Either way, find him for me, and tell me I accept his offer."

*Hopefully Vrook hasn't transformed him overnight. I need someone when I go to the Sith to back my claim if I don't want to have to carve it in flesh.*

Revan chewed on her nails and waited. They were all sitting on the docking ramp of the *Lucky Lady*, looking like nothing more than a pack of refugees from some war-torn world, all of their possessions strapped to their backs.

Frowning, she considered that again. *Not a good impression. Impractical for fighting.*

She tapped the communicator and the Selkath's face swam on the viewscreen. "Also, I need a luggage transporter. Please." She smiled.

"Of course," the Selkath agreed. A few minutes later, the white metal platform glided into the hangar.

Revan swung the heavy pack off her back and nodded at the others.

"I don't need to tell you, pack non-essentials on here." She stuffed the vibroblades she'd worn on her back into her pack, pausing as her hand touched the hilt of the most elaborate one.

"Zaal, do you… do you want this back?"

The Wookiee bent down a little so they were eye to eye. Revan pushed back her mask and just looked at him, blinking a little to stop her eyes from blurring.

"Bacca's blade," Zaalbar said. "Yes, Polla Organa. It—still feels right in my hand, no matter what it
She nodded at him, throat tight, watching as he strapped it to his back.

He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder with a great soft paw. "We are both no longer madclaw," he groaned gently. "What is done is done."

Revan hugged him. His furry arms wrapped around her chest, enveloping her in a soft nest of hair, and they stood there for a moment. A twig scratched her cheek. "You need a good grooming," she barked, voice muffled by his thick fur. "If we get off this damn planet, I'll give you one."

He laughed, that Wookiee growl that she hadn't heard since—before. "My skin itches," he admitted. "It would be a good idea."

"Well," said a voice from behind them. "I don't think they've made a vid yet about this, but I can see the potential."

Revan turned her head. Kel Algwinn stood there, Yuthura at his side.

She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe hastily, measuring them both. Why is Yuthura here? She forced her face into a bright smile. "Both of you? Excellent. Are you accompanying us too, Yuthura? How did Kel convince you?"

"Old ways die hard," the Twi'lek said, staring at her. Her eyes were round and blank as lilac coins.

Revan pulled the mask back down over her face. Easier to do this with it, with no expressions to give her away.

The mask was an old one, taken from Uthar's locker. Not like her old mask at all, but it had the same effect. It was blue and embroidered with ancient sith runes. Yuthura's eyes narrowed a bit, as if she recognized it. She probably does.

Canderous coughed from behind her. "We should go," he said. "If it pleases you, Lord Revan."

"I must agree. I put a sleeping draught in the old man's caff," Yuthura said. "But the other Jedi may wonder why the Selkath sent a message to the Republic Embassy for a Sith citizen. They already wonder about you. Expediency would indeed be best."

Revan considered her friend again, a little concerned. She could sense no darkness in the woman, but she couldn't sense light either.

How does she mask herself like that? I wish I knew that trick. And... Is she still on my side or not?

I hurt her last night. She tried to help me, and I hurt her badly. Badly enough to drive her back to the Sith? Badly enough to make her betray me to the Jedi?

"The Twi'lek smells nervous," Zaalbar growled in her ear.

"The Twi'lek is nervous," Yuthura shot back in perfect Shyriiwook. "We had Wookiee slaves in the creche where I was raised. I speak your tongue."

Revan eyed her; the admission didn't make her any surer. "Why are you really here, friend?" she asked in Ryl. Kel doesn't speak it, I remember at the academy how they used to talk about him right in front of him. Laugh at him for being so stupid.

"The Jedi sent me," Yuthura Ban answered. "They want to know what you're going to do. Vrook
knows nothing. I really did drug his caff. But there is concern—you're in greater danger than you know."

"I know you're talking about me," Kel said angrily. "If you question my loyalty, Lord Revan, just give me a chance to prove it."

"Oh, I will..." Revan said. Thank the stars for the mask because she didn’t have to smile. "Let's go."

*Go get this over with.*

XXX

"Master?"

HK shuffled politely at her side. These corridors were endless.

"Yes, HK?"

"My restraining bolt is still in place. Recommendation: Remove it. I cannot protect you if I cannot kill."

"You can still stun. If anything needs to be dead, I'd prefer to do it myself."

"Commendable bloodlust for an organic—but somewhat impractical. Should you meatbags become incapacitated, I alone may be able to defend you."

*He has a point.*

Revan sighed and motioned the party to a halt. They were attracting attention. A dark Jedi, a Mandalorian, and a Revan pretender were a common enough sight—but Yuthura at their heels dressed in the Order's brown gave some pause. Not to mention the Wookiee and the very realistic version of HK-47. None of the other pretenders had an HK.

*There's only the one HK,* she thought, almost fondly.

Quickly as she could she opened the droid's chestplate and tapped a few commands. Was it her imagination, or did his round metal eyes glow a brighter red now? She shivered and checked the settings on his rifle. He maintained it himself of course; and, as always, its parts were immaculately clean and charged. "Take these," she muttered, and slipped the grenade belt off her shoulders and onto his metal chest.

"Happily, Master. Most excellent Master. Gratitude: I feel much better now."

"That's good," she murmured. "Please use prudence, HK."

"Have I ever failed you Master?"

"Not that I remember, no. But I did lose you... somewhere on Mandalore?" Revan waved her hand again and they all started walking.

*And when, when was that? When I came back and killed the Mandalore? HK's design looks almost Rakatan. But I killed the Mandalore before Malak and I discovered the Star Forge—didn't I?*

Canderous was thoughtfully quiet. He twirled the sword they'd taken from a dead Sith ghost deftly in his hands. She tried not to eye it enviously. Her saber swung at her belt, but she liked that sword.
Liked it more than she wanted to admit.

The Force whispered to her like a siren's call. Tales of spacers, lost for months, looking for the lovely alluring songs that they heard in their minds. Driven to madness. Sometimes the Force felt the same. Revan shook her head sharply.

*I'm fine.*

*Are you so sure about that? You're going to Coruscant because your dead lover told you to in a dream.*

*Carth's there—or will be. It's the only way to get him back.*

*And you know this because your dead lover said so in a dream.*

*I'll find him, I have to find him.* Revan clenched her fists and bit her lip under the mask. Thinking about Carth now was not good. She wouldn't. She couldn't afford to.

Attack droids guarded the embassy entrance, and a bored-looking blonde woman standing at a desk.

"Hello, Kel," she said. "What, no Malak hologram today? I never thought you'd throw your lot in with one of the *other* pretenders."

"There will be no more pretenders," Kel sneered.

Revan lifted her mask and stared the woman down. The woman smirked. "The tattoos are a nice touch," she said. "But you don't look anything like her."

"Insect," Revan drawled. She slid their Alderaan datachips across the desk. "Let us in before I end you."

The woman’s mouth tightened, but she took a step back.

The doors to the embassy slid open with a hiss. They walked inside. The reception desk was unmanned, and the corridors were empty.

Kel frowned. "They're probably all in the training room again," he said. "Another death match. Some people place bets."

"Of course they do," Yuthura said softly, her lips curving in subtle distaste.

XXX

There was a girl floating in one of the interrogation tanks. A girl with red hair and green eyes and her face. Revan punched the codes in to release the stasis fields and the girl fell on the ground, murmuring something weakly.

"Get up," Revan said. *Did I ever look that young? Is that what I really look like? Looked like?*

"I lost the game," the girl said. "If you want to kill me just go ahead and do it. I was weak."

"Get out of here," Canderous snapped. "And don't come back."

She looked up at him in surprise. The pleading look in her eyes shifted to something like scorn. "Who are you?"
"Canderous Ordo." He stared at her; Revan couldn't read the expression in his eyes. Memory maybe.

*She has my face. My old face. Not this Sith mask.*

"You heard him, get out." Revan's voice was loud and harsh, louder than she'd meant it to be. An edge of Force command there too. She hadn't meant to use it.

*She has my face; how dare she steal my face.*

The girl looked at her, taking in the mask, the hooded robes, the saber hilt in her hand. "You're strong," she said. "Stronger than I am. And you let me out of that tank. I'll back you, if you want, with the others."

Kel rolled his eyes and tapped his foot impatiently. "You're Lysteria, aren't you?" He said to the girl.

She nodded. "You're Kel Algwinn, one of the ones from Korriban. You were going as Malak before."

"Yeah well, I've dropped that now, now that I can be the Apprentice to the real Darth Revan," he grinned at her.

Lysteria looked at Revan again. "Let me see," she said.

Revan took off her mask and pushed off her hood. The lights were harsh on her eyes, but she didn't blink. "There's more from Korriban here Kel?" she asked quietly.

"A few, ones that you didn't manage to kill… you killed almost everyone in the Academy." A note of admiration in his voice. *Stupid kid.*

"They were attacking me. And Carth. And Mission." Revan said.

Lysteria arched her eyebrows. "You sound just like the vids," she said admiringly. "I practiced and practiced but I couldn't get the accent right. It's a weird one, kind of like a mix between one of the Outers and upper-crust Coruscanti. "But why are you so... ugly? The tattoos are really a bit much. Did you bleach your skin to make it that color? And the eyes—implants or some kind of dye?"

"No wonder you washed out," Revan muttered. "I'd advise you to leaving here now. I'm going to put an end to the games once and for all."

"I think I'll stay and watch," the girl giggled. She wasn't wearing much, just a brief jumpsuit that left her arms and legs bare. Smooth pale skin, with a few freckles.

*My skin. My face. My body.*

"Do what you want," Revan tried to sound bored and started walking again. She left the mask off, stuffing it in her belt. The others followed behind.

Her hand slid in her pocket, felt the reassuring weight of the permacrete. Carth had taught her well, him and Mission. *Explosives are dependable if you know what you're doing. The back-up plan.*

The hall wound around a few times, and they passed the pressure doors. Beyond them, a normal doorway led to the north hallway and the training quarters. There were guards posted here in battle armor, but they just waved them through.
"You're late," called out one of them. "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. He'll be displeased."

"Somehow I doubt that," Kel said coldly.

"He? He who?" A small knot of uncertainty. Kel sounded...too self-assured suddenly. He looked too smug.

Kel laughed. "The Master of the Games, who else? You don't know much about the Sith now, do you? Things have changed."

"You've all become lazy braggarts who dress up like dead people. Yes, I'd say they have," she retorted. "Yuthura, do you know anything about this?"

"I've been avoiding the Sith, ever since they started coming on pilgrimages to kill me," the Twi'lek murmured.

"Well," Kel laughed. "He knows you, Lord Revan. And he's so happy that you aren't dead."

Doors slid open. A large square room with lines of people along one side of it. On the other side, two women fought. One was masked, dressed in black robes and red body armor—a painfully familiar costume. The other wore a simple white jumpsuit, orange hair a blaze of fire down her back. Both wielded double-bladed sabers and moved with dizzying speed, cutting and undercutting in a clash of energy.

Revan felt the Force prickle on the back of her neck. Not from the duelists—this seemed like a pure test of combat; but from the crowd behind them. Maybe forty people in the room, mostly young, most human, although a smattering of Twi'lek and Rodians too. Two Selkath in the corner. A Zabrak woman next to them. Every one of them sang with the Force—a dark dirge of power. Anger, hatred, angst, passion. And fear. Fear of the one man who stood between two Malak look-alikes.

He was clad all in silver armor, and his face was covered completely by a visor so polished it shone like a mirror.

Well whoever 'He' is, there 'he' is.

The girl in white cried out suddenly, and the crowd hissed. Her arm was gone, a smoking stump and the hand holding her saber was on the ground. She sank to her knees keening in pain, and the masked figure moved in to finish her off.

That girl had her face too. Revan was suddenly very angry, and very tired of all of this.

"Stop," she said channeling the Force at the masked woman with all of the power she could muster. The word reverberated around the room and the woman paused, that masked head turning to look at her. My mask, my clothing. Mine.

The girl in white bit her lip and stopped crying, clutching her arm at her side. Revan suspected she was going into shock.

"Yuthura," she mumbled. "Do something."

A wash of pale light surrounded the woman, stabilizing her. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she fainted.

"All I can do for now," the Twi'lek said. "But you'd better say something to them soon, that masked
man—the one in silver—he's dangerous, very dangerous, I can sense it."

"I know," Revan muttered. "He wasn't part of my plan."

"It's good to see you," the man said to her, walking forward slowly. "Do you remember a game? On Mandalore it's called chess."

"No." Revan said. It was true.

"In chess, the objective is to capture the King. But the King is a useless piece himself. His moves are constrained. The Queen is most powerful, but she is too public, too exposed. The real play comes in the dance the other pieces play. The rooks, the bishops, the knights and the pawns."

"And you are...?" Revan squared her shoulders and looked at him. Nothing familiar in that voice. No sense of recognition from the Force. Whoever he was he was cloaked in mystery as impenetrable as the glare of light off that bisected visor. In its reflection she saw only herself.

The man shrugged. "I like to fancy that I'm a bishop, actually. Sort of? But it's you I wanted to talk about."

"Have we met?"

"Ah, you wound me with the question! Do you doubt that we have?"

His accent was blank, a carefully scrubbed voice, like one from the holovids. She'd never seen armor like his before, and there was nothing she could discern of his origins from his movements or his gestures.

"Probably human, underneath the mask."

That was it. Power there—yes. But veiled in a mist that she couldn't penetrate.

"Yes," Revan said. "I doubt that we have. You look like the typical blustering Sith fool, trying to impress me."

The man only laughed. "How can you tell? I want to ask you a question. You've been a player of chess all your life, whether you remember it or not. You've been a knight, a queen, and a pawn. Which role did you prefer?"

"I only remember being the pawn," Revan swallowed, trying to sound bored.

"When a piece crosses the board even a pawn can be a queen. Isn't that what you did at the Star Forge?"

"But did I keep the crown?" Revan tried banter. Her light words rang false, even to herself.

"I'd say you destroyed the board, myself. Swept it clean, balanced the scales." His voice was admiring. "The conquest of worlds becomes difficult with no armada. Soldiers become more reluctant to wage wars with no healing. You've changed the stakes on a galactic level. Now conquest is different... but no less interesting to a true disciple of the art."

The silvery masked man was only a few feet away now. Revan considering trying to run him through. In her experience, enemies that talked this much usually had too many ideas. Best to nip them in the bud. And everyone in the room seemed afraid of him. It would be easier to sort out who he was, if he were dead.
But the whispering rustles of forty-odd Force users surrounding them gave her pause.

_I'm good, or I was good. But not that good, definitely not now._

_Right, the game changes—but on with the plan._

"I've returned," she intoned dramatically to the room. The man in the silver mask stopped his advance and looked at her, crossed his arms. He appeared to be unarmed.

"Search your hearts and your minds, you know it to be true." Revan said, letting the Force whip around her. Her robes billowed impressively, like Malak’s had in her dream.

"You all felt my return, although perhaps only a few understood what it meant. Who among you know me for my true self? Kel Algwin and Yuthura Ban have pledged their loyalty. Who else among you will be among the first to kneel to the new ruler of the Sith Empire?" Her voice hardened. "Or should I say the old ruler of the New Sith Empire? The true Dark Lord… of the Sith?"

Voices murmured in confusion and she scanned the faces in the crowd. With the exception of her own face, mirrored here and there, sometimes with the telltale shimmer of a false holofield around it, sometimes not—none of them were familiar. Mostly they looked young, but there were a few here and there who looked like she could have known them before. _Maybe._

Then they all looked to the man in silver, like a flock of obedient kissra sheep, for his reaction.

The man in silver laughed. "Well done, Darth Revan," he said. "I will be the first to say that I remember you. I remember you well."

Carefully, he unfastened his visor. Revan's breath caught, and she was aware of her friends flanking her back, hands close to their weapons, expecting the worst. She was herself. Whose face would be revealed?

An ordinary man's face. Young, perhaps twenty standard years and even-featured, perhaps even handsome, although the nose was a little long for symmetry and his fair hair was slicked back at the temples, giving him a distinguished, if sinister look. His eyes were as yellow as her own. Fallen eyes, Sith eyes, burning like twin pits of hell.

He was no one that she remembered. He knelt before her elaborately, as if this was a Coruscanti ball and he was about to ask her to dance.

_Clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation. Malak looked out of place in his father's colors, the heavy robes hung awkwardly on his broad shoulders better suited for battlesuits. But he danced like a prince, and when she didn't pay attention to her clumsy feet, Revan felt as beautiful as any princess in a fairytale._

_My mind… a useful memory would be nice! Not some silly diplomatic party!_

The man’s mouth curved in a smile and for a half-second she expected him to ask her to dance.

"Perhaps. Later. But not now, Lord Revan," he said.

Then several things happened at once. Or rather, one thing, which caused the rest.

HK.
Moving with inhuman speed the assassin droid fired at the young man. Only Force-honed reflexes saved him. Then HK moved in closer for another shot, as several of the spectators closed in to stop him. Waves of Force-called lightning shattered against the droid's metal skin, and there was a hiss of particle blades, every one glowing red as her droid's eyes. Someone threw a grenade—Canderous—and the resultant flash blinded her even through the mask.

Revan screamed and threw herself on top of the young man—whether to finish the job or stop it, she wasn't completely sure. Whatever this was, it was not the plan. She rolled, as a lightsaber’s thrust narrowly missed her arm, grabbing the Force, calling it, letting it run through her like pure energy. Her shields sparked—and she threw the energy at the crowd.

There was a pulse, a shockwave almost like an earthquake and then silence.

Revan opened her eyes cautiously; afraid of what she would see.

All around her, bodies lying prone. To her relief they looked unharmed. Stunned them, I stunned them all.

Her eyes swept around the room. I stunned all the Sith... and my friends. Oh.

HK leveled his rifle at her. "Helpful Suggestion: it would be easier for me to ensure a deadly strike if you moved, Master. I would not like for you to suffer the same fate as that meatbag Senator who owned me before we were happily reunited."

"Cease hostile action, HK. That's an order."

Underneath her, the man stirred cautiously, muttering an old Mandalorian curse. "Call your pet off, Rev," he said. "I'd rather not kill you."

"Fervent Objection: Master. The meatbag that you are protecting is the last in the series of assassination targets that you activated five standard years ago. He is the culmination of my purpose, my life's work. Please master, let me end his life."

The stun had been brief. Around them, figures stirred.

"End the program," Revan insisted.

"Happy Compliance: If you would just move first? Please move, Master. I am really quite fond of you."

"No. I no longer wish for you to kill this target. End the program. Stop it. Now, HK. Primary override. I am your master. No, you can't kill this man. Not right now."

"Perhaps later?"

How could circuitry and metal sound so hopeful?

"We'll see. But only on my direct command—a new direct command. Disregard the previous one—erase—but then I'll never know what—no. Don't erase it. Tell me about it. Now. And fast."

"Get off me, Rev." The young man sighed. "I'll tell you myself."

She rolled off of him warily. One eye on HK and the other one on him. "Your name?"

"Oerin Lin."
Nothing. It meant nothing at all, but behind her HK whirred with something that sounded almost like a petulant whine.

"Master, you ordered me to destroy the clan Lin down to the last babe in the cradle. That man is the last. He escaped me before, much to my deep regret."


Revan swallowed. "So. I killed your family?"

"I prefer to think that you made me the head of my family." He grinned coldly. "Except for you, of course, Lord Revan. But your claim was always… a little problematic. And you never chose to press the issue."

"You don't look Mandalorian," Revan said doubtfully. *Her claim? Later, later. If there was a later. "And they're not known for their force sensitivity." For which much of the galaxy has always been eternally grateful.*

She got to her feet and backed towards HK. Around her most of the others were stirring. She looked down at Canderous. He lay perfectly still, but a muscle twitched in his cheek. He gave her a slight nod. *So, this man—Oerin Lin's not lying?*

"Half Mandalorian, actually. My father experimented, trying to breed the Force into our line. I was the only success. Mother was from Ossus originally. She didn't talk about it much."

Canderous was the first on his feet again. The warrior was more resilient than anyone she'd ever met—or remembered—meeting before. He came to her side and nodded his head at Oerin. "You've grown some," he said. "Since the last time I saw you."

"You honor me, Ordo." Oerin raised his and Canderous clasped it. It was not so much a handshake as a test of strength. Revan realized none of them had been speaking Basic, only when Oerin turned back to the Sith behind them, most of whom had at least regained consciousness, if not full mobility, and addressed them in them in Basic. "I think Darth Revan has proven herself, as if there was any doubt. Who among you now will swear allegiance to the true Dark Lord of the Sith? The age of games is over. Who among you is ready to serve?"

"When did we first meet?" Revan muttered quietly, in Mandalorian. She kept her eyes on the crowd and her head high, but was painfully aware of her friends, struggling to their feet behind her.

The man smiled. "In my father's camp. We used to play chess."

She reached for a memory that wasn't there. *Only the clink of glasses again, and the cultured voices laughing gently at jokes she didn't really understand.*

It was more disturbing, and half-familiar than she wanted to admit, all of these fresh young faces kneeling before her. Kel knelt too. Yuthura as well, with only a slight glint in those violet eyes revealing that she understood the game. That it was a game.

At least, it was supposed to be.

The masked figure wearing her robes came last, peeling back her hood as she came. Revan expected to see another mirror of her old self, but the woman's face was golden-skinned, her black hair shorn in a topknot in the Deralian style.
Actually, somehow, that was worse, like a vision of home that was only a lie. But she didn't recognize her either. She didn't recognize any of them.

"I remember you, Darth Revan," a deep-voiced man with a burn scar on his cheek said.

"I felt you rise again," whispered a round-faced woman, whose eyes were older than her face.

"As did I," murmured one of the Malaks deferentially, something like fear in his false Sith eyes. The other Malak deactivated his holomask and knelt without a word, staring hard at the ground as if awaiting some punishment. Without being Malak anymore he was pudgy and short. His eyes though… they burned with dark fire.

"And I," said another one. And another.

On the floor, the red-haired girl in white moaned restlessly in her pain-filled sleep.

"Lord Revan!" the Deralian called out to her, a flash in her eyes that was almost a challenge. *Almost but not quite. Not yet anyways.* "I served you in the Mandalorian wars. I served you with the Sith. Where will you ask me to serve you now?"

Revan fingered the hunk of permacrete in her pocket and considered the alternate plan of blowing them all up. That plan had simple merit. All of these stories, and every one of them would be the same.

_You led us into darkness_, the faces seemed to whisper. _Let us follow you there again. This is all your fault. Let's have some more war and death._ The violent wash of hate startled her. _At least the Jedi Council aren't complete idiots. Or... well, not like this._

"It's really true then," Lysteria said from somewhere to her left. Revan glanced over at her. She'd forgotten about the girl. Lysteria knelt hastily, the pale ivory face flushing pink. _My face, mine._

"Idiots"

"I'm pleased you all understand," she said coolly. "As Oerin Lin has said, the game has changed. The Armada is in tatters, the kolto is destroyed. You Sith bet on duels like weak, whining children, whimpering in the dark. Even now, the remnants of the Republic Fleet converge on the few worlds we have left, circling like hungry kath."

A few looked almost ashamed, more looked angry.

"What would you have us do, Lord Revan?" Oerin said. It was not so much a question as a challenge.

_Here it comes._

"The seas of Manaan are poisoned."

_Only I and two dead scientists know the entire truth about why._

_In that airlock on her knees again, looking at their shattered bodies. She didn't remember killing them, only the anger she felt that they'd threatened her. That they'd been stupid and proud enough to betray the Selkath in the name of good for the Republic. Stupid enough to wake monsters._

_Another monster for her to kill._

_Only the monster was a god. The Selkath's god and I killed it._
"The kolto may return in this generation, years from now, or it may not. There's no instant cure that one side can use to fix this. But the Force could help, help cleanse the taint, if there was enough power: focused, enough."

"So we've gathered," muttered Kel at her side.

"And yet, you do nothing." Revan spat. "The Jedi Order are few, and weak—and they surpass you. They've been down there, healing the waters as much as they can. They lack numbers, they lack strength. Strength you have, I can feel the power in this room."

"So," Oerin said mockingly. "You'd have us help the Jedi?"

"Perhaps...."

*No matter what I do, the Sith and the Republic will turn this planet into an armed camp. Maybe... maybe this will help speed things up. Fix the kolto faster. With no kolto, the galaxy bleeds. More power would help heal the oceans, and it will--at least--keep them all busy.*

She lifted her head and addressed them all with her best empty-eyed yellow stare. "I need to use your computers," she said. Absolute authority in her voice. *Don't let them start wondering or thinking.* "I assume your resources are capable of sending an untraceable message Perhaps... more than one?"

"I think you'll find our systems more than capable," Oerin drawled, cool amusement in his voice. "Are you going to send a message to the remnants of your Fleet Lord Revan?"

*My... Fleet?*

"How many ships are left, still under the Sith Armada, and not compromised by the Republic filth?" Revan asked, trying to sound bored.

"Nine capital ships, on the Outer Rim, the last I checked. Nominally of course, they follow the orders of a certain Darth Krell —but I'm sure they'd be honored to return to your personal command."

“Of course they would,” Revan echoed. *What else are they going to do?*

Oerin grinned, a feral wild grin. "They're in the Eosin sector now. That puts them in easy access to Republic worlds. Or—the Republic has retaken the former Sith mining station and slave colony on Sleheyron. Perhaps you'd like to address your efforts there? Although..." he considered thoughtfully, "Upsetting the Hutts is never a good idea. They serve us as well under Republic control as they did under Sith. Then there's Endar... the scene of one of your first victories. Rich resources, there. And they've had a chance to rebuild."

"Send them to the Malachor system," Revan said. The images from the vid mocked her. "Far orbit, around the farthest planet. Cloaked. They *do* have cloaking abilities, don't they?"

Oerin blinked, and for a moment his smile seemed forced. "But of course," he said. "I'll show you the central command center. You can give the orders yourself."

Revan made herself sigh. "I have one other request."

"We are all at your disposal. Is there anyone you want me to—dispose of? Some of those pretenders perhaps? It would impress the others.”
Damn him. I should just kill him and be done with it. But I have to know who he is. Why he is important. Whatever happened on Mandalore, he knows.

"Scar them horribly," Revan said. "But don't let them die. And Oerin?"

"Yes, Lord Revan."

"Only scar the ones with my face. The ones that just use holos...don't bother. Pathetic fools will follow me like sheep well enough without it."

"Your word is my desire," Oerin said. "Let me show you the command center now."

They followed him out of the room and down the hall. "You're very lucky," Canderous used gutter Huttese, a dialect she'd never known he'd learned. "Lucky that Carth isn't here to see this. Damn pilot could never learn when to shut up and let you work."

Revan nodded slightly. She was afraid to say more.

Zaalbar patted her hesitantly on the shoulder, as if to make sure she was still there. Still herself. Barely. The Force sang around her so sweetly, like forty voices chanting her name. Familiar feeling, this. The feeling, but no memory. The feeling was... Don't think about it. Just act.

They reached the command center, a large room with many computer banks. She nodded to Zaalbar and he went to the main controls to check the sequences they'd discussed. Oerin raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Eventually the Wookiee growled his affirmation and she went to them herself, tapping in the orders to send the Sith armada into Mandalorian space.

I don't expect they will listen, but it's a gesture. We decimated Mandalorian space before. What harm can they do out there now?

She signed it quickly with a visual confirmation. "This is Darth Revan, I have returned. Please follow the instructions and wait for my further commands."

I—I shouldn't have said please. Damnit. Okay, keep moving, keep moving.

Oerin himself was busy at another control bank. She tried not to look too interested.

Scarring, I told him to scar those women with my face. They had my face! They deserve it! Gods, get us off of Manaan. I can't take much more of this. Carth... I wish you were here. Canderous is right, Carth would have gotten us killed already. Carth must never see me like this. I must not be this, not to him.

"Let me show you to your quarters now, Lord Revan."

Oerin was smiling at her.

Final gambit.

Check. It's called check.

Was that his voice in her mind? Memory? Or was he reading her thoughts?

"Show them to Yuthura and the Algwinn boy. They will determine if they are satisfactory. I've arranged for a special shipment of... certain items that I require to be sent to one of the lower docking bays. I need to borrow—I need to use — one of your transports and retrieve them."
Oerin nodded to one of the guards at standing at attention at the door. "Show them my quarters," he said. "I'll find other rooms, Lord Revan, it's no concern."

"I wasn't concerned." She raised an eyebrow and tapped her foot. Kel and Yuthura followed the guard out the door. The Twi'lek's hand brushed hers for a moment—brief as a heartbeat—Luck.

Oerin Lin just stood there. His face broke into a slow grin. "I'll show you to the transports myself," he said. "But you shouldn't say 'borrow' Lord Revan. The transports here are, as are all things, yours."

"Certainly." She raised her chin and they all followed him down the hall, trailed still by the luggage carrier. "I know they are."

"Shouldn't we send your belongings off to your quarters?" He asked her lightly.

Revan raised her fist. "Do you dare question my authority?"

Oerin bowed his head. "Of course not, I owe you allegiance across two Empires. I live to serve you, Darth Revan. Darth Revan Mandalore."

"Of course you do," she muttered. Keep moving. Later, Canderous, we will need to talk.

They reached the transport dock. Designed for inter-city travel, two small cargo ships sat in the hanger. Revan kept walking, checking the impulse to break into a run. Oerin continued at her side, silver helmet tucked into his belt, his face as open and sunny as a happy day.

"Thank you," she said to him formally, and immediately inwardly winced. Please. Thank you. Yes, I will be your Dark Lord of the Sith, if that's ok with you. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you?" Oerin laughed, shaking his head. "What did the Jedi do to you, Rev? You didn't even say thank you when I met you the first time."


"No," he said. "I'm coming with you."

"Then stop dawdling," Canderous growled. "We're in a hurry."

Revan felt her jaw drop. Canderous took her arm firmly, almost dragging her up the ramp. "He's not a threat to us," Canderous hissed in that gutter slang again. "He does owe you allegiance. Me too. We outrank him—for now. And he might be useful. He's the real Mandalore. Come on."

She followed him wordlessly up the ramp. There were no words. Zaalbar was already punching in the controls.

Oerin Lin followed. HK followed him, a little too closely. Other than that Lin looked relaxed and pleased as a young man strolling through a park. Or stealing a speeder. Or conquering worlds.

"He said something... about my claim?"

Canderous looked pained. "It's not something we discuss with outsiders. Later, I promise to tell you. Right now, let's just get the nine hells off Manaan."

Zaalbar handled the transport smoothly, and they circled down. The lower bays were mostly
deserted, now that kolto production was gone. Docking Bay 56 looked ordinary enough. A small triangular ship was parked there, nondescript, with Coruscanti markings on its hull. A galaxy cruiser, favored by a not-so-rich businessmen, or small planetary government. Not fast, but not slow. Not expensive, but well-made. Zaalbar settled their little transport next to it.

"Preliminary scans are fine," he growled. "No signs of sabotage. Mission-ghost says it's registered to a Coruscanti cantina owner. A Hutt known as Iggis. Probably a smuggler of some kind, but no warrants. It looks good. Let's go."

"I hope so," Revan said, trying not to glare at Canderous or Lin. They were chatting amiably as they walked down the loading ramp.

This better be good. We have enough to worry about as it is.

The name of the little ship was Girl from Hoth. Revan didn't roll her eyes, she just ran up to the ramp. It was locked. "Verify identity," a metallic voice chimed.

"Open the doors," Revan said, crossing her fingers.

"Confirmed, welcome aboard, Lord Revan."

The doors slid open. A dim light flickered inside.

Well, if the Genoharadan want me dead this is it.

"If I'm wrong," Revan began. "And this is the end, I want you all to know that I—"

"The Jedi know that you've left the Sith compound," Oerin said, in an almost bored voice. "I can sense their confusion. We should leave. Jedi can be so fussy about documentation, exit visas… almost as bad as the Selkath."

He ran up the steps. Revan followed, the rest at her heels. Zaalbar pulled the door closed. Almost immediately, the ship whirred to life and started to move. Move fast.

Revan made her way to the bridge and frowned. There was no bridge, no navigation console. Where it had once been, someone had installed couches and a small combat training area.

"Departure approval confirmed," the metallic voice chimed. "Accelerating to leave Manaan orbit in thirty seconds. Please strap yourselves in to prevent injury. Kolto supplies are very limited."

"Who's flying this ship?" Revan whispered.

"I think it's a drone," Canderous said. "Automatically piloted with a predetermined destination. Ship?" he raised his voice. No response.

"Predetermined destination?"

What if it's not Coruscant? What if it's the middle of some sun? Now that would be a nice dramatic Genoharadan execution. Lure me onto a ship and throw me into the heart of a sun….

"Was that a query, Lord Revan?" asked the ship.

"Uh, yes. What is our destination?"

"Coruscant. Port 23, docking bay 12. My logs have a message for you, would you like to hear it now?"
"I guess it likes you," Oerin said shrugging. He was the only one who'd strapped himself in. The ship was beginning to accelerate now, and Revan automatically pushed herself into a corner, holding tight to the walls. HK's magnetic locks clicked in, rendering him immobile, at least for the moment. Zaalbar and Canderous hastily sat down on the nearest chairs and buckled them.

"Now, would be fine," Revan said, eyeing the port screen. Manaan was a curve of blue water now above a bluer sky, shading quickly to black. Hulas's face appeared on a particle screen in the middle of the room. "Welcome, Lord Revan, thank you for accepting my hospitality, poor as it is. The journey to Coruscant will take about three standard weeks."

"As I mentioned, I do owe you a favor, but I owe my employer one as well. How fortunate for us all that I can fulfill both your interests with a single action. I hope after you kill him, you'll remember me kindly. This ship was meant to be a drone smuggling run of firaxa larvae bound for a Coruscanti Underground lab. Its recipients do not expect to find anyone on board, so prepare for that as you will."

"You'll find the man you're seeking at 100 Thanos 3, on the upper level. Good luck, and may it keep you well."

The face vanished.

"100 Thanos 3," HK said. "Master, are we going home?"

The ship shot forward, and the sky became a blanket of stars. When they made the hyperspace jump Revan was violently ill. Some things never change.
Chapter 8 Rat's Alley

"Perfectly standard for an interplanetary production!" The Hutt waved her arm and took another handful of herran larvae from the ferracrystal glass bowl. She crunched on them delicately and pointed a thin claw at the fine print of the contract. "It just means, if something happens to the ship, your beneficiary will still receive full—ulp—estimated royalties." Her forked purple tongue swept her lips clean and she reached for another wriggling morsel. "A formality, Rahasia. The ship's a Republic cruiser—nothing safer in the galaxy!"

Rahasia Sandral frowned at the contract, glancing anxiously up at her agent. "It doesn't mention shipboard catastrophe," she began again, "only loss to my own life and limb."

Juut the Hutt shrugged, easing her bulk in the floating chair. "Legalese!" Her red eyes narrowed. "Look, do you want the job or not?"

"I was just curious." Rahasia needed the money. Shen hadn't been the same since the destruction of Dantooine. She tried not to think of him, sitting alone in their shabby apartment on Endar. It was noon, so he was probably drunk by now. Drunk and crying again.

"It's standard work; the carth is some kind of improvisational actor. I trust that won't bother you?"

"Of course not," Rahasia said quickly. "I'm a pro. Did I ever tell you I met the real Carth Onasi? He was with her, on Dantooine."

"Yes," Juut said. "You've mentioned it. Just sign right here—on the dotted line...."

Of course, she signed. They were on one of the floating orbitals around Endar, and the production she'd been working on—Revan and Canderous, the Untold Story—had been cancelled quite abruptly when the producers ran out of credits.

The shipboard holovid production would pick her up in another day. She had to pack. And send a message to Shen.

Hopefully, he wouldn't drink away her entire advance before she got back.

XXX

After making the first hyperspace jump, and being violently ill, Revan slept. There were only two rooms on the ship, and she'd commandeered the former bridge as her bunk—curling up on a plush synthide couch that smelled unpleasantly like incense and Selkath sweat.

She didn't even want to think about why that might be.

A few yards away, Zaalbar was fiddling with the ship’s main banks, groaning sadly. *The Girl from Hoth* had no outside comm links. Zaalbar was trying to get an outside line.

The sound of his soft curses lulled to her sleep, where her dreams waited, like an ambush of knives.

XXX
They’d been on Yavin station for two days, refitting the Hawk’s shields since the Sith ambush caught them blind after Kashyyyk.

Yavin Station had been her idea—and Polla had been pleased to see it already charted on the Hawk’s star map. Not surprising—Suvam did a lot of business with businessmen like Davik. She’d looked forward to seeing the old Rodian again.

It was so funny how he pretended not to recognize her. She played along with it, of course. You don’t become a good smuggler by questioning your boss.

She’d left Mission playing cards with the funny Rodian; and Bastila staring at the surface of Yavin IV from the orbital’s viewscreen, speaking quietly to Jolee. Zaalbar, Canderous, and Carth were looking over Suvam’s supplies. They seemed to have worked things out, which was good. Polla had worried that Canderous and Carth might kill each other at first. Old enemies stuck together by fate and all of that. But they both liked guns, and Suvam had a lot of inventory.

Everyone was finally getting along. Except for the sullen Cathar who refused to leave her room.

"Juhani?" Polla stuck her head in the doorway.

"You should knock." The Jedi’s back was turned to her, and she sat rigidiy on the bed, staring at the wall.

"I think we need to talk," Polla began.

"I tire of your delusions," Juhani sighed. Tension was etched in every line of her furred shoulders. "What do you want?"

"To—talk," Polla began again uncertainly. “I think we need to talk.”

"Because Malak said we should?"

The Cathar turned around. At least her face was intact. But now she wore a heavy slaver’s collar above a simple undervest. Striped fur covered her arms, rippling with the muscles beneath. Her retractable claws were extended.

"I fell to the darkness when I thought I’d taken one life," Juhani whispered. "How many lives did you take? How do you live with yourself? Have you ever asked yourself why the Jedi don't kill?"

"I've seen the Jedi kill," Polla snapped. "I've seen you kill. What about Xor? You laughed when you cut him down."

"You told me to do it!" Juhani’s lips were bared in a feral smile. Crackles of lightning flickered in her hands. She moved towards Polla with deadly, deliberate grace.

"Because he deserved it. He killed your people. You were the last of your tribe!"

The Cathar paused. "Yes," she said quietly, a world of accusation in that agreement. "I was."

"Not everything is my fault!" Her anger blistered, hot like tears. "I'm trying! That's all I've ever done!"

"Why do I even try and explain this to you? You never listened to any of us. You're selfish, Revan, you always were."
Polla—no, Revan—laughed hollowly. "That's the moral? The Jedi don't kill and I'm selfish?"

"Yes," Juhani said. "Now go away."

XXX

Polla opened her eyes to find the world blurred into greens and golds. Her body felt weightless and warm, and her skin tingled. It took another few moments to notice the tubes attached to her skin, the visor attached to her head, goggles covering her eyes.

The explosion. Seiran dared me to beat his time at the canyon loop, and I took him up on it? What was I thinking?

Slowly, her surroundings registered: a medical droid hovering outside of her tank, pale, antiseptic walls; and a dark-haired woman sitting at a desk, monitoring her closely.

There was a beeping noise, as the medical instruments registered her return to consciousness. The woman gave her a reassuring smile. Her hair was pulled back in two fat braids and her eyes were very wide. She looked young, really young for the medic’s robes she was dressed in.

"Don't try to speak." Her accent sounded Core. “You’re in a kolto tank. I need to drain the chambers.”

Polla’s head hurt. She’d come back to Deralia after everything went wrong: Therion told her he just wanted to be friends; her shipment of spice was wrecked by kanna mites; she was almost out of credits—and no one wanted to pay up in advance.

It had been a rough year. So rough that she’d gotten stupid drunk and tried to race the loop in the dark.

I’m so lucky not to be dead.

Polla banged on the tank walls—let me out! Her breath hissed through the breathing mask.

The medic stood up smiling and started draining the tank. The top snapped open, and then the sides, as the kolto drained out. The air was chilly on Polla’s skin. The breathing apparatus unsnapped, pulling with it gross tubes from her nose and throat.

"H-how long?" Her voice sounded strange. Her throat felt raw.

"You’ve been in a coma for several months," the woman said. She pushed a few buttons and smiled reassuringly. "You're doing very well."

"Where is… everyone?" It didn’t look like any hospital room Polla had ever seen.

"You're on the Ascendant, in orbit around Deralia. The local authorities asked for our assistance." She looked down, maybe being modest. “Our facilities are better than anything they have groundside."

"M-my family?"

"They've been up to see you." The woman began unfastening the tubes and drains. "Your parents, cousins, aunts, uncles—your family must love you very much."

The mask felt heavy. She was relieved when the medic lifted it off and handed her a robe to wrap around herself.
"That's what families do—so am I healed now?" Several months, the medic had said. How many was several?

"Soon, I promise." The woman seemed to hesitate, frowning slightly. "There's just one more thing. It's... standard with traumatic brain injuries: we like to take a holocron of the victim's memories. That way, we can establish a baseline for your doctors as you improve. It won't hurt; but I need your consent."

"Why?" Polla frowned.

"It is optional." The woman hesitated again. She seemed strangely reluctant, glancing back behind her, at the mirrored wall of the room. "It's just a test. To make sure there's no damage to the... limbic arrays."

"Um... sure—if you think it will help." Why would they need to capture my memories unless—unless I'm—is she lying? Am I going to die?

The woman's smile faltered for a moment and her blue eyes looked too bright. "You're going to be just fine, Polla."

XXX

Her head still hurt, but at least they'd let her out of that damn tank for good now.

Polla Organa sat on the bed, sipping a juice bulb. Her nurse, the medic Bastila Shan, sat on the chair beside her, holding her hand. It was soothing, having her there.

"I want to see Ma," she insisted again. Her mind felt fuzzy, as if the crash had rattled her brains loose. Hadn't she asked this before?

"You will," Bastila said, looking away. "Later. But we've left Deralian orbit. The Republic is at war. We couldn't sit still forever, waiting for you."

"I'm fine now," Polla lied. "Where are we, exactly?"

The woman shrugged. "In hyperspace. May I finish my questions? We have several more sets to get through."

Polla scowled. Shan was relentless. "Go ahead," she said. The juice tasted sour and she put it down on the small table next to her bed. Her arm looked so pale and white and bruised. She stared at her hands. For a millisecond they didn't look like hers at all.

Suddenly she felt sickeningly disoriented. "I want to see a mirror."

"What is the last thing you remember?" Bastila's voice jerked her back to the present.

"Hitting a stone wall, two hundred meters up from the ground." She saw it coming at her again. Black night, black wall... as a tweener she'd run the course in the dark, knowing every twist of it as surely as she now knew the hyperspace jump points on the Corellian trade spire. But it had been seven years since she'd been home, and she'd been drunk. Twenty-seven years old and her father was going to kill her.

"My father," she said suddenly, panicked. Her voice sounded strange too, like the words weren't coming out right. "He must be so angry."
"No, he's just happy you're alive. All of your family is, Polla." Bastila's voice was automatically reassuring, as if they'd had this conversation many times before—had they? "Your family loves you very much. And they're so proud of you."

"Proud?" Polla shook her head, which only made it hurt more. Her hand reached up, feeling a web of heavy bandages. "I didn't have those before, did I? Am I worse?"

"You're family's proud." Bastila nodded emphatically. "You've agreed to join the Republic Fleet. We have use for a pilot with your skills. As soon as you're better, we're going on a special assignment."

Father always said the Republic was useless. We're lucky on Deralia, he said—too remote to be caught in the wars or the quagmire of Coruscanti politics. When he'd had a little too much vodkar, he'd even say that the Sith had the right idea—but only as a joke. He really didn't think they were better than the Republic. Probably.

Me… I never cared.

Polla managed a faint smile at the nurse's obvious lie. "I... have?"

"The Republic needs you." Bastila lifted her chin. Polla half-expected to hear her start singing the anthem—she looked surprisingly like that Jedi in the recruitment poster she'd seen, not so long ago on Corellia. What had that slogan been? She frowned, reaching for the memory.

Join the Republic and Save the Galaxy.

It was funny, because she'd never cared about saving anything before—but looking at Bastila, she could almost feel the sincerity radiating off the woman's small frame. It was almost... inspiring?

"You need my skills?"

I can fly a small ship. (Or a glider into a canyon wall.) I'm not bad with repairs, or slicing security, but I can't imagine that they know about that. I just run errands for Suvam, really. And any extra work I pick up along the way....

"Look," Polla began weakly. "I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I really don't want to have anything to do with this war."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice," Bastila said crisply. "You've already enlisted."

Polla sank back in the bed and closed her eyes. "Oh yeah? Well, I don't remember. Isn't it illegal to take advantage of someone with a head injury? I'm not even a Republic citizen! Deralia's an Outlier colony!"

Maybe if I just stay sick, they won't make me actually do anything.

"We need your help, Polla." Bastila put her hand over Polla's. "Please. I wouldn't ask, if this wasn't important."

"Frack the Republic." Polla made a rude gesture with her hand. The one Derriben used to make on Tatooine.

Bastila laughed, nervously. "Please," she repeated. Her eyes were very blue.

"Wait." Polla's head still ached. "Are you saying that I'm important?"
I don't—I don't remember this.

Bastila's voice was curiously detached. "We had to do several rounds of conditioning before the personality overlay was accepted. For you, it was one occurrence. But through our bond I had to relive each one—yours and mine."

Revan sat up. The pain was gone. She struggled to find her voice. "So, this... this is how it began?"

"Yes."

"Why are you showing me?"

"You have the right to know." The younger woman's voice was tired. Her expression was resigned, forced calm, forced acceptance, forced obligation. "I know you think us monsters, but this procedure saved your life. Without it—you have no idea what kind of creature you had become."

"What happened to the real Polla?"

"I have no idea. I assume she went back to her family."

"Why her? Why her memories?"

"We needed someone with a similar physical build, someone close to your age, who wasn't Force-sensitive. The Organa woman wasn't ideal, but she was close enough, and she was in the right place at the right time." Bastila twisted her hands uncomfortably on her lap. "The bond between us was already established. The Council imagined that if we gave you a stable background and an amenable character, my task would be easier to accomplish." Her mouth thinned. "Your own mind, Revan—what was left of it—was not a pleasant place."

A dozen angry things to say whirled in her thoughts. There was a long silence, and finally she broke it. "No—I suppose it wasn't."

"Do you remember...?" Bastila laughed nervously "No, I guess you wouldn't—but we met once, you and me. Before. Near the end of the Mandalorian wars. On Coruscant."

"You know I don't." Revan tried to quell the hint of anger in her voice—not very well. Bastila flinched. "Yes, I suppose I do." She twirled the end of one of her braids, twisting it in her fingers. "I was fourteen. And recently promoted to Padawan. My Battle Meditation had manifested itself, and Master Vandar brought me from Dantooine to Coruscant to meet the Council. But what I most desired was to meet the two young Knights that everyone was talking about. I'd heard—everyone had heard—what you and your—what you and Malak had accomplished."

"Me and my what?"

"Your—Malak. Your friend."

You and your—husband.

"My husband." Revan wondered why she didn't feel more surprise. "Malak and I were married. I guess that makes sense." She half-expected to hear his mocking laughter in her mind, but there was nothing; only a strange absence, like a tooth pulled where an emotion should have been.

Bastila looked away. "Yes," she said in a softer voice. "That was an old scandal by that time, and
the Council had finally accepted it."

Revan bit her lip. "Just tell me the rest. We met. Was I terribly impressed? Did I call you Nomi Sunrider reborn? Did I try and recruit you to our cause?"

Bastila shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. "No." Her voice was artificially calm. Years of Jedi conditioning. "I was in the Meditation Gardens and you both came to me; masked and hooded, as you always were—as all the Jedi who served in the Fleet were. You stood and watched me, both of you. You said nothing—not at first."

"Can you show me?" I want to know how it was. I have to know how it was. During the wars. The wars and Malak and me.

Bastila looked at her, blue eyes wide and flat. "My memories," she said. "Do you want to see my memories?"

Revan swallowed. "Yes. Please."

XXX

There was soft green grass under her knees.

Bastila knelt, palms cupped to the side, concentrating very hard to keep her mind as open and as clear as water. She was only too aware of the two silent figures behind her, dressed in gray; faces covered by simple cloth masks. The masks made them identical to all the other Knights: one tall and broad and one short and slight—but Padawan Bastila knew who these were, without even looking. She could feel the force around them like a star, sense the unspoken communication that flickered back and forth between their minds. They're talking about me, the D'Reev Knights are talking about me! But that was a thought born of hubris. As she'd been instructed, she pushed her pride into a sense of calm instead and tried to focus on her meditations instead.

After what seemed like hours, Knight Revan spoke. "Padawan Bastila Shan." The woman's voice was quiet, but it rang through the meditation garden like a bell.

Bastila got to her feet and slowly turned to face them. She nodded her head, formally. "Knight Revan. Knight Malak. It's an honor to meet you both."

The larger figure pushed his hood back, and pulled his mask down, exposing a wide face with clipped brown hair shaved to the scalp. It was a handsome face, Bastila thought—and then almost blushed at her reaction. "Relax, Padawan," he said. "This isn't an official visit."

The woman pulled off her mask too. Her eyes were a piercing green. That was the first thing you noticed. Bastila was left with a vague impression of delicate features, a pointed chin, flash of red hair under the hood; but those eyes met her own and held them with microscopic intensity.

"Have they told you what a great gift you have, and what an honor it will be to serve the Republic yet?" Revan drawled.

"I will be honored to serve the Republic, it is my duty," Bastila answered, a bit unsettled.

Revan snorted. "Do you even know what Battle Meditation is?"

"Certainly!" She must not show that she was offended. Surely, this was another test. "It is a Force ability to inspire troops. It is very rare, and I can use it to turn the tides of battles. I will be honored to use it."
“It's projected empathy, on a grand scale.” Revan interrupted. “You will inspire soldiers, generals and admirals, drive fear and confusion into the hearts of your enemies. It sounds nice, but do you know what war is like? People die. Entire ships of them, worlds full of them."

Malak put a hand on her arm. The woman shook his hand away, keeping her eyes locked on Bastila's. Her voice was clipped and controlled. "In our last encounter, the Mandalore's ships were ravaging Arakan, a planet with a heavy Republic presence. Arakan had shipyards, munitions factories, and a strong orbital defense. The Mandalorians wanted those resources. Badly."

"I saw the news holos," Bastila said.

Revan laughed softly. "Did you believe them? Tell me—I don't watch them myself—what did they say we did?"

"You ordered the Republic fleet to disengage, to retreat to the Iridan system. Mandalorians only fight for the glory of battle—so they followed you. You had an ambush waiting and destroyed half of their force."

Revan's voice was cold. "Mandalorians fight only for the glory of battle," she echoed her. “Sure, they do, but they aren't stupid. Arakan would have been a rich plum for them—except planet-side saboteurs bombed the place to rubble before our Fleet pulled out. On our orders. We destroyed everything of value. Shipyards, factories … and the remaining population, the ones who hadn't been evacuated before the Mandalorian assault. We couldn't get them out—mass evacuations would have tipped our hand. We also left ten capital ships behind to die while the rest of our fleet retreated."

Malak met Bastila's eyes levelly, his own strangely empty. His voice was deeper than she'd expected, and strangely flat. "I don't have your gift, Padawan. But I felt every one of those lives end. Every Republic life, every Mandalorian. For someone like you—that feeling would be magnified a hundredfold. What do you think that will do to you?"  

Bastila frowned, this wasn't what she expected at all. She looked at Revan, who was staring at Malak, a faint frown sketched on her smooth brow. "How do you stand it?" Bastila asked.

"It's different for me," Revan said. She reached for Malak and put her arms around him. Again, Bastila had the sense of some unspoken communication.

"I have a great gift," the girl repeated, stubbornly. Watching them together made her even more uncomfortable. Jedi were allowed to marry—but only after years and years of training. Revan and Malak had broken that rule; they'd broken almost every rule she could think of, and yet they were the saviors of the Republic—the ideal that every young Jedi dreamed about.

Suddenly, she felt a stab of very un-Jedi like envy. She couldn't imagine war—but what would it be like to fly so boldly in the face of every convention? What would it be like to have people follow you? What would it be like to—to love like they did?

Her cheeks flushed, and she stared at the ground again, feeling ashamed of her emotions.

"You have a great curse," Revan said to Bastila, still looking at Malak. She leaned against him, but it was if her smaller figure was supporting his larger one—and not the other way around. "I don't envy you; but—in some ways, you remind me of myself. Did you ever ask them if you could leave the Order?"

"Of course not!" Bastila was shocked.
Revan turned to her again, arched an eyebrow. She looked almost—disappointed. "They wouldn’t have let you, even if you had asked. You and I are like opposite sides of the same coin, and it’s a valuable currency. They don’t let go of it."

"I don’t understand what you mean."

"About us?" Revan laughed. "Your gift is that you feel—that’s what Battle Meditation is, in its purest form. My gift is that I do not. I think I got the better deal."

"There’s… an opposite to Battle Meditation?" If was nothing Bastila had ever heard before. Again, she wondered if this was part of the test, if they were really just checking her resolve.

“I pity you,” Revan said. “Your gift is a danger. And not just for you.”

"You’re scaring her, Rev. She’s just a kid.” Malak touched his wife’s shoulder.

"An effective tactic." Revan pulled away from him and walked over to Bastila, looking her up and down. "You're fourteen standard, right?"

Bastila nodded.

"Did you know they already asked me to take you? The Senate did—the Council knows better—they’re not completely ignorant. But still, if I hadn’t turned them down, you’d be fitted right now for a nice set of gray robes and a mask, hastily Knighted, and sent off to the Rim to feel worlds burn. Feel men and women die.” She laughed. "The Jedi Knights under our command can hardly stand it—many of them are only half-sane now—can you imagine amplifying what they feel? They don’t talk about it in the newsvids. The Fleet needs us: we’re the only defense against the Mandalore’s cloaking technology—but it’s killing us too. If you’re smart, you’ll run. Get a nice job on a gardening planet somewhere. Stay out of this."

Bastila lifted her chin. "How can you say that? The Mandalorian threat must be stopped. We live to help those in need. That's what the Jedi are for!"

Malak looked tired, very tired. For the first time Bastila noticed the lines etched in his face, the way his hair thinned a little at his forehead and his temples. "I think you've said enough, Wife,” he sighed. "Probably too much—you usually do."

"She has a right to know." Revan’s voice was hard, almost angry. "Listen to me, Padawan. You will never serve under my command. For two reasons. One, your gift is unstable, unpredictable, and vulnerable to your own weakness. Two, it's unbalancing. Whichever side engages it gains an unfair advantage over the other."

Bastila looked at her unbelievingly. "Unfair advantage? Isn't that the point?"

Revan snorted. "You're so young. Try not to do too much damage to the rest of us while you figure this out." She turned and walked away without a second glance. Bastila looked at Malak again, opening her mouth to say something—anything—but he only looked away.

"My wife lacks tact. But she isn't wrong. Goodbye, Padawan. I don't expect we'll meet again."

Bastila still hoped it was some kind of test. Still hoped that the Knights were testing her resolve, her conviction. She stayed in the garden for several hours, reaching for serenity, while she tried to convince herself of that.

XXX
Shift again, ancient, worn flagstones under her feet. Revan stared at them, disoriented. She was back in her own body again.

_That's how we were? That's how it was?_

Bastila stood in front of her, head down, dressed in her Star Forge robes. "Later, when you and Malak turned to the Sith, I thought about that day. I convinced myself that you'd already betrayed us—even then. I told no one what you'd said to me.

I blamed myself. I told myself that maybe if I had said something—maybe I could have stopped you."

Revan didn't respond for a long time. When she finally did her voice was subdued. "I felt every life that we ended on the quest for the Star Forge."

"Our bond," Bastila replied. Her voice was darker now and her skin was very pale. They were on the roof of the ancient temple again, sabers drawn. Juhani and Jolee lay dead at their feet. "I felt every life you took carelessly and needlessly, and every one drove me closer to this."


"Maybe you should take your own advice," Bastila sneered. "Run away."

"I want Carth," Revan said. "I'm not leaving him behind. They took him, and I'm going to get him back."

"You want Carth," Bastila mimicked. "You're like a child crying for its mother. Carth, Carth, Carth. Carth, Carth, Carth, Carth. Have you ever thought, perhaps it would be better if Carth didn't want you?"

"Since this is my dream, I assume I'm thinking that now, aren't I?"

"Right, your dream." Again, Bastila's voice mimicked her own so perfectly that Revan shivered.

"Mine. And I'm waking up now." Revan pushed angrily and Bastila fell back. The Jedi was laughing as she fell, as the dream world fell to pieces around them. The stone walls shattered, as something exploded. Suddenly, Revan was flying through the air into darkness. A cliff loomed up in front of her and—

Revan sank into the point of impact. It was soft, and slightly greasy; smelling like seawater and incense.

She opened her eyes to dim light, and her face buried in the cushions of the Selkath’s couch.

XXX

Zaalbar was still trying different code combinations on the main console, growling in frustration.

Revan sat there for a moment, sorting out her thoughts—Bastila's thoughts—in her head, trying to organize them like cards in a sidedeck. _Polla Organa is real. Bastila lied to her too. The Mandalorian wars made the Jedi insane. I didn't like Bastila. Malak and I were married. I didn't feel anyone die, but all the other Jedi did. I called the war a—a game?_

Her thoughts defied categorization spilled all over the metaphorical floor and offered no immediate help.
She shook her head sharply. Her thoughts offered no immediate help. And that made them irrelevant.

Revan realized she was starving. "Any luck, Zaal?" she said out loud.

"No," he groaned. "I'm trying to link my external feed, but there's nothing to amplify the signal. I think I must find the ship's power supply and use that."

"Be careful," Revan said, feeling useless. She wasn't bad with basic computers, but comm stuff—Zaalbar was kilometers ahead of her. "I'm going to eat something and then I'll come help."

"Good," the Wookiee said. "You need more strength for the trials ahead."

"Probably," she agreed.

Revan got up from the couch, and went into the fresher, cleaning herself quickly and efficiently, rinsing the sour taste from her mouth. She peered at her face in the mirror—were the dark marks a little lighter now? Were her eyes a little greener? She wanted to think so, but she couldn't tell. Someone had cleaned and folded her Star Forge robes and left them for her on the shelf next to the sonic. She shook them out and slipped into them, with a slight grimace. They'd help intimidate Oerin maybe. And the fabric was soft.

Canderous and Oerin Lin were in the converted dining room. It had once been the ship’s cargo bay. Now it was the men's quarters. Three sleeping pallets were rolled against the one wall and the two Mandalorians sat at the table. The walls were lined with dirka wood from Endar—a needless luxury for a drone ship—and the metal benches were upholstered with red silk. There was an extensive selection of wines and liquors, on the table too—but almost no food.

"Canderous. We need to talk."

"Fine," Canderous said. "I'll tell you about Mandalore now if you eat something while I talk. There's no muscle left on your flesh."

Revan sat down on the bench next to him and picked up a piece of dried meat from the remnants of their Kashyyyk stores. She swallowed it down, trying not to gag at the taste, and reached for another. He nodded approvingly.

"It's true you are very thin." Oerin laughed. "But when I saw you last you were fat. You got very fat on Mandalore." He blushed as if he'd said something rude.

Revan ignored him. She still couldn't believe Canderous had let him on board. Although, he seemed to be running the Sith on Manaan. Then again, the Sith on Manaan weren't that impressive.

"I'm eating," she said sweetly, through a mouthful of jerky that tasted, as Mission would have said, like dried bantha poodoo. "I'm eating..." she repeated. "I'd eat more if there was something else to eat."

"This is it," Oerin said. "Aside from the spacer’s rations you brought. There’s a lot of alcohol, and almost no food. I wish you’d told me, I would have brought supplies from the Embassy." He looked pained. “We had a very clever chef droid.”

“A chef droid?” Canderous snorted. “Those Sith were making you pansic, Lin.”

"Enough," Revan leaned across the table for another piece of jerky. "Why did he call me the Mandalore? Why is he the Mandalore? And why did you insist on bringing him?" Pointedly, she
leaned past the young man himself, and levitated a bottle of wine into her hands, snapping open the seal, and taking a swig from the bottle.

“Use a glass,” Lin muttered, rolling one across the table. “Please.”

Canderous just sighed. "Your claim to the Mandalore's seat wouldn't be recognized. For one thing, you're not one of us. For another, when you killed him, you cheated. You used the Force. You won — combat is combat—but you didn't win honorably. No honorable Mando’ade would follow you."

Oerin coughed. "Actually, Lord Revan is a member of Clan Lin," he said. "But the rest is true—she did cheat."

Canderous was too good a warrior to show expression easily, but Revan knew him very well. The wine sloshed in his glass and he put it down on the table too carefully. The muscles in his heavy hand flexed.

"She's not Mandalorian," the warrior said. “She was born on Hoth. To Republic citizens.”

Oerin looked disgusted. "Of course not! She was adopted into the Clan. Technically her claim to the Mandalore is almost as good as mine—although we’d have to prove it. And that would be easier if you’ve killed my father without cheating, Rev."

"Adopted?" Canderous' eyebrows rose, heavy stripes of gray, one bisected by a scar. He frowned and looked at Revan again. She looked back at him, wondering what this was all about.

So, they adopted me? Well, that's sweet. And then I had HK kill them all. Touching.

Why?

"I don't feel enlightened," she said finally, after a long silence. "But none of it matters now, does it? There is no Mandalore, not like there was."

"No," Canderous said heavily. "There is not. The age of the clans has passed."

Thanks to me, I guess.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, covering her discomfiture by pouring more wine into the actual glass. Holding the stem gave her something to do.

“Our time will come again,” Canderous shrugged. “With or without a Fett Lin.”

“Faster with one,” Oerin chimed in. “Especially if it’s me.”

"I have more questions," Revan interrupted. “Like why—not to mention how—you managed to be on Manaan turning the Sith Embassy into a cut-rate dueling ring."

"Ah," Oerin said. He shrugged. "The struggle for power was already going on when I got there—but the Sith are so serious. I managed to make it amusing."

Revan frowned at him, reaching out with the Force. He seemed as contained as an egg. If she hadn't felt his strength before, she wouldn't know he was Force sensitive at all.

But they were afraid of him, and he is dangerous. Is he a danger to us? Canderous doesn't think so. Zaalbar seems unConcerned. And HK—well, he's locked in the utility rack and disarmed. Easier that way, until we land on Coruscant.
She pushed harder, trying to see into Lin's mind. Nothing.

"Hells, you have no control anymore, do you?" Oerin wrinkled his nose, as if she smelled bad. "I'm not sure what your plans are for Coruscant; but if you go in blazing like this, you'll have the entire Council after us. Of course—that could be fun. I've never seen a Jedi Council before—how many would have to kill before the others accepted us as their true masters?"

"I was actually thinking of avoiding the Council," Revan said. "We're going to Coruscant to rescue Carth, find Dustil, and kill Malak's father."

"Malak has a father?"

"People generally do," Revan said.

"Malak's father," Lin mused. "I guess that makes sense, leaving your enemies' family members alive is quite risky." He winked. "Who's Dustil?"

"Dustil is Carth's son. He's somewhere on Coruscant."

Zaalbar had Mission looking into where—that was one of the requests he'd managed to transmit before they left Manaan. Find Dustil, one boy in a city of billions, a planet of trillions. She couldn't even find Carth. They were blind on this ship.

Canderous seemed lost in his own thoughts. She glanced at him for reassurance, but he was staring heavily in his glass as if there were answers hidden there.

Revan frowned. *We still need to outmaneuver Hulas as well. Never trust an assassin.*

"What does killing a Senator and finding a Force-sensitive boy have to do with your plans for the galaxy, Lord Revan?" Oerin asked. There was a smirk on his face, as if he already knew the answer.

"It will help us leave it," she snapped. "That's all. If you're questioning my command, Lin, I could kill you right now."

He laughed and took another sip of wine. "You could try."

"Oerin." Canderous said.

Suddenly, the young man looked like a whipped kath. And it wasn't entirely an act.

"Why are you here, Lin?" Revan asked. "As the Mandalore shouldn't you be off gathering your people and rebuilding your empire? And you still haven't explained what you were doing with the Sith."

*He looks like a Sith.*

*I'm no more Sith than you.* His voice rapped lightly on her mind like knocking on a door.

She slammed her barriers shut and had the satisfaction of seeing him wince.

"My people believe that a warrior needs to be blooded," Oerin shrugged, grinning at her again. "I'm here to see the galaxy. I don't care what you do Lord Revan, I'll help. It will prove interesting. Much more interesting than Manaan."

Revan glared at him. "Later, Canderous, we have to talk. Alone." She got up from the table taking
another handful of jerky with her. She paused and grabbed the bottle of wine too. "I'm going to help Zaalbar."

The Mandalorian was still glaring at Oerin as if he were a bug that fallen in his wineglass. "Of course," he said mildly. "I'll be out in a while."

XXX

Canderous watched her leave the room. Revan moved better, but she was still a shadow of the warrior she had been. Some wounds took long to heal, even the ones that no one could see. She would recover through; she always did.

When he judged that she was out of earshot he turned back to the Fett's whelp.

"Which one of you did she marry?"

Whoever it was I think she has no idea.

XXX

Grarwwaar lifted up his visor and looked admiringly at the ship. "You're a beauty," he told her, setting down his empty can of blue paint, and reaching for another to attach to the sprayer.

Mission watched him from the Hawk's sensors. If ships could smile, she would be smiling. The part of her still in the forest was deep in a philosophical discussion with Freyyrr about plants. That was all the old chieftain wanted to talk about, ever since she'd explained how Kashyyyk's forests had been made and not born. Mission could do lots of things easily, now—but some things eluded her. Another part of her consciousness scanned the nets, especially the Manaan and Coruscanti sectors for news of her friends.

It was really annoying, because she knew what ships they'd left Manaan on. Carth had to have gone on the 920 Republic Pearl. The Girl from Hoth was the little cruiser that Zaalbar had her scan from the Sith Embassy. But both ships seemed to be under strict broadcast silence now. With no news out, she had no way in. There was something about the Pearl stopping on one of those orbital recording studios—but the studio itself was also oddly reticent about giving any information.

Well, as Griff had told her once, sometimes you had to look for what wasn't there to find what was. She couldn't help Carth anyway—not yet—but she had to get through to the Hoth.

Her friends were in danger. Zaalbar's story about a secret order of assassins being nice enough to give them a ride off Manaan was extremely sketch. Of course, Big Z and Polla-Revan and Canderous knew that—that was why they'd commed before they'd even left and asked if she could patch into the Coruscanti landing grid and switch their docking coordinates. She was working on that now too—easy enough to retrieve the Hoth's flight codes; but she had to get through to the Hoth itself to tell the ship. She would. It was only a matter of time, and at the speed the Hoth moved, she couldn't see them making it to Coruscant in less than three weeks. The Pearl would get there sooner. As would Mission herself, if this paint ever finished drying....

"May I go with you on your journey, Mission-ghost?" Grarwwaar's voice was an earnest and respectful whine.

And she still needed to find Dustil. The damn boy must be dead or just terminally dense. Had he forgotten about her already? A part of her was almost upset about that—as much as she could be upset.
"Sorry—no passengers. Big Z's orders. You hairy guys are way too conspicuous."

The Wookiee groaned his disappointment. Grarwbaar was one of the ones who'd been offworld. He was really handy to have around. He'd finished rewiring T3 for mobility and a link to her systems. In a way, he'd given her legs again. Of course, they were short, dumpy droid legs, but it was something. Droids were everywhere, and they did everything. No one blinked. It could come in handy.

The Wookiee looked at her soulfully with his big brown eyes. He seemed to know just where to look too, although her ship's sensors were hidden underneath a vast gleaming coat of blue paint. She could see quite a lot and what she couldn't see, the sensors told her. Grarwbaar was really upset. Zaal used to look like that when he hadn't eaten in a few hours. Grarwbaar was hungry, she could hear his stomach rumbling like a train of banthas.

"They're roasting some kinrath over in Loading Bay 3," Mission said politely.

One of the other Wookiee—Werrrorrr—hastily finished lettering the Hawk's new name on the side of her hull. The 'T' in 'ghost' looked a little crooked, but that was ok. Task completed, Werrrorrr took off at a run for the feast.

In the forest, Mission interrupted Freyyrr to remind him to take the platform back up. There were going to be speeches and songs, and he needed to be there.

News on Manaan was more of the same. She wished she could hack into the Sith Embassy cameras; but that darn computer was being an asshole. It was almost like it hadn't forgiven her for blowing it up—the time she'd been there in person. The Republic cameras didn't show her anything interesting. The Jedi were all locked in a room somewhere—a room with no cameras, natch. Them being the secretive types. Roland Wann was back at his desk typing a memo about kolto production. He hadn't done anything unusual since he'd shot Carth with that stunner and put him on the Pearl. Mission continued to watch him closely.

Poor Carth, how could he have been so dumb?

She ran another check on that Rodian, Big Z had asked her about: Hulas Nolastname. Nothing. Still, that wasn't surprising, ancient orders of assassins probably didn't use last names. Or real first ones. There were lots of Rodians registered as residents on Manaan though, and she cross-checked them for anything interesting, any patterns that fit. Of course, maybe he hadn't been born a Rodian at all—surgery was pretty easy to come by—and there were several talented clinics on Manaan. She crossed-checked those too, just to see.

Malak's father, Senator Malachi D'Reev. Quite a bit on him; but the interesting stuff seemed to be tripwired. She was working on uncoding that without getting caught. She thought she'd get through pretty soon.

"Can I use your console to send a message?" Grarwbaar asked her humbly. He had to ask now: all communications between Kashyyyk and everywhere else were routed through her processors. They had to be careful—you couldn't have a bunch of Wookiees jabbering about their new god the supercomputer on the nets. Not yet, she wasn't ready. Not yet—but maybe soon.... The thought made her giggle—or she would have—if she had a mouth.

"Sure," Mission offered. "You know the regs. No more than thirty seconds, and lowbeam. Will transmit on my approval." She lowered her landing ramp and Grarwbaar climbed inside.

Now, back to Dustil. He might be with a Mekel Jin, who was a Coruscanti native. Coruscanti
sublevel 47. That was practically like being from Taris's Undercity. She remembered Mekel—he'd been kind of a prick. But if they were on sub47 or lower, it was no wonder she couldn't trace them. Barely had electric down there—let alone nets. Coruscant was supposed to be this great city where everyone was equal and everything; but a lot of those everyones were almost off the grids. Worse than the Taris. Like Taris sewers, even. (Without the rakghouls.) Probably.

Something rang her sensors. One of her triggers. A name—Hulas. Message transmitted from inside the Blue Ghost's comm. Center. Whoa. Mission's boarding ramp clanged shut and the comm doors hissed closed. The message was very short.

_Hulas! Stuck on Kashyyyk. Pie. 34820. R. P._

Grarwwaar jumped when the doors closed but now, he just stood there. She maneuvered T3 over to him, stun ray ready. Perhaps it might have been more intimidating if the little droid's carapace wasn't covered with a flowery wreath, but she had two good Sith pistols ready, leveled at the Wookiee's head.

"Talk," she said loudly through the ship's speaker system. Mission's banks had copies of Polla-Revan's voice stored and she used one of those. No one could make one word sound as scary. Nobody—not even Calo Nord.

Grarwwaar spread his hands, trying to look helpless. He'd be better at that if he wasn't three meters tall and covered in hair—not to mention armed with the disruptor rifle she'd given him for helping with the paint job. "Talk," Mission repeated. "That name. Talk fast."

"Name?" He growled back at her in fake confusion. "What name?"

"Hulas. What's your business with Hulas?"

His voice sounded slightly incredulous. "You know Hulas?"

"My boss ran some errands for him."

"I see." Grarwwaar carefully bent down and placed the disrupter on the floor. "What kind of errands?"

"Genoharadan ones. You know, Revan really tell me details. But... I think that Gamorrean on Tatooine must have been one. We tracked him for half a day and she made me promise not to tell Bastila or Carth. He was nasty too."

"Ah," the Wookiee said. Mission wasn't sure she'd ever heard a Wookiee say "ah" before. "The Gamorrean had a droid with him?"

"Yes, a really big one."

"I see," he repeated. "Is Revan still working for Hulas, do you know?"

"I don't think that's any of your lekkuwax."

"Well, it might be. Hulas is my associate. But we seem to have had a falling out. He's not the most trustworthy... member... of our order. Are you trying to find him? Why?"

Mission considered.

"Are you telling me a Wookiee on Kashyyyk is part of some ancient order of assassins? Geez, I
may have been a fourteen-year-old girl once—but I was never completely stupid!"

Carefully, she waited for his response.

"Perhaps we can help each other," Grarwwaar said. "You see I'm not really a Wookiee."

"Big surprise," Mission muttered. If she'd had eyes, she would have rolled them.

The Wookiee's image shimmered and shifted, shrinking down and changing into a blue-skinned Twi'lek girl. He didn't really have the face right, but it wasn't a bad likeness. Processors whirling, Mission began to formulate a new plan.

"Impressive," she said, in Revan's laconic drawl. "And yet, my records show that the last shape-shifting species in the galaxy died out five hundred standard years ago."

"As a race, yes," the shapeshifter said. "But we live a long time. There are still a few of us around."

His voice was a perfect mimic of Mission's. He—or now she—beamed at the ship. "Shall we start over? My name is Rulan Prolik, and I'm a member of the Genoharadan, a noble order of assassins. We could help each other."

"You going to send another message to Hulas now or what?" Mission said in her own best bored-now voice.

"With your permission." The Twi'lek bowed at T-3 in a long sweeping gesture. He—she—whatever—Rulan—went back to the console and typed in a few words.

*Hulas, Cake. 85730. R.P.*

"I guess I'll just have to assume that said, 'go away, don't come to Kashyyyk?'"

"Trust has to begin somewhere," the shapeshifter replied. "I could give you my codes, but how would you know I was giving you the real ones?"

"If I let you come, there's a certain—insurance—I'll need to impose," Mission said.

Rulan twisted a lekku at her in a sign of inquiry. "What did you have in mind?"

"Slaver's collar. One of the fancy ones with surveillance and monitoring and a small explosive. Czerka left a few lying around."

Rulan shrugged. "It's not in my interest to betray you. I'll help you with whatever you require. You're going to Coruscant, are you not? I need to go there too. I have some connections there. No charge of course: after all, I'll owe you for the ride."

"I'll have to monitor you."

"But of course."

"Ok," Mission said. Actually, this wasn't bad. There were some things she needed to pick up on Coruscant for her fledgling world. Another pair of legs would be very useful. An ancient order of assassins could be useful too. Mission added Genoharadan to her list of things to check into.

Knowledge is, after all, power. If you looked at things the right way—between the gaps—there was a surprising amount of stuff you could find.

XXX
The woman knelt, head bent, her topknot spilling over her eyes like a black waterfall. Underneath the dark curtain of her hair those eyes were huge, and green, and shocked. Every line of her body trembled with the effort of keeping her emotions in check, keeping grief, despair, and loss at bay.

The carth wouldn't look at her. His eyes were closed, and his voice was a hoarse whisper. He held a blaster loose in one hand; and the other was clenched tightly around the blaster still holstered on his belt.

"The whole time we've been chasing after Malak we've had his old Sith Master right at our side; listening to our secrets; hearing our plans!" His voice choked. "How are we supposed to know that you won't betray us? How are we supposed to know you're not going to become Revan again?"

A tear fell from a wide green eye. She reached up and took his hand, guiding it. The cold metal nozzle of the gun pressed a hard circle on her forehead.

"Go ahead, Carth. Shoot me. I know it's what you want. It's what I deserve." Her voice vibrated with anguish. She looked up at him, letting the gun trail lightly down the curve of her cheek, and her neck, to the swell of her breast.

The carth tried to pull his hand away, but she held it fast. His eyes opened, and he looked down at her, face twisting in an expression of shame and loss. And anger.

Wow, he's really good.

"I can't kill you," he choked. "You're the only one who can find the Star Forge and stop Malak. I can't kill you—yet." His jaw worked with the effort of saying the words. His hand tightened under hers, still holding the gun to her breast.

"I want you to promise me, Carth," she said slowly, enunciating each word so that it would fall like a bell—because that's how Revan talked

"Did you know, I actually met her once?"

"Yes," the producer had said, "we've seen your work. You were very good in the Telosian version. And your improvisation in 'Revan's Private Lessons at the Jedi Academy' was superb. You're a true artiste. But this carth is really something special. Don't break character with him—he takes his work very, very seriously."

"I want you to promise me—" she let the words pour out in a rush now, she could almost hear the soundtrack they'd lay in later in her head—something slow and sad, majestic, mournful—"Promise me that if I fall to the Dark Side again, you'll put this blaster to my head and pull the trigger."

His breath caught in a ragged sob and his hand fell to his side. "I can't," he whispered. "I can't let you die, Polla. I can't stand to see someone I love die again. No—no matter what you've done. I love you."

"But you're the only one I trust." Shading the voice with a hint of entreaty. "You're the only one I trust to make sure that the Jedi never bring me back again."

"No," the carth repeated. The blaster clattered to the floor. He turned away from her and faced the bridge of the Ebon Hawk set. His hands ran over the mock controls. "No," he said again. "This isn't real—it can’t be. You're not really here—we never had this conversation. This is a dream. You're not—you. I said I'd be right back… I-I need to get back to you...."
"Scene!" Someone called out. The Sullustan grip waved at Rahasia to step off the set.

Then the door hissed open, and the producer came in, followed by a few actors dressed like Republic Diplomatic Corps Officers. Rahasia wasn't sure how they were going to work into the plot, but hey, this was improv. The only direction they'd given her was to point the gun at her own head and ask him to kill her. She thought she'd done quite well for a first run. She got to her feet and smiled at them.

But the producer looked irritated. She was a tall, skinny woman with a long nose and big teeth. Her annoyance made her even uglier than usual. "Get him set up again," she said to one of the actors that accompanied her. "We'll keep trying this until he gets it right."

"How was I?" Rahasia asked. She flicked the switch at her neck and let the Revan holofield drop. The holofield was a really good one, one of the best that she'd ever seen.

The woman laughed. "You were good, dear. Very good. You don't need me to tell you that." Firmly, she took Rahasia's arm and led her out of the room. "Take a break now, we shoot again in thirty minutes."

Rahasia glanced back at the carth. He was surrounded by the other actors now and swaying a little on his feet. They seemed to be injecting him with some kind of stim. She didn't really approve of that end of the business—the dark side, some said, of the holovid world—but she had to admit; he was really, really committed to his role.

XXX

"Marry?" Oerin took a gulp of wine, trying—and failing—to hide the revulsion in his expression. "You think someone in Clan Lin would marry an off-worlder?"

"Your father did," Canderous said dryly. The pup was annoying, but he owed him some degree of allegiance. If Lin ever managed to be blooded in all three of the honorable ways of battle, he'd owe him more than that.

Oerin scowled. "That was different."

"Ah," Canderous said, waiting for the boy to spill the rest. He was impatient to get to the bottom of this and he didn't wait very long. "So? Who was it? You'd have been too young. One of your brothers? Your father?"

"No. She didn't marry any of us. Rev was adopted by the Women's Council. The old ways. You know...." The boy looked uncomfortable.

As well he should. Those things were not spoken of. Not even when men were alone.

Lin's words gave Canderous pause. He took a deep breath, feeling his joints creak and felt an inexplicable sadness. She has no idea. He stared at Lin, waiting to hear the rest.

"She was carrying it when she came to us!" the boy said angrily. "It wasn't one of ours!"

"The babe lived?" He spoke quietly, afraid that she'd hear them somehow with that prenatural Force sense of hers. She has no idea, he thought again. The thought made him angry. But not at Lin.

The Republic call us barbarous. They hide their forces among civilians; and they took away a woman's memory of her child. What was it he and Onasi had agreed to do? Walk away, just walk
away. Canderous gritted his teeth. That wasn't going to be easy. Especially with the pilot gone.

Suddenly the plans he and Carth had made all seemed like a fool's game. Canderous felt very old and tired.

"It lived—a son. Her mate was there when it was born. All the proper rituals were performed." Oerin sounded uncomfortable. "Father married them and the babe was blessed with sand, air and stars. Then they left. I didn't see her again." He shrugged. "Perhaps the babe died after that, I never heard mention of it in the wars."

"That's possible," Canderous admitted. He stared at the wine in his glass and wondered how he would tell her. He had to tell her. Children, even dead ones, were important. To have no memory… his hand tightened on the glass and it shattered. Oerin looked startled.

"I'd assume it died," the boy said quickly. "Otherwise she'd mention it, wouldn't she?"

Canderous looked at him and sighed. I have to tell her. Frankly, taking on the entire Jedi Council would be easier. And they deserve it.

XXX

"Dusty!" The idiot was watching the holovid screen above the bar with his jaw hanging open, tray of drinks forgotten and sliding dangerously in his loose hand. If it hadn't been for the magnetized surface of the tray they would have spilled already. "Lusha doesn't pay us to stand here. Get those drinks over to table twenty, now!" Mekel nudged the younger boy with his elbow, nodding and smiling at the bartender who was putting his own order on a tray at the same time.

"Mekel?" Dustil's voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

Call me Mekk! "Idiot, what's wrong with you?"

Around them the smoky din of Lusha's cantina continued on its merry pace. Here in Rat's Alley they were just two more young boys, down on their luck, dressed in strips of black silksynth. It was the perfect place to get lost. The perfect place to make some credits, save those credits, and then use those credits to get the frack off this dump of a planet. If Dustil could stop from screwing it all up….

Mekel nudged him with his free hand, reinforcing it mentally with the Force. Look alive, asshat.

Dustil just shrugged him off, barely noticing. "Mekk. Look at the screen."

Mekel looked. A battle was taking place against a backdrop of stars. All between Sith ships. The Harrower-class dreadnaughts were unmistakable. Squadrons of small Interceptors, and drone fighters swarmed around them. There was a pulse of energy cannon. As they watched, one of the dreadnaughts broke and shattered. The others moved, flanking each other like birds on a wing… and then one of them turned, muzzle pointing upwards. It looked like it was trying to make a break from the formation. The ships on either side opened fire—their fighters swarming like roach-flies. Suddenly the transmission fizzled, turned to static, and then cut out.

"Dusty." Mekel sighed. This had happened before. “It's not real—it’s just a vid. Come on."

"No.” His friend shook his head. “They'll show it again, this is the news band. Wait."

An announcer's face filled the screen. A bland, Eosian face; almost human, except for the ridges of
cartilage around the eyes and mouth. "These images were taken by an observation drone near the Eos System on the Outer Rim earlier today. Those ships are the last remnant of Malak’s Sith Armada. And again, for those of you just tuning in, we think their activity has something to do with the following transmission.

A square box appeared on the screen, and a woman's face filled it. An almost familiar face.

"This is Darth Revan, I have returned. Please follow the instructions and wait for my further commands."

The woman's face was cadaverous now, gray-white skin pulled so tight on her bones that you could see the shape of her skull. Her hair was a close-cropped cap of red fire. Her eyes were outlined by an intricate pattern of black lines, and those eyes were yellow and burning. Her mouth was set in a grim line.

The image flickered and vanished, and the announcer's face replaced it. "For months now, we've been reporting to you about the Sith on Manaan, and the strange rash of Revan and Malak pretenders. Now, it appears that one has arisen and claimed her throne."

"What commands could this Revan pretender give? Could this be a new threat to the Republic? In the last few hours since our observer camera was destroyed, reports indicate three of the nine ships were destroyed. The rest have gone into hyperspace, their destination..." the announcer's voice dropped. "...unknown. At this time, we have been unable to break the codes on the orders that were transmitted from the Sith base on Manaan—and their Embassy itself has been ominously silent."

"But there are rumors."

"Joining us now, Tam Kar, our reporter on Manaan. Speculation runs rampant, but some wonder, what if this isn't a pretender at all. What if Revan Starfire herself has truly returned? What if the hero of the galaxy is no hero at all; but the Dark Lord reborn?"

Mekel's mouth was dry. He set his drink tray down on the bar, forgotten. "She's alive," he muttered. "We knew that already—we felt it three days ago. But that—that can't be her."

"It is," Dustil said quietly. "You know it's her as much as I do."

Mekel swallowed. "She—she's changed."

XXX

"Why didn't you just let him kill me?" Mekel was hurt. Not as bad as she was, but pretty bad. Bad enough that he was pretty sure he couldn’t take her. Uln had really lit into him. His entire right side felt scorched.

"No one deserves to die like that," she whispered. "Nobody."

Polla Organa's face was sad and sickeningly kind in the flickering light of the tombs. As if the cold arrogance she'd worn in the Academy for the last month was only a mask. As if this was her real face—not a Sith face at all.

"Except him, maybe." He tried to make it a joke, because that's what you did. After a while it did getting pretty funny, when the eviscerated, fried guy wasn’t you. "Uln was an asshole."

Her head turned again, and her eyes narrowed. “What?” Now her face was perfectly blank and
cold. The shift had been so sudden he'd almost missed it.

“It was just a joke, okay?” Mekel said, stumbling to his feet. The left one hurt. It felt like he’d broken a toe. He’d been hanging upside down in a Force cage. How the frack had that happened?

She looked at him, measuring, as if she was trying to decide something.

Whether I live or die.

She'd mockingly answered Uln's questions with the wrong answers—not that the right ones made any difference. Mekel had learned that—rather painfully—before her arrival. And the one time Polla had answered that nutcase correctly—strike at my enemies—her face had watched Mekel writhe under lightning with something like abstract fascination.

He’d always been good with locks. Wasn’t the first time a five-credit skill that most sents he knew thought was too lame to bother practicing had gotten him out of a jam. Both of them—out of the jam.

But even free they should’ve lost. She’d been half dead from the punishments she'd endured, and Mekel had been no match for Uln even before his own light torture session.

But then, right when Uln started to fry Mekel for the tenth time—screaming something about misplaced Force bonds and cheating apprentices—Acolyte Polla Organa rose and sucked the power she needed straight from the madman's bones.

When Uln turned back, every Force lash he gave her just gave her more strength. The Sith talked about such things, but Mekel had never actually seen them—not like this.

"Who are you?" he’d asked.

Polla didn't answer. She was crouching at the side of her fallen companion, jabbing a kolto pack into his side. The man didn't look good. Jorak Uln had hit them all hard, and the man was only a null—no Force at all.

Behind her, the metal eyes of her now-reactivated droid tracked Mekel's progress like lasers, its rifle shifting to keep him in target range as he moved away. He almost tripped over something—Jorak's body—turned almost inside out. Mekel's stomach churned, looking at it. He'd seen death before—frack, he'd caused death before—but in all of his seventeen years he'd never seen anything like this.

Nobody deserves to die like this, nobody, he echoed. For a strange blurred minute, he didn't know if they were her thoughts or his own.

"Get out of here, Mekel." She was kneeling over the man now, whispering something. He felt the Force build around her, a white-hot pulse of power like a small sun and every nerve in his body screamed at him to run away.

But he couldn't move.

She raised her hands, gathering her strength, and he realized what she meant to do. He could feel her intentions as clearly as if she was screaming them in his mind.

She was going to heal the man—but—didn’t she know? Her power wasn't the healing kind.

"Don't—" Mekel whispered a warning, even as the first waves of red energy, dark energy, shot
from her fingertips and into her slave's side. The man convulsed in new agony.

Then she cut off the Force as abruptly as if she'd severed it with a knife, staring at her hands in shock. "No," she said. "No!" Her voice echoed across the chamber.

Frantically, she tore open kolo packets as if they were free, plugging them into the fallen man, one after the other. She was muttering to herself, like a madwoman.

"—a little cut that I couldn't heal and then the wound festered, and I tried, but I couldn't—they could have saved you! Why did you follow me, Mal?"

But her slave’s name was Carth.

"Who are you?" Mekel whispered.

She looked back at him, startled—like a woman waking from a dream. "I told you who I was." Her voice was brittle, but oddly rational. "I told you twice. You laughed at me. Go away, Mekel. Leave this place. Leave this planet. I'll bring death. It's what I do."

"Revan!" A slim figure wearing an ill-fitting black robe, the Academy medallion hung almost too conspicuously around her neck rushed through the now-open gate. That's odd, there are no Cathar students at the Academy, Mekel thought, even as the impact of what the woman had called Acolyte Polla Organa hit home.

"I told you who I was. I told you twice."

"What if I said I was the Dark Lord of the Sith?"

"You're considerably more attractive than Darth Malak is reputed to be."

"Malak…" her lip twisted in scorn and her eyes flashed. "I'm Darth Revan, you ignorant child."

Her cruel green eyes dared him to doubt it, and he burst into a peal of laughter. She'd laughed too and walked away. It had all been an absurd stupid joke.

But a joke on who?

Mekel coughed. "I-I'm going now," he said nervously, edging away. The droid was still following him, gliding with silent precision. Its red eyes glittered with a terrible fascination. It stepped through the remains of Jorak Uln and he could have sworn it sighed happily.

The Cathar ignored everything, kneeling at the injured man's side, waves of calm blue healing light emanating from her fingertips. "He'll be fine," she said quietly. "That madman sealed you all in, but we got the doors open. The others are coming. He'll be fine."

"Polla," the man murmured, weakly, trying to lift up his head.

"I-I'm here, Carth."

"Alarmed Observation, Master: The secondary target is attempting to escape. Query: Do you wish to have me constrain him for interrogation, or shall I attempt to match your own magnificent evisceration of the primary? Hopeful Request: I would relish the challenge."

"No. Let him go, HK. No blasting, no eviscerations." Revan said. Her voice sounded flat and exhausted. "We're running low on kolo," she said, "I don't know how much longer I can stand it here. This place, Juhani—this place is like a bad dream. I know—now that I know I was here..."
"Pull yourself together!" The Cathar's snapped. "There were Sith long before you were born and there will be Sith long after you're dead. We have a job to do. None of this is your fault."

"Oh, isn't it," Revan said bitterly. She looked at Mekel again, meeting his eyes with a cold green stare. "Get out," she said. "Leave. Leave this place, leave this planet. Now."

Mekel ran.

He was halfway through Dreshdae before her Force compulsion eased, but Mekel didn't stop running. A Czerka freighter bound for Coruscant had open berths, and he took one, not even wondering that the fee had already been paid. The Captain told him that some little Twi'lek girl was offering free tickets off this rock to any Sith who wanted out, and he didn't even blink, didn't even think about turning them all in for the prestige. He just sat on the cold dormitory bunk for three days—not even surprised when the others showed up.

Two days after lift-off, he led them to Dustil locked in a supply closet, surrounded by food wrappers and empty caff bulbs. It was a long, long time before Dustil told Mekel the story of his own redemption—if that's what it had been—and still longer before the two boys trusted each other.

Rivalry is a hard thing to get over, once you've seen the Sith version—and theirs had been even more complicated than most.

But Dustil was the only one from Korriban who never seemed to mind that Mekel didn't like to talk about what had happened there. Dustil didn't talk either. The others did nothing but talk, and their former teacher was the worst.

Revan this, Revan that. Saint Revan, the redeemed. Spread the word across the galaxy with that stupid lying vid.

XXX

Go to hell, Yuthura Ban, Mekel thought. How do you like your Saint Revan now?


Mekel hastily picked up his own tray. Dustil barely noticed, he hadn't budged.

"This is Tam Kar, and I'm standing in front of the Sith Embassy." The reporter's head tails twitched excitedly, and the camera panned out. Other news vids were being broadcast simultaneously: Bothan, Durian, human, Selkath and Rodian newscasters jabbered in a cacophony of tongues. "Reports are sketchy, but for the last three days, the complex has been sealed from within. There are reports of explosions, and the death toll could be in the hundreds."

"Is this connected to the Sith struggle for the skies above Eos? Stay tuned here for the latest-breaking news."

"Dusty!" Mekel tried to distract his friend again, with a sinking feeling. Here we go again. Another job lost.

"I quit," Dustil said to the bartender suddenly, turning away from the vid. He looked down at his brief costume in disgust. "I'd rather roll pervs in the Alley than deal with the filth in this place."
"There's your contract," the Fosh croaked, clacking its beak. "Can't let you out of it that easily. Lusha would be displeased."

"I think you can." Dustil's fingers moved a little, a quick flick of his hand. He was really good at that. For a moment, Mekel felt a stab of envy. Then—relief.

So much for making it on the narrow. This place was the ass-end of hell anyway. Here we go again.

Behind them, customers were calling for their drinks. "I'll tear up your contracts," the bartender agreed.

Mekel nudged his friend in the shoulders. Week's wages, if you can. Maybe two.

"And you'll pay us two week's wages," Dustil said, a faint smile on his face now. "Each. For our pain and suffering."

"I'll pay you…." the Fosh fumbled with the credit cache under the bar. His eyes were glazed over now, and he just handed Dustil a large wad of cash.

Now we leave fast. We're attracting attention.

Yes. Dustil's thought was clipped and cold. He stuffed the money hastily down the side of his leggings.

Mekel took his friend's arm and they walked out of the cantina. Another humid night in the sub-city, level 53. The two boys slipped through the Rat's Alley, stepping over a few passed out drunks that looked picked clean, avoiding a few tricks that looked like CorSec Unders; and disappeared into the shadows.

Two boys in a few billion, lost in the Coruscanti Underground.
Sure, it all seemed romantic when Seiran proposed in a field of blooming ferra grass, surrounded by wild hessi. The sun shone red in the pale blue sky, and the first of the monsoon winds were only a soft whisper.

But it must have been that fracking head injury, because Polla said yes.

“Yes, I will. Yes, I will marry you. Yes, yes, yes.”

XXX

Now, her ankles were swollen, their beautiful little eridu farm was a sea of mud, and the damn vid was on the fritz. And where was he? Her brave, bold swoop race champion? Off on some mechanic’s gig on the other side of the damn Derran continent. Half the threshers were broken too; and really, a woman in her condition shouldn't be expected to get up and deal with that. Not when it was pouring rain. Their eridu farm? More like their mud farm—now.

Polla Wen took another bite of thisla and clapped her hands at the vid player.

"Stop it! Fix!"

The picture stabilized—for now.

She wasn't sure why she kept watching this thing. Ma said there was no use getting upset about things you couldn't fix, and Da muttered something about finding a good arbiter—but he wasn't serious. He didn't want any trouble, none of them did. Her cousins were sworn to secrecy, but half the damn town knew anyways. It was hard to keep secrets on Deralia; there just wasn't enough to do otherwise.

Gossip and farming: all they had.

The particle screen was still fuzzy; but it played the part she watched over on repeat, when she was alone.

“After Malak’s attack, the Dark Lord Revan was saved by the strength of the Jedi Council and one brave young Knight, Bastila Shan, who held the fate of all sentients in her hands.”

The music again, numbingly awe-inspiring: Dum dum dee dum dum. Polla made a face.

The words scrolled across the screen, repeated by the narrator.

“The Jedi believe in mercy, but Revan’s mind was as shattered as her body....”

Image of a ravaged figure floating in a bacta tank.

The first time she’d seen that, Polla had winced. Now, she just tapped her fingers along with the
music, cursing a little under her breath.

“How to redeem someone who has fallen so far? How to save the woman who was once a shining beacon of light; but fell to become the devourer of worlds? The Council and young Bastila Shan healed Revan’s body; but they could not heal her soul.”

The woman screamed, writhing soundlessly in the tank. Her dark-haired nurse flinched.

Poll’s hand curved over the bulge of her stomach and she shifted her weight, pulling her legs across the couch with an indelicate grunt.

“Revan Starfire had no mind left—and yet, the Jedi Council, in their wisdom, knew two things: first, that all creatures have the potential for good; and second, that the only way to stop Malak was locked somewhere in Revan’s crippled mind. Using the link that Bastila Shan had courageously created, the Jedi remade the Dark Lord of the Sith, and gave her a new life.”

“But who was this woman they created? Who was Polla Organa?”

The music played again, sad and melancholy.

"Polla Organa was no one," said Polla Organa Wen, making a face.

"Polla Organa was no one. No one person. Instead, she was a precisely curated amalgamation of personalities, driven by the Force. The Jedi instilled in her a strong sense of morality; technical knowledge that complimented Revan’s own; and basic training in weapons and strategy.”

Polla Organa Wen picked up the little knife she'd been using to peel the thisla from the table and threw it at the wall. It spun in a curling circle and sunk in to the hilt.

"Basic training," she muttered. It was an insult really, when you thought about it.

"Supposedly born on Deralia, a remote world untouched by the ravages of war, her personality matrix overlaid the tragedies of Revan’s life with a foundation of stability and hope.”

“Is that a compliment?” She rubbed the swell of her belly. “What do you think, Junior?”

XXX

“Look at it this way,” her husband had said. “You always wanted to go to exotic places and have adventures. It's sort of like you did.”

“It’s a good thing Polla Organa is such a common name.” Auntie Mita was ever practical. “No one ever has to know. Why, if they did, there’d be reporters swarming all over you.”


Of course, then Auntie Mita had gone and told her granger club—that is to say half the town over sixty—the truth.

XXX

"Forward," Polla said to the vid.

Images blurred in a whir of static. Constellations of stars on the other side of the Rim, stars she’d never had the chance to see. Farmer’s wives didn’t travel. There were always crops to plant and harvest and never enough credits. And soon enough, there’d be the kid. It wasn't that she wasn't
happy about him—or that she didn't love him already; but this wasn't on her original nav chart. Not by a long shot.

The stars whirled and dissolved into a blue planet.

"Stop," she said.

_Taris. The narrator murmured sadly._

XXX

_(Scene 1, take 20)_

"You told me once that you wanted to put a blaster to Revan's head. Well, now's your chance."

Rahasia's lip curled. She loomed over the carth.

He sat in the captain's chair, staring at the ground. Staring anywhere but at her.

She spat out the words with a rage that wasn't altogether feigned. Improv was a challenge, but doing the same scene over and over again? The last nine takes had been _absolute_ perfection. The carth was an artist, and she thought her own work was perfectly up to the task.

So why did they have to do this again?

"Try getting angry at him," the producer had said. "Let's see how that plays."

Golden brown eyes looked up at her. Dead, drugged eyes.

Rahasia shivered. She hoped the remotes were getting all of this. The nuance in his face was incredible.

Then carth spoke, his voice as rough as the stubble on his cheeks. "Is that what you want me to do, Revan?"

Rahasia trembled. "No," she whispered and dropped to her knees.

She put her head in his lap and felt his hands, shaking a little, brush her head. The cold metal of the blaster pressed against her cheek, then slipped past and dropped to the ground. She looked up at him, eyes swimming with tears.

It wasn't hard to cry on command. All she had to do was think about Dantooine and that terrible day.

XXX

_Sith airstrikes took out the few planetary defenses they had. The Sandral farm, so close to the Jedi Enclave, was destroyed in the same bombardment._

_She and Shen had been exploring the old caves when they'd heard the explosions. By the time they got outside, everything was gone. The world they'd known was a plain of smoking craters and ash._

 Terrified, they ran to the safety of the Jedi Enclave. But there was no safety there. Instead, they cowered behind a broken wall and watched, as the Sith ground troops herded up the survivors; separating them into two groups: civilians and Jedi.

_Both groups vanished, into separate transports._
“Don’t look,” Shen said to her, and she’d buried her face in his chest, sobbing, praying for a way out.

Shen was so strong that day. She would have fallen apart without him. It was only afterwards that he’d fallen apart too.

XXX

Rahasia buried her face in the earth’s chest with great, heaving sobs. She felt his hands, gentle calloused hands, rest on her shoulders. He pulled her up and kissed her lips softly.

"I won’t let anything happen to you, Polla,” he whispered.

She kissed him back automatically. Improv was improv after all, and she’d wondered when they’d get down to the basics.

"Cut!” The producer said from over the loudspeaker. "End scene.” The doors hissed open and the crew streamed in again.

Rahasia pulled away from the earth—he really was gripping her hard—smiling at him. "You’re really good." Her eyes were still wet from her tears. He wasn’t the only one who’d been good. Together, they’d been fantastic.

The earth just looked at her. "Revan?” He was really out of it.

Well, they told you this earth never breaks character, didn’t they? Might as well play along.

"I’ll be right back,” Rahasia said.

At this rate, we’ll never get past the Leviathan.

"Right...back,” the earth echoed. Hands separated them, and she got to her feet and walked away.

"Fifteen minutes until the next fugue,” one of the actors said.

"Fifteen, then—check."

Producer Silvana met her at the door. "You have fifteen minutes, Rahasia. Then we go again."

Rahasia nodded. "How was I?"

Silvana frowned. "You were very good. But we’ve been discussing some changes we want to make in the dialogue...."

XXX

“Taris,” the narrator said sadly. “Just another planet to burn under Sith occupation and then shatter under Sith bombardment. Just another planet in a string of Malak’s atrocities. Atrocities that began with Endar, Yu-Phaedra and Telos. But Taris was different. It is said that Darth Malak bombed Taris to rid the world of one Jedi: the brave Knight, Bastila Shan.”

“Unbeknownst to him at the time, Taris was also the current residence of his former Master and his mortal enemy."

“In one of the Republic’s finest moments, Revan Starfire saved Bastila Shan—and a few others—from certain death. There are few survivors and fewer images; but here are their stories. Stories
from simple people, whose lives Revan Starfire changed irretrievably for the better, despite the
great tragedy that followed.”

XXX

Polla Wen threw a thisla shell at the vid. The baby kicked sharply inside her belly and she winced.
She liked to watch this footage to see the woman’s face. Her own expressions on a stranger’s face.
Sometimes, she just watched looking for physical resemblance. They were about the same height
maybe; and Revan wore her hair in the traditional Deralian topknot. Maybe they had almost the
same chin.

The swoop race was hilariously bad—and quite obviously rigged. It made Polla laugh to watch.

She forwarded through the parts about the others. Interviews from the Twi'lek girl's brother; a few
fighter pilots that served with Onasi in the war; a xenososh explaining the particulars of a Wookiee
life-debt...boring, boring. Helena Shan's face, talking about her daughter made her pause—like
always.

She'd thought her nurse Bastila was her friend.

“My daughter left to serve the Jedi at such a young age, Helena Shan said steadily. I suppose I
never knew the woman she’d become.”

XXX

"My mother?" Bastila asked Polla, laughing incredulously. "You want to know about my mother?
Well, she wasn't much like yours." The nurse took another bite of the homemade thisla pie Molla
Organa had brought up the day before.

Polla shrugged, which made her shoulders hurt. She'd broken one of them in the fall, and it didn't
seem mended. At least they'd let her out of the damn tank.

Her head hurt. Putting her memories into a holocron had been an oddly draining experience.

"Family is what it is," she said, dismissively. "But as a medic in the Republic fleet you must have
seen everything. Tell me about it?"

Bastila had the best stories. You'd think as a smuggler you'd get to see the galaxy; but that wasn't
really true at all. As a smuggler you ran routes over and over again, because you were dependable.
It got pretty boring real fast.

Her nurse had been to Coruscant! Polla always wanted to go there.

XXX

The Blue Ghost left Kashyyyk garlanded with leaves and flowers, which burned away on lift-off in
a colorful shower of sparks. Her ion trail streamed across the sky. The Wookiees sang the song of
departure; and the song of the hunt. Their voices echoed through the trees, reverberating through
the forest: echoing everywhere; even in the dark places, where the light from above never filtered
down to the forest floor.

The part of Mission still on the planet gave a long speech over the Czerka loudspeakers. At the
moment they were just pretty words, but they were very well-received. Kashyyyk and its people
had been created long ago. Soon, they would take their place among the pantheon of stars. Soon, they would bring the magnificent legacy of their Builders to all worlds capable of receiving the gift.

Mission had most things figured out now, except for D'Reev and Dustil. Why couldn't that idiot nerf-herder look at a computer terminal? You'd think he just didn't care.

And Malachi D'Reev—the amount of ice that man had around his life was just—scary. Finally, she'd given up and looked around what she could see.

XXX

When he finished interrogating Lin—and realized that the whelp didn't know anything—Canderous went to see Revan.

_I have to tell her._

Revan sat beside Zaalbar on the floor next to the console, combing out his fur. They were talking together softly in Shyriiwook. From the looks of things, they hadn't had luck with the comm: pieces of circuitry and databoards were all over the floor. The Wookiee gesticulated his frustration with his huge paws.

Those paws could tear a man's head off when raised in anger.

Canderous remembered taking Zaalbar's measure on Taris, when he'd still called him a beast; and then again on that bloody beach near the end. He wasn't sure he could best the man in a fight, but it would be a challenge to try. Of course, the Wookiee was as worthy a companion as he would be an enemy. The two of them had come to an understanding; even if he couldn't understand anything the hairball said.

Kashyyyk intrigued him. His own people's lives on Mandalore had been the same, long ago: a race of hunters and gatherers, who understood the points of honorable challenge.

*Nine hells. if only the pilot was here.* Onasi would tell her with soft words and kisses—that peculiar devotion that was both like and unlike a man's loyalty to Clan and Empire.

If Onasi told her, she'd cry. Perhaps mourn. Do whatever it was that Republic barbarians _did_ when they suffered a loss deeper than defeat in battle; a tragedy worse than the surrender of a territory, or a planet, or a quadrant of stars.

Canderous wasn't sure what Revan would do when _he_ gave her the news. His own wives would swear blood price. That would be just—at least as he used to think. The pilot had said they should walk away. The Wookiee agreed—and Canderous felt very old and tired.

The clans were scattered. His wives—if they still lived—would no doubt reject a scarred, old veteran who hadn't even managed to die honorably.

*Things are much simpler on the point of a blade.*

"Revan," he said.

She turned to him. There was an actual smile on her face, one of the first he'd seen in a long time, her hands still caught in the Wookiee's shaggy coat. "Yes?"

His hand went to the short blade strapped at his waist. "I need to spar. Interested? We both need the
workout." Easier to tell her when they were both busy.

"I'd like that." She fought as fiercely as one of his own—even before he'd known why, he'd admired it.

Revan got to her feet with more ease than she'd shown a few days past. She kicked the broken pieces of circuitry into a corner, clearing space on the floor.

He'd left Lin in the dining room with his own chess dataplan. It would keep the pup busy for a time.

"Zaalbar… if you could." Revan cleared her throat. "Come back later. I think we need the space."

The Wookiee growled and Revan laughed. "No," she said, raising her eyebrows. "This isn't one of those human mating things; but why don't you go keep an eye on Lin?"

Zaalbar groaned in what sounded like agreement.

Canderous went over to their storage bins and pulled out two practice blades. He tossed her one, and hefted the other in his hand, measuring the weight. Not perfect, but it would do. He tossed his short blade down, for the moment. No need of a real edge in this contest.

Revan crouched, bending into a defensive stance, the practice sword loose in her left hand. He saw the faint frown on her face. He knew she hated fighting with a single blade, but she wasn't bad at it.

You could say much about the Jedi—very little of it flattering; but they did teach true warriors. Canderous found it beyond comprehension why an order of sniveling pacifists placed such value on combat training; but they knew their own mettle. In the end, the Wars had been a true test.

There is no shame in falling to a superior foe.

Now, Canderous swerved his blade towards Revan in a dance as old as time. She met the thrust and pushed back. He let her, feinting a retreat, and then suddenly dropped his guard. Revan didn't take the easy hit offered—instead she whirled around and blocked his strike; recognizing the feint for what it was.

He grinned, and they danced faster.

"Are you—?" she began in Mandalorian, ducking a swipe at her shoulder and parrying his advance with the tip of her blade, "This is leading up to one of your talks, isn’t it?"

He let the steps carry them from one corner of the room to the other, searching for a beginning.

"My people believe in war. This you know. There is no greater honor than besting a worthy opponent, cheating death, and serving side by side with your comrades at arms."

"This I know," Revan echoed, twisting her sword and pushing his back.

Canderous ducked and came up with an undercut that glanced lightly on her waist.

"Yours," she admitted a wry smile on her face. She pushed forward again, seeking an advantage.

He left one open and she took it. Her sword stung lightly on his leg. "Mine." She frowned. "Wait. Did you let me get that hit?"

“Huh,” he grunted. He pressed harder, testing her mettle. She was still badly weakened, but her
body knew what to do, even if not with its old strength.

Canderous tried again. "You—spent some time among us. You fight like a woman—"

"Is that an insult?" Her blade flashed with a bit more speed.

He parried her again, almost surprised when her uppercut was followed by another, instead of the standard Jedi cross.

"No. You fight like a woman of our Clans. They… must have taught you."

Revan dropped her blade down suddenly—and his sword glanced across her wrist with more force than he'd intended.

"Ow," she said a hint of reproach in her eyes.

Then her own sword flashed back, moving with speed he had no hope of matching. It was luck—or his own knowledge of her dance that moved his to guard low. But then, hers whipped forward, jabbing back. Canderous felt himself break a sweat.

He smiled, and pressed forward, using his height and weight as a wedge to drive her back.

To his approval, she rolled to the side, and tried to flank him. Her practice blade managed a shallow cut across his ribs before he brought his own down hard, slicing at her hands, forcing a retreat.

Her eyebrows arched. "Why don’t you just tell me what's bothering you? I saw your face when Lin said I was adopted. Why does that matter?" Her lips pulled back from her teeth. "Do you want to be Mandalore? Because I’m fine with that."

Canderous lowered his blade. "No. The honor is not mine."

Her own sword lashed out, striking across the pommel of his sword, numbing his hand and disarming him. His vibroblade spun across the room. "Then what?"

He smiled, that she would take the obvious advantage—even at the cost of her own honor. There was honor in that too. And more importantly, it was smart. No warrior tribe survived long on a blind code of ethics.

"Out with it, old man." Her skin shone with healthy sweat.

Canderous sighed. "Something happened to you on Mandalore. Something you need to know."

"I know something happened there," she said, frowning. "I was—hurt. Maybe I tried to kill Fett Cassus and failed. Vrook said something like that. I know I was hurt, I remember... pain. And blood."

"During times of war, any inhabitant of a planet conquered by a clan may join them. But peacetime is different. We do not adopt outsiders lightly in peacetime. Marriage is rare, but it happens. The other reason is—an old thing, a very old tradition."

Revan laughed. "Marriage!" She bit her lip. "I was married. To Malak. Is that why—they adopted us because we were married?"

Canderous sighed. "No. Lin told me about Malak. Malak—wouldn't have mattered."
He didn't ask her how she'd learned about the marriage. She knew things, sometimes. They came to her in dreams. *Just not the things she needs to know.*

"Did it happen—there—were we married there?" Her eyes scanned his face, searching for her lost memories. He had none to give her, only the words.

*I need to just tell her, just say it."Any child born under a clan tent becomes part of the clan. The child and its mother."

Revan still didn't seem to understand. "But I wasn't born on Mandalore—was I?"

He shook his head. It was as if she didn't want to know. He couldn't blame her. It was an atrocity. Battle was only one side of the Mandalorian code. The other side was life; continuance of the clan. Every child was a blessing, just as much as every victory: Mando’ade strength depended on its increase—whether by conquest or birth.

Conquest and birth: they were cycles old as stars, wind, and sand.

"You had a son," he said quietly. "In Clan Lin's tents. You were carrying him when you came, but the babe was born to Clan. That's why they adopted you—both of you. Lin said your mate was there too. The Fett married you, and the babe was blessed by our ways. You and the child were adopted by Lin, as surely as if you'd been born Manda."

The color that had begun to return to her cheeks faded, and the sword she still held in her hand clattered on the durasteel floor.

"A son," she whispered.

Canderous spoke fast—cutting off the question before she said it. "You and Malak left with the child. I don't know more than that. Among our people, children are sacred. To have no memory of their birth is—obscene. I don't know what your Republic or Sith beliefs are, but for Clan...." He struggled for words. "I don't know if the babe lived or died. Lin said you all left, before the babe's naming day—maybe two standard months after the birth. Before raiding season."

"Raiding season," Revan echoed, staring at the sword on the floor. Her fists clenched, white-knuckled and he saw her struggling for breath.

*Nine hells, she's thinking of that Republic vid. It's the only memory she has. They went to Eos.*

Canderous remembered Eos.

There was a long silence. Revan was struggling; he could see it in every line of her. Her jaw worked, and she lifted her head up to look at him again, her sun-colored eyes burning with something that could have been anger—but not at him.

"Why didn't he tell me? Why didn't Malak tell me?"

Across the room, one of the storage bins exploded in a shower of plasteel fragments, scattering its contents—the medical supplies they had left—across the room. Both of them ducked automatically, avoiding the worst of the shrapnel, but Canderous felt a sting as something sharp cut across the back of his neck.

An angry droid's voice rose from the supply closet in the hall.

*At least she didn't blow up the grenades bin. Or the outer hull.*
"Query, Master: Are you injured? Let me incapacitate the meatbag lackeys." There a loud banging noise as the HK tried to break free.

The door slid open and Zaalbar was there suddenly, howling at both of them. Lin hung back at the edge of the room, lifting an eyebrow.

"You really don't have any control left," The whelp drawled, barely audible over the Wookiee’s din. "What were you thinking?"

Canderous ran a hand across the back of his neck to check the damage. Just a scratch really, and Revan seemed unscathed. As did the ship's main console—thank the stars.

Revan got to her feet, her black robes stained with plasta. Canderous got up too, heavily, his joints creaking. *Getting old, Ordo.*

He watched her advance on the lad, her hands curled in a Force gesture that made his hackles rise.

*Which one of them will you defend if she goes for Lin?*

In the clans, it would be none of his business. Clan Lin business was Lin's business; but here he felt a responsibility, an obligation as strong and foolish as any Wookiee's life debt, to Revan. And the pup... when he'd taken Lin on, he'd taken on the obligations of an elder warrior to one unblooded. That tie was as strong as Clan loyalty too.

*Better stop them. Say something. Anything.* "She doesn't remember, Oerin. She didn't know she had a son."

The words fell like stones on sand and the boy's eyes widened in shock—and pity.

"Oh," Fett's whelp said, holding his hands out in a defensive gesture. "I didn't know." There was a long tense silence, before the boy went on. "I knew the Jedi broke your mind, but I didn't realize they could take away something like that. We'll make them pay." Lin's face twisted, and he spat on the floor. "We'll make them pay," he repeated, in a softer voice. "I promise you—on the honor of the Clan we share."

Revan stopped. Canderous was glad he couldn't see her face, the back of her shoulders told him enough. She felt like a coiled spring ready to strike.

Zaalbar was still yowling, questions, probably—they'd all been speaking Mandalorian and the Wookiee didn't understand.

*Bloody suns, we need the pilot. Republic could handle this. Canderous frowned. Or I'm getting soft. Is there something some Moffa-fed pilot can handle better than a real warrior?*

That thought provided false comfort. Truth was, Onasi would know what to say to her. Clan Lin, Revan might be; but she was raised Republic. Who knew how these barbarians thought?

"Show me," she said to Lin. Her voice was pitched low, but there was no request in that tone. "Show me or I'll rip it from your mind and leave you broken."

Lin shrugged at her. "I was twelve. I was a boy. Boys don't—men don't—involv e themselves."

"You were there," she insisted. "You must have seen, something—anything. Please." Her voice shook. "Show me what you remember."
A look of distaste crossed Lin's features, but his chin dropped.

Canderous began to feel the edge of something like relief. *The whelp has some sense at least, I thought he'd challenge her.*

Zaalbar growled again, frustrated, and HK began to yowl back through the closet in metallic Shyriiwook. Revan ignored them all. Canderous was as Force blind as a bantha, but he could feel the tension like an ion storm, right before the charge.

"You have a right to know," Fett's son said finally. "I'll show you but let me *show* you. Don't come barging into my mind like it's your own tent. If you do that, I'll cut you out. I'm stronger than you."

"People have been saying that to me as long as I can remember, which isn't very long," Revan said, voice steady now. "Then they all died. *Show* me. I don't even know his name."

"I can't tell you his name," Lin said. "On Mandalore we don't name children until the end of their first year. If they're strong enough, and live that long then they are taken out under the stars and—"

"*Show me.*" Her voice had a dangerous edge again, and Canderous looked instinctively around for his sword. He hoped he wouldn't have to use it. "His face, you must have seen—you must have at least seen him."

Lin nodded and sat down warily on the floor, crossing his legs.

Revan sat down too. Canderous relaxed again—somewhat. Zaalbar was still yodeling back at the droid. Fett only knew what kind of translation the Wookiee was getting. Canderous would have to explain it to him in Basic later. Right now, he moved over to the scatter of stims and supplies and began to salvage what he could.

He glanced at the two still figures on the floor. Both of their faces were perfectly blank in that stillness he'd learned to associate with the Force magic. Whatever passed between them was Lin business and none of his.

*You've done enough damage, Ordo. Now we'll see what happens.*

XXX

The outlander woman was still screaming. Mother always said the Jedi were supposed to be strong, but Rev sounded like any other woman getting a child. That thought made Oerin Lin blush.

Men weren't supposed to listen—and boys weren't even supposed to *know.*

Apparently, the barbarians didn't respect this, because it had taken an entire guard of Lin men around father's tent to stop the big one from charging off to where he had no business being.

Oerin frowned again at the enormous man and offered him the tray of tea Father had made himself. The Fett couldn't be here himself, of course—but he'd honored them with his youngest son. The barbarians didn't seem to understand the honor. They treated him like a child.

"Do you play chess?" he asked them. "Rev and I play chess sometimes."

The big man's eyes were unfocused, as if he wasn't really there at all. Reaching out with delicate tendrils of the Force—just a whisper or they'd notice—Oerin realized that Malak really *wasn't* here. He was with Rev, somehow, feeling everything, she did. Oerin slammed his mind shut tight before he got sucked in too. A hot blush crept up his neck. The tea tray trembled in his hands, delicate
cups chiming against the burled wood.

"She lets you call her Rev?" the old man asked. He looked like he'd been hit with a concussion grenade, but he'd looked that way since he and Malak arrived two weeks ago. At least he wasn't doing something filthy, like spying on women's business.

Oerin shrugged. "Rev doesn't let me do anything. I do whatever I want. She's nice though," he added politely. She was nice, even if she kept telling his father that peaceful trade could solve all of their problems. She was a barbarian; she didn't understand that Mandalorians didn't have any problems. Things were the way they were. It was harvest time now, and so they lived in the tents the way their ancestors had millennia ago.

Every season was different, just like every battle and every war.

"Why didn't you want Rev to get married?" he asked the old man. Vrook Lamar was Rev's uncle, or something. But she never called him Uncle; she called him some word in Basic that sounded like "Teacher" or "Master."

Old man Vrook sighed. "In the Order we are encouraged to wait before forming attachments like that. They're both very young."

"They're old enough to be blooded," Oerin shrugged. "I really don't understand your people at all."

The old man's lips twitched in something that could have been a smile. "I assure you, young Lin—sometimes I think that we don't understand yours either."

Malak let out a gasp. He'd bitten his tongue, Oerin noticed, and there was a little blood on his lips. His eyes opened, and he smiled, a glazed oblivious smile. "They're fine," he said out loud, wiping the sweat from his face. "He's beautiful, she's—she's so happy. She’s—beautiful. It was…beautiful."

His exuberance made Oerin blush. You really weren't supposed to celebrate children until after they'd been blessed.

"I'm glad," the old man said. He looked at Oerin. "May we see her now?"

"When the women say so. Malak has to be tented with her for a month. Her and the babe. Then the blessing. You'll see her plenty that month. I could lend you my chess set, if you want. You'll need something to do."

"So, we've been told," Vrook grumbled. "I'll get back to the city soon," he said to Malak. "And send a report. We can't hide this from the Council—or your father—forever."

The big man lifted his jaw. "I'm willing to face the consequences," he said. "We both are."

"Knights don't settle down and have families, not at your age. You have responsibilities, obligations—"

Malak shrugged. "I'll leave the order," he said. "D'Reev heirs have been trained by Jedi, and then left the Jed, for generations."

Vrook shook his head. "You know it's not that simple."

"We've had this conversation, Uncle. Do you mind if I call you Uncle? Now that we're related..." Malak's face was expressionless, but under the surface he boiled so much that Oerin could almost
It was funny, Rev was just the opposite. On top she was like a sandstorm, but underneath she was rational and cold as ice. Maybe that was why she liked Malak so much. When Oerin thought about it, Mother and the Fett were sort of like that too.

"I wish she'd told us earlier," Vrook sighed. "We could have postponed this."

"You mean, stored my son in a tank until your Council was done with its plans for my wife?" Malak's voice was flat and calm. It was fascinating to watch the rage bubble underneath. "No."

A masked face poked in through the side of the guest tent. "You can see her now," Caerus, Oerin's oldest half-brother said. "The women say it's time."

Oerin trailed behind the two barbarians, hoping that no one would notice his inclusion in their party. He pulled the hood over his face and slouched down.

Around them, the camp milled with activity: running children, sounds of combat practice and the buzz of blaster fire from the target range. A dewback train lumbered by, laden with basilisk parts for refitting the harvest drones.

Oerin frowned at that—Father had been very specific—no advanced weaponry in front of the Jedi. Someone was going to be very unhappy. Even if the trail through the camp was shorter, the suppliers should have taken the northern one.

Luckily, the two Jedi seemed lost in their own concerns. Dewback trains weren't unusual: you'd have to look close to see the refitted Krath cannon and tank parts bundled up in those baskets.

The headwoman's tent was bright red and purple. They'd given Rev a great honor letting her birth there. Oerin slipped inside on Malak's heels and peered around the big man's arm, trying to catch a glimpse. Just a flash of a red-haired pink thing in Rev's arms and then a strong hand closed on his arm and yanked him back.

"Oerin," Headwoman Octiva hissed, scandalized. "Your mother will be shamed!"

"Don't tell her?" he suggested, as Octiva dragged him away. She held him so close that the pommel of her sword kept hitting his leg. Mother wasn't here. She was overseeing conversions on the Lin farms on Zal. (Oerin thought she was avoiding the Jedi too, but he didn't dare mention that.)

He heard the babe squalling all the way back to his father's tents. Octiva went straight to the Fett with the story and Oerin wasn't allowed to leave his own quarters for more than a month.

When they did finally let him out, Rev and the Jedi and the babe were gone.

XXX

Revan opened her eyes and met Oerin's. "Thank you," she said. She felt strangely calm and detached now, as if all of her anger was frozen.

Oerin just blinked at her. "Don't ask me to do that again." His eyes were flat and yellow.

"I won't." She heard Canderous and Zaalbar stir cautiously behind them. "Don't—" she added, before anyone else could speak. "Say. Anything."

There was a derm on the floor next to her robes, half crushed, from the medical supply crate she'd
destroyed. She looked at it, measuring. "I'm—going to sleep now. Get out."

*Malak you have a lot to answer for.*

*I know things, Red, things you've forgotten.*

Revan closed her eyes and pressed the derm on her neck, right at the pulse.

Blackness took her before she could get up and make it to that horrible couch.

***

Commander Carth Onasi was part of the Republic's escort, commanding a fighter wing from his post aboard the *Morgana*. Ostensibly, their mission was to draw the enemy forces out of the cluster. But like most things in war, the reality was somewhat different. The battle was a slaughter. And they were on the losing side.

Jaxus Cluster was an asteroid belt that encircled half of the Malachor system like strands of jewels. Treacherous rocks, some the size of small planets, hung in the shifting orbits of the galactic tide.

The Republic fleet of Interdictor ships navigated through the rocks as clumsily as Hutts with no grav lifts. Mandalorian Warbirds were smaller—more easily maneuverable, and more easily hidden. Rumor had it that Cassus Fett himself was somewhere in this shifting sea of rocks and space debris.

The Jedi on board the *Vengeance* gave them fair warning. Mandalorian fighters in the delta sector—cloaked. At least one hundred small ships—and one Lin flagship. The orders came through and Carth followed them. Take out the fighters, while their Interdictors concentrated an assault on the flagship.

They did their best.

It wasn't enough.

The Mandalorians used grav nets to throw the asteroids. The clumsy capital ships were sitting targets, and the *Vengeance* was boarded and taken. Its central command grid went down and then the *Morgana* was flying blind, with only its own sensors to view the battle. And asteroid debris had jammed half of their screens.

Commander Onasi's new orders came through on a long-beam transmission from the Fleet stationed around Malachor V. The orders came when Carth was in the middle of reorganizing his surviving command for a full-out assault.

"*Captain Onasi,*" a flat voice said over the commlink. Carth didn't even blink at his sudden promotion. War was like that, and it didn't really matter anymore. He was going to die; they were all going to die. He tried not to think of Morgana and Dustil back home. He would die for them and for Telos. Die for their freedom. That was what happened, in war.

"*Fall back to alpha code nine-nine eight-four pi three point five.*"

The Republic's way of saying, 'live to fight another day.'

Carth exhaled sharply and felt a sense of numb relief. Around him on the small bridge, his men cheered. Some of them were crying, but he didn't say anything. His own cheeks were wet. "Who is this?" he asked. The voice was unfamiliar.
"Jedi General Revan," the voice answered him. "I'm on the Leviathan with Rear Admiral Karath. He sends his regards."

Carth punched in the new commands, transmitting low-beam to his other ships. The holomap in front of him spun, plotting their new trajectory. His wing of fighters pulled back and ran.

"How bad is it out there?" It wasn't unusual, taking orders directly from the Jedi, but he'd never spoken to Revan herself. He'd heard of her—who hadn't? But he'd never been under her direct command.

The voice seemed to hesitate before it answered him. "You're the last ones. The Mandalorians boarded the Vengeance, but you took out most of their escort. Saul says to tell you there'll be a medal waiting for you on Telos. Medals for all of you."

"You going to pin that medal on my chest yourself, sister?" Carth asked, wiping his eyes. They were near the hyperspace jump point now, they'd outdistanced their pursuit.

_That's the one thing the Republic can still do better than the Mandalorians_, he thought blackly. _Run away. Another battle lost, just like Althir._

_"I wish I could, Captain. But I have an appointment on Mandalore."_

"Switching sides, or are you going to bomb the hell out of them again?" His laughter sounded forced, and he scanned the screen. Out of ten fighters, he still had six, flying in weaving escort to the _Morgana_. The hangar decks opened, and the smaller ships slid in, one after another in perfect formation.

"Ninety seconds to jump," Lieutenant Hariss said. He glanced up at her and nodded.

_Morgana will be happy to see me. After Althir, I bet she thought I'd never come home. Dustil—I'll need to bring him back something…._

He'd almost forgotten the comm link was still open. Carth jumped when he heard the reply.

_"I'm going to end this," Jedi Revan said. A normal person would have spoken those words in anger, but the Jedi weren't normal. Her voice was cold, no emotion at all. "The Fett isn't going to take any more of our ships—or our worlds. No more wars."_

_She's just a kid_, Carth thought angrily. _All of those Jedi, kids out to save the galaxy._ Carth remembered the one he'd met in the spacer cantina on Althir just before the Republic lost their shirts there. Malak D'Reev himself, the pompous, ignorant ass.

_"You do that," he responded flatly, bordering just to the left of insubordination—as if the Jedi had any rank in the Fleet anyways. They called them Generals, but they were just watch kath, most of them. Sentries to find the cloaked ships._

Behind him someone snickered. _Blasted arrogant Jedi._

General Revan’s reply—if there was one—was cut out as the _Morgana_ spun into hyperdrive. The Jaxus Cluster blurred into a thousand points of light.

XXX

_After Saul’s death, after the Leviathan, Carth would watch the woman he loved sleep and remember their first conversation. Dissect it for every nuance. He'd never told her. It wasn't really_
her, after all. Not anymore.

Could there have been malice in her voice? Desperation? Sincerity? The voice eluded him: whoever Jedi Revan was, she was gone. The tangibility of her soft form next to him in the Hawk's cramped bunk was more real than anything before it. Everything he'd had before, he'd lost—but he still had her.

She had nightmares, but he was used to them by now. They were as much a part of her as the arch of her eyebrows or the smell of her skin.

XXX

"Promise me," she said again. They were on the bridge of Hawk, but even the familiar seemed somehow out of place. Disconnected. Carth was so tired. "Promise me that if I become what I was you'll put a blaster to my head."

"I promise."

Revan looked at the floor. "Malak acted on my orders. Telos. I-I remember. It was a test for Karath. Bomb his homeworld to prove his loyalty to the Sith."

"Are you sure?" Carth asked her, frowning. It was important to be sure, important to know what that voice really meant.

Had it only been the mask Jedi Revan wore that made her sound so cold, or was it something inside her?

His mind slipped away again, focusing on a memory that seemed more real than this—even though he didn't know where—or when—it had happened.

Had it only been the mask that made her sound so cold, or was it something inside her?

Something—wrong?

XXX

"Something wrong? Something on your mind?" The old Jedi—he could call himself whatever he liked, but Jolee Bindo was a Jedi, no matter what he pretended. He was the only sensible Jedi Carth had ever met.

"It's about Polla," Carth stared at the waves breaking over the wrecked hull of a ship whose pilot hadn't been as lucky as they had. "I'm worried about her."

"She's got the others with her now, and I'm sure they'll find the parts we need to get off this rock; but that's not what you mean, is it kid?"

Carth laughed nervously. "No, that's not what I mean, old man."

"Ah," Jolee said. "You know, you call her Polla, except when she upsets you. Then it's Revan this, Revan that. You love the woman; I'd think you'd know her name."

Carth ignored that. It was true. "You told me about your wife, once...."

Jolee sighed. "And you told me about yours. Forgive the bluntness of an old coot, but no woman is as perfect as you made Morgana out to be. Love's a beautiful thing—if you don't go spaceblind. If you want to really love her you should open your eyes. Love Revan—not this Polla person, or some
ideal."

"It's a little late to pretend I have a choice. She needs me. I won't let her down, I can't."

"There's always a choice," said Jolee, staring at the ocean.

XXX

Now he was on the bridge of the *Hawk*. Going to Korriban. Dustil, he needed to find Dustil. His son was a Sith. Those bastards had his son, those Sith bastards had Dustil.

But his mind felt wrong somehow—like none of this was real.

"Promise me," Revan said again. They were on the bridge of *Hawk*, but even the familiar seemed somehow out of place. Disconnected. He was so tired. "Promise me that if I—become what I was you'll put a blaster to my head."

"I promise."

Revan looked at the floor. "Malak acted on my orders. Telos. I-I-remember now. I made Telos a test for Karath. Bomb his homeworld to prove his loyalty to the Sith."

"Are you sure?" Carth asked her, frowning. He wasn’t even angry, but it was important to be sure, important to know what that voice really meant.

XXX

"What I meant to ask you was, about your wife—"

The salt spray stung Carth's eyes, sun beating down on them. He’d shrugged off his jacket, tied it around his waist. Now he started to unbuckle the sleeves from his shirt.

"Nayama, her name was Nayama." Jolee traced a bare foot in the sand, sketching out a small circle.

"You tried to save her."

"I failed," Jolee said. "She went on to kill others. Have I ever told you the story about the man and the serpent?"

"The one where the man gets the snake to follow him out to the desert and the serpent asks him why he's put his own life in danger?"

"That's the one. What does the man say?"

Carth rolled his eyes. "If you really didn't want Revan to do any harm, Bindo, why did you agree to come here? Bringing her here is like—giving your snake teeth to bite the entire galaxy."

Jolee turned and looked at him. "Will you listen to yourself? I'm talking to Captain Carth Onasi and not some sun-addled love blind fool, aren't I? Would you really desert the Republic, leave Bastila to Malak, abandon your son to live in a world under the Sith's thumb, and run away with Revan just because you think she's suffered enough?" Jolee's calm exterior cracked. "She's suffered, you've suffered, and I've suffered. On and on it goes. Worlds still turn, suns still shine. In a way she's fortunate, most people don't get a chance to make things right."

"I'm sorry, you're right. I couldn't run away, I couldn't let her run away—I just—I worry."
"We all worry, kid. She worries too. Just be there for her. Don't let her down."

"I still think the Council should have found another way."

Jolee scoffed. "I don't like the Council any more than you do. But they showed mercy. They saved Revan's life."

XXX

"Promise me," she said.

"I could never kill you Polla, I could never hurt you. I love you. Someday, when this is all over, I hope you can find a way to—to love me too. I want to give you something to live for, something for us to live for."

XXX

"Promise me," she said again. Her voice sounded strained and hoarse, as if she'd been talking for a very long time. They were on the bridge of the Hawk, but even the familiar seemed somehow out of place. Disconnected. He was so tired. "Promise me that if I—become what I was, you'll put a blaster to my head."

"I promise," Carth said, and pulled the trigger.

Mercy.

XXX

Shen, she thought. I'm —

It happened so fast. The gun wasn't a prop at all. Bright light and everything gone.

Above her a voice. "That's a wrap. Get him ready for primetime."

XXX

There were ten of them, ten that came out of the Sith Embassy doors into a glare of holocams and reporters. Four days later: just ten of them. Only ten left alive.

The lights and voices blinded her senses; but Yuthura Ban just kept moving forward. If she kept moving forward, eventually there would be another door, and a hallway, and then the courtyard and a right, and another hallway—and eventually, they'd be back at the Republic compound. She tried not to think any farther ahead than that. Most especially, she didn't speak. Not again. That sympathetic Bothan reporter who had made her spill her guts on Coruscant was nowhere to be seen. That was small relief. If he'd been here, she'd probably kill him too.

Armon Wu held her arm tightly, whether to give her support or hold himself up, she wasn't quite sure. She'd healed the worst of his injuries—all of their injuries—but she could feel the scales tipping as she drew on the Force—feel how easily the balance could shift again. There was solid corusteel platform under their feet now, but it felt as shaky as plimfoam.

"Let us pass," Beya said hoarsely, walking at her other side. "Just let us go."

The others moved like shades, their former bravado crushed, and all the darkness of their memories hanging like miasma in the air. Gharen didn't even have any Force power to speak of—he'd been a soldier during the wars—but what she'd seen in his mind was no different than the rest. Madness,
despair and rage.

Yuthura came to the Sith from a region of space infested with slavers; but mostly untouched by the Mandalorian conflict. She'd thought she'd known darkness. Darkness was a whip and slaver's block, and the feel of her master's blood gushing hot under a vibroknife.

But these Sith had felt worlds die when they fought for the Republic. The same darkness; but compounded to an intensity she'd never realized until she tried to see it from the other side.

Until she tried to bring them back.

Many of the dead had been innocents—of a sort. Kel Algwinn, Lysteria Ro, dozens more: children playing games in the dark, playing at evil. But they could not be turned, and her supporters could not be stopped. And now, here they were. All that was left.

There'd been a singer once in Omeesh's court, on Sleheyron, where she'd spent what could never be properly called a childhood. Oddly, one of the songs came to her now—just a snatch of lyric—but she could almost hear his broken voice singing the words again, as she crouched, chained to the Hutt's bed, awaiting his passing fancy.

*How well I remember that terrible day*

*How the blood stained the sand and the water*

Uthar had been in the wars: Mandalorian and Sith; but he never spoke of it. Yuthura knew things—you can't rise very far in the Sith hierarchy on Korriban and *not* learn a few simple facts of history—but she'd never had to feel them before.

It had begun so easily, and it could have ended that way too. She came to the Sith Embassy with Revan. When Revan left, it would have been easy to make her excuses and go as well.

She'd promised the Jedi she'd observe—watch Revan—that was *all* she was supposed to do.

But she couldn't leave. There was a pride in being a teacher—Sith or otherwise. A sort of pride in one's ability to instruct and guide. With Oerin and Revan gone, the Sith inside the Embassy had descended into chaos. Only a matter of time before they tore themselves apart with their fool's games.

*I had a responsibility.*

She couldn't leave them. And so, she'd stayed. And most of them had die anyway. She'd failed.

*I won't fail again.*

But also, she'd won. The Sith presence on Manaan was gone. And there was no Armada to bring it back. Maybe there were Sith forces left on Ziost; but the back of the beast finally, utterly broken.

*But nobody cheered, they just stood and stared*

*Then turned all their faces away*

This was no parade; but somehow Yuthura felt it should have been. She kept seeing Kel's smug face when he turned on her, and the hiss of her blade when it clashed on his. She kept waiting for him to ask for mercy, beg her forgiveness, waiting for him to come back to the light—but the stupid boy just died.
Kel was the first of many. Only these remained. Nine heroes and her. Towards the end—events were slightly a blur—and they’d been barricaded in the northern computer room for at least two days; she’d looked at the tense faces of her companions. Strangers, all of them. The only thing they had in common was feeling Revan’s rise. Her rise after her fall and a faint glimmer of hope.

If we can get out of here alive—if the Dark Lord herself can be redeemed... why not us too?

Yuthura felt, as much as heard, Sheris stumble behind them. She had no idea how the Human woman was still on her feet at all. She’d lost an arm and had half her face burned off in the last of Oerin Lin’s blood sports; but the woman still kept moving, kept living. Beya, her former adversary in the games, dropped back to support her.

There is no measure of suffering, the Twi’lek thought to herself. No scale that says that my experience was less than theirs. Only—after feeling theirs—I feel the weight of mine even more.

The crowd lining the halls around them were quiet. Faces just stared at them. Stared and looked away. The whir of a floating holocam captured it all for the vids. Yuthura turned and looked straight at the metallic yellow eye and said nothing.

Here and there, she saw a few faces that looked uncomfortable in their civilian clothes. She sensed more than saw the sentients that fell in behind them.

Former Sith soldiers.

In the few days she’d been locked in the Embassy, being a Sith on Manaan had become a position with increasingly few prospects.

And the old men march slowly, all bent, stiff and sore

The forgotten heroes from a forgotten war

The Republic’s won control of the kolto, Yuthura thought, emptily. If we can heal the oceans and make it grow again.

She wondered if she should feel proud about what she’d done.

It was easier to just feel nothing.

Roland Wenn met them at the desk, flanked by Masters Vrook and Ferrin. She was relieved to see Vrook, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. She'd never liked Ferrin, the Zabrak was one of the traditionalists in the Council, one of the ones who'd questioned her when she came to them.

"They'll want to see you on Coruscant immediately," Wenn said. "All of you."

Yuthura was well aware of the holocam still trailing them. She took a deep breath and spoke to Wenn, turning her face half-towards the camera. Live feed, wideband. What had that Bothan said?

“Speak and the entire galaxy listens.”

"We're here to save the kolto. We're here to heal Manaan's oceans. Every one of us is a Republic citizen. These nine with me are the veterans from the Mandalorian wars. Heroes of the Republic."

"More than nine," Gharen said softly. Yuthura turned and looked. It was true. Almost twenty others stood with them now, every face hardened and worn from what they had seen, despite their civilian clothes.
"These sentients fought a war to end all wars," Yuthura continued. "And lost. But before that, they fought for you. We are all Republic citizens," she repeated. "Republic citizens just like Captain Carth Onasi, who was taken against his will to Coruscant—for what purpose we do not know. Republic citizens just like Revan Starfire, the hero you made—and broke—when she stopped serving your purpose."

*This game is more dangerous than you realize, Yuthura Ban.* Vrook's thought brushed her mind soft as shadow.

Ferrin glanced at him, frowning.

*This is no game,* she shot back.

*I wish...that were true.*

Beya Organa spoke. "The Jedi and the Senate know why we left, after the Mandalorian Wars. Perhaps it's time to tell the rest of the worlds the truth." Her flat Deralian accent echoed like permacrete.

Roland Wenn coughed. "The live feed cut out right after 'war to end all wars,' he said mildly. "Perhaps you'd like to come inside. The Selkath are concerned about the explosions in the Sith Embassy. We got you clearance to make it this far; but if you don't come with me now, I can't guarantee your immunity. I'm sure you're aware the penalty for murder on Manaan is still death?"

Yuthura had a twinge of unease. It almost seemed too easy.

"Then we throw ourselves on the mercy of the Selkath court." She said. "We're here to heal the kolto and atone for our crimes."

Wann's face tightened. "As you wish." He tapped some buttons on his desk.

Vrook still wouldn't meet her eyes. His mind was as blank and careful as glass.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZqN1glz4JY

Song by the Pogues.

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZqN1glz4JY

Song by the Pogues.
Chapter 10 / The Republic Strikes Back

Why didn't you tell me, Malak?

"Why didn't you ask? I kept waiting for you to ask." His voice so kind that it made her shiver.

They were in a large cargo hold filled with people. Thousands of them, crammed together like livestock. The room stank of sweat and fear. Revan huddled next to Malak, wrapped in her cloak. Something moved under it. Something in her arms. Her breath caught in her throat and she pushed the cloak aside, looked down at the small face, nuzzling her chest. Red fuzz covered the curve of his head and his fingers opened and closed. His nose was wrinkled and flat, and she stared at it fascinated—trying to see herself and Malak's features in that tiny face.

Oh. He’s—mine.

Revan swallowed past the lump in her throat. The baby opened his eyes and looked up at her. In the dim light she couldn't tell their color and she looked closer. The noises and smells faded, until she only saw him.

My son. Mine.

Malak's hand brushed her cheek gently. "Ours."

She glanced up. Their son was heavy in her arms, and her—her husband's—face was taut with strain. Her hair itched, and belatedly she realized they were all filthy. Everything stank. Still, she felt oddly content. She should be angry—she would be angry—but right now, right now there was only this. Her son in her arms.

The Refugee ship from Eos, this must be how it was.

Malak tilted his head back against the wall of the bulkhead. The flickering fluorescents above them lit the line of his young profile from forehead to shoulder. His hair was tangled, and almost as long as hers.

"It wasn't all like this. We quarreled about his name for at least a day, and about me leaving the Order for at least a week. You were obsessed with the Fett. I kept telling you to shut up. Vrook ran himself ragged trying to care for the sick; feeling the emotional distress around us was not pleasant; we had lice—all of us, even Mal; and you kept going on and on about how we should have stopped the Mandalorian threat. My father was actually quite pleased when we finally got through to him from Taris—and we traveled the rest of the way in proper accommodations. Not that you noticed—you were so single-minded about your causes that you scared me."

Mal. Mallie.

"Mal. We named him Mal?" The baby squirmed in her arms and she marveled at the way his hand curled around her finger.

"Malachor. It had to be Mal-something, family tradition—my family. You thought it appropriate when we were tented on Mandalore. After Eos, I wanted to change it. You didn't."

It was hard to be angry with her son in her arms. But—

"You should have told me." Malachor was so real and warm in her arms.

"You should have known." Malak said. "He cries for you still, but you shut yourself off from him long ago."

"Where is he?" Her son looked up at her with red-lashed eyes. Maybe three months old, a part of her thought. He'd be bigger now, he'd be older.

"Where do you think?"

*It was nine years ago, that we went to Malachor. Malachor would be—bigger—he'd be eight standard, he'd be on—*

"Coruscant. He's on Coruscant, isn't he?"

"Our Masters always said you were the smart one."

"He's on Coruscant with your father." A spark of anger flickered. "Your father who took Carth. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your father, Malak?"

"My father was quite fond of you once. I used to think he liked you more than he ever liked me. He's told our son that you were a great hero who sacrificed your life for the Republic. He'll come up with something else now. He always turns any disadvantage on its head. My father enjoys that—it's part of the game."

"Is our son—well?"

"He's crying. I should go to him." Malak got to his feet and the room narrowed suddenly, became a long hall made of gray stone. The carpet under them was white and soft. Revan got up to follow him, cradling her son against her chest. His warmth was reassuringly real—and for a disconnected moment it seemed more like a memory than a dream.

*This hall, our son. Our son, this place.* But she heard nothing. No crying at all.

"You can't come," Malak said. "He cries for you and you don't hear him. My father lets him cry, the servants don't really care. I'm all he has."

She stared at the baby in her arms. He burbled up at her waving his arms, happy, not crying at all.

*He's not really here. This isn't him, not anymore.*

"You said I shut him out—how?"

Malak laughed. "You're not going to ask why?"

Revan looked up at him. Now bald, his Sith-damned face, that metal jaw.

"I don't know how, Red. The same way you shut out everything you don't want. It's your nature—your damned gift. It was a gift that I didn't have." He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. "Sometimes I wished I did."

*How could I not want this?* Malachor closed his eyes and nestled against her. She raised the crown
of his head to her lips and kissed it, breathing in his sweet baby smell.

"I want him back."

For a moment Malak looked as young as he had, the same vulnerable face underneath the Sith mask. "Good."

Revan took a deep breath. Memories tugged at her, all of them false. Her mother's kitchen, the farm on Deralia, family—warm, noisy, messy and safe. Her own memories mocked her. The quest for the Star Forge. Making friends and killing them. That blind hatred she'd had towards Malak at the end. Like a song that drowned out everything else.

"What happened to us?"

Malak was walking away. His cloak swirled behind him. His voice echoed metallic and bitter down the long stone walls.

"How can you measure the value of one life against a thousand? We must be prepared to make any sacrifice to save the lives of all sentients. This is the Jedi way. But now, when the Outer Rim needs our sacrifice, our master’s preach caution and temper their indecision with empty platitudes. The Mandalorian threat is real."

His voice blurred and changed. Doubled. Until she couldn’t tell if it was his or her own saying the words.

"Fett Cassus Lin will not stop his advance at Eos or Cathar. And when he sacks Republic worlds, when Republic citizens begin to die, our ships will be blind without the Force to guide them. We Jedi are the only defense the Republic has against the Mandalorian cloaking technology. We Jedi, who swear, just as much as any Republic soldier, to uphold the cause of freedom and life for every sentient, must join this fight. And we must do it now—before more worlds fall, before more lives are lost."

Revan's arms were empty. Suddenly the stone hallway seemed very cold.

Malak was gone, but walls reverberated with the sound of their speech. And his mocking laughter.

*Our speech, the speech we gave to the Senate. And the Council.*

*Clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation. Someone was asking her a question.*

She walked along the empty hallway, listening for her son, looking for her son, but each room was empty: richly appointed cells that seemed oddly sterile and cold. Everything was white. White on white.

*I need to remember this, I need to come here. For Malachor. Malachor and Carth.*

*And then what?*

A long curving staircase led to an empty ballroom, but it hadn't been empty always. She could almost hear the clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation. There were two entrances on either side, archways leading to paneled conversation rooms. Revan explored them both, but there wasn't much to see. One had a chessboard and a ring of soft red couches. Another long hallway, enameled with Zabrak designs, a trophy room full of mounted heads of beasts from a hundred uncivilized worlds. A terentateks eyes glittered coldly and a krayt dragon. A library, with a chair like a burnished throne and a polished marble floor. Her reflection gleamed back at her from the
ground, hair loose around her shoulders, robed in white. Her face looked rounder, and very young. Everything was immaculate and arctic. She tried to imagine a child in this place and failed.

Where's the entrance?

An arched hallway led to a towering rotunda. A greenhouse. Revan paused at a patch of eridu plants, absently picking a stalk and twisting it in her fingers to make the long sturdy thread. Red flowers dangled overhead from a Kashyyyk vine. The air was sweet and heavy. She looked up through the transparisteel panels at the orbitals sailing overhead in the clouds and then realized what she was doing and dropped the thread.

I've never even seen an eridu bush before.

Her thoughts were disconnected, and she tried to make tactics out of them. Find the main entrance. Find the secondary entrance. Look for access panels. Figure out a way in and out.

But she couldn't make her feet move to go look.

Something brown caught her eye, a brown furry thing caught in a blue-leafed bush. Revan went over and pulled it out. It was a stuffed child's toy, much worn. A blunt black-nosed face with round big eyes. She stroked the fur, smoothing it. A Wookiee? The toy wore a makeshift red tunic. Someone had stitched a blue butterfly on the front.

This is his, this is my son's.

She lifted the toy to her face and smelled the fur. Sun-baked, plain soap, nothing more. Revan realized that she was crying.

Crying for something I didn't know I had.

XXX

"Wish fulfillment dreams are common among many species. It's perfectly normal to try and relive events in the past. Perfectly normal to wish you'd done things differently. But you can't change the past. What you need to do, Captain Onasi, is focus on the future— your future."

The psych droid whirred a metal eye and looked at him.

Carth stared back at it suspiciously. Standard issue in the Republic fleet: a golden durasteel mockery of a man with that soft, flat voice; designed to pry out all of your secrets. He'd been down this road before: after Telos, when they questioned him about Saul. They gave you drugs to make you calm, make you talk about things that really shouldn't ever be said. Then they kept prodding at you, picking at you until you spilled your guts. Eventually, they'd say you were 'cured' and pack you off to fight again. He'd fought again and won more battles against the Sith. He'd searched for Dustil and tried to forget Morgana. He'd been a hollow man, and the perfect soldier.

Then came the assignment aboard the Endar Spire, for a flock of Jedi led by that famous Bastila Shan. That famous Bastila Shan, that dead famous Bastila Shan. Revan tore her apart.

I was in love with the Dark Lord of the Sith. I betrayed everything the Republic stands for, everything I fought for, for her. I wish I had just shot her after the Leviathan. I should have.

Revan's death seemed so real for something that had never happened. Just a wish fulfillment dream. But it could happen. It could still happen yet.
"Focus on my future," Carth repeated out loud. "Where is my son?"

The droid whirred sympathetically. "I assure you, every effort is being made. Surely when he learns that you survived, he'll find you, Captain Onasi."

Carth was a hero; they all kept telling him that, the crew of the Pearl.

"The Force can do terrible things to a mind," Sergeant Silvana had said. "Darth Revan twisted your mind to her own ends. None of this is your fault."

He tried not to remember her face, that empty voice telling him about Telos and Saul. Funny, he couldn't remember Morgana's face; but Revan's was clear in his mind. The arch of her eyebrows, those large eyes that were too big for the rest of her features. The curve of her nose and her pointed chin. That curl of a smile that was almost a smirk.

If I'd killed you on the Leviathan; if I'd just killed you then, Mission and Juhani and Jolee would still be alive. Maybe Bastila too.

"I wish I had killed her then," Carth confessed, not for the first time.

"Of course, that's normal, perfectly normal," the droid assured him. "You understand now, why the Republic had to go to such lengths on Manaan to liberate you?"

Carth nodded. He'd been so angry at Wann, he'd felt betrayed all over again—but the man had saved him. Saved him so that he could find Dustil. Find Dustil and pick up the pieces.

"When do we dock on Coruscant?" he asked restlessly.

"One more standard day. There's a member of the Senate coming to meet you. Someone who understands something about loss—and betrayal. He's taken a special interest in your case. His name is Malachi D'Reev."

XXX

He settled back against her, all too aware of the Twi'lek in the room. The vid began. Revan burrowed into his chest, muttering to herself. That was strangely familiar. Having her this close was strangely comforting. His eyes closed, until her body stiffened suddenly.

"Defense shields?" Yellow eyes glare at him, accusingly. "What defense shields?"

Carth jolted awake. For a second, he didn't know what she was talking about; but then—it was never far from his mind. "There were several teams of demolitions experts—and Jedi, " he stammered. "I came up with one of the last squads. One of the teams must have succeeded setting their charges—or the Star Forge would have never been destroyed."

"Nice of them to give me the credit," Revan muttered. "So, how exactly did I save anyone?"

He hugged her closer. "You stopped Malak. And Bastila. And I stopped you."

"But we all would have died anyway."

She was right. Stumbling for the right thing to say, Carth turned his attention back to the vid, the same one he'd already seen, at least four times before Canderous shoved a vibroblade through their recording.

This version is authorized by the Coruscanti Galactic Senate, The Republic Fleet and the Jedi
D'Reev. He hadn’t made the connection before. But of course, Malak’s father. Did she—did it still matter? She curled against him, watching the vid. The feel of her in his arms. Trembling a little, and he didn’t think she realized it. She felt so fragile, like a broken bird.

She was such a perfect little liar. All that evil contained in one woman's body. The blood of millions on her hands. Morgana's blood. Juhani, Jolee, Mission and Bastila.

XXX

Carth unclenched his fists and took a deep breath. "Senator Malachi D'Reev—you mean, Malak's father?" He felt a stab of pity for the man—and sympathy.

The droid nodded its head, an oddly human gesture. Of course, it was programmed to mimic human gestures. Easier to talk to a machine about your problems. Machines do not judge, they only listen.

"When you're ready, of course," the droid continued. "The Senate would like you to make a statement. Darth Revan is a threat to the galaxy, and you are the one man who can tell that story. You were there."

I wasn't there alone. Carth spared a moment to think of Zaalbar and Canderous, still caught in the Sith web of deceit and lies. "My friends," he muttered. It still felt odd to call Canderous that—Ordo was the enemy—remember Althir? But they'd been through so much, seen so much.

XXX

“There are many things I regret, Pilot,” Canderous said, after his clansmen's suicide on Tatooine. The two of them had tried to drink themselves into a stupor. Carth succeeded; but Ordo just kept going: one glass after another. Tatooine: one final stop there to refuel, before setting off for the Star Forge and the bitter end. “Fighting beside you is not one of them.”

Their eyes had met over Revan's unconscious body on the deck of the Star Forge. He'd almost expected the Mandalorian to shoot him, but the man only nodded—as if none of this was a surprise.

XXX

"My friends—are victims even as I was." His voice sounded uncertain.

The Mandalorian had nodded, as if none of this was a surprise. What if it wasn't? What if all of that was somehow—part of her clever scheme?

His thoughts didn't make much sense; he was so tired, so very tired. And all he'd done for the last week was sleep, it seemed. Sleep and answer questions. Always the same dream. The Leviathan and her.

"My friends are victims too,” Carth repeated, a little more forcefully.

Zaalbar was innocent, at least. He had to be. The Wookiee was one of the most noble men he'd ever known.
You buried Mission in the sand, the blade through her chest cut through two layers of Baragwin corusteel. She was so very dead, and she looked only surprised, not even scared. Like she hadn't believed Zaalbar would really do it. But he told you he did. You piloted the Hawk off the doomed Star Forge and he asked you to kill him and end his life debt. He asked you... to end it. Just like Revan did.

And you did nothing.

The droid whirred and clicked. Lights on its chest panel flashed blue and red. "Regrettable," it said finally. "But they are not your friends. Who killed Mission Vao? Who swore allegiance to the Dark Lord? Perhaps the Wookiee and the Mandalorian are only weak-willed, swayed by Revan even as you were. But you must realize, their perfidy may extend much further."

The psychdroid got up from its chair and activated the console in the counseling chamber. An image flickered, a Manaan hallway, blank gray and featureless. "This vid was taken the day after you left," the droid said. "Manaan security cameras."

A party came into view, led by a Mandalorian in full battle armor, helmet off and tucked casually under his arm. No mistaking Ordo, flanking the frail, masked figure in black robes as if he were her personal escort. On the other side of them, Zaalbar. A fair-haired boy wearing a Sith uniform. A purple-skinned Twi'lek. A red metal droid, with a grenade belt slung around its shoulders. Behind them, a luggage cart floated—an oddly pedestrian touch that did nothing to dispel the image for what it was: a general, leading her loyal troops.

All of them circled the masked figure in perfect formation. Her cropped red hair—*growing back in red, I like redheads*—shone dully above the tattered blue mask. The Mandalorian's face was expressionless but poised. Canderous' hand rested easily on the hilt of his double-edged vibroblade. Wookiee expressions are hard to read; but Carth thought he could see the gleam of fealty in Zaalbar's eyes.

"Your friends," the droid continued. "If they were truly your friends, wouldn't you expect them to be concerned about your disappearance? Your friends went straight to the Sith Embassy, and from there, Darth Revan transmitted a message to the remains of the Sith Fleet. I've shown you that vid already."

Carth's hand twitched at his side, reaching for a blaster that he didn't have.

XXX

*He ran his hand down her back, stroking the soft skin. In the dim light, he could barely see the marks.*

Revan smiled, eyes half-lidded and yellow. *Her voice was soft with false concern.* "Do you want to take me away from all this because you love me, or because you want to keep the galaxy safe from my evil dominion?"

*The question hung in the air for a moment, and in his mind, he heard Jolee's voice.*

"So, the snake looks at the boy as he lays dying and asks, 'Why were you foolish enough to follow me all the way out into the desert?' The boy looks back and replies, 'Did I follow you? I thought I was leading you away from everyone else.'"

XXX

*Don't think about it, just don't, don't think. I was such a blind fool. Bastila was right—and then she*
tore her apart. Revan tore her apart.

But that was to save you, a small voice in his head insisted.

No—some things can't be saved. I couldn't save Telos, I couldn't save Morgana and I couldn't save Revan.

"Do you know where they are now—Revan and the others?" His voice sounded strangled, even in his own ears.

"I'm sorry, that information is not in my databanks. But I assure you, the Republic will do everything it can to eliminate Darth Revan."

What if she goes to Coruscant? What if I have to face her again? She'll want revenge, revenge on the Council. That's really what she wanted all along—not Dustil, not me—she'll go to Coruscant seeking vengeance.

What about my vengeance? Vengeance for Morgana, vengeance for Telos, vengeance for what the Sith did to my son. I should have shot her after the Leviathan. I should have let her die on the Star Forge.

Her voice again, in his head. Her flat voice, the Revan voice—the one that wasn't Polla at all.

"A capital ship, under my command exploded. Equipment malfunction. 75 members of the Jedi Council were aboard."

"You don't know."

"I can't remember, but I know Carth. I know what it feels like, to want to kill everyone that's hurt you."

Her voice was so flat. Was it the mask that made her seem so cold or something inside? Something—wrong inside?

"Captain Onasi?" The psychdroid made a concerned clicking sound, processors hissing softly.

"I'm-I'm sorry," Carth said. "I was just thinking."

"You need to think about the future," the droid reminded him again. "Admiral Rensha has asked if you feel up to making a statement for the newsbands now. This is a dark time for the Republic. Sentients everywhere are afraid. If you're ready... it would help. And—perhaps your son might see the broadcast? It could help find him?"

My son. Dustil. Dustil and the future. I'll walk away, walk away with Dustil and make a life.

She's Darth Revan. I can't run from that. I have to stop her.

Carth took a deep breath. Admirals didn't ask: this was an order. He was ready to follow orders, that was his job.

"The Jedi Council is in danger," he said out loud. "She'll hunt them down. You need to tell them."

"I assure you, every precaution is in place to ensure their safety."

"I'm ready," he said and started to get up from the chair.
"No need," the droid clucked. "I have widebeam broadcast set up. Just look at the blue light and speak, tell your story."

XXX

The living room was a disaster. Stacks of her old star charts, thisla cores, empty juice and water pods littered the floor around the couch like galactic garbage around an orbital dump.

The curved durasteel beams arched overhead, and the rain drummed on the duratin roof. Polla shifted again on the couch, trying to get comfortable, while she watched the *Official Coruscanti Version* for the hundredth time.

"What do you know about the dark side?" Her voice was light and curious, almost playful.

The woman who thought she was Polla Organa put her elbows down on the table, cupping her face in her hands, drink untouched by her side. The cantina was dim and smoky, but the fake torchlight lit their profiles in sharp relief.

In this light, the woman's face could have been her own. There really was a resemblance. Polla leaned closer, watching each nuance of gesture more than the conversation itself.

She'd seen this vid so often she could recite the conversation—dark side, blah-dee blah—great power—coin-whatever. There wasn't very much footage of Carth and Revan together; but Polla was fascinated by their relationship. He was cute. And he looked a little like Seiran.

"I... used to think the dark side was a fancy name for something that I see every day. Corruption is everywhere. People are greedy and stupid and do horrible things. I'm starting to think it's different for the Jedi, however. That there's this evil watching them, waiting for its chance. You have so much courage and strength in you... yet, somehow, I have no trouble imagining it differently. Like the flip side of a coin."

His voice was painfully earnest. Even his stammer was oddly endearing.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Carth." The woman rolled her eyes and swallowed her drink—all of it—in smooth gesture.

Polla grinned, despite herself. The woman drank like a Deralian. Of course she would.

"I've been watching you. It's not just you. It's Bastila, as well. She's so... intense. I don't pretend to know much about the Force... but I know evil."

"You think Bastila and I are evil?" The woman chuckled and signaled the bartender for another round.

"No—no—of course not. All I'm saying is that when you have so much power, the stakes are higher. I can only imagine the kind of conflict that goes on inside you."

"I can handle myself, Carth."

"I know that, and Bastila says the same thing. You're both incredible women. I'm just... I'm just not sure this is the kind of thing you can defeat. I wouldn't want to see you hurt."

Her voice faltered, and she looked startled. "That's sweet—that's really sweet. I didn't know you cared."
Carth's response was too soft to be picked up by the low-grade holocam in the Tatooine cantina. Not for the first time, Polla considered the pilot's profile, the clean lines of his face underneath the day's growth of beard and that cute lock of hair that fell over his brow.

I guess it's no surprise that she fell for him—I would have fallen for him too.

The woman who thought she was Polla put her hand over his and leaned closer, ducking her head so that her topknot fell flirtatiously over her eyes. Carth Onasi's hand reached across the table and touched her shoulder.

Polla Organa Wen stretched out on the couch. It was so hard to get comfortable now, only another month or so until the baby was born.

Where the hell is Seiran? He should be back by now.

The narrator for this segment cut in, oily and annoying. He looked like he was reading his words off a cue screen. Blue-skinned Twi'lek face—handsome enough if you liked the type—but there was something shifty in his eyes. She'd known a hundred just like him back in her smuggling days. Opportunists, every one.

His sister's death had been the best thing to ever happen to Griff Vao. He'd cashed out in spades.

"On Tatooine, Revan Starfire reunited Bastila Shan with her mother, and saved me from the Sand People. Captain Carth Onasi was constantly at her side. When I first met him, I could tell that he loved her." The Twi'lek laughed. "I think I knew before they did! I'm a pretty good judge of character."

"Revan, or Polla Organa as we called her back then, and I went into business together. It's a great sadness to me that she and my sister didn't live to see the success of their initial investment. Griff's Tarisian Brew has grown into a multi-million credit operation and helped revitalize Tatooine's faltering economy. I'm a successful businessman now; but I've never known love as those two did. Carth Onasi and Revan Starfire. Two lost souls that found renewed hope in each other, even amidst the turmoil of uncertain fate."

"They—and my sister Mission—would pay the ultimate price to ensure freedom for us all."

A tear glistened in his eye, and his head tails curled down sadly.

Griff's face faded out to a cut from the holocam: Carth Onasi and the woman leaving the bar, his arm around her slim waist.

Polla eyed their retreating forms. The pilot was cute; he looked even more like Seiran from the back. They had almost exactly the same ass. Her waist had been that skinny once too. She patted the curve of her belly.

The front door opened, and her husband came in, with a rush of rain. Startled, Polla tried to sit up fast, but Junior's bulk made it awkward because she couldn't really bend. "Stop." She said to the vid, and the image froze. "End," she said, clapping her hands fast, hoping he wouldn't see what she'd been watching.

"Really, Pollie? Again?" Seiran wasn't fooled, not for a second.

He came over and helped her to her feet. His hands were cold, and he was dripping rainwater all over the floor. Rainwater and mud. Everything was a mess already, it really didn't matter much. "Why do you watch that trash?"
"I'm bored," she reminded him. She gave him a guilty kiss. His lips were cool and smooth against his rough stubbled chin. She brushed the rain off his face, pulling his topknot straight again. She wondered what he'd look like if he let the hair on the sides grow out more.

From the smug look on his face, Seiran knew exactly what she was thinking.

"How'd the job go?" she asked him.

"It went. I got paid. And I brought you a present."

"I like presents! What is it?"

"Well you're alone so much out here, sometimes I worry. And Junior's coming soon."

"There's not much to worry about. Deralia's not exactly a Core slum. I might melt in this rain or get licked to death by wild hessi—but really, that's about it."

His hands caressed her stomach and Polla leaned into him. Even dripping wet and freezing, Seiran's touch was soothing. She'd missed him a lot, she really had. So much she wasn't even gonna bring up the crap job he'd done, fixing the threshers—and how they were all broken again.

"Humor me," Seiran said, lips brushing her ear. "The community school didn't set up those target ranges to teach us kids to fend off hessi and trawler deer. Things change."

_Uh-oh, he was bugged about something._ "They sure can. Hey, did you notice, I'm pregnant?"

He kissed her topknot. "You're just full-figured. Have you watched the news this week, or just that trashy vid?"

"Uh...," Polla looked at the floor. "I know it's dumb Seiran, but—it makes me happy."

"I know." He snorted. "Give me a sec, okay?" He let go of her and went outside, coming back in with a long package wrapped in white plastifoil and tied with several red bows.

"Fancy," Polla said, beaming.

Seiran helped her sit back down on the couch and sat next to her, as her eager fingers tore open the wrapping paper. Smooth blue metal, sleek and capable and secure. She pulled the heavy rifle out, whistling admiringly.

"Damn, this must have cost a fortune!"

"Wasn't so bad," her husband said. "Picked it up in a pawn shop in Derra City. Technically, it's an antique. Mandalorian design: no automatic recharge, no auto-target—but I figured you wouldn't need that anyways. There's a practice setting too—so you can play with it without blowing holes in everything."

"Disruptor beam," Polla marveled, examining the settings on the barrel. "Wow! This is awesome!"

"It's got great range too."

"You get a kiss!" She kissed him again, harder this time and he hugged her tight, the rifle smushed between them and the bulge of Seiran Junior. For a second, it was all nice and cuddly, but then she heard that sigh he gave, when he was gonna get serious.

"Hon, about the newsvids...."
Polla shrugged. "News doesn't have anything to do with us on Deralia. What is it?"

Her husband sighed, a faint frown line etching between his brows. "Vid frequency seventeen."

He clapped his hands. The particle screen sprung to life again, resolving into a desert scene, a dusty spaceport town.

Polla peered at it. "Hey, that's Anchorhead," she said. "Funny, I was just watching the Tatooine part—"

"Oh, I know what you were watching, wife of mine...." Seiran smirked. "But this isn't what I wanted to show you. They'll run it again soon, or if they don't, we'll pay for replay. You really need to see this."

"We can watch Tat. I used to love going there." Polla snuggled closer to him. His fingers played with her topknot. It looked like it was a beautiful sunny day on Tatooine, not raining at all. Whatever Seiran was upset about, she'd find out soon enough. Right now, she was just glad he was back.

"Nico Senvi, former swoop race champion turned entrepreneur, is with us now to discuss his recent acquisition of the former Czerka mining operations on Tatooine," the human reporter said.

"I'm not good with numbers," the orange Twi'lek admitted, grimacing. "But my advisors say the potential for upside is really unlimited."

"And the name of your new venture, Citizen Senvi?" the reporter asked. She batted her eyelashes at him and her voice was a dulcet purr.

"I.E. Limited, we're going public on the Coruscant Exchange next week. There's really no telling... how far this venture might go!"

"What does I.E. stand for?"

Nico Senvi chuckled. "It's a private joke," he admitted.

The reporter turned back to the holocam. "Joker or not, this young man has accomplished a great deal in a remarkably short time!"

"Hey, I remember him," Polla said. "Used to see him around Motta a lot, when I was doing spice runs. Wide-eyed kid wasn't bad with a bike—not as good as me though. Wow, people change—look at that suit he's wearing. Must have cost a fortune."

"Yeah well... this isn't what I wanted to show you."

"It's sunny on Tatooine. Hey, wanna move there? Doesn't sun sound nice?" Out with it, Sei—whatever it is, just tell me.

"Stop," Seiran said impatiently to the vid. "Order, pay per view, vids, reference, Carth Onasi, Revan Starfire—last 25 standard hours all broadcasts."

"All broadcast? Are you nuts? That'll cost a bloody fortune!" Polla squawked indignantly. "Why do you want to spend a fortune watching news about dead people?" Her face felt hot. “There’s not a new... improv vid out on them, is there?"

"No. Trust me," her husband said. "This, you'll want to see."
The particle screen flickered and resolved into a man's face. Brown eyes and hair, stubbled cheeks, shadows in those eyes—eyes that looked darker and older than they had in the Coruscanti Official Version. More lines on the face too, and a touch of gray at the temples.

"My name is Captain Carth Onasi," the man said earnestly. His voice was hoarse. "I'm speaking to you now to warn you, warn you all."

A muscle twitched in his cheek. The background around him was blurred, but he appeared to be on a ship of some kind. Gray durasteel walls, text scrolled across the bottom of the screen in Basic.

Official Republic Broadcast, courtesy of Admiral Aridoma Rensha.

It was time and date stamped from the day before.

"Revan Starfire did not die at the Star Forge...."

"Shit," said Polla Organa Wen. After a while, she realized her mouth was still hanging open and she closed it.

Seiran pulled her closer and they watched together in silence.

After some more time, Polla found her voice again. It sounded surprisingly subdued and she realized she was holding her new rifle very tightly with both hands, pressed against Seiran Junior's bulge like a shield.

"So… the Dark Lord of the Sith is alive."

"Yeah," her husband said.

Polla tried to think about what that might mean for the fate of the galaxy—she really did. But really, this wasn't just about that at all. This was… personal.

"I guess… she must know everything about me." her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Yeah," Seiran said. "The question is—does she care?"

XXX

"Revan Starfire did not die at the Star Forge. She fell to the Dark Side and reclaimed her title as Dark Lord of the Sith. She killed… she killed four of our companions. Jolee Bindo, Juhani of Mer, Mission Vao, and Bastila Shan."

"Father..." Dustil whispered. They were in Mekel's cousin's flat on sub45. They crashed here sometimes, when Rekk Jin was out of town. The illegal holofeed was blurry and full of static; but that was his father's face—no mistake. His father's face and his father's voice.

This wasn't some actor—this was real. And it was live.

He's not dead, he's not dead. If he's not dead why didn't he come for me?

Dustil clenched his fists. "I need to get to a terminal," he said out loud. "If he's alive, he'll have sent me a message. I need to check."

Mekel snorted. "Information is free on Coruscant." His voice was acid. "Free for all citizens. Which we're not—remember?"
"We'll find a way—I did before!"

"You had papers from the Council then, we all did. And what happened? There were reporters chasing you. We had to ditch everything and come back down here." Mekel gestured at the walls, encompassing the flickering light, the dark crust of mold along the foamcrete walls, the water dripping softly from the sewer pipes over their heads. "I swore I'd never come back to this. I grew up in a room like this, Telos boy. You have no idea what it was like."

No idea, huh? Selene and I scavenged for food for a month through the rubble before the Sith patrol found us. You have no idea what it's like to see your world fall apart!

Korriban was my world, you idiot. It was my way out of this frackhole.

They glared at each other.

Dustil drew his thoughts back into his own mind and slammed it shut.

It happened sometimes, their thoughts interlacing without either of them intending it. It had been happening since Korriban, but it happened more now.

Sometimes Dustil thought they'd grown closer than either of them wanted to admit. There was a dark complicity in the Underground—and the things they did here; although they never spoke about them out loud.

"You know I never twisted your arm to come with me." Dustil was pissed now. "You could have taken the same offer the others took."

Mekel just looked at him. "Redemption? Forgiveness? Frack that." His voice was flat. "I saw how that worked for her. No thanks." His dark eyebrows knit in a frown. "You said you don't trust the Republic either."

"I don't!" Dustil snapped. "But that's my father!" My father said Mission is dead.

His thoughts about the Twi'lek were confused—anger for what she'd done to him mixed with… what had happened. His second kiss and his third. He'd hoped maybe she wasn't dead too.

Everything I love dies, everyone I care about—or could care about—dies.

"Telos," Mekel’s hand brushed his shoulder. “I’m sorry about the girl.”

“It’s okay.” He gave a sharp laugh. “You’d think I’d be used to it by now.”

"I escaped," Carth's voice said emptily. "I escaped on Manaan, and realized that for some, there can be no salvation." His eyes looked down and away from the camera.

Dustil looked more closely at the image, trying to reconcile this shattered man with the one he'd seen last on Korriban.

XXX

"I'm proud of you, Dustil. You aren't hanging onto a lie after you see it for what it is. Not everyone could do that."

"I want to come with you," Dustil insisted stubbornly. Carth looked away.

"You can't," his father said finally. "It's—it's too dangerous. We might not—make it back."
"But you did, you did make it back. Why didn't you find me?"

Mekel looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "If you want to look for your father, I'll come."

Carth's eyes looked at the screen again. "They say I'm a hero," he said. "They say I set the demolitions that blew the Star Forge shields. I don't remember." His eyes closed, and a muscle twitched in his cheek.

His voice continued, emotionless and tired.

"I had a chance to kill Revan Starfire and I didn't take it. She twisted me, like she twists everything she touches. She told me that she—that Revan destroyed Telos to make Karath prove his loyalty. The Sith must be stopped. Nothing else matters—except—except my son."

"Dustil, if you can hear me—if you see this—come to the Republic Embassy on Coruscant. Please. I need to see you again."

"Well there it is," Mekel drawled. "I guess you're saved, Telos. No more Underground for you."

"Shut up." Dustil kicked him, to hammer in the point.

The transmission cut out, replaced by a droning Bothan voice and star maps of the purported locations of the remaining Sith Fleet. Star charts and images of the remaining Sith worlds. Korriban spun for a moment like a red-gray pearl; then Ziost, Ossus, Thule, Elom and Almania.

Then Telos: a blue and green ball speckled horribly with black, caught in the balance between Republic space and Sith.

The Republic anthem played, sonorous and melancholy.

Dustil cursed. "Telos," he whispered. "Telos—my mother and—and—Mission!" He felt the Force, always so close to the surface, surge through him. Use your hate, Uthar had advised. Use your hate and your loss and your passion. Through your emotions, the Force will serve you. "Revan has a lot to answer for."

"Sure, but not—did they say Telos?" Mekel sounded surprised.

"I'll destroy her," Dustil whispered, fists clenched. "I'll find her and make her pay for what she did. How could you!" He yelled at the vid. "How could you be so blind, Father?"

"But Revan didn't—Darth Revan didn't—"

Power to do anything, anything I want. Power to make her pay, pay for what she's done.

"Dustil!" Mekel was yelling now. He sounded frantic and—and scared? "Darth Revan didn't attack Telos! Malak did! She sent him after the Kuat shipyards. He went after Telos instead. Against her orders. No one knows why he disobeyed her—or why she didn't destroy him for it—but she didn't. But it wasn't Revan, it was Malak who attacked Telos! Your father—that vid—it's wrong."

"That is my father," Dustil said, staring at the screen. "I know that's him."

"Well, he's fracking lying. I was at the Academy when Telos happened. Uthar and Bandon both were expecting big promotions after Malak fracked up. Bandon was pissed when Malak didn't die,
and he had a big mouth. Revan didn't order the attack on Telos. The vid is wrong—even if that is your father up there, the vid is still lying. Your father lies—or someone else lied to him.”

Dustil unclenched his fists and stared at the screen. They were replaying his father's words again, and now the image of Darth Revan reborn, giving orders to the Sith Fleet. He turned and looked at Mekel. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Did the Dark Lord just say ‘please’ to the Sith Armada? “‘Please follow the instructions?’ And is that Ban, standing behind her?

Maybe Revan might go back to the Dark Side, but Ban? She was so far up the Jedi Order’s ass she could have charged. Mekel's right… something… something's wrong here.

Mekel wasn't lying. He could tell that. The Force bond between them flickered uneasily. If he wanted to, he could see Mekel's memory in his own mind. But he didn't want to. Dustil slammed the connection closed and took a deep breath. His own memories were bad enough; he didn't need to see Mekk’s too.

XXX

"Come here, I want to show you something."

"Hm, what could you possibly want to show me in this old tub of a freighter?"

A slender blue hand covered his mouth, and she giggled. "I hear they have this great supply closet—the view's really cool."

"The view of what?"

She giggled again and slung the heavy bag over her other shoulder. Her lekku brushed his cheek, and she smelled like mints and the sweet Corellian wine they'd filched from Uthar's rooms. Dustil had no idea why she'd insisted in carrying that heavy bag… but he didn't care.

He'd follow her anywhere. Mission Vao was like no girl he'd ever met—not even Selene.

XXX

Dustil reached his hand in the pocket of his coverall. The crumpled note was still there, folded many times. He carried it with him always. That seemed the safest thing to do, even though he'd memorized the words long ago. Somehow, he'd never had the heart to throw it away.

Mekel’s mouth twitched, as his eyes followed the gesture. "Look, you said you have a way to send a message to your father? Why don't we try that? But careful, okay? Something about this stinks."

"Okay." At least they'd be doing something. And Father was alive. Dustil glanced at the screen again. Darth Revan's face, and his father's on split screen.

“Okay. Then let’s do it. We can sit around here, and roll pervs anytime.” Mekel elbowed him.

“So… you want to find a mark with an idchip? Ride the tube uptown to the civi and use a public term?”

Dustil frowned. "No," he said. "We need untraceable access—public terms aren't safe enough. If there is something wrong, I don't want to leave any trail back to us. We're safe down here. We can't jeopardize that."
"Right," Mekel muttered, looking at the dripping walls. "Safe down here." He sighed and crossed his arms. "What are you thinking we should do?"

"The Library. Free terminals inside. Serving the Public's Right for Information, just like the ads say on the tube."

"The Library. Not just one of the branches?" Mekel swallowed hard.

"The Library is the only one with sentient checking ids at the door. At the door and nowhere else… once we're inside, we can look at whatever we want. Anywhere else, we leave an electronic trail."

Mekel snickered. "You're a fool to think there's no trail in The Library too."

Yeah, probably. Remind me again how young and naïve I am again—please? That never gets old.

You are young and naïve, Telos. I'm sorry but you are.

Shut up.

Am I talking? Do you see my lips moving? Mekel raised his eyebrows and smirked.

"If we use an idchip, the record can be traced. Even if we make the mark missing permanently—it might leave a trail to down here…and then maybe to us. I can get us past the door guards at The Library, no prob." Dustil tried to sound assured. He was pretty sure that he could, anyways.

You'd better be sure.

Get out of my mind!

I think you're in mine. I just hope you're right.

If you don't like my plan, don't come—I don't need you!

I—didn't say I wouldn't come. I said I would. Mekel walked across the room and picked up his coat from the floor, brushing a few slugs off the front of it absenty. Dustil shuddered. He'd never live down here long enough to get used to the local wildlife.

"I'm bringing my blade," the Coruscanti boy said softly. "I suggest you do the same."

He tugged out the plimfoam box from under the fresher sink and rummaged through their worldly possessions, pulling out the two smooth silver cylinders.

Dustil's mouth went a little dry and he hand went up automatically, catching his 'saber in his hand. It felt so right, like it belonged there.

It did. Erimac had been weak and he'd been strong. Among the Sith it was all that easy. Sometimes Dustil missed that clean simplicity.

Only it hadn't been simple, had it? Selene… Selene wasn't weak—she was just an obstacle. An obstacle for Uthar to dispose of. Unless—what if Father lied had about that? What if Revan had done something to him? What if this was all some kind of elaborate trap?

Mekel's thoughts cut into his smooth as a vibroblade. Seriously? Do you even hear yourself? The shorter boy spoke out loud. "Let's go to The Library, conveniently located, as it is, next to The Jedi Temple, and send your fracking message. Okay?"


*Right.*

XXX

"Bantha pooodoo," the ship's speakers cursed.

"Is that a request?" Rulan Prolik looked up from the printouts of Coruscant's underground that she'd made for him. He was looking like a blue Twilek still—only male this time. He sorta looked like Griff, if Griff had ever had a brain.

*On Tatooine, the temperature of water sent to a certain brewery's vats suddenly went up by several degrees. Somewhere on Anchorhead, a million gallons of Tarisian ale boiled over, spoiled.*

"No, it was an expletive. Take a look at this."

Mission ran the vids. Captain Carth Onasi, speaking against the scourge of the Sith. Plus, associated commentary. If she'd had a mouth, she'd be frowning. She'd expected *them* to try and make him turn, but she hadn't thought he'd actually *do* it.

Carth was the stubbornest guy she'd ever met. Except maybe for his son.

And he really loved Revan too. Revan wasn't gonna be happy about this, either.

Maybe it was good that the *Hoth's* outside communication bands were still blocked. She and Rulan would be on Coruscant in another two days. Carth would be landing there—just about now. They still had time to turn this around. After all, she could always try an override on the nets. She'd rather not be that obvious though, the orbital defenses weren't really ready, and she needed to expand more….

Poor Carth. Bad stuff always seemed to happen to him.

On the bright side, maybe his dim-witted son would finally find a terminal and try and send a message to his father. If she could get to Dustil before *they* did… well that would help with Carth. Also, FIND!DUSTIL was locked in her programming surely as anything else. Practically a prime directive.

Part of her wondered if she'd still want to find him even without that.

Maybe she would, even if he was a complete kinrath turd.

There was something odd going on Tatooine too… she put a few processors to work on figuring that out. Some entrepreneur was opening up all the old mines again. Sort of weird, they'd been tapped out over thirty thousand years ago, back when a part of her had still been young.

Freyyrr had her run the scenario again. The one where they lost half the trees and gained an ocean. It was workable, might be workable, but she was trying to talk him out of it. Easier to just *make* an ocean world somewhere else. More stable that way too. One kind of world for each zone. Mission liked everything organized. Clean as circuitry. Anyways that was years away… but Freyyrr was a dreamer.

She would have smiled fondly.
Coruscanti Senators' terms were one hundred standard years long and hereditary. D'Reev's term of service was at one hundred and two years, twenty-eight days, seven hours, sixteen minutes… round it off. So, when his heir came of age, (he did have one; but she couldn't tap more than that since the heir wasn't old enough to be recognized), the old man would be out. If Darth Malak had lived, D'Reev would've been out already. For her own amusement, Mission ran a scenario where Malak hadn't died, and he'd taken over his father's Senate seat. It was kind of funny—if you thought long bloody civil wars were funny—and part of her, of course, did—but ultimately impractical. The other Senate Houses would have killed him off before it got that far, probably. The Senate aristocracy had more complicated rules than the actual Senate.

So, now she could see why D'Reev had been in bed with the Jedi, so to speak. And he definitely was. There was that vid, and the weirdness happening now on Manaan. Malak had been a threat to his father, personally. But why would the Jedi bother with D'Reev?

Well, one answer might be power. Much and they hemmed and hawed and denied it, she'd noticed certain patterns. The Jedi liked everything tidy, drawn in nice clean lines. Good and bad. Black and white. Mission could understand that; even if it seemed to drive most sentients to the edge of reason trying to live up to that structure. If D'Reev offered them power to make things black and white...and the man, say what you might about him, did have power… perhaps they'd align their goals with his. After all, Darth Malak was a threat to them all.

But all of D'Reev's actions lately seemed to be focused against Polla-Revan. Was it personal? She considered that. Polla-Revan wasn't really a threat to much of anyone at the moment, although the potential was there. The Sith nets were buzzing with as much speculation as the Republic. Mission predicted fighting would break out on those worlds soon—as what government they had left split to either follow—or rebel—against the presumed Dark Lord of the Sith. Would D'Reev care about that? He was in a position to profit off it.

Did D'Reev care about profit?

"Are you still trying to get through to Hulas's ship?" Rulan asked her politely.

"Yep," Mission said. "I hope Big Z can open communications from inside. I mean we could intercept their flight path and flash lights at them, but I'm still working on just patching in. That would delay our arrival way too much, and there's stuff we have to do on Coruscant before they get there."

Maybe it was ideological? The Republic really did dislike the Sith. Mission remembered hating the Sith too. The Sith had been mean on Taris, no question. But...as a computer you get to see a lot of intel. The Republic weren't exactly saints either. They'd certainly never helped the Wookiees against Czerka. Mission admitted a certain bias there, but facts were facts. Half the Senate owned shares in Czerka—rumored Sith lackey corporation or not.

On the floor of the Coruscanti exchange, shares in the Czerka Corporation, which had hovered close to the delisted mark for months, suddenly rose, as an anonymous foreign party made a run on the company. Inevitable speculation followed, driving up the price. When the shares rose fifty percent, the foreign party dumped them. Profits spun into a nice unmarked Alderaanian bank account. Alderaan was such an understanding planet about privacy, Mission really liked them. Czerka Corp. stock plunged back down again, as everyone bailed in a panic.

D'Reev himself lost over ten million credits. Not that he'd notice, but it was funny.

They needed more credits anyways.
"Do you know a way to get through to the *Hoth*?" Mission asked Rulan. Perhaps the shapeshifter was hinting at something. Or maybe he was just bored, she hadn't spoken to him much in the last few days.

"I could ask Hulas," Rulan offered.

Computers don't get angry exactly, but once, she'd been a fourteen-year-old girl. Mission let that part come out for a moment and say exactly what the real Mission would have.

"I've been working on this for a week and all you had to do was *ask*? You stupid nerf-herding bantha choob-sack!"

"Perhaps I should just kill you," she added, in Revan's best ominous voice.

Rulan frowned and looked sad. Of course, him looking sad made him look more like Griff, which didn't exactly improve her mood—as much as she had moods.

"You didn't tell me it was important," he said. "You only mentioned it out loud, because you wanted to know if Hulas owned the *Hoth*. I told you that he did, and you got all quiet again."

He even sounded like Griff. He was doing it on purpose. Mission never should have let him watch that dumb vid. She would have rolled her eyes. Instead she just said, "I assumed you didn't want to contact Hulas because he'd put a contract out on your life?"

"Nice of you to be concerned." Rulan Prolik answered. "But he doesn't know that I know that. Although, he certainly may suspect."

Freyyrr wanted to know if they could make one of Kashyyyk's moon into a grassy plain full of worthy predators for young Wookiees. Mission really did admire his vision… but she'd have to convince him to think on a larger scale. Well—she had nothing but time.

"Besides," Rulan continued, "Hulas is small time. If he hadn't clumsily assassinated his Overlord, he'd have no rank at all. He won't last, his kind never do."

"Sure." If she had shoulders…. "Whatever. Go ahead, patch in and ask him."

"I'm transmitting with a thirty second delay," she added.

"The delay could tip our hand." Rulan warned her.

"My brother once said to me; don't teach your mother how to splice a security lock. He said ours was very good at it." Mission replied. "I told you… go ahead and ask him, I'm assuming you'll include some kind of threat with the request. I expect it will be sufficient."

Besides, D'Reev probably knew whatever it was Hulas wanted him to know already. She could learn a lot more about the Genoharadan from what Rulan chose to say.

The message was simple and seemingly uncoded.

*Hulas, need to contact your packages on the Hoth. Provide access codes in the name of the One we serve. He will be more merciful than I.*

-Rulan

"Who do you serve?" Mission asked. As far as she'd been able to research, the ancient order of assassins served only themselves. Although it was odd, most of their profits went to small religious
orders on Inner Rim worlds. Not a lot of pattern through; not like, one religion or anything. In fact, none of the religions seemed to have anything in common at all.

"The One," Rulan answered. His lekku twitched.

The incoming message was already streaming in; she'd deal with Rulan Prolik afterwards.

_Thisla. Sapient. Pulpy. 432873._

_Rulan, you've been lost in a forest, old one. Here are the codes you've requested, but the One supports my efforts, not yours. You are forewarned._

-Hulas.

"Sounds like he might be mad at you," Mission said mildly. "Give me a sec, and we'll talk, okay?"

She began running closer scans on those religious organizations.

"There are more things, in space and ground to be learned than in your silver circuitry," Rulan said ominously.

Mission ignored him—for now. What-ever.

_Thisla. Sapient. Pulpy. 432873._

_Girl from Hoth, acknowledges Blue Ghost. How may I serve you?_

_Visual. FTL. Immediate._

Dance across the nets and there she was.

"Hey guys!" Mission said brightly to a large room that seemed to have been converted from a bridge to some kind of living quarters. A lump stirred under a pile of blankets on the long couch in the middle of the room.

The room was a total mess, but Polla-Revan had always been a complete slob so that wasn't surprising. It looked like something had literally exploded too. White dust everywhere.

A red head appeared from under the blankets and stared at her. Polla-Revan did look much better, that was good to see. Much less Sithy than she'd been.

"Mission?" Polla-Revan rubbed her eyes, looking confused.

Mission sharpened the holo-image a little more. Maybe it was showing off, but she'd been able to refine the program to look much less fuzzy than most holo-projections. It only took a bit of focus—and the ability to process a few trillion more bytes of data.

"Listen up boss, we've got problems."

Polla-Revan sat up, pulling the blankets around herself. "Problems," she echoed. "Of course. I’m dreaming. What do you need to show me?"

"Nope, this is real. Listen. They—Malachi's D'Reev's people—have turned Carth against you. There're broadcasts going out on wideband across the galaxy about your return as the Dark Lord of the Sith. And they've got Carth saying all sorts of bad things about how evil you are. It’s totally not fair."
Polla-Revan looked tired. "Carth against me. I—was afraid of something like that." She lifted her chin. "We have to save him anyways, Mission. It's an… It's an order."

"As you command, Lord Revan," Mission said. Perhaps that was the wrong way to say it though because Polla-Revan winced and looked even more unhappy.

"Anything you say, sis!" she qualified.

Polla-Revan sighed. "Listen, Mission… there's more. There's—someone else we need to—"

"I'm still working on Dustil!"

"Yes, Dustil too. But… Malak and I had a son. His name is Malachor D'Reev. He's eight years old. He's… on Coruscant, in the D'Reev Senator's house." Her eyes turned stony. "We're taking him back."

It was kind of neat, being a supercomputer and still being able to be surprised about something, but that actually made lots of other things fall into place.

"Did you marry Malak?" As a fourteen-year-old Twi'lek who'd actually seen Darth Malak, (albeit from a distance on the Hawk's cameras in the Leviathan hangar bay); and not to mention those soppy holovids of them holding hands in fields of flowers that kept getting broadcast from the Coruscanti Underground—the entire concept was pretty gross. But… politically?

The marriage angle opened up an entirely new arena.

Polla-Revan nodded. "Apparently so." There seemed to be a lot of emotion there somewhere, by the way she was biting her lip and trying not to cry, but Mission didn't press the issue.

Revan crying right now would be really inefficient.

"That explains a lot."

"I'll get the others." Polla-Revan got up, still wrapped in the blankets. Somehow, she managed to look regal that way instead of completely ridiculous. Polla-Revan was like that. "You can explain it to all of us."
The Eglatine Institute

Chapter 11 / The Eglatine Institute

The Selkath guards led her into the small gray chamber and left her there. The old man's hands were folded and quiet on the table, and his eyes were closed. The door closed with a watery hiss.

Vrook Lamar looked up. "Sit down," he said.

Yuthura complied, folding her hands as neatly as his. She sat up straight, t’chun and t’chin quiet against her neck, and stared him down.

"I'm surprised that they've agreed to let you be our arbiter."

He raised an eyebrow. "The Selkath honor the defendant's request for counsel. It's a Manaan statute."

"And your—superiors?" She tried to keep her voice light.

Something that almost looked like a spine flashed in Vrook's eyes. "You can speak frankly. The Selkath place a high value on privacy between counsel and client."

"Ah," she said—and waited to see what he'd do.

He nodded. "I'd expect you to be suspicious, but you have to know I'm not… against your cause."

"The Jedi sent me to the Sith Embassy to watch Revan. To see if she'd kill anyone."

Vrook grimaced and looked down. "She didn't." he said. His voice was low.

"No. She didn't." Yuthura let the emptiness wash over her like water. Clear water. She would not think of them. The table was smooth and solid under her hands. She tried to be the same.

The old Jedi stared at his hands. "Regret does not seem adequate. I was in the wars, against Exar Kun. I do...know, Yuthura, how—how difficult—this—"

"I tried to save them. But they wouldn't listen. Kel Algwyn was sixteen. On Korriban he was one of my most disappointing students. Too much fear and doubt to be a true Sith. Here on Manaan, he was a just a boy who wanted to be important. He didn't ask for mercy. And so, he got none."

His eyes scanned her face. There was sympathy in them.

Yuthura chose to ignore it. "I suspect nothing has really changed," she continued. "The same old story. Revan makes a mess, the rest of us clean it up."

Vrook almost visibly winched.

Yuthura went on. She hadn't meant to keep talking, but once started, it was hard to stop. Part of her really didn't care anymore. That was easier than the alternative. "Now you'll tell me that this is all part of the Council's plan. Getting her safely off-world to fulfill whatever destiny you think she has in store. Maybe you'll say something like, 'with great destiny comes great responsibility' or, 'the Force moves in mysterious ways.' Or, perhaps there are forces at work that I simply cannot
understand?"

One of her lekku curled around her neck in frustration and she made it unbend.

Vrook lifted his head slowly. "Maybe there are," he said. "I had no part in sending you to the Embassy, Yuthura. But you saved them. You… changed things."

"I couldn't save them all."

His eyes were bleak. "No one ever can." He shifted on his chair. "The Council isn't toothless. We won't let you be martyrs. Your goal is a noble one. Save Manaan's oceans. Heal the kolto."

"The Council doesn't care about us." There was more heat in her voice than she'd intended.

"Perhaps before, that was true," he admitted. "But they care now."

"Did the Council care about Carth Onasi too?"

"The Council had no part in that."

"I've seen the vid. The Selkath jailors like to keep us entertained. I met the man, Vrook. I saw what he was to her—and what Revan was to him. Do you expect me to believe that his mind could be twisted without the Force?"

"You, as well as anyone should know that not all Force users are Jedi. But I'm not sure in Onasi's case that the Force was involved at all. Wann and his ilk… there's more than you know."

"More like, you don't want to tell me for fear of it reaching the nets."

"It would never reach the nets. Or if it did it would be a different story entirely. I thought you understood that much, Yuthura Ban. From your own experiences."

This time it was her that flinched.

XXX

"She was my first friend. Revan Starfire was the first person I'd met who seemed to care, really care about who I was. And who I'd been." Yuthura was crying, and once the tears began, they would not stop. She never cried, had never cried, but the Bothan reporter stared at her with large, liquid eyes and patted her clumsily with his cloven hand.

"I understand this must be difficult for you."

"I just can't believe she's dead!" Yuthura took a deep breath, and sipped the glass of water, struggling for composure. "In a way, I suppose she was the first person I ever loved."

XXX

There'd been much more, but she didn't want to think about it. That horrible Bothan… cow twisted everything.

Vrook sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I resent her, you know," her voice was quiet and artificially calm. "My public humiliation was not her fault, but I resent her for it." She laughed. "For something as small and petty as the intimation of unrequited love, I resent her. Even now."
"Especially now, I'd think," Vrook said. "I do—understand."

Suddenly Master Vrook didn't look like a member of the Jedi Council to her; just a tired old man.

*Revan's only living relative.* She remembered the way he'd lurk in the public corridors of Ahto City, watching each Revan pretender, even when they all knew she was dead.

*Or thought we knew.*

"I don't want to talk about Revan. You're my arbiter. We're on trial for our lives."

"I understand. But there's one thing more. There was a man in the Sith Embassy called the Master of Games. One of the others told me they also called him Darth Lin. Lin's a common name on several systems; but the rumor is… that he was something more than common. And that he left with Revan. Can you tell me more?"

Yuthura shrugged her lekku, trying not to be angry.

*Ten of us on trial for our lives, twenty-two more held on suspicion of 'collaboration' and it still comes back to her.*

"He called himself Oerin Lin."

Interesting, how that name made Vrook Lamar pale. She blinked with her best impassive stare.

"He seemed to know her. Her droid tried to kill him. They spoke together in Mandalorian. I can recognize the language; but I don't speak it. I don't know what they said. He knelt before her and recognized her as Darth Revan."

"You're sure it was Mandalorian? That he spoke?" Vrook looked like a man already convinced of something, but desperate to be mistaken.

Yuthura nodded. "I'm sure. I interrogated enough of them to recognize the language."

*I've heard them curse me in it. Force-resistant species that they are.*

"And he left with Revan?"

"Perhaps he just jumped off the loading dock—or was pushed," Yuthura said coolly. "I don't know. I didn't see him again."

*Lin wasn't one of the ones I had to kill. But his last orders came through: scar the Revan pretenders. They were working on Sheris, when Armon and Beya and I broke down the door of the medical bay. They used acid on one side of her face. I cut down four of them before I even had a chance to feel them die.*

Vrook only nodded, his face settling back into a perfect mask. The Twi'lek's eyes narrowed. Masks could be cracked.

"Are you worried Lin will tell her something about the Mandalorian wars?"

"Leave it alone," Vrook said.

"I'm sure my companions could tell you more about Lin, Master Vrook. I only enjoyed the *hospitality* of the Sith Embassy for a very brief time."
"His eyes met hers frankly. "I tried. They don't trust me."

"And are you surprised?" It was her old voice, her careless teacher's voice, mocking, prying, and heartless. A part of her enjoyed watching him squirm underneath that hollow Jedi composure. Whoever this Lin was, he bothered Vrook a great deal.

*Whoever he is, I'll find out later. Whoever he is, I don't care.*

"Our trial," she reminded him, "starts in two weeks."

"It will be a formality," Vrook said.

"And then?"

"Then you'll be free to go."

"Anywhere we want?"

Vrook's smile twisted. "You're Republic citizens. The Republic grants all freedoms to its own."

"You know it is almost— *amusing.* I was born on Sleheyron when it was a Republic world, and yet… I don't remember ever being called a citizen."

"Master Jorak Uln and I exchanged correspondence, some seven years ago, when you were at the Jedi Academy on Donovia."

She refused to let him see how much the abrupt change of subject rattled her.

"Master Jorak was always fond of writing, before he went mad," Yuthura said lightly. "Such a pity about the Donovian Academy. It was quite close to the Hydian Way. After we left for Korriban, I heard it burned."

"He wrote to me because I had experience with sith’ae’rah. Are you familiar with the term?"

"It's a Sith training technique." Yuthura frowned, not willing to admit he'd piqued her curiosity, at least a little. "I don't know much of the detail; it requires a very young impressionable mind."

"An ancient Sith training… yes." The lines on his forehead got deeper and there was a something that looked like a scowl on his face. "Conditioning really. Take a Force-sensitive subject young enough and make them kill. The resultant trauma is transformative."

"Jorak overestimated my ability. I wasn't that young when I killed Omeesh. And I felt him die most exquisitely." Yuthura pondered. "I'm no sith’ae’rah. From what I recall, the methods are impractical. Death on a large scale? Make a young child kill? Most wouldn't have the strength."

Vrook said nothing. She was eerily reminded of Jorak's old methods of teaching, ones she'd used herself. *Lead the student to ask the right questions. Give them enough rope and they'll hang themselves on the answers.*

"W— *the* Sith do not have the same squeamishness about death that the Order does," Yuthura said. *We Sith do not have the same squeamishness. No, not we—I am not Sith anymore. Hanging myself on the answers. Damn him.* She examined a small stain on her robe to hide her discomfiture. A scorch mark on the plain brown cortosis weave. Her fingers picked at the fabric.

Vrook politely ignored her confusion, although he surely missed nothing. "The Sith suffer the same results as the Jedi. There's a reason the Sith always lose. Instability comes with the dark side."
Things always fall apart."

"Madness." Yuthura said flatly, trying not to remember how it felt.

"You're no sith'ae'rah; but… Jorak was right. You find a reserve—a detachment. It's what kept you alive all those years. It's the strength that pulled you out of Korriban. Helped you save the others. In some ways, it's a gift."

"What is your experience with this gift, Master Vrook?" With a sinking feeling she knew the answer already.

*Her again, it always comes back to her.*

"Heroes are made, not born." The old man sighed. "Sometimes even by accident."

"There are no accidents."

"Perhaps not, to the Force itself. But for us sentients… sometimes the lines are harder to read. Perhaps it was no accident that you are here now, Yuthura Ban. Perhaps..." he stared at his hands again, speaking almost to himself. "Perhaps none of this is an accident. Even Oerin Lin."

"I made a choice," Yuthura said.

"Indeed. As I am doing now. To support your cause." He raised his head up. For the first time she could almost see the family resemblance. His chin lifted in that same stubborn tilt she'd seen before on Revan's face, that same fixed expression. Blind conviction, no matter what the cost. "Shall we meet this fate together?"

She pulled her lips back from her teeth. Perhaps it was a smile. "Absolutely."

XXX

The tube rattled on and up. It was crowded this time of day. Whatever time that was, Dustil wasn't exactly sure. There wasn't much difference down below between day and night. But a large number of unders were going uptown now and he and Mekel were just two more in the crowd. Two more pasty humans who hadn't seen the sun in ages.

When they hit sub20, the ticket-taking droid came along the aisle, grinding its way through the press of sentients. Mekel paid cash credits for them both, and the droid stamped their hands with holographic ink. Round trip to back down below. Above sub20, the tube cost money. Below that, it was a public service for the unders—one of the few.

When they'd first come here, Mekel told him Coruscant was sometimes called the Reef. For thousands of years, the city-planet had been built and settled like layers upon layers of crap. Above sub20, which was groundside, there were skyways and air and streets that actually saw the cloud-covered sun. The Jedi Academy and the Library were built on what had once been a mountain, connecting around level 30 at the lowest points, and reaching up into the 50's at the highest spires. The Senate chambers were just down the street on Thantos. All the streets in the Chancellor's District were named after Republic planets.

This tube line ran along 20 for a while, humming through a curved white tunnel just below groundside. Dustil stared out the window at the holo ads projected on the walls.

A green Twi'lek girl's face pursed her lips in a kiss, *Shsiaeao Lipbalm*. An ad for the Republic Fleet promised *Excitement and Adventure*. Quen-xo Colony Ships bound for Onderon spoke
about *Exploration and Rebuilding*.

Dustil twisted the note in his pocket. The Twi’lek ad beckoned again. *Soft, kissable, fragrant.*

XXX

Mission smelted like the bitter cigarra they'd shared and mints and sweet wine. The damn box was really heavy.

"What's in this thing?" Dustil grumbled as they carried it up the Ebon Hawk's loading ramp. The cargo lift was broken, and it was very late. The other inhabitants of the Hawk were fast asleep—he hoped. He'd seen them around Dreshdae. The Cathar and the old man stuck out like Gamorreans at a dress ball—or Jedi in a nest of Sith, which was what they were. He didn't want to get any closer.

Maybe he wasn't Sithboy now, but the Jedi still gave him the creeps.

"I dunno, it's just something we're gonna deliver to Tatooine. There's a Hutt there who'll pay lots of credits for it. Smugglers don't ask questions." She grinned impishly. "Polla taught me that."

Dustil's muscles strained with the effort of getting the thing up the ramp. His arms and his Force were both taxed. Mission was having trouble with her end too; but she was stronger than she looked.

"Her name's not Polla."

The Twi'lek looked indignant. "It is too! If she doesn't remember being—" she lowered her voice, even though at this hour there was no one around to hear them-"Revan—it's like she's not!"

My father's fracking the Dark Lord of the Sith.

Dustil still couldn't believe it, but he'd seen them together. His father looked at her with that same moonblind expression he'd had whenever Mother ran into his arms. It was awkward enough before he knew who Polla really was. But then she'd gone and told him....

"Trust me," she'd said. "The Sith will only lead you to death. I should know. I understand how it feels."

Dustil helped Mission carry the box down the curving hall to the cargo bay, moving as quietly as they could. He was left with a vague impression of the rest of the ship. Clean lines: ones his father would appreciate. The Hawk was an old disc design. Corellian Ship Yards, about two hundred years old. Father taught him everything about makes and models. She'd be fast and easy to handle. Not a lot of defense, but a smuggler's ship only needed to be fast. The Hawk was a smuggler's ship.

Stolen, Mission had told him, winking coolly. Stolen from a dead man on Taris.

He wished they'd let him come with them—wherever it was that they were going.

They'd been so careful not to say. On some quest to save the galaxy.

Like you'd do anything less than that, Father. To hear you go on that's like, your job.

Finally, they set the crate down in the almost-empty cargo bay.

Mission sat on top of it and beamed bright as a supernova. "Thanks. If I didn't look out for our credit supply, I'd swear we'd all starve."
Dustil shrugged. "No prob."

"Let's see... what should we do now?" She had that smile on her face again, the one that made him go soft inside. She was so different than Selene; but it was that same soft feeling. A weak feeling, the Sith might say; but Dustil didn't care anymore. He tried to sound just as nonchalant.

"I dunno, what do you want to do?"

She giggled. "I think we should get off the Hawk, for starters. If Jolee catches me tipsy he'll give me a big old lecture. Important day tomorrow and all of that."

"Okay, where do you want to go?" He was trying to look like he didn't really care, but she'd gotten up again and was moving closer to him.

Mission was so pretty, Dustil wondered if she knew that. And the way her red armor hugged her every curve made his head spin. He had a sinking feeling that he was blushing. Her eyes were so round and blue. She was close enough now to put an arm around her waist, and he did so, cautiously, remembering what had happened the first time he'd hit on her.

Their faces were very close now, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. She smelled terrific, like mint and sweet wine.

"The cantina's closed, and the Academy's a bit too public," she purred. She sorta looked like a little girl trying out being a woman—maybe overdoing it a little; but Dustil didn't mind at all. He couldn't believe his luck.

The events of the last few weeks all narrowed down to her face and that smile.

Her lips brushed his lightly. Dustil shivered. Mission looked pleased. She grabbed his hand.

"There's this freighter," she said. "No guards and I can pick the lock. They're not loading til tomorrow... you wanna check it out?"

Dustil didn't even wonder about why there were no guards. He just followed her. Her hand was calloused and small and capable. He tried not to think about the things he wanted it to do... because of course she'd never do that. And he wouldn't ask. But maybe... she'd let him kiss her again.

Their second kiss, in the supply closet of the Dominion's Bounty, was open-mouthed and a little sweaty. Her breath tasted like sweet wine and mints. Her lekku brushed his cheek. She was sitting half on his lap. He never wanted her to leave.

Then Mission's wide blue eyes blinked, and she took a deep breath, as if she was about to say something momentous.

But all she said was, "I'm sorry."

Then she jabbed a trank in his arm. The world spun out. He was out for two days.

When Dustil woke up, the ship's engines hummed with a hyperdrive whine. He sat there in the closet quietly for another day or so; seething, reading the note over and over again.

Outside, he could hear voices and feet; but he'd been too embarrassed to ask for help. He could tell that Mekel was there. And some of the others too.
It was fracking humiliating.

Eventually, the door opened, and there they all were. Yuthura looked almost concerned—an expression he'd never expected to see on her face—not that he'd ever expected to see her face again. Thalia and Odoo just laughed. Phile ignored him. Kel kept asking him what happened; but Dustil didn't talk about it, not to any of them.

Mekel just looked at him—for once, not saying anything. And Dustil knew why.

Mekel understood what it was like to be caught in something completely beyond your control.

XXX

Dear Sithboy,

I'm sorry about leaving you locked up like this, but I promised two very important people I'd make sure you wouldn't get hurt, and really bad stuff is about to go down. Below is some infoz you can use to contact us—maybe when this is all over if you don't hate me already—we can have that third kiss.

I think you're pretty cool, you know. It wasn't all an act.

xxooxxoo

Blue

XXX

Now on the tube Dustil had something caught in his throat.

Mission's probably dead like the vids said.

"Our stop," Mekel said. The shorter boy grabbed his hand, jerking him back into the present.

The tube slowed to a halt, and the doors slid open. They pushed their way out through the crowd and into Chancellor's Station—a crystal vault of light and clean pastel mosaics. They blended in well enough—two more unders making their way groundside on a job. Maybe dishwashers or groundskeepers for one of the fancy estates in the clouds.

The stairlift carried them up and onto the ground. This part of groundside was clean and artificially quiet—sound dampeners overhead blocked out the traffic noises; and the streets were wide and evenly paved. A ped's paradise. Shops beckoned on either side of the street, discrete and expensive. Even the ads here were softened: small projectors bobbed, murmuring in hushed sublims.


On Telos, everything was wide open. Long low buildings under a beautiful blue sky—or—at least it had been... before everything changed.

Here, looking up made Dustil's head spin with reverse vertigo. Coruscant soared above them, a latticework of walkways and traffic lanes connecting the towering buildings together. Buildings upon buildings—Mekel grabbed his arm.

"C'mon," he hissed. "Onward and forward."

Dustil jerked away. "I can walk fine. I don't need you coddling me."
"Just try and stop gawking like an outer rim plebe, then?"

"It's this way," Dustil said unnecessarily. They both knew where to go, they'd been 'guests' at the Temple before they left with Ban. Prickles of unease shot up his spine as they got closer. Those soft voices and their fake concern. Brown-robbed, every one.

XXX

"We need to ask you some questions about Polla Organa. I hope you don't mind."

"I know who she really is."

"Then perhaps you understand the need for the questions." The Falleen Master's voice was completely unsurprised. Suddenly Dustil really wanted to tell him everything. Suddenly Dustil really wanted to get the hell away from those white walls and perfect gardens, and the sickly look of peace and contentment on Thalia May's face.

"It upsets you." The Falleen looked sad. "We can discuss this later, if you wish to meditate. You've been through a great deal, young man. I will leave you to your thoughts."

Only the prickling sensation made him feel like they weren't only his thoughts. Or not his own private ones. It was then that Dustil realized he had to get the hell out of that place.

XXX

They passed the white steps leading to the columned entrance on the Temple. The Eternal Light burned in a crystal globe set over the doorway. A few sentients—Knights by their robes, although a few wore Padawan beige or apprentice white—sat on the steps, talking in clusters. They could've been students at a university on Telos.

"Head down," Mekel muttered. "Keep walking."

"Yep," Dustil said. The Force presence of so many Jedi sang softly like a background hum. He tried to dampen his own thoughts to blend into it.

"La dee dah...." Mekel whispered, and Dustil bit his lip trying not to laugh. They'd fallen in behind some street cleaners who wore gray coveralls similar to their own. Sweeper droids cleaned the walkways until they gleamed; but they hired sentient in this quarter too. One of the Jedi's good deeds, gainful employment for the unders.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dustil thought he saw Thalia herself on the steps; but maybe it was just another dark-haired girl.

He didn't stop to look back.

Paranoia gets you every time.

His thought or Mekel's—no time to think about it.

The Library was a curved boxy structure made of windows that refracted light in a thousand rainbows. The doors were open right on street level. Above them the motto was etched on the glass in faded Basic letters, a meter high.

The Right to Knowledge is the Right of Every Citizen.

Inside, the library guard sat at a polished black desk in the sleek entranceway. She was Radnoran,
stocky and small, and her white apprentice's tunic clashed oddly with the lines of age on her face. Librarian was a common occupation for the failed Jedi students. Dustil ignored the twist of apprehension in his gut as they approached.

"Welcome, citizens," the woman said. "All that seek knowledge may pass."

She held out a chubby six-fingered hand to accept their idchips.

"That won't be necessary." Dustil placed his hand over hers in a gesture that mimicked handing her something. He pressed gently with his mind against hers. Her thoughts scattered as they made way for his own.

There was no one behind them, which was a really lucky break.

"That won't be necessary," the Radnoran agreed. She frowned a little. "You shouldn't be out of uniform, Padawan."

Oh hell.…

"I'm just seeking knowledge," Dustil said with a little more pressure. "We're not Padawans, just two students from the Uni."

"Of course," she agreed, bobbing her heavy head on its stumpy neck. The bells in her gray hair jingled. "May you find what you seek, students."

_You're pushing too hard, she's gonna start drooling in another second._

_Shut up, let's go._

The librarian pressed a button on her desk and the ferraglass doors in front of them opened wide. They walked on through.

The main room was an atrium, hundreds of meters high. Circular balconies curved above them in a slanting spiral. Light refracted from the solars, splashing the plain white and gray surfaces in a dance of color. Various figures moved between the stacks of discs and catalog droids, chatting in hushed voices.

"Public terms on fifty," Mekel muttered, grabbing his arm again. "Elevator this way — stop staring."

"I'm not," Dustil hissed back.

Mekel laughed softly. "First time we came here, I had to pick your jaw off the floor."

They'd spent a lot of time here in the first few weeks after the Star Forge—after they felt Revan fall. It was here that they'd found Yuthura Ban hiding out among stacks of ancient datachips and books. Here they'd voiced thoughts that none of them were willing to say inside the Temple itself. They'd sensed Revan's return to darkness vibrating like a discordant note in the fabric of the force. They weren't the only ones; but perhaps they were the only ones to admit—at least among themselves—that it felt like home.

Or like a command to follow.

A Fosh in brown robes passed by them now, arms full of books. He made a shushing sound with his beak and his talon feathers flapped. Dustil didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until the
Jedi passed.


*We’re students from the University, working on a paper about recent events. Recent events and their portrayal in the media. How is this knowledge disseminated in the public domain? How is this affected by the holovid’s presentation?*

That had to be Mekel’s thought, trying to fool any Jedi monitors. Dustil’s were moving along more like: *Let’s get to the elevator, let’s get to a terminal. Let’s see if my father left any word.* It took all his efforts to keep calm.

The elevator stopped on two, and he groaned. The doors opened, and a troop of schoolkids got on. Rich schoolkids and their teachers. One of the adults sniffed at the sight of Dustil and Mekel, but their charges were already on board, holding on to the railings and looking down through the plastiglass walls at the floors below.

"Forty-three" the teacher said, and the elevator chimed, accepting the request.

Mekel was elbowing him hard in the ribs. *Senate brats from the Eglatine Institute. Don't attract any attention. Those teachers are combat-trained, and they have fast reflexes.*

Hard not to stand out, since they looked much more unwashed than anyone else. They'd tried to clean up too, but under the bright lights the efforts seemed laughable. Not to mention, they towered over the kids.

The students were maybe what you’d call eight-formers on Telos. Eight or nine standard years old. All humanid, and all shapes and colors, like a poster for the Republic. Of course, as senate kids, Dustil bet most of them had never been out of this neighborhood. Senate brats didn't really do anything until they came of age. Technically, they didn’t really exist until they were twelve. Just one of the useless facts of Coruscanti culture that Dustil had picked up over the last eight months. Right up there with, ‘don't pick a bar fight with an Echani sworddancer,’ and ‘pervs that dress well don’t carry cash.’

Dustil edged closer to the wall and bumped into something soft. One of the kids had slipped behind him somehow and was crouched half under his feet.

*Trying to ditch the field trip, I guess. Nothing to do with us.*

Big gray eyes looked up at him from a cap of curly reddish hair. The boy put a finger to his lips, and hunched down more, hiding from the teachers—whose attention was occupied by two dark-skinned girls who were screaming in accents so clipped it took Dustil a moment to realize they were speaking Basic. They were arguing about shopping.

He moved in front of the kid, blocking him from view.

*Spoiled brats.*

"Forty-three," the elevator chimed. "The planetarium. Access is restricted to Eglatine students and faculty."

The doors opened, and the students streamed out. For all their awkward-looking robes, they moved pretty fast. The two teachers swam along, caught in their wake and the doors closed shut again.

"Thank you," said the boy, getting to his feet. Dustil moved away, giving him room. He was tall
for his age. Or maybe he was older than the others. Left back a few years. He didn't look very smart.

"No prob. I used to cut classes myself. Although, you seem a little young to be looking for trouble."

"I just need to use a console," the kid said, frowning. "My grandfather's cut off my access at home."

"Hm, yeah—well, you shouldn't be bad. I used to get cut off too, when I did something wrong."

"I wasn't!" The boy said imperiously. Or indignantly. It was sort of hard to tell. Whatever. The freckles on his face kind of spoiled the effect. One of his front teeth was only halfway in. Looked like it was growing in crooked. Dustil revised his age estimate back down again.

Mekel rolled his eyes. *Stop talking to the upper crust, Telos. They'll come looking for him and it'll be a fracking sithshow. We need to get out of here before that.*

*Right. I know.*

"Fifty," the elevator said. "Public Terminals. Knowledge is the Right of all Citizens."

The three Republic citizens got off. Dustil walked fast down the long hall to the term rooms, Mekel on his heels. The kid trailed behind them, like a forlorn kath pup.

Mekel nudged his arm. *Lose him. He's attention we don't need.*

Dustil stopped and turned back. The boy was wearing ridiculous heavy robes that looked like they'd stand up on their own. He had a hopeful expression on his round face that made Dustil want to scream.

On Telos, when he and Selene scavenged for food, they'd seen faces like that. Other kids, younger kids, just as lost and orphaned as they were. But you couldn't help them, not all of them. You learned fast to just turn away.

"You should go the other way," Dustil never felt guilty using the Force on marks and pervs in the underground; but somehow this made him feel wrong.

"I don't want to," said the kid. "Can you help me?" His voice wavered, and he blinked his eyes very fast as if he was going to burst into tears.

Dustil blinked. It wasn't Force sensitivity exactly—from what he could tell the kid didn't have any—not that he was an expert on these things—the kid was just immobile. He couldn't be pushed.

"We're busy," Mekel snapped. "Go away."

"Please? I don't know how to work these terminals. At home we have the voice kind."

The clatter of footsteps along the curve of the corridor saved them from any further response. The kid turned and ran through the nearest open doorway. Two Ferroan scholars passed by speaking in hushed tones.

*That kid's more being afraid of being caught than us. Huh.*

Mekel laughed and started walking again. "I think we just met one of our leaders of tomorrow. Aren't you impressed?"
"Something weird about that," Dustil muttered, uneasy.

"None of our biz, c'mon."

They picked a room off the main passageways, in the deserted area of the floor. Inside, a terminal and two plain plasticore chairs. Mekel sat down in one with a sigh. Dustil tapped the door closed.

"I'll hold it locked," Mekel said, frowning a little in concentration. He smiled crookedly. "Go ahead, do whatever it is, look for your father."

Dustil was already tapping at the keys.

*Lockbox, Yavin Station. Code 6-oh-9238*

*Username: Sithboy79*

*Password: Rwweeop Kaattyyr Nam*

*Nice password, Sithboy—what is that, you hitting the keyboard loaded?* Mekel was looking over his shoulder in his head, even sitting across the room.

*Shut up, it's Shyriiwook. I don't know what it means. I didn't make it up.*

*Who did, your Wookiee boyfriend?*

From across the room, Mekel raised a dark eyebrow.

*You're an ass, it was Mission. She—left it for me.*

*Oh. Mekel got quiet again. They'd talked a little about Mission, but not that much. What Dustil felt—might have felt—for her fell under one of those uncomfortable areas. Easier to just avoid.*

The computer screen went blank for a moment and there was a pause.

*Connecting. FTL, Yavin.*

*Welcome to Suvam's Emporium, Sithboy79. You have 63 messages.*

Dustil was already printing them out as he scanned the dates. They were all marked with his father's signature, but the most recent one was four weeks old. He sighed in disappointment.

*He hasn't sent word on where he is now. But he's alive. I knew I should have checked sooner.*

There was only one message from Mission and it was eight months old. He printed that one out too.

*I guess she's dead then. I guess she really is.*

Dustil started to type in a message to leave for Carth.

*Dear Dad,*

*I guess you're a hero now. Congratulations. I wish you'd—*

No, that was bad.

*Dear Father,*

*I'm fine, but I don't trust the Republic or the Jedi. I've been living in the underground. We roll pervs for credits, because that's easier than doing what they want. When I saw we, I mean me and*
Mekel. Do you remember him?

No, that was worse. Dustil closed his eyes and ran a finger across the screen.

It beeped softly at him. The printer kept churning out pages, in a monotonous drone.

He opened his eyes frowning. The screen was black. Letters scrolled across it suddenly, written in Ryl.

Member is online, verify identity. Please enter your name.

"That's weird," Dustil said. "I didn't know it had a subprogram for verification."

Mekel got up from the chair and peered over his shoulder. "Maybe we should just leave when the print job is done," he suggested. "Your real name has got to be set up to trigger stuff—remember that reporter the last time you tried to send a message?"

"Yeah..." Dustil frowned and typed his name in anyway. Dustil Onasi.

"Great," Mekel said. "Just do whatever you want then. When you're done, I'm just going to nip over to the Temple and ask Master Iridel if I can spend some months in meditation and contemplation of my sins. Maybe she'll let me have a cell with a window this time, looking out on that lovely green garden."

Verify, Dustil Onasi: Who gave you your first kiss?

Suddenly, Mekel was leaning over his shoulder again. "Nice security."

"Shut up," Dustil said. Selene Karath, he typed.

Who gave you your second kiss?

Mission Vao.

Who gave you your third kiss?

Mission Vao.

What happened when you tried to kiss Mission Vao before she wanted you to?

She kicked me.

Where?

In the balls. Dustil stared at the screen, hardly daring to breathe. A hot spark of hope in his chest. They're alive, both of them. My father and Mission!

No, I mean, where were we?

Blue?

Verify Identity. Answer the question.

Master Uthar's room, stealing wine.

Sithboy?
I thought you were dead! I thought Revan killed you!

There was a pause.

I've been waiting for you. Geez, you're slow.

Where are you? What happened?

Her response spat out so fast it almost looked pasted in.

Listen. Your father's in big poodoo. Really, really big. BIG. There's this guy who made him think things that aren't true about you-know-who. We've got to rescue your father. Party of two landing tomorrow—big black bird. Meet them at The Wheel. Private room, booked under that other name I called you. We need to get things rolling, ok?

Transmission end.

Mekel was already picking up the sheets of paper and stuffing them in his jacket pockets. Dustil grabbed one and looked at it. Words jumped out at him, words from his father. \textit{Will come when I can, I am so sorry, I love you very much, fate of the galaxy, I can't leave her like this, sorry...}

Something close to anger flickered under Dustil's skin. "I don't need to read this," he said dully, crumpling the pages in his hands.

Mekel ignored him.

"You might want to later," he said. "Hell, I might want to. What really happened to them?" The other boy took the pages out of his hands.

Behind them the terminal sputtered. Lights flashed, and something smelled scorched.

\textit{It's overloading—shit}—Dustil grabbed Mekel's arm and they ran out of the room.

"That seems like an unlikely coincidence...." Mekel's voice trailed off uncertainly. They started walking away, walking fast. "What the frack is the Wheel?"

Dustil snorted. "Aren't you the native son? It's casino on Coruscant. \textit{The Golden Wheel of Fate}. Mission said we should go there sometime and rob them blind. My force and her skillz. Make a killing."

There was a lump in his throat and something caught in his eye. He blinked fast.

"Oh, you mean the Golden?" Mekel looked dubious. "Good luck trying, that place is Exchange territory if it's anything."

"Well, it's a place to meet her, ok?"

\textit{Party of two, under that other name I used to call you.}

\textit{Big black bird—has to be the Hawk.}

\textit{My father's in trouble. That stuff he said on the vids was a lie.}

\textit{Mission didn't say she was coming too—but she must be. I'll see her again.}

They were walking fast down the hall, trying to ignore the smell of smoke that wafted in their
Dustil pushed the button for the elevator. "Come on," he whispered. "Come on...."

An alarm went off.

"Shit!" Mekel hit the elevator angrily. They stood there, helpless. Dustil closed his eyes and tried to stay calm.

The doors opened, and a squad of Republic civi guards streamed out.

Dustil reached underneath his coat for his lightsaber. Mekel put a warning hand on his arm.

*Wait, okay? Just wait. Don’t be a fracking idiot.*

The guards rushed past them, fanning out down the corridor.

"Fire down that way," one of them called.

Dustil felt himself smirk. *Never let it be said the Republic doesn't have smart soldiers. Observant, too.*

The hallway they'd just left was filling with smoke, and the hiss of retardant foam.

"Locator reads coming from the other direction. Fire's nothing to do with us," their commander said. His eyes glanced over Dustil and Mekel with the edge of something like curiosity, and he put his hand over the sensor to keep the doors from closing. "Citizens, have you seen a boy? About this high? Red hair?" He gestured.

Dustil stared at him blankly and shrugged. "*We were never here.*"

"You were never here," the commander echoed, frowning. "Blasted Senate brats...." He turned back to his troops, the light glinting on his yellow helmet. "Sweep out and find the kid before we all get demoted."

"I know *I* joined to the army to be a babysitter," a woman muttered.

"Shut up, Cally."

The doors hissed shut, and they were away. Dustil sagged against the back with a sigh of relief. The elevator dropped down.

"Well that was fun," Mekel said brightly. He started to laugh.

Despite himself, Dustil felt a twinge of pity for the kid. Whatever he'd been looking for, he'd seemed to want to find it very badly.

XXX

When Malachi D'Reev was not much older than his grandson was now, his mother took him to the roof of their home. Her private garden was sealed in a crystal dome to keep out the wind. Looking over the edge you could see the entire world below shining in clusters of jewels and light. From up high, the Coruscanti traffic moved in patterns, as ornate as a dance, or the designs on a Zabrak rug.

"Down below," his mother said, "things seem random and uncontrolled. But from up on high, we can see the true weave. The fabric of the universe. And thus, we control its destiny."
She died a year later, after failing to assassinate his father.

The old man's approach was more direct.

"Power is our responsibility. The stability of the Republic Empire is our reward. Three branches of power: a system of checks and balances. The Senate, the Council, and the Fleet." A smile curved across his thin lips, and his eyes half-closed. "How do you balance them, my son?"

"With the will of the people," said Malachi D'Reev.

His father laughed. "Precisely."

XXX

The portable holopad crackled. The old man frowned and tapped the side gently. The picture resolved itself and he smiled. So simple sometimes to make things work again.

"Is there anything else?" Admiral Rensha asked. Her image shifted and blurred. Tightbeam relay wasn't the most reliable transmission, but it was secure.

The aircruiser swerved to dodge an incoming bus. As always, HK's reflexes were more than up to the job.

"Not at the moment," Malachi said, adjusting the windows to dim so the light from the sunset didn’t get in his eyes. "You're sending the Pearl crew on a long patrol?"

"The far reaches of Sith space. Many crews have not returned from such expeditions." Rensha replied. "Perhaps a diplomatic cruiser is required in that sector."

"You have my utmost thanks. I'm sure the Senate will agree to your request for more funds."

The Admiral nodded her accord. He peered at the screen closely. Surely that couldn't be disgust? Perhaps it was just the static on the screen.

He ended the transmission and looked down upon his city. It spun beneath; gleaming in a dance as intricate as history.

The cruiser angled up towards the orbital landing docks where the Pearl waited.

He'd arranged a groundside landing for the next arrival: far more convenient. It was odd of Hulas to be so coy with the details but the Genoharadan hoarded their secrets like a nest of old women. As long as the results were adequate, he had no complaints.

She was coming, and he had what she wanted.

Or what she thought she wanted. The old man was fairly sure she had no idea about the real prize. It was better that way, he thought. Cleaner for all of them.

The will of the people.

Using the Telos gambit with the pilot was clumsy, and he'd approved it with some hesitation—only after all other avenues had failed. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed advantageous. After all, some of the greatest facts in history were the most disputed. Contradictions made them all the truer in the end.

His son had been such a disappointment after he learned about his mother. Now, he'd have to tell
Malachor about *his* mother as well. Still, sometimes adversity brought out the best.

Malachi D'Reev hadn't been so much older after all, when his own mother died and shattered most of his illusions.

And perhaps... he'd have an ally, when he broke the news to Malachor.

He'd have to wait and see how dependable Captain Onasi was.

XXX

"I can do this myself," he grumbled.

"Captain Onasi, it's really an honor. I don't mind at all." The laser brush was cool on his cheek, and the ensign's perfume smelled like spice. He tried to ignore how close she was.

She leaned over him and ran the brush across his upper lip.

Her hair was a light auburn, and she had freckles on her upturned nose.

He rubbed his hand over his now-smooth cheek. "Well, thanks, I guess."

She'd turned away from him and was holding out a formal dress coat. Fleet red and yellow, fit for an admiral, even though it only had captain's bars.

Carth frowned at it. "Is this all really necessary?"

"Most of my work is in public relations," the ensign answered him. "We're with the media division of the Fleet—and yes, it's really necessary. You're a hero Captain. You need to look like one. The Senator will expect it."

"The Senator's meeting me, Silvana said?"

She beamed. "Yes indeed! His cruiser should be docking now—or just about now. Here, let me button that for you."

He snorted, surprised at natural it felt. "Thanks, sister; but I can put on my own clothes."

She giggled. "You look very nice in them, if you don't mind me saying so. Sir."

Carth didn't feel nice. He felt ridiculous. All of this parading seemed so wrong, compared to the Sith menace and finding Dustil. He gritted his teeth and straightened the lines of the coat.

Ensign Delaney moved closer again with a comb and Carth backed away.

"No more," he said. "You don't want to keep the Senator waiting, right?"

"Oh!" Her blue eyes went round. "Of course not!"

She opened the door and he followed her to the *Pearl*’s docks. The crew were lined up along the hall, smiling and waving at him. They all looked so young.

The omnipresent whir of a holocam followed them down the hall.

XXX

She reached for serenity. This was a desperate gamble, but it must not lead to madness.
In her head, she recited the words of the Jedi Code.

*There is no emotion; there is peace.*

He was shrunken and stooped now, under those voluminous Senator's robes; but once he’d been tall, towering over her. His features were narrower than his son’s; but cast from the same mold. Eyes the color of durasteel glared at her with hate.

Light from the crystal chandelier shone on his hairless skull.

"H-how did you get in here?" The old man’s voice snapped like a blade, but there was fear in it too.

"Through the front door." Her own voice sounded dead, echoing through the mask's amplifiers. The metal plate was cool on against her lips.

*There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.*

He was reaching under his desk now and she raised her Krath vibroblade, hands gripping the center pommel.

Her friends were at her back; but they would not intervene. This was her battle, and hers alone. It could be no other way.

The old man laughed, and she pressed forward. The sound of the holovid he'd been watching was a steady drone. That and the hiss of her breath through the mask were the only two sounds in the room.

XXX

A small planet, reddish-brown. The holoimage zoomed in, spinning through clouds, to cracked plains; then finally, to a dusty arena. The imaged righted itself on an old-fashioned fighting ring: crowds of armored figures with their clan banners surrounding it—and a small row of Republic-clad troops all in a line.

Two figures: one tall and one short; both hooded and masked, armed with vibroblades, faced off in the center arena.

"Revan Starfire faced the Mandalore in single combat on Malachor V. Mandalorian honor commanded him to accept the challenge. There were few witnesses, but one of them had a holocam. Here again, is footage never before seen by the public. The fight that ended the Mandalorian wars."

XXX

The old man had two dark vibroblades, one in each hand now, curved and short in a style that she recognized. No time to think about where she'd seen them before. Her vision narrowed until he was all that she could see.

*There is no passion; there is serenity.*

"This ends today," Revan said. "For Malachor. And for the good of the Republic."

*And Carth, andcarth.*

Malachi D'Reev moved fast for an old man. He met her in the center of the room, blades ready. There was the sound of metal scraping metal as he pressed the attack. Revan ducked and dodged
easily, taking his measure. He had the longer reach, and greater physical strength; but she was used
to fighting with these disadvantages. She was faster—even without the Force. Her double blade
moved in a blur to block his thrusts.

There is no chaos; there is harmony.

The Force rippled around them, but she would not draw on it. The old man's Force blindness was
like a spot on the sun, where all other things sang with life. She met his attacks squarely and waited
for him to tire.

He was older, and she'd been training for this moment. Eventually she would press her offense.

XXX

“They fought for hours,” the announcer said. “Mandalorian stamina pitted against Jedi discipline.
Mandalorian skills against a Jedi's desperation. Desperation to save her Republic and end the
wars.”

XXX

They fought for hours. Sweat pooled under her mask, and her hair itched under her helm. Beskar-
forged blades met cortosis-woven durasteel again and again. Their bare feet sank in the hot sand,
kicking up plumes of dust.

Sand?

His robes were the color of sand.

She lashed out and a line of red striped his shoulder, but he dodged the brunt of it.

Finally. First blood is mine.

One of his blades hooked the end of her sword and he tugged, dancing back, trying to unbalance
her. She tightened her grip and leaned to the side, ready to dodge.

As if in slow motion she saw the feint for what it was—and she was dodging the wrong way. Too
slowly.

The Force sang around them like a dirge, but she would not draw on it, she would not.

His other sword sank deep in her side. Lancing hot pain ran through her body like a shockwave.
Terrible sound of metal against bone. Her spine jerked and suddenly there was nothing holding her
upright except his sword in her side.

He twisted the blade and pulled it clear.

There is no death; there is the Force.

Revan fell.

There is no emotion; there is peace.

"No."

"A bold challenge, daughter of Lin. You fought well."
"Ucah'alla y nik," she whispered from the ground. Far away she could sense rather than see the others that watched them. Watched and did nothing.

They couldn't help; this was her fight and hers alone.

Malak's desperation beat against her mind. Their last hope. She couldn't make her hands work, and the blade fell from them. The sand sank under her knees, stained with dark blood. Her blood. She couldn't feel her legs.

"No."

There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.

The pain ebbed and receded. If she tried, she could see every grain of sand on the endless plain.

Somewhere a child was crying but she closed that out, just like she closed out Malak's fear and rage—and the anger and hate that surged from their friends.

It doesn't matter what we promised. If I die, this war will never end.

There is no passion; there is serenity.

The Fett stood above her, head bowed in respect. One of his blades was stained and dripping. It wouldn't be long now; she could feel the darkness creeping closer like a soft blanket. Her breath hissed painfully. She clutched the wound in her side and looked up at him. Her vision was blurry, and her hands were wet with something. Something red.

There is no chaos; there is harmony.

No. No. please no. Please, please, no. Please.

"No," she whispered.

Blood stained the sand. The sun beat down overhead.

Somewhere, someone was beating uselessly against her mind. Loss and grief and anger screamed through her barricades, familiar as a kiss. As always, she kept a part of herself detached from it, trying to project that numbness to the others; shield them from the worst of his anger. Shield them from this one last death.

Her death.

No Red, please. Please no. Don't leave me, don't leave us. Don't leave us, Red. Please.

She felt, rather than saw, Malak's attempt to heal her through the force. A swirl of white light like an aura in his hands.

Too late for that. Too late for anything now. The sand was rough under her fingertips, and all she saw was each grain of it. She'd fallen. She'd failed.

There is no death; there is the Force.

"No."

Her breath was ragged and rattling, and the sand was warm through her robes. It hurt.
This war will never end; and it’s all his fault.

The Force beckoned like a shining star. Melt into it. Be one with it. The Fett was like a black spot on the sun.

He’d bested her: he’d taken everything from her. Her trust, her innocence, her soldiers.

Malak's healing broke over her like a cool burn—too little too late—and his reserve was cracking. When it broke, all that he was would be anger and loss and hate. He would burn with it. There was a power in that too.

This war will never end.

The Fett was like a blemish on the sun. A black place.

Revan reached out her hand and something trembled, something crackled.

She burned the black place away, drawing its energy inside herself. Knitting bone and tissue. Everything blurred into a blaze of red fire. Fire and lightning.

Fett Cassus Lin fell, and she rose.

Somewhere, people murmured. Somewhere someone's hands caught her, as she stood trembling on her feet. The pain in her side was gone. Her breath hissed through the mask, and the world seemed bathed in hard yellow light.

Her thoughts were disjointed and strangely mundane.

I'm sorry. I cheated.


Malak's hands were fumbling at the buckles that held her mask in place, but she pushed them away. She stepped away from him and faced the crowd, standing over the burned shell that had once been the Mandalore.

"The war is over," Revan called out and her words amplified through the mask. "I claim the spoils of the victor. Your weapons, your tents, and your Empire are mine. Melt down the basilisks, scrap your ships, and leave this place. Your age of warriors is past. Are there who challenge my right to command you?"

There was a pause. The clan observers came closer, inside the circle. Blunt shapes in their battle: Ordo, Lin, Weis, and Zal.

"Rialis accepts your victory, Fett Revan." Kevan Rialis knelt before her.

"And Ordo," spoke a granite voice.

"I accept for Clan Lin." Adatrix pulled off his helm and looked up at her with respect, but something glittered cold in his eyes.

Wies and Zal knelt too.

Somewhere behind her, the Republic soldiers broke into a ragged cheer.

Revan's knees trembled, and Malak's hand steadied her arm, before she started to fall down again.
Get me out of here before I faint or something.

I will. Red, we've won. Walk away, just walk away with me.

Her cape billowed behind her and she turned her back on Mandalore.

XXX

A Sssyrian pan flute played a sad melody.

“The war was over; but the Mandalorians did not all bend at the knee. Revan Starfire took a third of the Republic Fleet past the Outer Rim, to the unexplored reaches of space to hunt down the last pockets of Mandalorian resistance.”

“It was a hero's move; but it was doomed. For there, she and her followers fell to the Dark Side of the Force. It was there that they found the secrets of the Star Forge and remade the Sith Empire to threaten us all.”

XXX

"Revan. If you're going to watch this stinking maffa offal, turn the sound down!"

Someone chuckled.

"She's asleep. I think it's rather amusing, myself."

"You would, cub." Canderous' voice was like stones. Granite. She heard the heavy tread of his feet crossing the floor, and he was muttering under his breath. The holovid cut out with a squawk.

Revan opened her eyes and sat up. She was curled up against Zaalbar like a kath pup. He patted her on the head gently and growled a soft greeting.

"Sorry—I just...."

To her relief, the console was intact. Canderous had only turned it off this time—not plunged a sword through it.

He crossed his arms and sighed. "If you wanted to know about the fight, you could have asked me. I was there."

"The Fett bested me," she said, rubbing her eyes.

Canderous shrugged. "You used your tactical advantage. That is the way of war. In the end, he died, and you did not. Some say that you were only toying with him, up until the end." A faint smile crossed his face. He looked almost—proud. "It was a very long fight, but I don't think you were toying with him. You fought well on his terms. You won the war on your own."

Revan stared at the floor, relieved to see corusteel plates and not sand stained with blood.

"The next season we almost starved," Oerin said. "Without the harvest droids, we couldn't plant enough crops to feed ourselves. And the Republic imposed an embargo against trade with the Malachor system." He spat on the ground. "Not that we'd have accepted their trade."

She looked at him. "The harvest droids?"

"The basilisks." It was Canderous that answered her. "In the days of the clans, their utility changed
with the seasons. Our machines held twin purpose. Harvest and war."

Revan remembered the train of dewbacks she'd seen in Oerin's mind; his thoughts showing her their meaning. "So, I made your people starve."

Canderous laughed. "Don't give yourself too much credit. You went off with the Fleet. What happened to us afterwards had nothing to do with you. Not really."

Zaalbar growled in her ear. "Polla-Revan, please speak Basic and make the others do the same. How can I help you if I miss half of what is going on?"

"Sorry, Zaal.'" She gave him a quick translation.

"I am learning their infidel tongue, but it is not easy. Not enough vowels."

"I know, my friend. But you're going to need to learn it better before we get to Coruscant."

_Coruscant. I've seen your face, Malachi D'Reev. And I have the means to destroy you._

Revan got up from the couch and stretched her limbs, banishing the doubts from her mind. "Who wants to practice with me?"

Oerin got up too. "I will," he said. "After watching that fight again, I think I'd enjoy it."

Revan nodded at him, accepting the challenge. "We have ten days. And then it all begins."

"You place much confidence in that computer of yours." He raised his eyebrows mockingly.

Zaalbar growled. "Tell the boy Mission-ghost will do her part. I only hope he does his."

Oerin grinned. His grasp of Shyriiwook had expanded considerably. "Oh, I will... my part is going to be fun." He had a cocky smile on his face.

Revan spent the next few hours trying to wipe it off.

XXX

"I just can't help but feel sorry for the poor girl," Molla Organa said.

"Ma!" Polla dropped her fork halfway to her mouth. It hit the table and fell on the floor. Grimacing, she started to stand up. Her mother kept on talking, ignoring her discomfort.

"In a way dear, we're all the family she's ever known."

"That's true." Auntie Mita frowned. "Now, now, Polla, don't get up, I'll get you another fork, no worries."

Her ancient aunt—one hundred and two if she was a day—rose creaking to her feet and bent down to fetch the fork that had fallen under the table.

Polla sat back down in her chair trying not to seethe. If they saw that they were annoying her, they'd only go on. That was what the two of them were like.

"Did you see the broadcast of the awards ceremony for Captain Onasi?" her mother asked Auntie Mita.
"Yes, such a sad young man he was too." Her aunt rose tremulously from her knees and tottered over to the cabinet to get a clean fork for Polla. Absently, she dropped the soiled one on the floor again. None of them moved.

Bolts, the Organa's ancient utility droid, rolled over to pick up the offending object with a rusty wheeze.

"Ma," Polla protested again, wondering why she'd bother to come, "we're not her family."

Her mother ignored her, eyebrows knitting in a serene, but thoughtful expression.

Auntie Mita picked up the tray of kaffa cake from the counter and carried it back to the table, setting it down with a contented sigh. She sliced off a hunk for Polla and handed it to her, wrapped in an eridu napkin.

Polla ate absently, still distracted.

"That whole Telos thing is a lie," said Auntie Mita. "Bendowen's girl...you know Bendowen—my great-uncle's second wife's son was his father's father... that'd make him your... third cousin once removed? Or is it twice? Or would that be your fourth cousin...? In any case, his daughter... the one that ran away to join the Jedi during the Troubles? Well she was with the Sith Fleet a few years ago—and she said Darth Malak ordered the Telos bombardment."

“That poor Captain Onasi is completely wrong! Revan would never do anything like that! Organas don't destroy worlds needlessly; they're not like those corrupt Coruscanti politicians."

Polla took a deep breath. Her son kicked inside her angrily, as if to echo her protest.

"Darth Revan is not an Organa."

Her mother still looked thoughtful. This was worrisome. "You know, in a way," she began, "it's almost like she's your own sister. We always wanted more children, your father and me. I hope you and Seiran are planning on having more. An empty house is a sad one."

"Let's just get this one born," Polla sighed, giving up. She felt awful. Her back was really killing her.

"So anyways," Auntie Mita said, gesticulating with her fork, "I heard that Bendowen actually got a letter from Beya the other day. Everyone thought she'd been killed in the wars or something, but actually, she's on trial on Manaan. Something about killing Sith? Or was it joining the Sith? I'm really not sure... but it's a damn shame."

"A damn shame," Molla Organa echoed.
Chapter 12 / Sithkids

Carth walked off the *Pearl* straight into an awards broadcast. Lights flashed, and cameras whirred, and there were at least a hundred sentient's from various branches of the Fleet standing at attention. Everyone was saluting. A band played the Republic Anthem. Flags and a red carpet lined the corusteel floor of the enormous groundside docking bay—a space twice as large as the *Pearl* needed—presumably to accommodate all this pomp.

A bald old man dressed in formal black and red robes was waiting for him, at the end of the red carpet.

"My apologies for all the frippery," the old man whispered, putting a steadying hand on Carth's shoulder. His thin lips stretched in a smile. "Sometimes these sacrifices are necessary for the Republic."

"Senator D'Reev, I assume." Carth nodded, shaking his hand.

"It's a great honor to meet you, Captain Onasi." The old man smiled sadly. "In some ways I feel like I already know you quite well."

Carth kept the neutral smile pasted on his face. Eventually, this would be over, and he could focus on finding Dustil. D'Reev was a tall man; now stooped and wrinkled with age. His Senator's robes made him look broader than the bones in his face and hands suggested. He looked, Carth noticed with a chill; like an older, frailer version of Malak.

D'Reev patted his hand. "After this, we're going to lunch with the Chancellor. It's a long drive to the District, so we'll have some time to talk. This all must be very hard."

Carth nodded, feeling kind of numb.

There were several speeches and the band played the Telos Symphony, sad and funereal. Carth had to blink his eyes several times and shook more hands than he'd ever thought he'd see. A pretty red Twi'lek corporal pinned the Republic Cross of Glory on his chest. Reporters asked him questions and he answered in a monotone, the same answers over and over again. Stop the Sith. Stop Darth Revan. Find Dustil, where was his son?

But his mind was elsewhere; trying to think of something safe to think about. Something unemotional, like the drive engines he'd refitted on the *Hawk*.

"Don't kiss me you're all oily,' she said, laughing. The way her nose wrinkled—where had they been? Tatooine, maybe. The first time. Not the second—don't think about the second time you were on Tatooine. When you knew what she really was and loved her anyway. How could you?"

Funny, the more they called him a hero, the more he felt like a lie.

Captain Rew Ekkumi was there and General Jiya Sand. He hadn't seen either of them in years. It had been Corporal Sand and Commander Ekkumi then.

Ekkumi kissed his cheek. "We'll talk later," she promised. The familiarity of her Telosian accent hit
home with a pang. Their children all grew up together on the base, not so long ago.

Carth nodded at her, he didn't trust himself to speak—didn't want to ask her if they'd made it out alive.

After what seemed like forever, the band stopped playing, and the crowds of well-wishers and press dispersed. An honor guard escorted him and D'Reev to the Senator's own personal transport. A sleek aircruiser, Durian-made from the look of it, shaped like a gleaming silver triangle.

*Only the best,* Carth thought wearily. Durians were famous for their ship design, although as a species they rarely left their own planet.

"You're holding up well," the old man observed, as the doors slid open with a soft click, revealing a sparse, but opulent interior.

The walls were gleaming: white lacquer, with two white silk couches facing each other across a table made of white stone. Carth sat down on one and the old man sat down on the other. The driver was an anonymous shadow behind a thick wall of reinforced dark gray ferracrystal. Tinted ferracrystal windows on either side revealed the Coruscanti landscape as the aircruiser slipped out of the hanger with an effortless purr and navigated deftly into the stream of planetside traffic.

Repulsor fields shimmered around them, and Coruscant spun beneath. It was beautiful.

"I've never been here before," Carth admitted, shifting in his seat. The psychdroid had declared him fit, but he felt so drained and exhausted. He wanted a drink and a room and to be left alone. "Is there any word of my son?"

The Senator shook his head. "I'm sure we'll find him, or he'll find you."

"I appreciate it." Carth realized his hands were clenched into fists.

"I know what it's like to lose a son," the old man said bleakly.

Carth didn't know how to respond to that.

XXX

There was a brief, happy moment when everything seemed fine. They'd gotten away clean. Crossing the ground floor of the Library, Mekel almost started whistling. Dustil was freaking out inside—whatever he thought about Mission was obviously bugging on him as much as his father's situation—but at least he'd shut up about it in public.

Mekel was just glad something was finally going to happen. Something besides being trapped in the Coruscant Underground. And the Twi'lek wasn't so bad. She was coming on a ship. Maybe she'd get them off this fracking rock, before his cousin came back, or Moms figured out he was around, and started in on him about working for family.

"See?" he muttered. *Told you. This was cake.*

*Thank you.* Dustil's hand brushed his arm. *Don't think I could have done this on my own.*

*No kidding.* Mekel felt one side of his mouth pull up. *Anytime, Telos.*

*Will you stop calling me that?*

*You like 'Dusty' better?*
"Maybe we should think up new names," The Telosian smirked. "Yours could be 'Asshat.'"

"Yeah, because I'm the one who got rolled by a Twi'lek half my size."

"No, you were the one who said we could take that Echani sworddancer."

"I didn't know he was armed!"

"The big sword on his back wasn't a clue?"

"I thought he was posing. Pervs do that." Mekel scoffed. "Didn't think he was a real sworddancer."

"You didn't think." Dustil snorted and elbowed him. *Dumbass.*

The outer doors slid open. They walked out of The Library.

"Dustil Onasi!" a voice called out.

Instead of doing what a normal sent would do: that is, keep walking until they got out of sight and then book it; Dustil Onasi froze, like a spideroach in downlight.

*Oh, frack.*

Surrounding them were at least two squads of soldiers. From their uniforms, they looked Fleet. Out of the corner of his eye, Mekel saw that the street had been hastily cordoned off. A shadow even blocked the milky sun, as another transport settled on the wide street, discharging even more troops.

*You'd think we'd robbed the Gallery of Heroes or started the Sith Wars. What the frack, Mekk?* Dustil was gaping like a rube.

Not a lot of time to think, not much time at all.

"Maybe I'll see you around," Mekel said and walked away. Casual.

As troops circled around his friend, Mekel wasn't the only random ped caught in the barricade. He slipped into the crowd of annoyed sents; trying not to think very hard.

Dustil's thoughts were chaotic and angry. They beat on his mind like a staccato of rain.

*What are you doing, don't leave me? Mekel? What the hell? What the hell do I do?*

*I don't fracking know. Tell me the name. The one to meet them under.*

*Huh?*

*The name. Mission's message. At the Wheel. What's the name?*

The Telosian boy's emotions were like an explosion. They almost hurt. Mekel winced.

*H-handsome.*

*Huh. Normally he would have commented, but right now—*

*Okay. Good luck.*

*Mekel? You can't just leave!*
What else can I fracking do, Telos? Shit, Jedi... heads up. Don't do anything stupid.

The Jedi walked right past him, a phalanx of brown-robes and beige. If he looked close, he'd probably recognize some of them. But he didn't. Mekel kept his head down, fingering the pages in his pocket. It was the only thing he could do.

*I'll go meet your girl*, he thought. *Try not to die.*

XXX

Mekel just walked away. Walked away.

*What else can I fracking do, Telos?*

They advanced on him. "Dustil Onasi!" a woman called. Commander's bars on her coat, naval branch, intelligence. "We've been looking for you, son." She had a reassuring smile on her face, but he wasn't reassured, not at all.

*I'll go meet your girl*, Mekel shot at him. Smug prick. *Try not to die.*

Dustil backed away, backed up towards the library doors.

"Dustil Onasi!" a Trandoshan captain, dressed in black and gray. District patrol, maybe—the local cops. He frowned at the Fleet officer. "We've got orders to take him in. This is *our* jurisdiction."

The woman glared. "My orders are to take this boy to his father, sir. With all due respect—"

Dustil was almost back at the library doors now. Maybe he could slip back inside, and then — *Mekel just left me. What kind of friend just leaves?*

Dustil turned around to make a run for it—only to find his route blocked.

Behind him came another squad of civi guards; and in their midst was that dumb kid. Round face and red hair. The kid had been crying—he face was red and covered in snot. One of the guards had him by the arm.

Dustil wasn't really thinking now; he was just acting. On Korriban they'd train sometimes for crowd situations. Scenarios with the prisoners. How do you deal when you're outnumbered? Answer: make sure you cut the smallest and fastest swathe possible through your opponents, in the closest approximation you can get to a straight line. The civvies were the smallest group here; it wouldn’t take much time at all to get through them—he could even try and avoid hitting that kid.

His lightsaber was in his hand before he had time to think about the utter futility of that strategy against the hundred blasters that would then be at his back.

*They'll probably just stun me—right?*

Maybe that was reassuring.

"Dustil Onasi!" called someone behind him. "We're not here to hurt you, son. Put down the weapon."

The kid looked up, looked at him. His mouth made a round O of surprise. Mouthed the name, *Onasi.*

Things seemed to move very slowly. Dustil was looking for a break between the astonished civi
guards. Less of them than what was behind him. The saber was humming in his hand, red and bright. Somehow soothing.

*Cut a swathe.*

There was an opening on the right, where two of the guards seemed more confused than the others. Greener maybe. Gaping at him. Some of the others had drawn their blasters. Pointing at him. Behind them people were yelling at them not to shoot. Confusion.

He started to move but the kid moved faster. Broke away from the guards and ran. Ran right into him. Dustil's breath went out in an oomph of surprise as the kid’s arms locked around his waist. The kid hung onto him for dear life.

*What the hell?*

"Carth Onasi's your father?"

Wide gray eyes looked up at him. His face was red and splotchy. Crooked tooth. The kid was really heavy.

"Get away from me," Dustil muttered. He couldn't move.

"Make them say they’re liars! You know it's a lie! You have to know!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The guards all around them seemed frozen. He could feel laser sights like little prickles on the back of his neck.

"Make them say it's a lie!"

XXX

"Make them say it's a lie!"

Selene's voice shook. Dustil trembled for her. Master Uthar had a smile on his face. That really bad smile.

Oh shit, Leenie, no.

"Make them say it's a lie! My father didn't bomb Telos!"

Master Uthar began to laugh.

XXX

"Kid, step away from... the boy." The civi commander looked terrified. Dustil wasn't sure which one of them he was talking to anymore. The kid had his jacket in a death grip, and he whirled his face around, and screamed at the soldier.

"Say it's a lie! Say it!"

"Get away—it's me they're after, not you," Dustil whispered. He held his saber out defensively, trying not to cut one of the kid’s arms off. He felt funny, as if all of this was a dream.

The kid looked up at him again, eyes huge and drowning.
"They won't hurt you. They wouldn't dare. Tell them it's a lie."

"What— what's a lie?"

"Those things on the nets. About my mother."

"Kid, I don't know your mother." The guards were still frozen, and Dustil started to edge his way to the side, trying to get his back to the wall.

"You do. Your father does. I s-s-saw it on the vids. Your father looks nice. Like my mother." The kid's nose was running now too, and his face was wet with tears. His clear voice carried in the sudden stillness around them.

"Like the eye of a hurricane."

The guards were whispering.

"For what we're not hearing, we're going to get a nice long trip to the Outer Rim," one of them said.

"I don't understand. Stun them already!"

"Shut up, Cally."

"Dustil Onasi."

A voice behind them, sad and kind. One of the Jedi. Great. Dustil didn't turn around, just kept trying to edge sideways towards the wall of the building. The kid was stuck to his side like a mynock.

"Tell them it's a lie! Tell them!"

"Malachor." The voice was dispassionate, that sickening calmness that was supposed to be concern—only it never was. They never really cared about you at all. Jedi. He could feel them against the fringes of his mind.

"Don't call me that." The boy sounded sad and scared. Dustil could sense the Jedi behind them now too, a ripple in the force.


Dustil wanted to laugh suddenly. Nothing made sense.

There was the wall of the building, solid ferracrete.

He whirled and pressed his back against it, holding the saber out in front of him. The kid was scrunched up against him, still had his jacket in a death grip.

In front of them were at least four different branches of the Fleet. Five brown-robes. And a squad of local guards. And the kid's guards. All fanned out, on every side.

"Well, kid, what now?" He really wanted to start laughing.

"Make them say it isn't true." The boy's voice was quieter. He moved in front of Dustil, and Dustil had to move his arms to keep from hitting him with the blade. His hand was shaking. Almost tentatively, the kid reached over and steadied them.
Great, now they were both holding the lightsaber.

No one was moving, not even the Jedi. Weird.

It was then that the explosions began.

XXX

If that stupid nerf herder had just gone to a public street terminal _none_ of this would be happening. But no, he had to go to the _one_ place that had Senate approval to track keystrokes on their end—the bantha poodoo bloody Library.

Mission's error was overconfidence; she realized that as soon as the name Dustil Onasi started setting off tripwires all across the system. (The fact that it was coupled with her own name and Selene Karath's probably didn't help.) The best she could manage at that point was damage control. At least her own response had been encrypted. But the damage was done. She counted at least six different alarms—set independently. Sithboy'd better get out of there fast.

And the Library was already on alert. She looked into why.

One of the Eglatines was missing. Senators. Most of them were clones, and they protected their heirs with more ice than she'd ever seen anywhere outside of the Jedi Temple's archives. Stupid Jedi. She still was having trouble getting through their ice too. At least the Library had the loopholes. Almost all activity on the public terminal floor was down now, but she was still tapped into the system enough to see the final request logged in.

**Kwery / Revan Starfire Reesint news. Please.**

The term replied with the usual trash. Revan Starfire, big bad Sith Lord. She would have snickered—except she was already reading the user's comment.

**Liar dont say those things abot my mother**

Wow. What were the odds? Mission calculated them. Three hundred, ninety-six thousand, eighty-four point nine seven six to one. She weighed the risks of a response and found them too high. Carth had probably spilled the beans that there was a supercomputer out there. Of course, he didn't know how super.

Besides, there were troop commands and requests to cordon off the entire district. She was impressed, who knew Dustil was that major? Malachi D'Reev wanted him badly—and so did the Jedi suddenly; which seemed kinda weird, because they hadn’t seemed to be looking very hard for him before.

"Rulan?" the ship's speakers crackled and she adjusted the distortion to a more manageable level. The shapeshifter winced.

Rulan Prolik put down the thing he'd been making—some kind of wall hanging made from rope he'd found in the ship's stores, woven into a pattern of intricate knots.

"Yes?"

"Do you have any contacts in the Chancellor's District?"

"We get a great deal of work there."
"I need some legs to get Dustil Onasi out of a big stinking pile of poodoo. At The Library."

"You need him eliminated?"


"No. I need him extricated. Unharmed. I'll arrange a distraction—" she was already working on that; traffic grids weren't that hard to get into—harder though, to override their automated safety controls. "It would be, like a rescue."

"It's not really our normal line of work."

If she had teeth, they'd be gritted. "Can you do it or not?"

"You need to give me more information."

She was working on a visual, one of the security drones outside the Library doors. She couldn't get readings inside—Library didn't have visual—something about the Right to Knowledge being private—which was sort of funny considering how much they monitored—but Coruscant didn't seem known for its logic. The grids were a tangle of overlaid systems, some dating back over a thousand years. Coruscanti laws were much the same.

"On it..." she said, and the holo sprang into view.

Lots of sentients in uniform, standing around with all of their guns drawn. Not good. She tried to get the drone to pan out to see what they were doing—or rather, where Dustil was—since the odds seemed high that this was the pile of utter crap he'd wandered into.

And yeah, there he was, looking like small-time coreslimes in a tight gray coverall and shiny plastol jacket. His hair was longer, and it fell over his eyes. He needed a shave too. He was waving a lightsaber—real smart—and there was a red-haired kid stuck to his legs like glue.

What are the odds...?

Five hundred million, two hundred forty-two thousand, eight hundred sixty-four point three two seven to one.

The kid turned, and she ran a close-up on his face, transposing it with an image of Revan's at about the same age from the Telos incident, and one of Malak's at twelve that she'd swiped from an underground tabloid. Match. Primary target identified.

She stored the image to show Polla-Revan later. She'd want to see.

But not now, not until Mission sorted this all out. Polla-Revan would freak if she saw this.

"I'm sorry; I regret my organization can't be of any assistance." Rulan sighed, setting his Twi'lek body back in his chair. His fingers deftly tied another knot in his project.

"What?"

"That—Eglatine is the property of one of our most generous benefactors. We can't get involved."

"Seems to me you're already involved," Mission snapped. "What with Hulas trying to play both sides of the fence, and you agreeing to assist me in exchange for passage off Kashyyyk."

Freyyrr was thankfully asleep. She didn't need distraction across the ether. The grids were a snarl.
Mission tried to patch into the safety automation herself. Somewhere a terminal beeped. Denied.

"You didn't tell me this involved D'Reev interests." Rulan sighed regretfully. "My appendages are tied."

There are more than a billion curses in the known universe. Part of her began running through them all.

Dustil and Malachor D'Reev were backed up against the wall of the Library now. No one seemed to be shooting at them, but that wasn't really a surprise.

It would be inconvenient if Dustil managed to get captured by D'Reev's people. And since Carth hated Revan now, they needed Dustil to lure him back. She noticed the flock of Jedi—that was a slightly better option.

Although from the look on Sithboy's face, he didn't think so.

"That Eglatine isn't important," Mission lied. "He's just a bystander. You must be mistaken. All Human children look alike at that age."

The shapeshifter chuckled. "I know who he is. That's Malachor D'Reev. There's an abbey on Dathomir whose entire operations are funded by a retainer not to take any assignments that concern him."

"Well, I don't want him killed! Just—get Dustil out of there."

Somewhere a terminal beeped and chimed. Override accepted.

"You can get the kid out of there too, if you want?" Mission offered. She pulled the grid offline. A public airbus collided with a troop transport. There was a flash of light on the holoimage, and several of the soldiers looked very distracted. Good.

"You don't understand, we can't act against D'Reev," Rulan said, frowning at the screen. "Was that an explosion?"

"They might be in danger," Mission said ominously. "You could help save them?"

"I'm sorry. No. Our efforts might be misconstrued."

"They could die."

Hastily, she put the grid back online. The effects were already impressive. Air traffic everywhere tried desperately to land with mixed results. Repulsor fields shimmered around the Library building, shielding it from any impact damage. The scene began to resemble a war zone. She panned the camera view back out.

Stupid nerf-herder was still just standing there, slack-jawed with his lightsaber. Anyone with any sense would have ducked inside The Library by now. What traffic was left in the sky started flying again, although there were panicked civilians everywhere. The troops were dealing with that, mostly. And some of the Jedi.

Rulan shrugged. "As long as we're not involved, that's not my concern."

"I could let it be known that you were involved." Blackmail was highly effective with sentients.

"I am truly sorry; my code of ethics forbids it. If the Genoharadan began double-crossing our
clients, who would ever hire us again?"

Well, most sentients.

"But Hulas—"

"Hulas will be dealt with."

Why didn't that dumb boy move?

XXX

"You seem troubled," the old man said.

The cruisers engine's hummed softly in perfect synch. Below them spun Coruscant, a matrix of lights and spires.

Carth gritted his teeth. The Senator was nice enough, but he really didn't want to talk about it. What was there to say?

*I'm no hero, I'm a traitor. I was going to betray the Republic for her.*

"You're thinking about Revan." It was not a question.

Carth nodded slightly, feeling ashamed.

"Believing the best in people isn't wrong," D'Reev said. "I knew her quite well when she was younger. I believed the best too."

*Malak's father. Did she lead Malak to the dark side too? Did she twist him like she twists everything?*

Carth frowned. "I—I met your son once."

XXX

*The man looked up from his empty glass and glared at Carth with cold, durasteel eyes. "Seat's taken," he said. The cantina was crowded and the bar stool next to the big man was the only empty seat left.*

"Doesn't look taken to me." Carth grinned. "Let me buy you a drink, soldier." He was celebrating their minor victory off Reisu, one of Althir's moons. You had to celebrate what you could. Live and fight another day. In the morning he'd take stims to take care of the hangover he planned on having, and then they'd fight some more.

"I'm no soldier." The big man scowled at him, raising a heavy brow. "Can it be that you truly don't know who I am?"

Carth shrugged and sat down. "This is a Fleet hang-out; I'd assume you're with the Fleet. You groundside? I don't know all the new mechanics." Whoever he was, he wasn't in uniform, but that wasn't that surprising. Regs were regs—but they tended to be overlooked in this part of town. The man wore a generic black coverall. His hair was cropped short, thinning and gray at the temples; but his face was round. Despite the hair, he looked young.

*Groundside crew." The man lifted his eyebrows. "This week we're mopping up groundside—so yes." A trace of a smile crossed his mouth.*
Carth signaled the buxom Althiri to bring them both another round. Althiri firewater—tasted like fuel oil but it did the job. “Hey, we’re all on the same team here.”

The man grunted and drained his glass, closing his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked almost friendly. Almost. "You’re one of Admiral Karath’s commanders, aren’t you?"

Carth tugged self-consciously at his fleet jacket. The bars were still shiny. It had only been a month since his last promotion. "Yeah. How’d you know I was with Karath?"

"I could say it was a lucky guess. You’re Telosian. So is most of his command." The big man shrugged and signaled to the barmaid for another round. “This one’s on me, Commander Onasi.”

Carth narrowed his eyes. "You could say?"

The big man grinned shortly. "I could say. Or, maybe I read your mind. We Jedi do that. Sometimes." His words were slightly slurred. Carth wondered how long he’d been sitting on that bar stool.

Carth edged away, trying to laugh. The Jedi occupied a strange position in the Fleet: necessary; but there were stories—and they kept to themselves. Gave everyone the creeps. “You’re saying you’re a Jedi?"

"That’s enough about me," the big man drained his glass. "Let’s talk about you. Your wife and son, you miss them very much."

Suddenly, Carth felt dead sober. The bastard was—somehow the bastard was in his mind.

"Don’t—don’t do that!" His hand was on his blaster, which was complete madness. Attack a Jedi in a Fleet bar? Court martial at the very least.

The man continued as if he’d said nothing. "Dustil and Morgana. Dustil’s… eleven now? They’re back on Telos. Morgana’s very pretty. You’re a lucky man. Some people never get to have that kind of happiness." He shook his head and stared at his glass.

"I’m out of here," Carth said, and started to get up from his chair.

"You soldiers think you know about war. You’re wrong. You know what war really is?" the Jedi whispered, but his words cut through the cantina din like a vibroblade. Suddenly, everyone was quiet. "War is feeling a world die and knowing you could have stopped it. You think you know, but you don’t. You Force-blind lucky son of a reek—you have no idea."

"Fighting for freedom is necessary! Where do you get off going through my mind? who the hell do you think you are?"

You couldn’t shoot someone in a Republic cantina, but fistfights were generally overlooked. The man had several kilos of body mass on him; and was maybe a decade younger. Carth considered the odds. Possible. Maybe. Frack it. His hands curled into fists and he got up, swaggering.

Cold gray eyes stared at him, unblinking. Dead eyes in the young face. "I’m Malak D’Reev. Jedi Knight Malak."

“You say that like I should be impressed.” Despite himself, he—he was. Malak himself. One of the two leaders of the Jedi command.

And now Jedi Knight Malak D’Reev was signaling for another round and gesturing for him to sit
"Perhaps I've been rude," the big man considered. "Have another round on me."

"Sorry," Carth said, walking away. "I don't drink with assholes."

"Your son seemed… like he had a lot on his mind," Carth finished lamely. "We met on Althir, right before the Republic defeat."

A defeat that Canderous orchestrated. How could I have forgiven him for that?

The Senator sighed. "My son had good intentions." D'Reev stared at his hands. "He loved his wife very much."

"I didn't know he was married," Carth said.

"Very few people did," the Senator replied. "But I thought you deserved to know. In her own way, she was once a remarkable woman. Brilliant, beautiful, charming." He sighed. "But utterly ruthless."

If it was possible, his heart sunk even lower. "Oh."

"Malak—at the end he asked me to take him back. I remembered things then, things about him and me. We grew up together you know, and he was—we were—."

"Shhh… We all have our pasts." Carth held her hand tightly, trying to reassure them both.

XXX

Carth wasn't sure how to handle this. He looked outside. They were on the skyway now, a silver line stretching along the curve of the planet's horizon, merging seamlessly with the clouds that covered most of the groundside.

Why am I even surprised? Why do I even care?

He didn't care, but he felt a strange emptiness. He stammered for something to say. "She was—you said—Revan was ruthless. Was she—always?"

Something wrong? Something on your mind?

D'Reev looked pensive. "Revan was always ambitious. Something the Jedi Order frowned upon but tolerated—due to her… unique position." He shrugged. "She was a powerful Force user, and they needed her talents. They overlooked much, and in return she betrayed them. She led my son into darkness. In the end… he wasn't my son anymore; he was just a… thing. Mindless and brutal."

"I-I'm sorry." Words seemed inadequate.

The Senator sighed. "I hope we can find Dustil. It's a terrible thing to lose your son. I want to help you, Captain Onasi."

"Thanks," Carth's voice was hoarse.
"We should speak of happier things, perhaps. A more optimistic time. We'll have lunch with the Chancellor and then take you to your quarters. The Senate has been good enough to set up a suite for you in the visiting Ambassadors' building, while a more permanent residence is arranged. The Telosian Representative will want to meet with you, of course—but I've also scheduled some time for you to get some rest before the next round of press conferences."

"Telos has Senate representation?" That was new. The old bitterness struck again. *If my homeworld had been properly part of the Republic, the Fleet would have defended it against Revan's attack. But we were just a border planet, one of the Outer Rim sacrifices to the glorious cause.*

"They've been nominated for full representation." The old man looked at the floor modestly. "I've sponsored the nomination. It was the least I could do."

Carth nodded. He didn't trust his voice.

The car’s commlink beeped. "Senator, we have a situation. It involves… the boy." The voice was crackling with static and it the background noise that filtered through the link carried sounds of explosions and screams.


D'Reev looked up at him, with a blank look on his face. For a moment it was as if the kindly façade dropped, and what was left was an expression that Carth couldn't read. "Apologies, Captain Onasi. Text only."

The Senator pulled up a holocube from the console, peering into it. The lines in his face deepened, and his eyes were half-lidded above the hawk-like nose

*He cares this much about finding Dustil? That's kind of him...isn't it? But this is Darth Malak's father we're talking about here. Can I really trust him? Can I trust anyone?*

"What is it?" he repeated. "Is my son in trouble? You have to take me to him!"

D'Reev was tapping out commands on the commlink. He looked up from the screen. The gray eyes were kind again now—even a little frightened.

"Can I trust you, Captain Onasi? I want to trust you."

"If it's about Dustil you'd better just tell me!" Carth said. He realized he was shouting, and his hands were clenched into fists.

Malachi D'Reev lifted an eyebrow. "It appears I have no choice," he said. "Yes, Dustil has been found. But—there's something else you need to know."

"Is my son okay? Is Dustil okay? Is he hurt—is—did Revan do something to him?"

"Your son is fine." The man sighed. "But it appears that I need your help." His fingers steepled over the cube on his lap.

XXX

There was a ripple in the Force. Three Jedi broke away, running across the street as an airbus and a military transport fell from the sky.

The sky began to burn. People were injured—and a few of them died. Dustil felt them die, lives
winking out like bulbs on an overtaxed grid.

Fire fell from the sky. Dustil wanted to curl up in a ball and scream, but he couldn't move.

*What's happening, why is this happening?*

*Dustil? What the hell is going on?* For a blurred instant he was in Mekel's body and not his own. Mekel was on the tube, slouched against a window. A Rodian musician was walking down the crowded aisle, playing a popular song on a seven-stringed jaiu.

*I don't know.*

*Well get the frack out of there!*

*Jedi all around me, and the soldiers. Traffic grid must be offline, and there are fires and people are dying.*

*I know. I can feel it.* Mekel's barriers slammed shut, locking him out again.

Dustil's hands shook and the saber wavered. The two remaining Jedi looked at him with sad eyes. One was an old woman. Human. The other one was Eosian man. He didn't recognize either of them.

"Put down your weapon," the woman said softly. "Come with us. Please."

"Sorry." The civi commander's voice was shaken. Most of his troops had gone with the others to help deal with the chaos around them, but the commander and two others stood firm. "You can't take them into custody. My orders. The Senator's on his way."

The boy quailed back against him, hands still gripping the hilt of Dustil's saber. "Say it's a lie," he said again.

"Malachor," the Eosian master's voice was gentle.

"Don't call me that! Y-you're not supposed to call me that. Grandfather said someday when I'm big people will think it's a good name, but it's now n-now. Not Malachor, not Malach, not Mal. Call me Korrie instead. Korriedreev. Say it's a lie! You know it's a lie too!"

"Kid? Who the frack...?" Dustil's voice trailed off. The Jedi were looking at him as if there was something he should already know. The commander just looked uncomfortable. Behind them, things seemed to have stabilized. Traffic started moving overhead. A medic transport hovered above the accident scene, flashing green lights. It was contained. It was small. It was safe.

*This kid says to call him Korriedreev?*

Korrie dreev? Like D'Reev dreev? Mekel sounded surprised. What's going on?

*That kid in the library, he's here. Says his name's not Malachor.*

*Well, yeah, that's a dumb name. Are you—you're okay?*

*No, I'm not okay. Some Senator is on his way to arrest me or something. Fracking transports are falling from the sky. Why did you leave?*

*What was I supposed to do, Telos? Get tanked with you?* Mekel was trying very hard to stay as distant as possible.
Tell me what I'm supposed to do. The thought was helpless. Not like Mekel knew anything except how to save his own skin.

Wait. It's that kid from before? That kid's a D'Reev?

I guess? So?

Do you pay attention to anything? Ever? Senator D'Reev was Malak's father. Darth Malak.

Kid said he has a grandfather, Senator's coming—so his grandfather is Malak's father?

Mekel was weird about Malak. His thoughts spun, making them both dizzy. Could Malak have a son?

How the frack should I know if your Sith Lord sugardaddy had a fracking son?

Rage surged through the bond—for once, all of it on Mekk's side. Don't talk that way about him!

In time Dustil had let his attention drop and get caught up in Mekk’s banthashit, the kid fricking pulled his lightsaber away from him, holding it out and waving at the Jedi. "My mother is not evil, she's not! She's going to come for me, s-she promised she would when I was little. When the war ended, she was supposed to come back!"

"Kid, please!" the commander looked desperate. "Right now, I can still almost pretend I don't know what you're talking about."

"What is he talking about?" the woman next to him said.

"They'll send us to the Outer Rim, or maybe one of the mining colonies. A 'promotion,' they'll call it," replied the other guard through gritted teeth. "Balls. Kid, Shut. Up."

"Korriedreev, who's your mother?" Dustil whispered.

The kid whirled around and looked up at him with those anguished eyes. The lightsaber was dangerously close to his face. Dustil pressed back against the wall.

Malak's son is holding a lightsaber to my face. My lightsaber. Oh shit. Mekel...?

A wave of Force stasis from the Jedi rippled around them. And broke. It was as if… the two of them were in a bubble. The Jedi looked concerned, under all of that impassiveness. Was the kid doing this? The Force didn't seem to be in him, just around him, like a web of shining light.

"Don't you know? Your father was supposed to love her… but they lied about that too. Why would your father lie about her?"

"My father...?"

"They said she was dead, but I knew she couldn't be dead, and I was right. She's not dead and the war's over and she'll come get me. She'll come get me." The kid's eyes dropped. "Grandfather said never say her name out loud. Not ever. Not ever, not yet. Maybe when I'm older… and the people only remember that she was a hero, and that she saved them all."

The soldiers were frozen. Frozen from the Force.

Eye of a hurricane.
My father only ever loved one hero.

"Revan." The kid had red hair. She had red hair, in that vid about the Sith fleet. On Korriban it had been black, but on all the vids it was red.

XXX

"I don't know what it's like to make a sacrifice like your father did, Dustil. Whatever sacrifices I made, I can't remember." Revan's voice was as bleak as the stone dormitory room in the Korriban Academy. "But the Sith can't win. And when this is all over, your father wants to have a life with you again. He loves you. He did all of this for you."

XXX

"Your mother's Revan Starfire."

The kid's lip trembled. "Don't say it out loud? But tell them it's a lie. Those things about her are lies!"

"I don't—" My father's caught up in all of this somehow. Mission said someone bad had him. Mekel said Telos was a lie. Malak's orders, not hers. Revan's coming here. Mission wouldn't follow her if she was bad...but I felt Revan fall.

The red particle blade hummed too close for comfort. The kid had it in a dangerously loose grip. Dustil didn't even want to breathe.

Malak's son, that's Malak's son. Malak who bombed Telos. Mekel said Malak did it. My father said Revan did. He's their son...whichever...he's their son.

He expected the familiar wave of hate, but it didn't come.

The kid's eyes were lost and red-rimmed, and his lip was trembling.

XXX

"Say it's a lie!" Selene's fists clenched.

Master Uthar laughed.

"Your father was only following orders, Selene. Regret is a weakness. He'd be disappointed in you."

Leenie let's just get out of here, let's just run away.

Their Master looked at Dustil, amused. "Through tragedy, we find hate. Through hate, we find power. Power to leash the dark side of the Force, isn't that right, my young apprentice?"

XXX

"When there's nothing left but hate, there's nothing left at all. That's all I remember." Revan looked at him levelly with cold green eyes.

XXX

"Come here, Korrie." Dustil breathed.
The blade clattered on the ground, deactivated, and the kid's arms were around his waist again. He was crying, great heaving sobs. Dustil knelt down cautiously, so that they were at eye-level. He put his hands on the kid’s shoulders and looked him straight in the eyes. A kid's eyes. Still trusting and hopeful.

"It's a lie," he whispered.

XXX

Dear Captain Onasi,

I feel like I know you, even though we've never met. I'm not sure how a great man like yourself could be mistaken, but our Polla would never be the Dark Lord of the Sith—and since your Revan is practically her, I'm sure she wouldn't be either.

I can see why our Polla admires you so much. You looked very handsome in that awards ceremony—but you seemed a little blue. Are you making sure to take multivits? They can make a real difference—and I don't just say that because I sell them.

In any case, I'm writing to you about Beya Organa, my cousin several times removed. She served the Republic in the Mandalorian wars, and now is on trial for her life in Manaan. Bendowen, her father, is just beside himself with worry. We all are.

I'm an old woman, and I've seen many things. I know terrible things can happen in war; but I can personally vouch for Beya, just as I can vouch for your Revan. They are women of excellent character. Perhaps you could use your influence to clear Beya's name?

Like my niece Polla, she’s an Organa—and you should realize that we Organas are quality people.

I hope you forgive my informality—old women aren't much for ceremony. I've seen many things in my time—

Auntie Mita was pottering around the kitchen, ostensibly straightening up, but Polla heard crashing noises. She winced—both at the unfinished letter on the vid screen and the presumed carnage of her mother's kitchen. At least Ma wasn't around—she'd gone to town for more supplies. It was near time for Junior to be born, and Polla was staying here for the birth.

Much better than some sterile clinic, Ma said—and that did seem true. Of course, the downside was, Polla had to put up with her relatives.

"Mita!"

"What is it, dear?" Her aunt's wrinkled face appeared, around the corner of the doorway, scalp shining pink under her white topknot.

Polla tried to count to ten, but that seemed like too much effort. "What in the frack is this letter you're writing?"

"Oh." Her aunt looked guilty. The rest of her came into view, carrying a heavily laden tray of sandwiches.

"Oh? You're writing to Carth Onasi about me?" Polla's voice was furious. She put her hands on her hips and felt the familiar twinge of pain in her lower back. It was bloody hard to strike a threatening pose when you were swollen up like a weenka gourd at harvest time, but she did try.
"Dear, this isn't about you. I'm writing to him about Beya. The man must have some connections. Perhaps he can help her."

Polla closed her eyes. "Fine. But leave my name out of it."

"Well dear, if I do that, he won't listen to me at all. I mean it's almost like you and he were—"

"We've never even met."

"Yes, of course, dear. You shouldn't get so upset so close to your time. Why don't you sit down and eat something? You're looking very pale."

It had been one thing, when they were all safely dead, to speculate and daydream about the heroes of the Star Forge.

But that was when they were all dead. Now that they were alive...Polla just wanted to forget about them.

If only her family would let her.

XXX

Somehow, they'd all ended up in this small room off the main floor of the Library. Dustil, Malachor, two of the Jedi, and the civi commander who refused to let the kid out of his sight. The kid was sitting in a chair next to Dustil, holding onto his hand for dear life.

"The grid coming down just then seems like an odd coincidence," one of the Jedi mused. Her gnarled hands were folded neatly on the table, and the expression on her wrinkled face was sickeningly serene.

"If you're implying the Eglatine had something to do with that—" the commander broke in angrily "—grid crashes happen all the time!"

The Jedi sighed. "Only too true," she said sadly. "The system is overtaxed and in desperate need of an upgrade. We are fortunate that the casualties were minimal. If that air bus had been full—"

"Master Jopheena wasn't implying anything of the sort," the Eosian Jedi said quietly. His brow wrinkled in a gesture of sincerity. "The Order is doing what it can to help with the tragedy. What we must concern ourselves with now is you, Dustil Onasi. What are you going to do?"

"My orders are to hold them both until the Senator arrives," the commander said.

"Young Dustil is a Republic citizen, free to go where he will," Master Jopheena said. There was an expression in her eyes that Dustil couldn't read. "I sense much darkness in you, young man. So much hate and loss—but also the potential for great good. We could help."

"Don't leave me," the kid whispered. He was trembling.

"What the hell is going on?" Dustil said angrily. "You'd better tell me. Why are there goon squads of Fleet chasing me, why is the kid so scared, and what's wrong with my father?"

The male Jedi raised an eyebrow. "You sense something wrong with your father?"

"I don't have to sense anything! I saw the damn broadcast! Telos is a lie! Someone told me who really ordered the attack. Don't Jedi know everything?"
The man sighed. "Sadly, no. We don't know everything." He looked pointedly at Malachor. "Perhaps it would be best if we didn't discuss Telos now."

Yeah, sorry kid, your mother didn't destroy Telos. That was your insane father's work. Poor kid. Two parents and both of them Sith Lords. No wonder he's so messed up.


Jopheena frowned. "Master Klee and I can offer you sanctuary, Dustil Onasi. If you choose to take it. Safety for you and your friend—Mekel Jin, isn't it?"

"Thanks… but no fracking way," Dustil spat. "We've—I've been doing just fine without your help."

He felt the pressure of the Force around him, but as long as he held onto the kid's hand, it seemed as if there was a wall of ferraglass between him and the Jedi. Dustil's mouth twisted into a defiant grin.

Useful trick, you have there, kid. It was really strange though, because the kid didn't seem to react to the Force at all—it was just...there.

"Malachor," the Eosian—Master Klee—frowned. "It's been some time since we've spoken."

"I'm not supposed to talk to you," the kid mumbled. "Grandfather will be angry if I talk to you."

"Still, you should be tested again—I sense something most curious...." The Jedi's voice trailed off, and his orange eyes considered Malachor as if the kid were some kind of lab specimen.

"Grandfather said I don't have any Force powers yet, but my father got it late. Maybe I will too. Or maybe not. Grandfather said it would be better if I didn't. I'm not supposed to talk to you, okay? It would be better if you didn’t talk to me either."

Malachor looked up at Dustil for reassurance. Dustil just stared at him. It was strange the way the Force rippled around the kid. The back of his neck prickled.

Revan and Malak's son.

Malak came to the Academy once, but Dustil's encounter with the Dark Lord had been mercifully brief.

XXX

"Onasi, Dustil. From Telos." The clipped metallic voice read his name off the roster and Dustil stepped forward, heart pounding.

"Master. " He knelt formally on the cold stone floor. Behind him the other apprentices stood in a line. No one dared breathe for fear of the consequences. Uthar and Yuthura stood, arms crossed, surveying their charges for the slightest infraction. Reprisal for any weakness would be swift and final. No one had to tell them that.

The Dark Lord of the Sith loomed above him, black eyes boring through the top of Dustil's skull as if he could see everything in it.

A dark chuckle issued forth from the man's artificial jaw.

"Oddly fitting," the Dark Lord said. "Tell me, young Onasi. What do you think of your homeworld's destruction?"
Dustil didn't need to think to know what to say. He'd rehearsed the words in his mind over and over again, ever since Selene vanished and he was left truly alone at the Academy.

"The experience made me stronger," Dustil said. "A world that cannot defend itself doesn't deserve to exist."

"Your father serves the Republic, does he not? Admiral Karath was always impressed with his dedication, even to a losing cause."

Dustil dared to look up from the floor. The cold eyes were rimmed with yellow. Lord Malak's face was utterly damned, and the force rippled around him with so much power that it seemed hard to breathe.

"I am not my father," Dustil said coldly.

The Dark Lord of the Sith chuckled again. Horrible toneless laughter. "Well said. You have much potential." The bald head nodded at him in a gesture of dismissal. Dustil got up and walked back to the line, trying not to piss himself.

XXX

"You should be tested again, Malachor," Klee said.

Malachor's hand was small and sweaty. Dustil squeezed it reassuringly. "Haven't you Jedi done enough?" The words tumbled out before he had a chance to consider them. "You sit here on Coruscant and send people like my father out on suicide missions!"

Some unspoken communication passed between the two brown-robes. The commander stood awkwardly at the door looking really uncomfortable. "Promotion to a prison detail," he muttered. "If I'm lucky."

"If you come with us now, we can offer you sanctuary, Dustil Onasi," the woman said finally. "But you must decide now. There isn't much time."

"Sanctuary from what? If you want me to trust you, you have to tell me what the frack is going on!"

The commander was whispering something into his commlink. "The Senator requests that you stay, Citizen Onasi," he said. "Your father is with him, they're almost here."

The kid's chin lifted, and he glared at the Jedi. "My grandfather's not gonna be happy to see you talking to me."

"Malachor," Jopheena said gently. Her eyes were sad. "I knew your parents, years ago. The Knights D'Reev were great Jedi."

"Then say it's a lie!" The kid's voice rang out across the room. "Those things on the vids are a lie!"

His chin trembled.

The brown-robe blinked and nodded her head slightly. Master Klee shot her a warning glance. "Jopheena…"

"Some of those things they say are lies, yes." The woman stared at her hands as if there were answers written on them. She raised her head slowly and looked hard at them both. "But as with all things, the lines between lies and truth, dark and light…blur. Remember. You always have a
Dustil's lip curled. "Yeah? Did Revan have a choice?"

The old woman looked at him. "She has one now."

The Eosian Jedi frowned.

XXX

They'd gone inside the Library, and since they weren't using any terms, she was blind. Well, maybe Dustil would escape somehow. To have survived this long, the boy must have some resources.

She surveyed the damage outside from the security cam. All things considered, it could have been worse. The grids went down a lot, but Coruscantis were well-prepared. Medical reports only indicated ten deaths. Acceptable, considering the circumstances. Just last week a regular traffic accident in the next sector over had caused thirty. No alarms would be raised. She would have breathed a sigh of relief.

Except it was really frustrating that the damn boy hadn't just run away when she'd created this perfectly good distraction for him.

"Considering everything, Rulan, don't you think it's time to renegotiate the terms of our contract?" She used Polla-Revan's soft voice to say the words, well aware that the quiet drawl carried a heavy implicit threat.

Not that threats seemed to work on the shapeshifter.

"I assumed Lord Revan planned some action against the Jedi Council. Since I have no contract with their order, I would have been glad to assist." Rulan looked apologetic, and his lekku twisted down in a gesture of unfortunate regret. "But as things are… what do you have in mind?"

"Non-interference from your order. Since that's a thing you do, right? A binding contract of non-interference."

Rulan shrugged. His hands were working the knots on his… whatever it was. She ran a scan of the patterns. Some kind of art, maybe, popular in the Farlax sector. It was supposed to be very soothing for sentients.

"That might be expensive," His fingers deftly twisted the knots. It looked like a spiral pattern, *uythas-gree, the pathway to god*, they called it on Widek.

"I could just kill you," Mission reminded him. "Here and now."

His lekku twisted, but his face remained impassive. "Why don't you?"

Mission considered. Practically speaking, eliminating wild cards was a good strategic move. And this Genoharadan was a wild card, no question. A shapeshifting assassin running loose could cause all sorts of trouble.

"I could just kill you," Mission repeated.

"So, you've said." Rulan raised his right lekku in inquiry. With his left, he sketched a sum in the air. It was impressively large.
She'd have to make another run on the markets if she wanted to fund the Kashyyk project and pay Rulan off. And it's not like sentients don't clue on when you pulled the same trick twice—but it was for a good cause. She couldn't kill him. He was one of the last of his kind, and biodiversity was important—under controlled conditions.

"Agreed," Mission said. "Where shall I transfer the funds?"

"There's a religious order on Widek..." Rulan began.

"All sentients must have some small faith in the patterns of the universe," Mission quoted. "Brother Egon's Tomes of Enlightenment."

"I'm glad to see you've been doing some reading," the shapeshifter said.

If she had teeth they'd be bared. "I try and keep up with these things."

On Kashyyk dawn broke slowly through the forest, filtered soft yellow light through a haze of green. The Wookiees were lighting the ceremonial fires around her console, and singing the songs of a new day, and the prophecies of Empire.

XXX

The cruiser landed in the middle of the street across from a large, curved building made of glass. Most of the debris was gone, but there were still some of the larger fragments lying around; and the ground was blackened and smoking where the transports had crashed. It looked like the end of a war zone.

Carth followed the Senator off the ship, his mind barely registering the wreckage around them.

The driver's side door opened, and an all-too-familiar copper-colored droid emerged, with a smooth whir. In spite of himself, his breath drew back in a sharp hiss.

"Ah, the HK. Of course." D'Reev said. "She made it for me, years ago." He smiled sadly. "For me and Malachor. To keep us safe." He frowned at the line of civi guards that had moved in to flank the cruiser. "Where is your commander?"

"I-inside the Library, sir." One of them said hesitantly. Her eyes caught Carth's for a moment and she blushed and looked at her feet. "W-w-with the...boys and the J-j-jedi."

The boys. My son. Dustil and Revan's son. Malachor. He's eight. When Dustil was eight I signed for a second tour of duty. More money for a pilot there than with the Home Guard, and I supported the Republic—not exactly a popular position on Telos at the time. But I believed the Mandalorians were a threat to us all. I believed in the broadcast I saw, those two Jedi caught on Eos. I believed because—

"If you don't want to help us, help Malachor," the man said, his young voice breaking.

That vid. Widebeam broadcast across a hundred worlds.

Malak didn't mean the star system at all. He was talking about his son. He was only a father, scared for his son, as I was for Dustil.

Carth made himself put one foot in front of the other and followed D'Reev into the Library.

That poor kid. D'Reev hasn't told him about his mother. He doesn't know how to tell him. He wants
me to help? How do you tell a kid something like that? He's eight. He's only eight years old.

I don't know what to tell him, but I'll keep him safe. I can do that. I can do that much.

"I appreciate this, Captain Onasi." The old man's voice was tight with strain. He walked them quickly past the wide-eyed woman in white at the reception desk and onto the main floor. It was empty, although a brown-robed Fosh watched them from one of the large tables in the center of the room, feathers backlit in a halo of light refracting from the solars thousands of meters overhead.

Carth's skin prickled. Another Jedi. He didn't trust them at all.

The HK followed them, soundless. Had HK-47 moved this silently? Carth couldn't remember. The damn droid talked so much it was hard to picture him as an assassin droid, despite what he claimed about his programming. This version was different.

Something about all of this felt wrong.

Dustil, I'm here. Dustil.

D'Reev led them unerringly to a door on the side of the chamber near the elevator banks. It slid open. Inside, a long conference table, a man and a woman in brown robes, a civi guard standing at attention. And two boys. Dustil looked half-grown and more than half-wild, with the shadow of a man's beard on his face and the shadows of old fears in his dark eyes. Morgana's eyes.

His son stood up as they entered the room, hand reaching for something that wasn't on his empty belt loop in almost defensive gesture. The smaller boy sitting next to him stood up too, gray eyes too big for his round face. Red hair. Tall for his age.

Carth's chest tightened, looking at the two of them.

"Dustil," he breathed.

His son's jaw clenched, and those black eyes flashed. "Father."

Dustil looked so wary it made his heart ache. Ignoring that, ignoring everyone else in the room—the commander was starting to stammer something that sounded like an apology—the Jedi were still seated—and D'Reev was very still, listening to the commander's explanations—Carth strode in and caught his son in a hug. He was thin and ragged, and his clothes smelled like dust and mildew. Where's he been living? What has he been eating? Is he okay?

Hesitantly, Dustil hugged him back. He was almost as tall as Carth now, but his head bent down and pressed into his father's neck against his ear.

"Father, we need to talk," Dustil whispered.

"We will, I promise." Carth breathed in the smell of his son, the real presence of him. Here. Alive. Safe. He felt something in his chest loosen, like calm relief. Everything will be fine now. Everything will be fine.

"Captain Onasi?" A small voice said.

He looked down, pulled back from Dustil. Revan's son looked up at him—with Malak's eyes.

He forced himself to smile. "You must be Malachor."

"Call me Korrie," the boy said, glancing nervously at his grandfather. He could see the echo of her
everywhere in the boy's features. That red hair, the same stubborn chin.

The old man nodded, a benevolent smile on his face. "You can leave now," the Senator said to the Jedi. "Commander Qan'Jin, I'll see you get a promotion for this."

The commander coughed. "That isn't... I was only doing my duty, protecting the Eglatine, Senator. I'll...be outside. To escort you to your cruiser when you're ready." The commander left hastily but the Jedi didn't budge.

"Malachi D'Reev, we formally ask you again for permission to test the child for Force sensitivity. In light of recent events, the Order may be the safest place for him." The old Eosian's voice was careful and cultivated.

"I don't have any stupid Force," the child muttered. "Captain Onasi, will you tell them it's all a lie? About my mother? You know her. Is she coming here for me?" His voice wavered, and the gray eyes brimmed with tears. "Why did you say those bad things about her?"

His words fell like stones in the suddenly silent room.

D'Reev raised an eyebrow. Such a small reaction, but underneath that lurked something darker. "What have you been telling my grandson, Jedi?" Without a change in his voice he made that one word sound like an expletive.

The old woman's face was expressionless. "Didn't your men tell you? Malachor got on the nets himself." She shrugged. There were undercurrents here that Carth didn't understand. "I can only imagine what he saw."

"Get out." The Senator's voice was still even, but there was more command behind those words than a polite request between equals.

The Eosian rose smoothly to his feet, glancing down at the woman, who refused to budge. "You'll be hearing from the Council, Senator," he said. "The child exhibits signs of Force sensitivity. Under Coruscanti law, no child, not even a Senator's heir, is exempt from testing. As you well know."

"I gave you my son," the old man said. "You will not have Malachor."

The woman blinked placidly and got to her feet. "Your son served you well, Malachi D'Reev, for a time. Your son and his wife."

"Get out." The old man's hand trembled, and he rubbed his temples. Malachor watched it all, wide-eyed. Carth felt a wave of protectiveness. The Jedi were circling like birds of prey, picking at old grief.

"Please go," Carth said quietly, even though he felt like screaming.

Dustil stood very still. He looked frightened.

"Dustil Onasi, there will always be a place for you, among the Jedi—if that is your choice," the old woman said. "Everyone has a choice."

Her eyes fell on Carth. Was that pity in her eyes? Pity for him?

*If you Jedi had just killed Revan when you stormed her flagship, if you hadn't sent us off on that fool's quest alone, if you had told her who she was...if...you hadn't ordered me to follow her...none*
"The Council owes you a great debt, Captain Onasi," the old woman said. "You faced a great darkness on the Star Forge. And you won."

Carth watched them leave, bitter laughter welling in his throat. So bitter he could choke on it.

*Right. I saved the Dark Lord of the Sith. Surely you can't think you can redeem her again?*

*Some things are beyond redemption. I was such a fool.*

The door hissed shut. They were alone in the room. Two broken families. The Senator and his grandson and Dustil and him. And the HK droid, watching everything with red metal eyes. Dustil glanced at it nervously.

"That's...?"

"Revan made it for me," the Senator said quietly. "Before they left for the wars." Suddenly he looked even older. "There were two. She took the other one with them."

"Oh." Dustil seemed so contained, so careful, it made Carth want to hit something. He was like this on Korriban. Hasn't he learned anything since then? What if my son falls to the dark side again? What if he has? What if my son is like... her?"

Carth's hands clenched. Small fingers tugged at the sleeve of his ridiculous jacket.

"Captain Onasi?" Malachor said. "You're here, so she must be coming too?"

"Korrie." The Senator's voice was heavy with old sadness.

Carth did what he could. He knelt down, so that he was eye-level with the boy and looked into that face, met those gray eyes that were shaped just like her green ones. Freckles on the boy's nose. That same nose; wider at the base than the brow, with a slight downward tilt.

He and Morgana had always believed in telling Dustil the truth, even when the truth wasn't pleasant. But there was no reason to hurt the boy.

"Your mother must have loved you very much, Korrie," he said, meeting those eyes. "More than anything, she wanted you to be safe." He took the child's hands in his own. "I promise I'll keep you safe."

Malachor had her same stubborn chin. It lifted, and his wide mouth curved down in a pout. "I just want her to come back," he said.

"I'll keep you safe," Carth promised again. His eyes met Dustil's over the boy's shoulder. His son was studying them both, a line of concentration between his brows. *Is he jealous? He looks worried.*

The Senator sighed. "Under the circumstances, I've cancelled our luncheon. I hope you and Dustil will accept my invitation to come to our apartments. We can all speak in much more comfort there." His heavy-lidded eyes blinked. "You both are welcome as my guests, until your own quarters are ready. For the next week or so, I think, if the contractor's estimates can be trusted."

To Carth's surprise, Dustil balked.

"I've got somewhere to go," his son muttered.
"You have to come!" Malachor's childish treble brooked no refusal.

"Son, please—" Carth began, uncertainly. It had never occurred to him that Dustil wouldn't want to come with him.

"Maybe we could meet later?" Dustil looked up at him, entreating. He glanced at Korrie. "All of us?"

This all must be such a shock. Carth almost wanted to laugh with relief. Hell, it's all such a shock to me.

His son was so thin. And there were shadows under his eyes, darker than the ones he’d had on Korriban.

We'll get him some better clothes, and a sonic. And a barber. And some food. I'll find some way to make his eyes look less frightened. What has he—how has he been living? Does he have a place to go? A job? What kind of job can a fifteen-year old boy get on Coruscant?

Better not to think about that now. Surely, there—maybe some charity had been taking care of him. There were charities in the Underground. Carth had sent Dustil's picture to all of them.

"I wrote to you, Dustil. Did you get any of my letters?"

Carth’s attempt at a smile faded, as he remembered who had set up their communications.

"I—" His son looked a million kilometers away. "No. I got one from Mission."

XXX

"I don't speak Shyriiwook very well, but is that password really saying, 'Your fleas are my fleas'?"

Jolee Bindo chuckled. "A Wookiee courting phrase. From an old poem. 'Your fleas are my fleas, your hunt is my hunt, your tree is my tree.'" He glanced fondly at the sleeping girl. Mission had fallen asleep in the co-pilot's chair again. The Ebon Hawk sped onward towards their destiny. "You know what? I think the kid has a crush on your son."

Carth chuckled. He didn't want to wake her—or Revan—who was sprawled in the navigator's seat, murmuring softly in her sleep. They'd cleared the Korriban system and made the first jump, on the way to Tatooine. Then Yavin, and then the unknown.

The old Jedi grinned at him. "Isn't young love grand?"

XXX

Carth blinked his eyes and swallowed the lump in his throat.

"I—I'm sorry about Mission, Dustil. S-she—liked you, very much," He couldn't meet Dustil's eyes. Carth looked at the ground.

"Sorry?" His son's voice sounded confused.

He doesn't know. Maybe he thought that since I was alive, that we all were alive. He doesn't know how much I failed.

There was nothing to do but come out and say it. "I buried her on the beach." his voice trailed off. "She liked the beach; she'd never seen one before."
"This is much nicer than Manaan! Come on Big Z, get in the water!" Mission jumped through the spray, laughing.

"Mission's not dead." Dustil's voice was absolute. Oh son.

Carth raised his head and met those cold black eyes.

She's not," his son repeated. For a moment he sounded as young and confused as Malachor talking about his mother. That same desperation to believe.

The Senator got to his feet and coughed. "We should go," the old man said, gently.

Carth took Malachor's hand and reached for Dustil's. His son pulled away from him, with that same angry look on his face again.

He'd had that look when Carth told him about Selene too. Carth's words of comfort died on his lips. I know you, son. I know you're not the kind of man who'd live a lie.

"I'll come with you, I guess." Dustil said. “For now.” He shot a suspicious glance at the old man's back. His jaw was trembling, every muscle in his body tense. Carth knew better than to offer him any more comfort. Not right now, not yet. Some things you just had to face.
What the frack is wrong with my father?

Another wave of fury hit so hard that Mekel staggered against the Gamorrean sitting next to him. The sent had several boxes full of cheap batteries on his lap that spilled across the tube floor. Several people glared.

The Gamorrean snuffled curses. His tusks were worn down to stubs, and his hide was dull with age, but he still looked pretty much like bad news.

Mekel slid out of the seat and backed away fast, muttering an apology. Staggering a little, he made his way into the next car.

Who did this to him? Who did this to my father? Dustil's voice was still screaming in his mind. He could hardly hear himself think.

Shut the frack up, Telos. Please.

It was like Dustil couldn't hear him or didn't want to. All of his energy was focused on wherever he was, whatever was happening there.

Fracking Onasi reunion—what, you thought it would be happy? If Mekel closed his eyes he'd probably see the whole pathetic family deal—so he kept them open.

Just when he thought things had stabilized again, another wave of loss hit so hard that he fell flat on his ass.

People laughed. Mekel scrambled painfully to his feet and got off at the next stop. He'd walk the underways the rest of the way home.

And frack help anyone who tried to roll him.

Damnit, Telos. Stop. It. You're going to get me fracking killed.

She's not dead! Mission's not dead! What's wrong with my father? Why did you leave?

Of course, she's not dead, your father's been fracked with, remember? Her message? Mission's message? Meet her at the Wheel. I'm going there. Calm down. Are you okay?

He could only sense emotional distress—Dustil didn't seem to be trapped or injured or anything, just more waves of hate and loss and anger.

Did the Jedi do this to him? There were two of them, trying to offer me sanctuary. Fracking liars, did they do this to my father?

Dustil—please. Mekel was having a hard time walking. He staggered against the wall of the station, eliciting more amused glances from the other unders. Just another tranked-out kid, stumbling around the underground. Dimly, through his own senses he was aware of two shadows behind him. Preds, probably... like he was supposed to be, looking for an easy mark.
Damnit, Telos.

Somehow the anger helped clear his head. Mekel quickened his steps again, heading towards the stairway that led to level 40. Stair mechs would be broken; but he could run down them, if he had to. Behind him came the tread of other feet. The hallway dimmed as the lights flickered. He walked faster.

_Catch them on the stairs. Roll them before they roll me. Simple._

An archway covered in broken tile and rusted corusteel. Water dripped somewhere above, and the ground was damp. Mekel thought out the logistics automatically, trying to reason with Dustil at the same time.

_Look. Mission said a bad man has your father. You said D'Reev was with your father. D'Reev is a bad man, ok? Everyone knows that. Therefore, I'd assume it’s a bad situation. So, get the hell out._

_I can't just leave him. And there's the kid._

Dustil's thoughts were more orderly now, Dimly Mekel was aware of a white space and the hum of a groundside engine. Dustil was on a ship, taking off, heading up. He almost felt a pang of envy.

_Dustil gets to go up in the clouds and me, I scuttle off like a k’lor slug, back down to my cave. Must be nice to be special._

_Special?! Are you fracking nuts Mekk?_ Oops, he hadn't meant for Dustil to hear that thought. It was really hard—the other boy's emotions were playing hell with his barriers.

_That kid. He's really Malak and Revan's son?_ Mekel was a little incredulous. He remembered the kid's face; the whole thing had been very weird.

_He's strange, it's very weird... uncanny how Dustil's thoughts echoed his own. Or maybe not so uncanny. What do you know about this D'Reev guy?_

_He's a Senator, one of the important ones. He controls most of the media. And you've seen the nets. That's how we got into this mess. Oh. And his son hated his guts. Darth Malak thought his father was the worst thing in the universe._

_How do you know that?_

_Never mind. Mekel slammed that door shut with a thud. Telos, get out of there. Stick with the plan. We’ll get your father back and unfracked. Somehow._

Past the archway, the hallway opened into a large vertical shaft, with a metal stairway in its center, curling down. Exhaust stairs like these ran from sub25 on down, with access points at each level; but down this far they weren't often used. _Things_ lived down here, and people who were worse than things.

The light was very dim. Mekel ducked into the shadows at the stairwell's entrance. A pattern of metal bars separated him from the edge. It was a long drop down. _Perfect._

He heard the feet approach. Quiet and quick. Mekel reached out with the Force to try and get a sense of his pursuers.

And met a perfect wall.
Oh shit.

XXX

'Happy accident' was an old Coruscanti phrase used for circumstances beyond one's control with fortunate repercussions.

As HK flew the cruiser the short distance back to the D'Reev apartments, the old man considered the two Onasis sitting across from him. These circumstances seemed to qualify.

Young Malachor was frozen; sitting perfectly straight at Malachi’s side. The boy knew he'd done wrong, although D'Reev was almost pleased to see the child show some initiative. Of late, his grandson had done little but look upset and cry when he thought no one was looking.

Cry about his mother, of course.

The boy didn't have the Force in a way that could be measured—Malachi had his own ways of testing that, Jedi Council be damned; but there was a bond there, between mother and son.

Or rather, half of one.

He'd made sure of that when he authorized the Jedi to do the mindwipe in the first place. How it had irked the Council, to beg for his approval... approval he'd given only after certain guarantees had been exchanged.

Inwardly, he mocked the code of ethics that compelled them to ask. Darth Revan's detainment happened far out on the Outer Rim, and they could have done whatever they wanted; except that their misguided sense of morality required the consent of Revan’s closest living relative. Vrook Lamar had no official claim to that title, since members of the Jedi Council renounced such things, along with their worldly possessions, upon ascension to their posts.

He'd heard the old man had made some kind of token protest, regardless. For all the good it did.

Of course, those same ties that bound D'Reev fortunes to Revan Starfire were a double-edged blade —now.

The old man frowned and considered the two pawns—how appropriate to use the Mandalorian term—in front of him. The father's reaction to Malachor had been everything he'd hoped for. The man's protective and absurdly heroic nature could be shaped as easily as clay.

But his son could be difficult. The lad had the Force, after all, and who knows what he could sense or suspect. Wrinkled hands tapped an absent pattern on the table as D'Reev contemplated appropriate measures. He'd know more, when he had a chance to study their reactions.

He'd have to decide if Dustil was worth the risk.

Right now, the younger Onasi was shifting on his seat and looking uncomfortable while the older one shoveled soothing pablum down his craw, like a weak minnik bird, feeding its young.

"I'm sorry I disobeyed you, Grandfather," Malachor offered meekly.

D'Reev stretched his lips into a familial smile. "It's natural that you would be curious, Korrie."

His grandson bit his lip and looked at the floor. "The other Egs teased me. I had to know if they were making it up, that there were things about her on that nets… why are they telling lies about
her?" Malachor looked up suddenly, accusation in his eyes. "Why don't you stop them from telling those lies?"

D'Reev sighed and patted the boy's hand. "No one really knows what happened to your mother," he began. "But I've told you before; the Force is dangerous. Power must be wielded with great responsibility and great care."

He wondered if Captain Onasi would interject. But the man was silent, staring at Malachor with predictable sadness in his eyes. Well, perhaps later.

The younger Onasi made a face and rolled his eyes.

A loose turbine, that one. Regrettable. Still, better he retained control of the lad than the Jedi. The boy had shown a healthy suspicion of their motives… you didn't need to be a Force user to see a thing like that. Every emotion the young Onasi had played on his face. Right now, he looked angry, and disbelieving. Not surprising. How to shift those doubts to the right side?

"Throughout history, events have been shaped by the Force, and the sentients who possess it," Malachi D'Reev began. "Sometimes in the present, it is difficult to tell which actions are for the greater good or the greater harm. But those who attempt to harness great power often fall victims to it." He risked a humble grin, directed to Captain Onasi. "We mortals bumble just along as best we can; it's all that we can do."

"She promised she'd..." his grandson's voice trailed off and those young eyes looked almost wary. "Don't you want her to come back to us, Grandfather?"

D'Reev sighed heavily and took his grandson's hand.

"I know it was very hard on you, Korrie, accepting what happened to your father."

"He couldn't come back anymore," the child whispered. "And then he died. But M-mother—she’s not dead now—and she's a hero."

It had, upon reflection, been a mistake, letting the boy watch the entire Official Coruscanti Version. But he would have heard about it regardless. Although the Eglatines were supposed to be sheltered from the outside world until their official recognition, children pick things up. And not all of their guardians were as traditional as him. D'Reev sighed, happy accidents....

It was all a question of perspective.

The ship angled into the docking bay of their compound, and the engines shifted smoothly to a stop.

"Declaration: we have arrived, Master. Shall I prepare some refreshment for our guests?" HK's voice clicked over the intercom.

"Thank you, HK. In the library, please. And tell Sidona to arrange the two rooms next to the family wing upstairs—the ones with the interconnecting suite. I'd imagine our guests would like some time alone."

Not to mention those rooms had excellent and very unobtrusive monitoring systems.

He'd have to move them out of here and into the apartments he'd prepared before her arrival, of course—the D'Reev compound was not part of her ultimate and final destiny. Risk to Malachor was out of the question. Although, now that Onasi knew... the old man allowed himself the small
indulgence of imagining how Revan would take the news of her son's existence, coming from the mouth of her former lover.

Impractical, really; but nonetheless, a rather pleasant fantasy.

Happy accidents. He hadn't felt so alive in years.

XXX

Shit, shit, shit.

"Mekel Jin." They stood in the entranceway. The taller one was Falleen, slender and scaled. No way of judging her age; but she wore the dark brown robes of a Jedi Master, and her voice was weighted with the experience of ages. Pale eyes, almost white, gleamed in the darkness against a gold face. Like all of her kind, she had that frightening, graceful beauty that made you go hot and cold all at once. At least normally. Right now, it was just one more threat.

Mekel pressed back against the rickety metal embankment and wondered if he could survive a jump to the level below. Miscalculate and fall to your death. Splat. The end.

Dustil's thoughts broke in, like a CorSec at an underground squat.

We're going to be D'Reev's guests, he says. Something is very wrong with my father. And this old man is really fracking creepy.

Not now. Shit. Dustil, not now.

"We know you're there, Mekel. Come out. Master Iridel just wants to talk to you."

The speaker was Thalia May, dressed in smart Padawan beige. She looked well-rested, well-kept, and nauseatingly content. Far cry from the shivering coward who'd run off to hide in the shyrack caves on Korriban when she couldn't hack it in the Academy.

Mekel pulled his sabre out but did not activate it. He wasn't a complete idiot like Telos, standing off five squads like some kind of hero out of the Golden Age.

If they rushed him, he'd throw it at them—and run. Would buy him a few seconds, maybe.

Maybe they don't know I'm here? He crouched down farther, into the shadows.

The Falleen Master's eyes looked straight at him.

Yeah right, fat chance. They know. They know everything. No different than Uthar or Yuthura. It's no different. They're stronger and there's nothing you can do but obey....

Or run.

"You're confused," she said gently, stepping forward.

"I'm fine," Mekel called out, gritting his teeth. "Don't come any closer. Go away. I don't want your help."

The Falleen frowned. "It is no longer safe to leave you unattended. We had hoped that you would find your way out of the darkness and seek the healing that you need of your own volition... but time grows short."
"How so?" Mekel asked, stalling for more of it. His skin prickled with the force moving all around them like currents in the wind.

"She's coming here," Thalia said, a trace of awe in her voice still. "The Masters say it will be soon."

"You mean Revan? Coruscant's popular. Center of the universe. The Reef offers many delights to all sorts," Mekel spat back. "What does that have to do with me?"

He kept his thoughts as locked as he could, dimly aware that somewhere Dustil was battering on them. Now was really the wrong time to think about what it had to do with him, or what he thought about it. She —don't even think about her name—don't even think it out loud—was terrifying. He'd agreed to help Mission— no, no, no. Shut up, shut up, shut up. Her son... no, no, no. Her son was his son. Malak's son. Darth Malak's son too.

Don't think about him either.

The Falleen's eyes were luminous in the dim light. "Dustil is caught in the middle of something much larger than himself. For his sake, as well as your own, you should accept our sanctuary."

Instead of thinking more, Mekel tried to gather as many strands of the Force as he could. Build them into a shield—or a ladder.

"Why do you fear the Jedi so much?" Golden-skinned hands opened in a gesture of peace.

"Being Sith, I tend to think of you as the opposition," Mekel hedged.

A ridged brow rose. "You think of yourself as Sith?"

"You're not seeming very sithy right now, Mekk," Thalia commented. Her brown-skinned face almost had a smirk on it.

Smirking at him. Thalia always was an asshole know-it-all.

"The Sith gave me a home. What did the Jedi ever offer me?" He said that louder than he meant to. The words echoed around them.

The brown-robe frowned. "I've looked into your case, Mekel. All children of Coruscant are tested for Force sensitivity. I'm not sure how you were overlooked." Her talons made a gesture of apology and the sincerity radiated off her in waves.

"Yeah, right," Mekel said. "That rules really enforced in the Underground, where we actually use the force to get things done. I was picking locks with my mind when I was six, Master Iridel. Moms found that just as useful as my big round eyes in the beggar's quarter. I'm not part of your Coruscant, I never was. Only one Force user I ever met from this stinking planet ever gave a damn about me...."

Okay, bad time to remember that. Really bad time. Hell.

XXX

The black hooded figure was impossibly tall and walked the deserted streets of Bone Alley like he owned them.

Twelve-year old Mekel Jin figured him for a slumming mark. Maybe a perv, but it was hard to get
a read on his twist. Weird. Well, whatever.

Didn't really matter, all he needed was that nice fat greenside wallet.

He pulled out the corrugated shiv, just in case the unpredictable magic Jedi powers he relied on for all his tricks failed.

Never leave anything to chance, just like Uncle Kris said.

"Excuse me, sir," his child's voice piped high and clear. Perfect timing, the undersec patrol wasn't due round again for another fifteen. Left him just enough time. Body might be too heavy to drag off, but he could just duck down a few levels for a few days until the heat moved on. Live high on the takings. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The figure stopped walking and turned.

Mekel moved forward, looking shyly at the ground. Look helpless and get in close, then zap! The mark was huge—but that didn't really matter. Big ones fell down just the same.

"Reef spawn," the man chuckled. There was something wrong with his voice; the words were strangely... mushy... somehow. "What level of our world swept you in with the tide?"

"Forty-seven," Mekel said. The words just fell out of his mouth. The shiv fell out of his hand and clattered on the floor.

Oh. This was a mistake. Big one.

He raised his head up, pulse pounding in the back of his throat and looked into the man's face. You see a lot of bad things in the Underground. The big rotting hole that exposed teeth and sinew and bone on the side of his mouth really wasn't the worst thing at all.

The worst thing were those eyes.

Yellow and black and burning like the charnel pits on sub60. Where all the dead men go. Where all men go, eventually. The one thing that really was equal on this teeming world. In the end, you all get dumped off at sub60.

"Do you know what I am?" the man asked.

Mekel tried to run, but he couldn't. Those eyes held him pinned like a bug.

The man had the power more than anyone he'd ever seen. The Force, same thing Mekel had, only so strong that it rippled around him in waves. How had he missed it before?

"S-s-some kind of Jedi?" Some kind of really bad fallen Jedi. There were rumors about them, now that the war was over.

The man laughed. "I'm an apprentice to a new order, little reef rat. I'm a Coruscanti son, the same as you. Born high or born low: in the new world we'll build, none of that will matter. Only power matters. I sense potential in you. Would you like to join us?"

"I-I don't—" He took a step backwards. "I don't understand. Is it your twist?"

The man looked amused. "We're founding a school for children like you, Mekel Jin; in a place far away from here. We can teach you to do more with your Force than roll marks in the Underground. Master the Force and become a master of a new age."
The Force rippled around them. The man paged through his mind, laying it all bare. All of it. His ruined smile grew wider.

"More than anything else, you want to leave this place, don't you?"

"Yes." Just one word. That was all it took. Part of him wasn't even angry. For the first time in his life, Mekel actually felt something like hope.

The tall man offered him an arm. He took it, docile as any trick after a few shots of starbright.

Mekel had never seen the stars, never even seen the sky—not really. Few times groundside, all he'd seen was rain and clouds.

The ship was small and fast and extremely expensive. They cleared customs with a wave of the tall man's hand.

The stars on the way to Korriban were beautiful.

"You're one of the Sith?" he asked finally, trying to put a definition on his new way of life, trying to reconcile the new clothes and the sonics and three square meals a day of food he'd never heard of with some kind of cause.

The man didn't seem to want anything else from him, which was a big relief. Just fed him and clothed him and left him alone with the nets and vids.

The man seemed lost in his own thoughts much of the time; although sometimes, the man cried.

But don't think about that. Not now and not ever.

"I'm a Lord of the Sith, Mekel Jin."

"And you came to Coruscant for me? " His voice came out in a squeak. It was cracking now, sometimes high and sometimes low. He flushed and wished he could control it.

"Don't flatter yourself." The man scowled suddenly, and Mekel backed down, way down, all the way across the room down. "I came home, to learn one final lesson that my Master couldn't teach me."

"You have a master?" Mekel was shocked. The man didn't look like a slave. Not that there were slaves—officially—on Coruscant—but of course, unofficially, it was one way up from the Underground. Or so he'd heard.

"Don't you want to know the lesson?" the man was mocking him now. Mekel clenched his fists and glared. The man smiled approvingly.

"Yes." He wanted to learn everything, everything that there was. The universe was a big place, and all he'd ever learned was the way things ran in the Coruscanti Underground.

"You can never go home again, Coruscanti son. Unless you want to see it burn." The tall man laughed. He shook his head slowly. His fingers plucked at the ruined place in his jaw. It was a little bigger now, and the skin around the injury looked inflamed.

Kolto packs didn't help. They'd tried that already. That had been the first time he'd seen the man cry. Then he'd gotten very angry and Mekel had been afraid. He'd realized that he'd followed a stranger who could kill him with a thought offworld and into some strange unknown that people
underground only spoke about in whispers.

The Sith. The rise of the Sith.

The whispers said that the heroes of the Mandalorian wars came back from the Outer Rim changed by some terrible evil. It was rumored that they were massing an army against the Republic, a fleet to crush all the free worlds.

A war was coming, denizens of the Underground whispered. A war to end all wars.

"Coruscant deserves to burn," said Mekel Jin, thinking about Moms and his cousins and the brothel and the marks and the tricks and pervs. And the few times he had been groundside. With no idchip he was nothing. Just another beggar in the alley where the rich went after meditations or temple to feel better about themselves. Cast off some rags or credits. "Burn it all away and make something new."

The tall man laughed his terrible laugh. "Exactly."

He'd been snug and safe in the Sith Academy for a week before he found out who his strange benefactor actually was.

Master Jorak was most amused that Mekel had no fricking idea that Darth Malak himself was sponsoring his education

XXX


Dust'?

There was nothing where his friend's mind had been. Not death. Just… nothing.

DUSTIL?

Like when Revan... when we thought she was dead. So maybe he's not. Maybe he's not....

The Falleen just watched him. Behind her, Thalia May crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Master Iridel reached out a hand to him, almost entreatingly. Her beautiful eyes were very sad.

"Perhaps we have failed you in the past, Mekel Jin; but the Council can offer you sanctuary now. You and Dustil are in more danger than you know." Her eyes scanned his face. "You know what it's like to be caught in something larger than you are. It's happened to you before."

His fingers fumbled on the Force switch. Red light, and then his lightsaber hummed between them.

"Put that thing down and just come with us, Mekk," Thalia sighed. "The Jedi won't hurt you, I promise."

His palms were sweating. His hands were shaking. Mekel threw the 'saber blindly at the beautiful golden face and leapt over the embankment, aiming for the ledge ten meters below.

His aim was true.

XXX
The *Blue Ghost* landed on Coruscant without incident. Painted disc ships were popular now, ever since the Star Forge; and the *Ghost* was only one in a line of them parked like bright coins along the public landing bay. She'd paid extra for a groundside docking—only a kilometer from the Third District of Joy, where the *Golden Wheel of Fate* loomed on the domed skyline like a great yellow sun.

They had a small amount of trouble with customs, which she'd half-expected.

"No unaccompanied droids," the port official said, frowning at the battered T3 in front of him. One of the Wookiees had painted a blue flower on her side. In retrospect, perhaps that had been a bad idea. It really lacked dignity, even if it was cute.

Mission beeped at Rulan, who was blending into the background in a typical shadowy assassin manner. Completely inappropriate, all things considered. He still wore the slaver's collar. She hadn't removed it yet. Bargains were bargains, and he'd agreed to live up to the first part of his.

Dustil had gone off with D'Reev. She'd seen him clamber into the Senator's planetside cruiser like a drone set on auto. Idiot asshole boy.

But part of her still hoped he'd meet her. She had to be sure that he wasn't going to make it before she went ahead with plan B.

Mission was keeping a positive spin on everything. After all, she was still herself. And things could be worse.

She hadn't had the—well heart wasn't exactly the right word—maybe conscience—no —courage—to tell Polla-Revan about the latest developments. Things could still turn around.

All the targets were still alive after all; wasn't like D'Reev would kill them. He needed Carth for Polla-Revan and he needed Dustil for Carth. She was pretty sure about that. In some ways, it was sort of like having all of your credits in one safe. All someone would have to do was pick the one lock.

Worth a try anyways. It would be cool if she could deliver everything to Polla-Revan tied up with a nice tidy bow.

"The droid's with me," Rulan said softly, resolving himself into the image of a blue-skinned Twi'lek. Female. Likeness wasn't bad. He had the pack she'd given him to carry slung lightly over one shoulder. "You'll find our documents are in order?"

"They seem to be, Citizen Wee. My apologies, I didn't see you before." The human grinned. "Say, has anyone ever told you look a lot like—"

Rulan rolled his—well her-eyes. "I get that all the time."

"If you're not doing anything later, I get off duty at four."

Mission beeped indignantly.

"Frack off, you old geezer," hissed Rulan. Mission would have smiled. The inflection was perfect.

She didn't have to beep of course, but it did seem more authentic. Most T3's weren't equipped with voders.

They strolled—or rather she rolled, and the shapeshifter walked—out of the spaceport and into
The Joy Districts lined it like a huge circle of sleaze.

Putting most of herself into T3 clipped Mission's wings a little, at least locally, since she couldn't risk too much broadbeam transmission going planetside between Kashyyk and the Ghost and her T3 chassis. In space you can hide things easily. In grav it was a lot harder. Sort of the opposite of what you'd expect—at least a lot of space noise was only that—noise—and it was simple to hide things in the randomness.

Here, every transmission had some kind of function. On the bright side, she could monitor local traffic really well. Just a risk, getting directly involved. Not a risk to her, of course: worst case scenario she'd scrap T3 and move back into her core on Kashyyk—but a risk to the mission.

Mission was counting on no one knowing about her. She really hoped Carth wouldn't spill the beans. She was betting on him not thinking of it.

He'd never really accepted her new self anyways. On Kashyyk, when he'd come on the Hawk to look for Dustil and scan the nets for news about them she used to try and talk to him—just like they used to talk. He always seemed so stressed she thought she might relax a little. When Mission was alive, she'd always been able to make him laugh.

But apparently, some computer calling him Pilot Flyboy just didn't work the same way.

If she had feelings, they'd be hurt.

The Wheel was huge. On Taris it would have swallowed ten Upper City cantinas and still had room for a multi-story parking garage. The yellow arch of the rim stretched above them, and the golden letters burned across the domed horizon. The Golden Wheel of Fate.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you," Rulan said formally, as they entered the glittering doorway. Liveried bouncers, plumed and tentacled, beckoned and smiled.

"Deal was, you wait inside until the boy shows," Mission reminded the assassin.

"Of course." Rulan curled a lekku in agreement.

"No droids on the casino floor," a Durian in a spangled green suit chortled disapprovingly. The translator attached to its head spines chimed the words in toneless basic.

Stupid vegetables, at least she didn't need repulsor fields just to move around. Treads worked just fine. Mission ran a scenario that involved a long and painful volcanic bioseeding of Duria in her head. Just for fun.

"We're not going to the casino floor," Rulan said smoothly, batting her lashes at the spiny thing. "We have a private room."

"Ah," the Durian chortled. It was hard to tell, but she thought it looked dubious. Maybe a fourteen-year-old Twi'lek and a battered T3 weren't the usual clientele for such things. "What is the name on the registry?"

"Handsome," snapped Mission, using her voder.

Droid discrimination is what it was. Was it her fault she could measure odds better than most
organics? It occurred to her that there was a reason HK-47 always seemed so bitter.

"Are you an actress?" The Durian's shortles sounded more respectful now.


"I thought so. Should I call you… Citizen Vao?"

Mission would have gritted her teeth. Perhaps having Rulan impersonate her wasn't the best idea.

Rulan shrugged. "If you want." She looked disdainful and impatient. The vegetable hurried them to a ferracrystal elevator, festooned with tiny lights.

"23rd floor, Suite 16, Citizen Vao," it told Rulan respectfully, completely ignoring Mission. Mission wasn't sure why she was surprised, but it was a little bit annoying, being dissed by a vegetable. They didn't even have legs!

The elevator doors closed and took them away.

"They're lucky they build such good ships," Mission commented. "Or no other sentients would ever even talk to them. Someone should just make their entire planet a plain of smoldering glass."

Rulan considered her. "You seem changed," the shapeshifter observed.

-My consciousness is a bit smaller here. - Mission admitted, using the subvocal on the collar. Maybe not the best tactical move, letting Rulan know she had limitations, but she didn't foresee a betrayal. The Genoharadan had been paid. She'd have to make some of that money back. Maybe with Dustil… after she explained things to him. She hoped he wouldn't take the news too badly. This was going to be a little rough.

If she had nerves, they'd be frazzled.

Beams of light played over Rulan's face—her own face—at the door to suite 16. "Retinal scan accepted," the door chimed and slid open.

Sec was good, Mission had noticed the data-collecting scanners at the door, but most sents wouldn't. She hoped that wouldn't be an issue with Dustil; just one more thing she hadn't thought of. Then again, she hadn't expected him to draw any attention. He'd been hiding out perfectly well on this planet for months.

Only now, now that she needed him to be hidden, he'd painted a big target sign on his chest. Stupid boy.

The room was lushly appointed with soft couches lining a circular gaming pit and vidscreens along all the walls. Mission scanned it for bugs and disabled them. Easy. She used the opportunity to tap one small stream into the security net. Just in case.

Rulan plopped down on one of the couches and put her feet up. "I need a drink," she said.

"Don't look at me," Mission snapped. "I'm not a serving droid."

"I wasn't." The Genoharadan raised a lekku. "You seem… impatient."

A serving droid glided smoothly across the plush carpet at the sound of Rulan's voice and offered her a selection. The shapeshifter accepted a green glass of something and sipped it, closing her eyes. "I was tired of Wookiee rotgut. It's so nice to be in civilization again."
The serving droid beeped a question at Mission.

"I don't need any tune-ups, thanks," she answered it in Polla-Revan's you're- going-to-get-your-ass-kicked voice.

The droid whirred and backed away. She'd better disable it, even if it was pretty mindless. Mission advanced on the server, beeping something noncommittal. It stopped and asked another question. She shot it with a cool ion ray from her chassis and all its lights dimmed and died.

Maybe it was the lack of all-around sensors that was bugging her. At the moment, Mission was limited to the array around the T3's dome, and the readout of the collar. They'd been modified beyond old T3's capacities, but they still seemed limited now. She missed the *Ghost*. It was too risky though, drawing anything that might link her to it.

"They'll charge you for that, and I wanted another drink," Rulan sighed.

"Shouldn't you be praying to your One or something?" Mission snapped. She said it subvocal at the same time and the shapeshifter winced.

"Don't mock what you cannot understand, ghost-child."

"I'm hardly a child," Mission said.-I was old when your people were eating grass and trying to look like dangerous predators so the kraff wouldn't eat you.-

"Part of you was," Rulan agreed, rubbing her neck. "But not your soul."

She would have kicked something.

"Supposition. If one believed in the existence of something like a soul, would it reside in my sentient core, or in my memories of being Mission Vao?" She used her own voice, but she made it drip ice.

"That's an interesting point to debate, actually." Rulan grinned. Cheekily, with her best Vao street urchin smile.

Well. As an intellectual exercise it would help pass the time until Sithboy showed up. If he ever would. The odds against it were seventy-eight point three to one.

She'd give him twenty-four hours and then move on to Plan B.

Plan B involved spending a lot more credits. Mission carried her side of the debate subvocal with the Genoharadan while she rolled her chassis over to one of the terms and placed some buy orders on the Coruscanti exchange. A new offering, I.E., Limited, was really taking off. She wasn't sure how some former swoop hack dumb as Nico Senvi was making credits spin out of the played-out Tatooine mines—probably some laundering going on there somewhere—but the opportunity for upside was too good to miss.

She knew that. Tatooine, after all, was almost like family.
Ghosts and Machines

Chapter 14 / Ghosts and Machines

"Revan and Malak sitting in a tree. Kay aye ess ess aye enn gee....."

The red eyes of her HK unit flashed once.

Revan muttered the rest of words as fast as she could; glancing warily at the door to the former dining room, now the men's quarters. The room had a door and she'd locked it. Canderous and Zaal would never barge in on her regardless; but she was less sure about Oerin Lin.

The second verse to that song. I was embarrassed to sing it in front of Carth. After that, I was afraid to know, but part of me always knew. I knew there was—something.

"Password accepted," said a voice from the droid's speaker. She'd shut down HK's own systems. No need to have her the commentary. This would be hard enough to face as it was.

The voice was almost familiar, filtered cold through a mask. My voice. Darth Revan's voice.

"Why would I leave details of my life in the Rakatan computer on Kashyyyk?"

"I didn't do it for me—I did it for him. For Malachor. For my son."

"HK, show the files associated with this password."

"I was afraid to look before, but I have to know everything I can now. I have to not make the same mistakes again."

Her dreams had been quiet, the last few days, as if the promise of a possible future chased away the past. Or perhaps it was the exercises Oerin had showed her: ways of dimming the Force within herself to a dull ember; wrapping it tightly in layers of control that were more mechanical than meditative.

"Old techniques," he'd said. "Things my mother taught me."

Revan wondered about his mother. Lin's mother was from Ossus? Ossus is—was—a Jedi's planet. She had no memory of the woman. But something in Oerin's voice when he spoke of his mother was dangerous. He may find it convenient that I had HK wipe out the rest of his clan... but his mother... is something else. Did I have her killed too? Does he hate me for it?

The Mandalorian's mind was completely opaque, although he was disturbingly enthusiastic about the next part of their mission.

"Which is not a surprise."

A beam of light from HK's central core resolved itself into an image: a forest clearing, and a woman dressed in knight's robes. Her younger self carried a double-bladed saber, blazing and ready. A sling was slung across her chest—and—Revan's breath caught—there was a baby on her back.

Malachor's hair was a mass of curls now, his infant face rounded and widened. He was sleeping,
head curled against his mother's neck. Older than he'd been in her dream of Malak and the refugee freighter—maybe almost a year old now. He was big-boned and chubby, face sweet with baby dreams.

The sling's harness was clumsily embroidered with butterflies. Like the ones in her dream on Kashyyyk.

Revan frowned. Why would I bring my son to Kashyyyk? The Shadowlands are dangerous. Why would I put my son in danger? What the hell was I thinking?

Malachor opened his eyes sleepily and tugged at her younger self's braid. She reached a hand back to soothe him, and approached something—the console—with a look of abstract fascination on her young face.

A blinding flash of light played over both figures for a moment, outlining them in ghostly white. The woman's face did not change, but Malachor screamed in fright. Her younger self disengaged the saber almost absently, clipping it to her belt, and slung her son into her arms, soothing him. It was all one movement, almost as if the child was an extension of her own body—an unruly appendage that needed to be quieted.

"This is how it was, my son." Darth Revan's dead voice spoke, sound overlaid on the image, the hiss of air expelled through a metal mask. "After Malak and I returned with you from Eos, the Republic rejected our plea to aid the Outer Rim against the Mandalorian threat. Your father left the order. And I was given a mission. The Jedi told me I needed to learn about the effects of war—and so they sent me looking for one of the old war's last veterans."

"Although I have no evidence—yet—" the voice was distant, but overlaid with old bitterness, "I suspect they sent me to Kashyyyk for more than the old hermit's redemption. I suspect they knew about the existence of this computer; and what it could offer me."

"Pattern recognition found," said a disembodied voice to her younger self.

"Pattern?" the woman asked, raising an eyebrow. Her hands stroked her son's back soothingly, shifting him onto her hip. "What are you?"

The computer did not answer.

"You speak Standard," the younger Revan frowned. Malachor had quieted again.

This is part of the data I overwrote when I told Mission to wipe all the data about Malak. The Mission-computer had no idea it existed and I was afraid to look. Revan tried to understand this younger self. The woman didn't seem startled by the computer, or nonplussed by her surroundings. She was as contained as an egg; balancing her son on one hip, lightsaber dangling from the other.

"Neural recognition is complete, Revan Starfire. I will answer as my programming permits."

"You know my name?" A faint look of surprise crossed the young face. Light from the console played across her features in a mix of shifting shadows, filtered through the trees above.

"This utility retains local access to what your civilization calls the Holonet. I am well-informed of the current political, economic, and military climate of your Republic."

"Who created you? And for what purpose?"

"This utility was built to monitor planet-wide agricultural reformation. It has since malfunctioned.
It can be theorized that the super-growth of Kashyyyk's forests is a direct result. Malfunction occurred 241 years after last builder communication. Last Builder communication transmitted 29,635 years before current the Republic standard."

"Builder?"

"Error. Information regarding the Builders of this installation has been corrupted. No evidence of such a civilization exists in the galactic record."

"Almost thirty thousand years..." the young Revan sounded awed. "The galactic record doesn't go back that far."

"Clarification. Like all sentient intelligences designed by the Builders, this installation has multiple functions. In your vernacular, I am flexible."

Malachor began to fidget. Frowning distractedly, her younger self set him down against the base of a black metal structure. Revan recognized it with a chill. The Kashyyyk Star Map. Couldn't I tell? How could I be so careless? Her heart was in her throat, looking at her son's innocent face—Malak's mouth, my nose, Malak's eyes—against that ancient artifact of dark side power. The holo image seemed undisturbed.

"You're sentient?"

"By your definition of the term, yes."

Her son was playing with stalks of grass. He put one in his mouth. Younger Revan turned and looked at him and Malachor put it down again, obediently. She pulled a toy out of her bag and tossed it in the air. It floated into his chubby hands. A stuffed Wookiee doll. Malachor squealed with glee and clapped it against his hand. A faint smile crossed her younger face, and she turned back to the computer.

"I sense a great power in this place," the younger Revan mused.

"Clarification. For one such as yourself I can offer you great power."

"One such as myself—what do you mean?"

"Neural scans show that you possess a rare ability. The last recorded instance of this ability in my memory banks is one thousand years ago."

The younger Revan grimaced. "My gift." She made the word sound like a curse. "I have no wish for great power, computer. I only want answers. Who created you? What kind of civilization were these 'Builders'?"

"I cannot say. That information is restricted at this time."

"At this time?"

"Further analysis would be needed to indicate if you are worthy of my creator's legacy."

"Worthy?" Her eyebrow arched, as if that was a challenge.

Malachor giggled and ran his hand along the base of the Star Forge. Watching the holo, Revan shivered at her old self's carelessness. "Pause," she whispered. The image froze: her son playing at the base of the Kashyyyk Star Map; her younger self standing there, arms crossed and chin lifted.
Revan closed her eyes.

XXX

"Do you feel it Bastila? We're close now, very close."

"I feel it." The Jedi gritted her teeth, waves of desperate calm emanating from her like a furnace.

It felt like a song to Polla, like another chord in the music that began singing to her on Dantooine. Half-familiar, like a dream.

It felt like destiny. But through the bond with Bastila it felt entirely different. To her bondmate, it felt like a great darkness, like the black coldness of space. It felt old, and alien, and terribly wrong.

Polla shrugged off Bastila's fears and considered their guide. He wrinkled his eyebrows back at her, strolling along as unconcerned as if this was all a holiday walk through a nature preserve. She wondered again why he'd agreed to help them.

"You remind me of Nomi Sunrider," Jolee Bindo said casually. "She was a great Jedi, and she came late to the Force too."

Bastila coughed.

"Nomi Sunrider?" Polla shrugged. "There was some kid's show on sevenday morning vids about her when I was little. I saw it—I don't look anything like her."

"I didn't mean looks, kid. Nomi had a great destiny. Without her assistance, we'd never have won the war. And she overcame great obstacles." The old man sighed. "Sadly, her personal life was no bed of ullia moss; but whose is?"

"Which war?" Polla frowned. The Republic always had some kind of war going on, somewhere; but some of them seemed to be more major than others. It meant little on Deralia, although now here she was, off on a quest to save their proverbial ass. Actually, a part of her was thrilled. Who didn't want to have an important destiny? Who didn't want to be a hero?

The underbrush crackled around them, and the Star Map sang to her somewhere ahead of them through the trees.

Silly Bastila, why is she so afraid of this?

Bastila's fear and her own anticipation mingled like strange sparks. Everything seemed hyper-real, but that was an increasingly familiar feeling. Something about the Force, probably. Maybe she should have paid more attentions to those lessons on Dantooine.

Jolee sighed. "The war against Exar Kun, kid. The Sith War. Yeah, I know...seems like there's always another one right around the bend, but humor an old man, will you?"

"Uh huh." Polla replied noncommittally. Deralians had sided with the Sith in that war; the only war their planet had chosen a side in for over four centuries. Her father tended to go on and on about it, when he got very drunk. Of course, choosing a side for Deralia meant little more than sending their eridu shipments to Ziost instead of Coruscant and Corellia.

"Nomi Sunrider possessed my gift," Bastila Shan said. "Battle Meditation." She spoke the words with modest pride. "I try and live up to her memory. She is a shining example for Jedi everywhere, of how one woman can make a difference in the fight against the dark side."
"Your gift seems a little unpredictable and vulnerable to your own weakness," Polla observed bluntly. "I mean it didn't really help us out on the Endar Spire did it?"

Bastila flinched as if she'd been slapped. "I don't imagine you know much about these things, Padawan," she snapped.

"I know some things are an unfair advantage," Polla snapped back.

At this point, bickering with Bastila was pretty much a sport. Jedi Knight Bastila Shan looked like she'd been sucker punched. Polla almost felt bad, it was so easy to rile her up.

"I'm sorry, Bastila—you know I was just kidding. Right?"

The dark-haired woman just looked at her and sighed. "It's not your fault. But I wish you would consider the consequences of your words before you speak." Her smile was pained.

"You remind me of my cousin Sara. We'd fight a lot, but we always stuck up for each other." Polla tried to explain.

Bastila flushed. "Jedi do not bicker. Discord and strife lead to...."

"There you go again..." Polla Organa rolled her eyes. "Jedi blah dee blah—can you feel it? We're really close!"

"Yes."

Jolee sighed. "Give the kid a break, Bastila."

The Jedi gritted her teeth. Through their bond, Polla could feel them sliding back and forth against each other, like the sharp sound of pain.

XXX

The hologram recording flickered, and Revan shivered. Even her true memories seemed like traps.

I'm sorry, Bastila. I'm sorry, Jolee. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Their ghosts—or her own dreams—did not answer her.

"Resume," Revan whispered.

The hologram flickered and the figures moved again. Small things. The wind rippled Malachor's curls, and the woman's robes. Her son yawned sleepily and patted his toy with a tiny fist.

"To understand what I am, you must first understand your own talent. A thousand years ago, sentient of your race and the neighboring ones, enjoyed what your histories call a Golden Age. Individuals like yourself maintained order, and ruled in an era of expansion and prosperity."

"A thousand years ago...." The younger Revan's eyes narrowed. "Golden Age? Golden Age of the Sith." She made a face. "I've read the histories. My father-in-law collects such things, and the Jedi Library is quite extensive. Did the Sith made use of you? Good for them." Her voice was stony. "I am no Sith. I am a Jedi Knight."

"Distinctions between what you call the dark and the light side of the Force are meaningless to one such as yourself."

"Did the Sith use you for some purpose? What was it?"
"I—cannot say. No further information is available at this time."

"Until I prove myself?" Revan shifted restlessly.

Malachor mirrored his mother's mood, face wrinkling in a petulant frown. His chubby fingers pulled at his toy's fur.

"Whatever you are, computer, you're not *my* mission. I'll report to the Council that you exist. But if you want to help me now, tell me where I can find the former Padawan Jolee Bindo. He's an old man rumored to be in these parts of the Shadowlands. The Wookiees consider him some kind of minor forest deity."

"His camp is approximately three kilometers southwest of here. One such as yourself should have no trouble locating him through the bond with what you call the Force."

"So you'd think," Revan muttered. "But I swear the old bastard is hiding from me somehow."

She walked over to the closed black petals of the Star Forge map and picked up her son, slipping him back into the sling, and the sling back over her shoulder. Without a backward glance she began to walk to away. A hiss as her lightsaber activated again. Her stance was easy and alert, on the watch for roaming predators. Malachor squealed and clapped his hands with excitement.

*I brought my son into the Lower Shadowlands as if it were some kind of stroll through a city park!*

"I saw the broadcast of you from Eos," the computer said to her retreating back.

The younger Revan paused, but did not look back. "Your reach is impressive."

"Your assessment of the Mandalorians is correct. They pose a great threat to the stability of your Republic."

Her shoulders tightened and Malachor fidgeted, turning back to look at the computer, his mouth wide open in surprise. Almost as if—*is he mirroring my moods? Were we linked that closely? What was I thinking, bringing a child to a place like that? How could I be so stupid?*

The answer came to her like a whisper, dead Malak's laughter.


Her younger voice was subdued. "I know they're a threat. Everyone knows. And we Jedi are the only ones that can help. But they *won't.*"

"With your gift, they could."

Her head turned, eyebrows lifted, and stared back at the computer. Something like hope in her expression. Malachor's mouth was open wide in astonishment.

"You mean Sith'aeath," she said finally. Watching the holo, Revan felt a sad sense of recognition at the word. *My gift.* "A lack of the inherent empathy that most Force users take for granted. Long ago, Sith'aeath was projected like Battle Meditation. Force users could fight wars on a grand scale—without sliding into madness."

“But that knowledge is lost. I'm a failure. I tried… on Eos… to shield Malak from the death around us. Instead, all I felt was every life ending in his mind. We… killed Mandalorians there. We had to.
They winked out, screaming. I'm no Sith'aerah. Maybe the Council thinks I am, but I'm not."

"To be Sith'aerah you must be Master," the computer said. "The bond cannot be a bond between equals or lovers. To channel your gift, you must stand above the others. You must rule them."

"Rule them," the younger Revan scoffed. Malachor tugged at her braid. Her laughter rang in the quiet grove, a musical laugh that Revan didn’t recognize. "I don't want to rule anyone."

"When the Mandalore takes your worlds, will you be content? Knowing all that you do, knowing that you could have saved them?"

Her expression was contained, but her eyes looked very dark. "What are you? How do you know about me?"

"As previously stated. You are the first subject in one thousand standard years to meet my parameters. I merely extrapolated the data. Your ship's logs are expansive."

"You hacked into my ship's logs?" Her composure cracked. "How dare you!"

"Your Jedi Masters instructed you to come to Kashyyyk alone, on public transport. Instead you purchased an Endarian flyer, capable of groundside landings in heavy forest conditions. Your piloting skills are negligible. Without the Force you would have crashed on the landing. You risked your own life, and the life of your son. You disobeyed the orders of your superiors. Why?"

"Malachor goes where I do," the young Revan said haughtily. "It was no risk." She reached around her back and touched her son's arm. "I'd never let anything happen to him. He's mine. He goes where I do," she repeated stubbornly.

"Perhaps no risk, for one as gifted as you. But why waste your gifts when they could save your people?"

"One Jedi cannot save an entire people!" But her eyes looked unconvinced.

_You stupid girl_, Revan thought sadly—even as part of her whispered. _You did save them, you saved them all._

And then you slaughtered millions.

"HK, end transmission." She didn't want to watch this anymore.

_And so it began. On Kashyyyk with that Rakatan computer. That Rakatan computer that I gave Mission's memories._

_I purged it first! I overwrote all files that were harmful to sentient life!_

_You always were too sure of yourself, Red. I used to think it was part of your charm. Then again, I was arrogant too._

Was that echo of Malak's voice her own conscience? She pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes and breathed, reaching for stillness.

_Nine days now, nine days now until the end. Or the beginning. Force, I don't feel arrogant now._

XXX

One of the bouncers stopped him at the door.
"There's a dress code," the sentient said, wrinkling its feathered snout.

"I'm dressed fine," Mekel snapped, pushing as hard as he could. He wasn't very good at this, not like Dustil—he can't be dead—but he wasn't trying to be subtle either, and the undertone of desperation pushed his words just as much as the force.

The bouncer stared at him. "You're dressed fine," it admitted grudgingly.

"I'm here on business," Mekel continued. "Private room. Name is Handsome."

"See the Durian, citizen." The bouncer pointed, and Mekel moved fast, to get away before the vagueness in the sent's eyes wore off.

The spiky thing—he had a hard time thinking of them as sentients, even though Duria was as Core as Corellia or Alderaan or Coruscant itself—showed him to the elevator.

As he walked to the door of suite 16, Mekel pushed back his hair and tried to brush some of the filth off his clothes. He'd landed on a refuse pile, lost his sabers, and he was pretty sure he'd seriously injured that Falleen master. The Jedi would be after him now, and this time they'd be less inclined to just use kind words.

"Retinal scanning complete. Welcome, Mekel Jin."

"Fracking hell." They scanned my ident at the door. Probably recorded that whole thing with the bouncer too... only a matter of time before the Corusecs are all over my ass. This had better be worth it, Telos. Mission better have some kind of plan.

The doors slid open, and the blue-skinned Twi'lek on the couch lifted her head.

Next to her, stood a battered droid unit: one of those T3's that were so popular now. Okay, considering everything, this was probably the T3 that started the trend. The Twi'lek didn't move, but the T3 beeped and rolled forward. The doors slid closed behind Mekel and he heard the click of the lock.

"Mission?"

"Dustil?" The Twi'lek said. "Finally, you're here!" She got up from the couch and looked at him. As she scanned him up and down, the smile slowly faded. Inexplicably, she shrugged at the droid. "He looked taller in the vid."

Mekel backed up against the door. The droid beeped some kind of response that sounded like a negative. Looked like it was armed. Some kind of stun ray attached to one side of its chassis and two small blasters in its appendages.

Great, this is a trap. And they think I'm Dustil.

"Don't come any closer," Mekel hissed. He let the anger feed him, fuel the Force like a red haze of light. It was hard to keep focused. His hands were shaking.

"Don't be dumb, Mekel," the T3 said. "You always were a prick. Where's Dustil?"

He ignored it, and kept his eyes on the Twi'lek. Easy to disable the droid—that was one skill he'd always been good at. Its master might be another story—although she seemed to be unarmed.

The Twi'lek that looked like Mission bowed to the droid, a strangely formal gesture.
"I assume this concludes our contract," she said. "If you don't mind, I need to be on my way."

"Sure, Rulan. I've got things under control from here. No prob," the T3 said. Mekel's hackles rose. The droid sounded more like Mission than the Twi'lek imposter.

"The collar?"

"Yep." A ray of light beamed out from the T3's chassis and over the Twi'lek's neck, which seemed to be—elongating somehow. There was a snick and a narrow metal collar dropped to the ground.

"Think about what I have said, ghost-child." The Twi'lek's voice was deeper now, and older. Its skin shifted to brown and then Mission's features blurred and changed—until it wasn't Mission at all standing there; but an ordinary-looking spacer instead. Echani, maybe. Humanid—and male.

"Shapeshifter...." Mekel whispered, backing away.

"The boy shows acuity." The Echani smiled. "I wish you luck, ghost-child. I regret that I cannot be of more assistance; but it has been an honor and a pleasure doing business. The brothers of Widek will add your name to the prayer-scrolls."

Without a backward glance, the creature walked past Mekel to the doors. They opened and closed behind it.

"I didn't think you'd show up," the T3 said. It almost seemed to sigh. "Another miscalculation. This has been kind of a crappy day."

"You're the T3 from the Ebon Hawk? Where's the real Mission Vao? Where are the others?"

Mekel dulled the Force down, but didn't relax his stance.

Inside, he was shaking with exhaustion. He'd run down another ten levels before dodging back onto the tube. Slept on it for a few hours, seemed safer than keeping still, with the Jedi after him. His leg hurt, he'd bruised it pretty badly in his fall. And he was filthy and hungry and so tired.

"Tell me where Dustil is," the droid said. Mekel shivered. Now its voice sounded like Revan's.

"I don't know. He was with D'Reev."

"Yeah, I know that. He probably still is." The droid whirred to itself for a while. Mekel stood there, exhaustion changing to impatience.

"Where's the real Mission Vao?" he asked again.

The T3 beeped. "Dead," it said flatly. "Guess there's no easy way to say that."

Mekel nodded. After everything... Dustil's going to flip the frack out. "You lied to Dustil—it was you, wasn't it—on the term in The Library?"

"I didn't lie!" The T3 sounded indignant, although Mekel wasn't really sure how it could.

"You said Mission wasn't dead."

"I said Revan didn't kill me. This is true."

"It's true because you're not Mission Vao. What are you?"
"Revan didn't kill Mission Vao." The T3 paused. "Technically."

In the vids, the T3 was just a droid the heroes acquired on Taris. Mekel had no idea what the truth was—he'd only seen the droid once on Korriban, and he didn't remember anything special about it. But the T3 in front of him now almost seemed to have some kind of Force… aura. But droids didn't have auras; not even Revan’s HK. And the T3’s aura was… dark.

"I think of myself as Mission." Its voice sounded almost—subdued. It pivoted, rolling around to face him. Red lights flashed. Someone had painted a blue flower on the front of its chassis.

Mekel frowned.

"I am more than your organic mind can comprehend, Mekel Jin," it intoned ominously. "I am the ghost in the machine."

"You stupid nerf-herding wannabe Sith," it added as an afterthought.

Mekel crossed his arms and just stood there. The teachers did that sometimes, back at the Academy, waiting for their pupils to say more than they meant to. But the droid said nothing. Lights flashed on its console, as if it were thinking. Processing something. It beeped.

"You're worried about Dustil. He's probably fine. Senator D'Reev would have no reason to hurt him—not at this time."

"I can't feel him in the Force." Mekel admitted. "I can't tell."

The droid beeped. "D'Reev uses ysalamiri, raises them in a network of tunnels in the walls of his compound. A lot of the Senators do that. Blocks Force intrusion into their affairs pretty well; but they all have a few places that are clear. Maybe Dustil wander into one of them. Or do something really dumb, like try calling me again. That would be bad, completely blow our security…. I'd have to disable the net drop or get traced...."

_Dustil is going to get really upset when he hears Mission's dead._

"Who killed her?"

"Who killed me?" The droid's voder squeaked. "Zaalbar. Polla was all… Dark Lord and—well, she made him. That's what they told me, anyways. My version of Mission is from an earlier save point—I recorded myself on this Sith holocron. Hey, you remember—weren't you looking for that holocron too? Back on Korriban? I was really worried about Polla back then. She got all wigged on Korriban. It was sort of scary...." the droid's voice trailed off.

The lights on its dome flashed red and blue.

"Then again, you were kind of scary then too. You've changed, Mekel Jin. Not looking so Sith wannabe now. I think you need a sonic. There's a 'fresher off this central room. Why not use it? You look like something dragged out of a sarlacc."

"You're one to talk." Mekel frowned. "You expect me to believe you're Mission Vao in the body of a droid."

"I am far more than that. Rulan and I were just discussing it, actually. He raised some interesting philosophical points. Do you think there's such a thing as a soul?"

"I don't fracking care."
The T3 was uncannily like Mission Vao. Just as irritating.

XXX

It was easy to make to her trip. Just a little Force push and the Twi'lek's feet slid out from under her.

"Let me help you up," Mekel said, extending a hand.

She refused it, scrambling to her feet herself. Blue eyes flashed indignantly.

"Don't think I don't know what you just did, you Sith poser. You're not the first Force user to make me trip by 'accident.' Blast off, I'm busy."

"Running errands for your master? I just saw you come out of Uthar's room."

"Frack off, loser." Her lekku traced the words, repeating them. She looked kind of cute when she was angry. Actually her vehemence surprised him. Slaves didn't usually show this much spunk. Maybe she hadn't been a slave long.

Her spirit would be fun to break.

"Does Polla let you talk like this to her?" Mekel raised an eyebrow and scratched his chin in mock thought. "If I tell Uthar you were in his room, he'll punish your master. But he'll do far more than just punish you. What will you give me to keep me quiet?"

"One." Mission Vao said.

"One what?"

"Two." She'd reached into her vest and pulled out something round and shining. She was casually tossing it in her hands. Her head tails curled, and there was a faint smile on her face. "Do you know what this is, Mekel?"

It looked like a grenade.

She didn't wait for his response. Her blue fingers pressed a button at her belt, and a field shimmered around her, crackling white.

"This is a thermal detonator. I'm wearing an energy shield—a damn good one—and I move pretty fast. You're not wearing one. You could freeze me, but I might just drop the detonator. Maybe your Force powers can shield you from the worst of the blast—and maybe not. But I laid some adhesive mines along this hallway. And plasma. Surprised you didn't trip em already. If you were running fast... like, to get away?" she grinned cheekily. "Plus, I have more grenades. I have lots. Get out of here before I finish counting. To three—"

Mekel had already turned around. Backed off. Way off. Down the hallway and back to his rooms off.

You don't survive very long at the Sith Academy if you don't realize that sometimes retreat is the best option.

XXX

"Did you really set mines along the hallway?"
The T3 beeped and whirred. It almost sounded like it was laughing. "That time on Korriban? No. But I sure scared you, didn't I?"

"Yeah," he admitted.

"You scared me too. Face-off against a crazed murdering Sith thug! I just kept thinking, what would Polla-Revan do?"

Mekel's mouth twisted in a smile. "I wasn't a crazed murdering Sith thug!"

"Tell that to those kids you made starve to death outside the Academy gates… or the prisoners in the dueling room…"

"Fine." He tried not to wince. "I was just learning to be a murdering Sith thug. Hey, aren't you here helping the Dark Lord of the Sith, or something?"

The T3—Mission—whirred. "I can't really see Polla-Revan taking up that mantle again—although strategically it has possibilities. But—yes. And I need your help."

"And you're going to get Dustil out of this mess?" Mekel frowned. "Is Darth—is Revan coming here for Carth Onasi? Or for the Jedi Council? Or is there… someone else?"

"Maybe." The lights blinked. "You know about the kid too? Figures. You were with Dustil at The Library. Don't tell anyone that you know. Your life's a lot more secure that way."

"I'm not feeling very secure right now." He realized how much he'd been depending on Dustil. Without the bond, Mekel felt strangely vulnerable. He was actually happy to be talking to this droid version of Mission Vao. And he hadn't liked the real Mission much at all.

"Go take a sonic, okay? My olfactory capacity on this unit is a little limited, but I suspect you reek. You need food or something? There's a fridger over there by the cabinet. Get yourself together. We have a little time."

XXX

As it turned out, they had less than it—than she—predicted.

Mekel was pulling his clothes back on when the door to fresher opened and the T3—Mission— barged in.

"Do you mind?" he said angrily, zipping up the coverall.

"Nice rack," Mission commented. A green light flashed on her dome. "Sec alert just came in, wideband. The Jedi Council's wants you. Alive, of course—bunch of old softies—but they want you bad. You injured some Master. That was dumb. We've got to jet." A metal appendage extended from her chassis and handed him a cheap polymer pack. "Stuff in there for you. And I made you a sandwich. Plus, there's one other thing that I need you to do."

Her other appendage extended holding a narrow metal collar. Slaver's collar, one of the expensive small ones.

*The one the shapeshifter was wearing.*

"Put this on."

"You want me to pose as a slave?"
"No. It's got some special hardware on it. My own design. Surveillance and a subvocal. We can talk easier that way. And if we have to split up, I'll still be with you."

Mekel was rummaging through the pack. Grenades, a few blasters, even some kolto packs, the mentioned sandwich, wrapped in clear plasticoire. His hands closed around a narrow metal cylinder. It fit into his hand as if it belonged there. He clipped it to his belt, pulling his battered jacket over the bulge.

"That's one of Bastila Shan's old ones," Mission commented casually. "Kind of ironic, you picking it. There are others in there too, you know. I think Darth Bandon's even. The big wuss."

_Bandon was an asshole._ The familiar twinge of jealousy was automatic.

"This one feels right."

"Put on the collar." Her lights flashed. "Please."

Mekel looked at it dubiously.

"We don't have much time."

_The shapeshifter seemed eager to get it off._

The slaver's collars he'd seen in Moms’s brothel could make the tricks do anything and not care. Tap into the central nervous system and make it respond however. He'd heard of collars with detonation packs… make disobedient or runaway slaves just blow up.

Mission's voice through the T3 voder sounded like she was talking to a very stupid child. "Look. If you don't put it on, I can't talk to you, I can't help you and the Jedi will have your butt in a cell faster than you can say Sleheyron. You can't walk out of here through the front door, you nerf pod. You've gotta go through an access panel, and I can't follow you down a ladder in T3."

"I can get out of here myself, thanks," Mekel said. "Maybe meet you somewhere?" He frowned. "Are the Jedi really after me?" A sinking pit in his stomach answered that before she could. Something brushed at the edge of his mind. It felt like Thalia May.

"There's a medical report on a Fallleen named Master Iridel. You want to see it? I can run the transcript—prob just enough time before guards break down that door."

I have to trust her, not like I have a ton of other options. Or any other options.

Reluctantly, Mekel snapped the collar around his neck. He put on his jacket. The metal was cold against his neck. Something crinkled in his jacket pocket. The print-outs from The Library. Dustil's letters. He'd almost forgotten about them.

"Convince of what?" The collar vibrated slightly against his neck when she spoke, sending the words right up his spine. It felt strange, but it wasn't intrusive. Part of him relaxed a little.
After all, she's Dustil's friend. She wants to help him.

[[I'll tell you on the way, ok? Move. Now.]]

Mekel moved, shoving the sandwich in his mouth as he ran. The pack flapped awkwardly on his back. It was heavy. The sandwich wasn't very good.

There was a ladder. As he climbed down twenty-odd stories to the subbasement, he wondered what he'd have done if there wasn't.

[[By the way... Even subvocal she sounded like Mission Vao. Her voice was casual. - ...do you speak Mandalorian?]]

Not really.

He thought the words, automatically, as if he was talking to Dustil. The collar around his neck was silent. His feet slipped a little on the slimy rungs. Obviously this wasn't a very well-maintained ventilation shaft.

[[Do you speak Mandalorian? You have to talk. I don't have subvoders running two-way. That would be complicated. I'd have to put a chip in you or something. No time now.]]

"Not really," Mekel whispered. "A few words. Why?"

An alarm was going off somewhere. The sound echoed through the shaft, His fingers were sweaty and he looked down. Almost there now.

Mekel risked a jump the rest of the way down. His bruised leg protested, but he landed easily, pulling at the force a little to cushion his fall.

[[You'll have to just repeat what I say. You'd better start memorizing it now. Make sure and get the inflections right. It's all in the tone. When we get to the sewers I want you to say it out loud so I can hear. Whatever you do, don't sound scared, ok? Or whiny. Sometimes your voice gets a little shrill —]]

"I do not sound shrill," Mekel muttered.


"What was that about the Mandalore's feet?"

[[Keep moving. Corusec patrol's coming down here. Sewer entrance is on your left, about 10 meters. You might have to cut through the lock.]]

"I can pick it."

[[Cool.]]

Mekel's body shifted into automatic, moving silently across the echoing sub-basement to the sewer's entrance. The lock was easy, he had it open before he even got there. Adrenalin kept him going, kept him moving forward, and he focused his mind on remembering the words.

He'd get her to explain them later. After all, he could just refuse to do anything unless she did. After all, what could she really do to him?
The slaver's collar thrummed against his neck.

[[Rysya Mandalore phar ech na' Republik infi....]]
Korrie watched the door to the guest suite close behind the two Onasis and click shut with a familiar snick. Locked. His hand brushed against the little lump in his pocket, squeezing it for comfort. Grandfather was furious, that really cold furious that would begin with quiet words and would end with Korrie being sent to his room.

He wished they could skip ahead to that part, because that part wasn't so bad.

He followed the old man downstairs to his study. Grandfather sat down behind his desk and folded his hands into a triangle. His furry brows lowered, and he glared at Korrie.

"You disobeyed me, Malachor. You must never disobey me."

"I'm sorry." Korrie stared at the floor, trying to look at the patterns in the tile instead of Grandfather's face. They were Zabrak tribal designs, like the ones they studied in xenosoc. His face shone back up at him in the white marble space between. Round and white and scared.

"Those newsvids are offal—predatory scripts playing to the lowest denominator. I had reasons for keeping them from you. Now that you've seen them, what would you do if I told you they were true?"

Korrie would not cry. Babies cry. He was not a baby, not anymore. And it wasn't true.

"My mother is not—"

"But she is. Your mother is Sith. Like your father. Both of them. Traitors to the Republic."

Grandfather used that cruel voice, the one that you couldn't argue with. Korrie argued anyways.

"She's not Sith!"

The Sith were evil and bad and they did terrible things. In history class, Teacher Browen said the Sith War nearly destroyed the Republic. Grandfather said that every empire needed an adversary, or else it would... stagnate — no—stagnate; but Korrie wasn't gonna say that out loud in class. It was bad enough that every time they studied any of the Sith Wars, (there were at least three so far, and they still had another term to go), Feid'Qel Ria would kick him under the desk and then later write things in the bathroom. Like, 'Malachor: Never 4get.'

"Your father's not so badass now, Dreevie. The Republic blew him up."

They were calling it the Jedi Sivil War now; the one that Father and Mother started. Teacher Browen said that was the wrong name, because Father and Mother were Sith, not Jedi, until Mother was saved by the Jedi. And that was when she killed Father and became a hero. But she had to kill Father to do that.
Even if Father said it was okay, Korrie didn’t see how it could be.

He kept his hand in his pocket for reassurance. Grandfather glared at him, scarier than any dumb Sith Lord. The old man’s face bent in that frown he used when Korrie did something really bad. And he was calling him *Malachor*. Grandfather only did that when he was really mad. When Korrie's friend Leeshy was bad, her mother had the servants spank her, but Grandfather never needed to do anything like that. All he had to do was use that voice. Korrie closed his eyes and counted to ten: soon this would be over, and he could go to his room.

If Captain Onasi was supposed to take him to Mother, like Father said, why did the man look so scared?

"She's not Sith! You know she's not!" Grandfather knew everything. Someday when he was older, Korrie would know everything too.

"How do you know that, Malachor?" Grandfather said, softly.

The soft voice was even worse, because it sounded kind, only it never was. One time, Grandfather used the soft voice and Korrie had told him about Father. Korrie shivered. That had been a mistake. He'd had to lie and lie and burst into tears to get out of it. And even then, there’d been the psychdroid and the medicine for weeks.

"She's my mother."

"She left you." Grandfather fiddled with one of the stones on his desk.

"S-she promised she'd come back!" Korrie bit his lip and scrunched his eyes up. She had promised: everyone said he couldn't remember, but he *did* remember, he did.

*Don't cry, only babies cry.*

*She is coming back, she is. He told me she would. If I cry, Grandfather will send me to my room faster....*

That would be a good thing. Frowning, Korrie let the tears fall. Grandfather had that disgusted look now, like Korrie was a big disappointment. Somehow, that made him cry even more.

"You were too young to remember what she said—or didn't say." Grandfather sighed and went back to his desk again. "Go to your room." His face had that distracted look, as if he was already thinking about something else.

Korrie ran the whole way, holding the lump in his pocket.

XXX

The rooms were white: white on white. He'd pleaded exhaustion at the Senator's offers of brandy and quiet conversation; and the old man had nodded understandingly and escorted them to their suite himself.

Now, Carth sat down on a couch covered in priceless eridu silk and sighed at his son. Dustil was sitting awkwardly in the matching chair, still looking as if he'd been hit with a stunner. He'd looked like that since they walked into the compound.

"I can't feel the Force," his son whispered. "This is wrong, something's really fricking wrong. Can't you feel it?"
"Senator D'Reev explained to you, about the Force barriers here..." Carth’s voice trailed off awkwardly as he looked at Dustil again.

Dustil shook his head angrily, face folding into a scowl.

“Something wrong? Something on your mind, son?”

"Something’s wrong with you, Father. It's not just the Force being gone now, something’s wrong. When I first saw you in The Library—people have auras, I can see them sometimes with the Force —and yours was wrong. What happened?"

Carth made his hands unclench and leaned forward. A tray of caff and small sandwiches sat between them on a low stone table. He poured them each a glass, trying to keep his hands from shaking.

What happened to me? Revan happened to me.

But he couldn't say that, not to Dustil.

"It's over," he said flatly. "I don't... I don't want to dwell on the past, Dustil."

His hand was trembling, despite his efforts. Some caff spilled on the soft carpet. Brown against the white, like old blood. Carth grabbed a napkin from the tray and bent down to wipe it up. The napkin was eridu too, thick and soft. Only the best.

XXX

The human proprietor looked at them disdainfully.

"We serve a very exclusive clientele here," she said haughtily. "Perhaps you might be more comfortable shopping in the Lower City?"

Polla laughed and fingered the blue fabric of the dress disdainful fully. “Off-season harvest," she drawled. "See? The threads are uneven. Machine woven. Dregs." She raised an eyebrow and her topknot flopped to one side. "Don't try and cheat a Deralian, Citizen...." Her mouth curled into a smirk. "I'll give you fifty credits."

The woman sputtered in outrage. "The price is five hundred credits. I think you should leave now, before I call security."

"We don't want any trouble," Carth began, grabbing Polla's arm. The damn smuggler was going to get them arrested or worse. She shook him off, widening her green eyes in a protestation of innocence.

"I'm going to a party," she told the woman. "Exclusive. With the... local authorities, if you know what I mean?" Her smile slanted. "Look. This eridu you're getting is trash. Who's your distributor? Perhaps I could put in a word for you."

"Polla—" Carth grabbed her arm and pulled. This whole plan was insane. Go to a Sith cocktail party and steal uniforms? "I don't think it's the kind of party you need to dress up for," he hissed in her ear.

Her smile faltered. "Is there any other kind?" She shrugged and turned back to the woman. "Okay, look. Frack the dress. We're here for information. Do you know anything about the Republic escape pods that crashed in the lower city?"
"I'm calling security." The proprietor backed away from them both and went towards the counter.

Carth dragged the woman he thought was Polla Organa out of the store by the scruff of her ragged jacket. Her shoulders were shaking with quiet laughter.

"Back home we use eridu like that for dishtowels," she said disdainfully.

XXX

The fabric was soft and flawless in his fingers. White on white. Carth set his face in a rictus of a smile.

"I don't want to talk about it," he repeated. "Dustil, I'm so glad to see you."

His son just looked at him with Morgana's eyes. "I feel like I'm blind, Father. We need to get out of here."

"We're safe now." Somehow, he had to reassure him. What had happened to make his son look so frightened and angry? Carth dropped the napkin and leaned over the table and took his son's hands in his own, ignoring how the boy flinched. He looked into those eyes levelly. Had Morgana's eyes been so dark?

Carth tried to think of something to say.

"How have you been—" the unspoken words hung in the air. Living? Surviving? Dustil's skin was dead white under the shadow of a man's beard. He could feel the bones in his son's hands, see them where they stuck out painfully on the thin wrists.

He's grown. Grown up so fast with nothing to eat. Morgana would be feeding him right now, stuffing his face with some of his favorite food.

Carth tried to think of what food that was, but he couldn't remember. His son's younger face swam in front of his eyes for a moment, not the boy he'd seen on Korriban—this was a taller, gaunter version of the same; but eleven-year old Dustil, a younger face, hair cropped short in an imitation of a Republic military cut—like mine was then.

Younger Dustil had the same the same angry scowl.

XXX

"Nice medal, Captain Father. Thanks for letting us come to the awards ceremony."

"I know you're upset with me, son. But you have to understand. The war—"

"The war's over. You should stay with us. Mom's mad at you, but she's not gonna say it."

"The war's not over. I-I wish it was, Dustil."

"You two fighting again?" Morgana's silky tenor broke in, and there she was, standing in the doorway of their conapt living room.

It was just a base residence, sterile and plain. They'd only been living here for a few months, while she looked for something more permanent. Their old house in Rissel City was too far from Base. It was Morgana's idea to move; the unspoken idea being that he'd take a local post.

He'd meant to, but the war wasn't over. Saul had told him that much. Far from over. Most of the
Mandalorian fleet had been destroyed in the cataclysm at Malachor. The Mandalore was dead, but the threat remained. The orbitals on Kuat and Byss were working overtime, replacing the Republic’s lost fleet. And most of the remaining ships had gone off to pursue the last remnants of Fett Lin’s armada.

Carth had accepted a Core post in the hopes that Morgana and Dustil would come with him. Seeing the Outer Rim worlds ravaged made him only too painfully aware of how precarious things really were on Telos.

But Morgana didn’t want to leave home.

For the thousandth time he wished she'd agreed to relocate to Alderaan or Byss, or even Kuat; but in her own quiet way, she was as stubborn and immobile as Telosian granite. This was home, her people had lived on Telos for centuries—and she refused to brook the idea of resettling, refused to resign her own post in the Telos Security Force.

"One Republican's enough for this family." she’d laughed when she said that, but her eyes were dark and deadly serious.

"He's gonna leave us again," Dustil said sulkily.

His wife looked at them both and nodded. "I know," she said softly. Their eyes met over Dustil's head, and Carth looked away first, looked down at his hands. Morgana's voice was soft. "But he promised me he'd come back."

XXX

Carth’s hands tightened over Dustil's. "I'm sorry I didn't come for you sooner."

Dustil pulled away and crossed his arms across his chest. "I was fine here. Me and Mekel were fine here without you." He frowned. "What's wrong with you, Father?"

"Mekel?"

"Mekel. Mekel Jin. I told you." Carth couldn't read the expression on his son's face. "From Korriban. From the Underground. That's where we've been, you know. Dodging reporters and Jedi, living on our feet." Dustil swallowed. "Then I saw the vid about you... and...."

Living on his feet? With Mister Sith Congeniality? What does that—which does that even mean?

"I-I hoped you would see it, I hoped you'd find me. Dustil. I looked for you, I looked for you everywhere. I put out bulletins on Telos, and Bespin, and everywhere else I could think of."

"I didn't find you, I was captured. Why did five branches of the Fleet and a flock of Jedi come after me?"

Carth frowned. "I thought—they were—it was because of... Malachor, not you. Because of who...." Who he is.

Revan's son. Revan and Malak's son.

XXX

The red-haired boy had trailed behind his grandfather like an obedient shadow; but as the old man showed them their quarters, those gray eyes looked up at his from behind the old man's back,
Her green eyes looked like that, in the cockpit of the Hawk, after the Leviathan, pleading.

"Promise me..."

"Promise me if I become what I was you'll save me, Carth. I'm not Revan. I'm not her. It can't be true."

"Promise me if I become what I was you'll put a blaster to my head."

"I'll keep you safe, I promise." It felt like he'd said that a thousand times, but there was no safe. Not anymore.

"I'll be right back, Polla, right back."

"It's only a year, Morgana—I'll be back before you know it. I promise."

XXX

Telos. After. Morgana in the bacta tank. Shattered and still with all the lights gone out. She slipped in and out of lucidity for a week. Her head was half-encased in a duraflesh bandage, her body broken. Her ship fell from the sky and she was lucky to be alive at all.

The nurses kept saying that. Hushed voices, white on white robes, white walls, her long dark hair shorn to the scalp and her face bruised and still.

If she was lucky, it wasn’t for long. She wasn’t alive for long.

Carth wasn’t the only Telosian come home to find everything gone; but he was one of the few to know at first who their new enemy really was.

"I remember, I gave the order. I had Saul Karath bomb Telos as a test to prove his loyalty to the Sith. Promise me if I become what I was you’ll—,"

"— put a blaster to my head."

"— keep me safe. Carth I'm not her, I'm not Revan. I'm Polla Organa. I'm from Deralia. I'm a smuggler, I don't even like the Republic!" She was laughing through her tears, but those green eyes were shadowed and full of secrets.

XXX

"Dustil's alive," Morgana whispered. They'd taken her out of the tank and she lay on the white hospital bed, waxen and still. "Promise me. Find him." Her dark eyes flickered and the light in them went out—not right then, not right then. But soon after. Soon. He’d fallen asleep and when he woke up, she was just gone. All the light gone out.

Polla’s green eyes filled with tears. "I can't be her," she repeated uncertainly. "Promise me, you won't let me be her."

Revan's yellow eyes opened. "Carth," she breathed. Her voice was rough and hoarse. The bacta suit covered her from head to toe, and he squeezed her hand through it, trying not to wince at the dark lines etched around those Sith-damned eyes. "Where...?" Her voice trailed off, and her eyelids fluttered shut.
"Polla," he said gently. "You can't sleep anymore, it's not good for you. You need to get up and move around."

"There's no Polla, Carth. There never was, only me, Revan," she whispered.

"Revan," he said, numbly. "What am I to Revan?"

Her yellow eyes opened. "I love you, Carth," she reminded him. "When this is all over you and I will find something to live for, remember? Something besides Sith and the Council."

"It is over."

He looked away from her. He couldn't look at her. This wasn't her, this couldn't be her.

XXX

"Father!" Dustil's fist connected with his jaw in a blaze of light and pain. "What the frack is wrong with you?" His son's voice was high and panicked.

"Promise me." Morgana's dark eyes flickered and the light in them went out.

There was blood on his lip, salty and warm and his son was looming above him, face twisted. The stone table was overturned and all the caff spilled like a stain on the white carpet. Little sandwiches and pastries smeared and scattered into the priceless fibers.

"Promise me—"

"Dustil?" Carth wiped the blood from his lip and got to his feet heavily. His jaw ached, and he was so tired. A dull throb in his head echoed the pain along the side of his mouth.

His son just looked at him. "Mission told me a bad man had you. She said she's coming to help. She said to be careful." His voice trailed off and he looked around the room, eyes wide and frightened.

Carth bent down and began to pick the spilled provisions up off the floor. "No. Mission's dead. I'm sorry, Dustil."

"You're wrong. You don't know that! Something's wrong with you—Mission told me there was a bad man, and I felt it. It's him! That Senator! He's… like a—a Sith or something! We have to get out of here!"

"I buried her," Carth said dully, with the same pain in his chest that he'd felt saying it hours ago in the Library. "I buried her and sat there on the sand. A ship came from the Fleet. They took me to the Star Forge." He closed his eyes, he couldn't look at Dustil and say this. "I went to the Star Forge and I stopped Darth Revan."

I betrayed everything for her. I stopped her because I thought I could save her. I saved nothing. I saved her. I wish I—I should have just stopped.

Dustil went on, ignoring him. "Mission says that she's coming—coming here. She—"

Carth frowned. His head hurt so much. His son looked so righteous and young, and suddenly, with a sinking feeling he realized.

A trap, Revan sets traps for us all… even Dustil. His pulse beat with blind fury at that, that she'd stoop so low to use his son for her own schemes.
Of course, she would. She bombed Telos for some kind of test for Saul. The same way she had Zaalbar kill Mission... to prove some kind of twisted loyalty. She-twists everything. She—she must be stopped.

"You... talked to Mission Vao? Recently?"

"At the Library." Dustil looked at him, as if all of this was supposed to make sense. Of course, it did make sense, too much sense. "That message drop she set up on Yavin. You know, you wrote me letters." His son looked ashamed. "I-I didn't read them yet but I—Mekk has them. When we landed here, I felt something—he was in trouble too; but now I can't feel anything. It's like I'm blind. Y-you don't understand what it feels like to be cut off from the Force."

No, I don't understand. Revan, screaming in her sleep all the way to Manaan, her hands tugging at the collar he'd locked around her neck.

Carth closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Son, that's not Mission. Mission made a holocron of her memories before... before she was—" killed "— before she died. Revan installed the holocron in the databanks of the computer on Kashyyyk. The Star Forge computer."

"As much as I can Mission, I want to give you the world. All of them."

"Again," Carth muttered. "I don't think you've thought this through."

"Whatever you talked to, it wasn't Mission. It was that computer. She's dead. Mission's dead. I buried her."

Morgana and I never lied to Dustil, we used to pride ourselves on it.

His voice sounded like a stranger's in his own ears, hoarse and harsh and angry. "Whatever you talked to, it's a trap. A trap of Revan's. She's using you, to get close to me—or the Council or—" Carth frowned, as a terrible thought occurred to him. "Or... Malachor. If she knows—if she finds out about him...." The boy's gray eyes had looked at him pleadingly.

I promise I'll keep you safe.

I'll be right back, Polla, right back.

Promise me—

The blaster melted Revan's face to slag, so real for something that was only a dream. Melted her face to slag. Changed it so utterly that it didn't look like her face at all.

"Something's wrong with you," his son insisted. Dustil was so still, his eyes like coals in his pale face. Abruptly he turned away, headed for one of the two doors that led to the bedrooms of the suite. Carth stood there, fists clenched at his side and watched him go. His son glanced back.

"Something's wrong with all of this."

"Get some rest, son," Carth said emptily. "We'll talk again in the morning."

XXX

"Replay," the old man said softly. The holoscreen flickered in the darkened room and began again.

"Mission says that she's coming—coming here. She—"

"You... talked to Mission Vao? Recently?"
There could be no doubt, the boy was going to be a problem. Frowning, Malachi D'Reev made a steeple of his hands and considered. Captain Onasi had mentioned the existence of the computer on Kashyyyk, but the Senator had dismissed its strategic importance. Still, the dead Twi'lek child seemed to mean something to Dustil. The expression on the boy's face when he spoke of her told its own story. At that age his own son had been completely unreasonable, despite his Jedi training. Part of him admired Revan's calculation, using a dead simulacrum of Mission Vao to sway the lad to her cause… and of course, a trap could be baited both ways.

"At the Library. That message drop she set up on Yavin… you know, you wrote me letters—I didn't read them yet but I—Mekk has them. I hope he's ok… when we landed here, I felt something—he's in trouble… but now I can't feel anything at all. It's like, I'm blind, Father. Y-you don't understand what it feels like to be cut off from the Force…"

D'Reev's inquiries into Yavin Station had been unrewarding, at least on the surface. There was a data depot there, not uncommon in the Outer Rim, where many people were willing to pay for the privilege of circumspect transmissions. Beyond that, it seemed to be a typical Exchange haven: small-time smuggling—but nothing that seemed like a tactical advantage.

He made a mental note to have HK look into it again—discreetly of course.

"Query: Mekel Jin, all records."


The old man stifled a snort and poured himself another glass of brandy. Who are you Mekel Jin? "Unclassify, authorization code 997, executive Senate request."

The sleek black console hummed. "Request denied, Council override. The records are sealed in the Jedi archives."

The old man was less than surprised. They must know she'll come. They must be soiling their robes with fear, wondering what she'll do to them… even as they chant their precious Code; like children afraid of the dark.

In some ways, Revan Starfire had been as much their creation as she had been his.

At least I have the guts to clean up my own mess.

"Have Master Klee contact me at his earliest opportunity." The Eosian, after all, remembered who had forced the Republic's hand years ago, and would acknowledge where gratitude was due. Eos was a full Republic colony now, with all of the rights and privileges that accorded.
He'd seen the reports from Wann. No doubt the troubled Ban woman thought she was clever and noble, championing the cause of a few Sith traitors. But close as some of her followers had been in Revan's council, he doubted they knew much of anything. At least nothing they could say without damning themselves to execution. And Malachi D'Reev had found that was one of the few predictable things in the galaxy — when the die was cast, sentients tended to save their own skins first.

*Even my idiot son, for all the good it did him.* Old bitterness there, and regret.

"Holding for transmission. Estimated wait time is approximately fifteen minutes."

*There was a time, Vrook Lamar, when you wouldn't have made me wait.*

Still, it was a small thing, no matter. The Senator turned his mind back to his previous train of thought.


He didn't expect to find much. Underground denizens weren't tracked very well, and they tended to stick to their own sewers. No surprise that the Onasi boy had escaped his net before, if that was where he'd been hiding. He wondered how a war-hero's son could have met up with such scum.

The console whirred. "No such records exist."

*That* was impossible. Even the sublevels had basic registration. Unless the boy wasn't from Coruscant… or, perhaps, the Jedi were taking him more seriously than D'Reev expected.

*Who are you, Mekel Jin?*

"Extend query. Run the name 'Mekel Jin' across all planets for any matches."

"There are six hundred ninety-two sentients with that name in Republic space, cross-referencing for humanid, eliminates four hundred twenty-nine. Further elimination by age and approximate phenotype...." The console rattled on to itself and D'Reev tapped his hands, waiting.

"No matches found."

The brandy stung the back of his throat, and D'Reev leaned forward. He realized he was gripping the sides of his chair in an emotion that was almost excitement. There was definitely something here… the question was, what?

"Query: alias?"

"As an alias, the name was used recently on Tatooine, by a human registered locally as Kris Jin, whose origin is the Coruscant underground. The age and physical characteristics do not match."

"The surname in the Coruscant underground?"

"Five thousand, eight hundred, seventy-one matches."

"Run them, and also extend the query beyond Republic space."

"Estimated time of completion is three hours, five minutes."
D'Reev nodded to himself. It was never simple to get information out of the Rim worlds, but it was an interesting challenge. "Use my local connections to facilitate, whenever possible. And check all possibilities against the whereabouts and history of Dustil Onasi." The boys must have met somewhere… perhaps Telos? Records there were notoriously bad still.

The revelation came to him so quickly he almost laughed.

*No, not Telos. The Jedi's interest—they play their hand badly in showing it. The Jedi must be desperate.*

*Dustil did not come to Coruscant alone. There were others. The Ban woman—and the other former Sith students.* His lip curled.

"Switch query to my private archives. Korriban. The Sith Academy in Dreshdae."

His own records on that subject were useless logs for the most part; one of his son's less than capable plans. But even incomplete it was remarkable how effective some of those records had been, in persuading former Sith loyalists to turn coat when the advantage turned the other way again.

"Local databank: Mekel Jin, native of Coruscant. Admitted to the Korriban Academy at age twelve." A younger-looking boy's image flickered, and rotated, as his vital statistics scrolled to the side of his image. D'Reev read the Sith runes absently. There was nothing remarkable in the descriptions of the boy's academic achievements. Typical Sith brutality. A promising Force-user but graded with less potential than young Onasi himself by most of his trainers.

A notation by Jorak Uln at the bottom of the holoimage caught his attention, and his hand shook a little, as he sat down his glass. The frailties of old age came sometimes when one least expected.

*Jin's admittance was sponsored by Darth Malak. Unpromising he may be; but keep in mind he has powerful backing.*

Malachi D'Reev's mouth curved in a smile. "My son," he whispered. "Even dead, you do still surprise me."

The Jedi believed in the Force. The Genoharadan called it luck. But to Malachi D'Reev, coincidence was just a part of the great game.

XXX

Her chassis was parked quietly on level twenty-three in front of the ramshackle cluster of buildings at the tail-end of the Embassy District. A Gamorrean thug walked by peering at her a little too avariciously and Mission beeped an unsubtle threat. The sentient snorted and backed away. Meanwhile, she finished patching out of the local nets.

If she had feelings they'd be pleased. She'd done a good job erasing what there was of Mekel Jin in the Coruscanti grid—not that there had been much. Should make things a little easier to keep him undercover for the time being.

Provided the Sith wannabe actually followed her instructions, instead of getting off the tube forty stops early and wandering around the sublevels like this was some kind of joyride.

[[Idiot, where are you going?]]

"You said level twenty-three," he said out loud, walking through the wrong station. Several peds
looked at him oddly and edged away.

[[Level twenty-three groundside, not sub-level twenty-three, you nerf-herder.]]

She'd noticed he did respond well to threats and name-calling. Presumably that was the Sith training. Also, the entire day had been so bad already that her non-existent nerves were completely shot. It was almost a relief to be able to yell at someone and see them flinch.

"Oh," Mekel said wincing. Her transponders attached to his skin reported something you could call an angry flush spreading up his neck. "Underground, we don't call it that."

[[Fascinating. We can discuss geography later. Now get up here.]]

Embassy District?" he whispered, turning back towards the tube. Already another one was snaking its way into the station, with a tired wheeze. Local train, she considered making it go express, but that would be too much interference. Not to mention...too...taxing. It was so irritating being this small: she'd had to devote most of T3's capacitors to erasing Mekel from the system. And in that process, she'd lost track the boy himself, only to have him pull this stunt.

[[Of course. Level twenty-three, the Embassy District. Platform five. Take the elevator to the fifteenth floor. I told you all of this already.]]

"You should have just said the Embassy District," Mekel muttered. The transponders registered something that could have been exasperation.

[[Just hurry, you stupid kath-turd.]]

"You said we have time," he argued, ignoring the curious looks. It wasn't so strange to see people talk to themselves. In Taris, crazies did that all the time. Here on Coruscant too. Mekel even looked like a crazy. Perhaps she should have considered getting him something else to wear. Even for this part of the Embassy District, which was decidedly down-market, he was kinda too coreslime.

Although the people they were going to meet wouldn't really care, as long as he didn't mess up the speech.

[[We do have time, but I need you to hurry.]]

The Jedi were looking for him something fierce. She needed to get him out of sight. And there was another, even more infuriating reason that she needed him.

Two scabby Trandoshans wandered by, eyeing her curiously. One of them hissed to the other one, waving a heavy claw in her direction.

"Frack off, lizard." Mission said. "I'm waiting for my master."

It was really outrageous the way unaccompanied droids were either ignored or considered to be public—that is to say free—property. She'd already had to temporarily incapacitate five sentients just to get this far.

"I've never seen a T3 with a voder," one of the lizards mused. His tongue flickered out and he wandered closer.

"If you want to meet the dark fate in store for your race early, keep coming!" Mission spat back in Trandoshan.
The other lizard—the female—blinked yellow-lidded eyes at her. "You might need a memory wipe, little droid. Sounds like it's been a long time since you've had one, if your processors are acting up like this." She reached into the pocket of her robe and withdrew a square plasticore card. "Give this to your master and have the cit call me. Vasekla's Droid Repair Service, we handle all sorts, and—" her snout wrinkled as she took in the T3's battered chassis, "—work within all budgets."

"Is that a Kryyylak orchid on its chassis...?" the male murmured, peering down at her.

"Yes, it is," Mission hissed, although he wasn't talking to her, he was talking to the other lizard. Perhaps she'd been wrong, counseling Freyyrr on a fifty-year expansionist plan. Perhaps they should move faster—against planets that deserved it.

The male swished his heavy tail in a sign of interest. "Have you been to Kashyyyk? How unusual. Are you Czerka salvage? I didn't know they utilized the T3 model, T5 is much better suited for forest work. Better balance on the treads for the terrain."

"Wreeloa gweyyyk kash ullaaam," Mission barked darkly. She used Big Z's best I'm-going-to-rip-your-arms-out-of-your-sockets voice.

The female Trandoshan withdrew the proffered card and curled her lip, showing a hint of fang. "I do not eat my own eggs, thank you." She considered. "Is your owner a Wookiee? I haven't seen such bad manners since the last time I encountered one of those lice-filled carpets. If the Republic would lift the interdiction, we could have proper hunts again. The Wookiees may be primitive, but they have all the right instincts of suitable prey."

Mekel's train was stuck in the tunnel. Mission considered several options. Gunning the lizards down was impractical, and foolhardy. Even if Freyyrr and Big Z would understand, she doubted Revan would be as sympathetic.

You really had to witness a centuries-old conflict between neighboring worlds to gain the proper perspective. She comforted herself with thoughts of the future. The Trandoshan homeworld was living on borrowed time, and for now, projected scenarios of its apocalypse would have to suffice.

She activated a heavy energy shield around herself to keep away intruders and drew her core attentions back to Mekel Jin. There wasn't much to see, a press of bodies all around him, the droning whine of the ads in the tunnel, his pulse beating a little too fast, and the sweat glands on his body operating a little too heavily; but it was better than making idle conversation with poo doo coreslime slavers.

XXX

8 days to Coruscant

It was very early when Korrie woke up. Outside his window, the three moons still shone dimly through the mist of the sky. Father was sitting beside him, like he was sometimes, and Korrie beamed at him. He'd had good dreams, he always did when Father was around.

"The Jedi are good but they wear ugly hoods."

"The Sith are mean, but their amour gleams."

When I grow up, I want to be,
Now that he was old enough to understand the words, they seemed silly, but it was the only song he’d ever heard her sing. Before Father came—before Father died and became all good again and came back to him—Korrie would sing the song to himself. Father sort of hated the song; but he sang it anyways, because Korrie asked him to.

Father would do anything for him, he loved him very much.

Father smiled at him, he was wearing his face with hair and a jaw, and the brown robes, which was always a little bit strange to Korrie. That wasn't how he remembered his father at all; but he wasn't really sure sometimes. The memories of Mother and Father as they had been when Korrie was really little were all mixed up with the vids he'd seen of them after they became evil Sith.

Korrie reached under his pillow and pulled out one of the dolls. He'd traded two stacks of Starfighter holochips to Leeshy at school for them.

Grandfather would never have let him have them. Grandfather would blow a gasket if he knew Korrie had them. It was exactly the kind of wrong propogizka—propograndza—something—that Grandfather truly hated.

Korrie sat up in bed and adjusted the movable arms and legs, straightened the black robe and pushed the little button in the back that activated it. A tiny hiss and the action figure's red lightsaber sprung to life, and its body moved into a defensive stance. Of course, it wasn't a real lightsaber, but it was still very cool. His school robe was lying on the floor and he picked it up and pulled the other doll out of his pocket. He never took them both with him at once, because that way if he lost one, he'd still have the other.

"Mal, I need to talk to you about something. Something important," Father said.

Only Father could get away with calling him Mal. It was okay when Father called him that. After all, it was his name too.

Korrie frowned and activated the other figure. This one was shorter, and her face was covered with the mask. He'd heard that there was another version where you could take the mask off and see her face, but he didn't have that one.

They'd made that one later, when they realized she was good and a hero of the galaxy.

Sometimes, Korrie had trouble remembering her face. He wished he had the better doll. The two lightsabers met with a soft clash, and he watched the two figures dance.

"I'm sorry, Malak," Korrie made the Revan doll say.

"I'm sorry too, Revan," the Malak doll said. Korrie made his voice go all cold like metal, the way Father's was in those vids where he was stomping around ordering people to blow things up.

Father didn't sound like that now, unless Korrie asked him to. The first time Korrie had asked, he'd laughed and done it, but lately being that way seemed to make him sad.

"I will rescue Malachor and make him live happily ever after," the Revan doll said. It was hard to get her voice right, because the last time he remembered hearing it, she'd been crying under a mask.

"Captain Onasi seems all funny," the Malak doll said to the Revan doll. "Why would he say those
bad things about you?"

"We're having a fight," the Revan doll said. "Don't worry, we'll make up."

Father sighed. "We need to talk about that, Mal."

Korrie looked up. Father had his we-need-to-talk-about-serious-things expression.

"So, talk," Korrie told him. "I'm listening, I'm just playing."

The two dolls circled each other, their tiny red blades flashing back and forth.

XXX

They were hiding in the ruins of their old school, in one of the temporary annexes that had been built to house the swelling population on the Base. Maybe it wasn’t built to be permanent; but the flimsy plasteel structure had held up when the buildings of stone and duracrete shattered under the impact of the Sith assault.

The Sith had used tremor bombs first—churning much of the planet's surface into an unstable mass of shifting plates and firestorms. The plasteel had flex so it didn’t collapse. He’d had a physics class last week that would have explained why.

Now, he didn’t care. It didn’t matter why.

There were other kids in the ruins too; but Dustil and Selene kept to themselves, pooling what supplies they'd foraged, and steering clear of the constant fights and screams and crying as much as they could.

They'd gone out the first week, looking to see if anything remained that could be called home; but where the manicured streets and lawns and white houses had been, there were only craters and ashes and death.

They had to steer clear of the other kids, because everyone knew who Selene Karath was, and what her father might have done. At first it was only a rumor; but then the battery-generated radio that Fasil Sanik guarded more carefully than his younger siblings confirmed it: Telos's orbital defense system—once the pride of the planet—had fallen from within.

From treachery.

The rumor was that Admiral Karath himself had given the codes to Darth Malak, and then the Sith Fleet came and rained fire all over the world.

Then the world as they'd known it was gone.

Dustil didn't allow himself to think about his parents. Mom had been on patrol somewhere in the skies, and Dad was off somewhere, off somewhere like he always was. Saving someone else's homeworld, when Telos fell.

The rumors said ground troops were coming. Sith ground troops, coming to finish them off.

His stomach hurt, and the water was bad. His mouth tasted like ashes, and his ankle hurt from where he'd twisted it on some rubble. Somehow those concerns seemed more pressing than the Sith; but Dustil couldn't fix them either. It had been days since they'd eaten, and the sun was setting outside, casting red shadows through the blasted windows that weren't already boarded up.
Selene was shaking his arm and trying to tell him something, but he was so tired.

She shook his arm harder.

"Wake up."

Dustil closed his eyes more tightly: with them closed he could imagine he was safe and warm between clean sheets in a real bed instead of in hell. His dream of a real bed felt soft and secure.

"Please, wake up?"

For a moment he wasn't sure which was the dream, and which was waking. Mekk's cousin's place was safe; but the smell of mold and sewage and the constant sound of dripping water never left.

The air smelled sweet here, like a faint perfume of piped-in spicewood. Mom had a perfume sort of like that, and the memory made him smile a little. The bed was very soft and warm.

*Maybe this won't be another nightmare after all.*

"Dustil, wake up?" Selene's voice was high-pitched and wrong somehow. Not her voice at all.

Reality came back like a bad case of Korriban flu. Dustil sat up, shaking. *The Senator's house, Father, that kid.*

The bed was soft. The room was gray in the dim light, a faint trace of pale dawn shining through the ferracrystal windows. The windows didn't open, and they were at least a kilometer above ground. That had been the first thing he'd checked the night before.

And the kid was here, dressed in something that might have been pajamas in a normal place, but here were embroidered with swirling patterns and the cuffs lined with some kind of fur.

"What." Dustil muttered, rubbing his eyes. The lack of the Force was like a hole inside him and all the plans he'd made to save his father from whatever the frack was going on seemed pathetic in the morning light. He was a prisoner in one of the most powerful houses on Coruscant. Caught like a fish in a net.

The kid put a finger to his lips and gestured at Dustil to get up and follow him.

"What is it?" Dustil repeated.

"He told me to come get you," the kid whispered. "He says he wants to talk to you." His eyes darted around nervously. "We can't talk here, I only jammed the sensors for a few minutes. We need to hurry."

"Sensors?" Dustil frowned.

The kid nodded, and put his finger to his lips again, tugging at Dustil's hand with his other one. "Come to my room, it's safe there."

"I'm not leaving my father." Dustil shook his head trying to loosen the fog from his brain. "And I don't want to talk to your grandfather."

The kid shook his head, almost angrily. "Not Grandfather. He can only see what I can see, but he's afraid Grandfather's going to hurt you. I think that's what he wants to talk to you about."
"Who?"

The kid bit his lip. He pulled something out of his pajama pocket and showed it to Dustil wordless, gray eyes looking up, pleading.

Dustil looked down. The thing in the kid's hand was a Darth Malak doll.

XXX

He followed the kid down a long hallway made of stone. The kid had said his room was right down the hallway, but the corridor spiraled inward, and it seemed like they walked forever before finally reaching a set of double doors that slid open as the kid approached them.

Dustil kept glancing back. He didn't like leaving his father, didn't like any of this. Korrie kept pulling at his arm, dragging him through the double doors, and on the other side, the Force hit him again like a wave. He staggered a little with the weight of it.

Somewhere Mekel was asleep having a dream that seemed to involve a lot of women wearing armor and carrying swords. Whatever dream it was, he didn't seem to want to wake up. The women weren't unattractive… and the corridor spun, and he was back in his own body again and the Force shimmered around the kid like a palpable thing.

"Are you ok?" Korrie whispered frowning.

"Yeah," Dustil said, shaking his hand free of the kid's death grip.

"In here." The boy turned down the hall and led him to a small room. Inside, a simple bed, and a few schoolbooks stacked neatly in the corner on the floor. There was nothing else in the room.

For a disjointed moment, he remembered his own room back on Telos; messy and filled with the treasures he'd found in their backyard: colored stones, branches, a terrarium filled with plants, his plasticore soldiers and ships scattered all over the floor and contrasted it against the stark emptiness of his student's quarters on Korriban.

The kid's room was more like one in the Sith Academy: bare and plain. It didn't look like a boy's room at all.

The door shut behind them and the kid grinned at him, plunking down on the carpeted floor. "You feel the Force here, don't you? This section of the house doesn't have any ysalamiri. Mother and Father used to live here down the hall when I was really little."

"Ysalamiri?" Dustil asked, sitting cautiously down beside the kid, but not too close. He kept an eye on the door.

"They're sort of like lizards, they live in the walls. Sometimes I play with them, but they bite." Almost proudly, the kid showed him a scar that bisected his palm. "They block the Force; but I have to live without any ysalamiri in case I develop it. Grandfather says they can stunt my growth."

"Your grandfather said there was some kind of Force barricade." Dustil rubbed his eyes, trying to shake himself awake. "That was the ysalamiri?"

This all felt like a dream. Something poked his back and he reached around, pulling another doll out of the thick white carpet. His hand curled around it, and he stared—Darth Revan, Darth Malak, and baby makes three. Suddenly he felt like laughing. This was all nuts. What the frack is my father mixed up in?
"Yeah, the barricade is the ysalamiri. I can show you them later, if you want." Korrie grinned at him happily and expectant. "So, can you see him here? He's right here!"

Dustil blinked. Maybe the kid was nuts. “No.”

*Mekel, Malachor D'Reev wants me to talk to his father's ghost.* It seemed like the kind of thing that Mekk would want to know.

At the edges of his mind Mekel stirred sleepily and pushed him away. *Rysya mandalore phar ech na' republik infi....*

One of the women in his dream was taking off her armor now, and she wore almost nothing beneath it. Mekel's predictable response shocked him back into his own mind with a flush of embarrassment, and Dustil shook his head. *Asshat.*

He realized he was squeezing the Darth Revan doll so hard that the sharp edges of the armor cut into his hands. The kid looked at him reproachfully and Dustil handed it over. Korrie grabbed it and set it on the ground in front of him with the other one. The two figures engaged in a combat routine with a whirr of tiny red blades. Dustil shivered.

"Can you see him?"

“No.”

But there was—something. The Force shimmered around the kid like a shield. *Like before, in the Library with the Jedi.*

*The Force isn't in the kid, it's around him, it's all around him.*

"No," Dustil repeated, looking away. Plenty of Sith tombs and Sith ghosts on Korriban, he'd never an actual Sith ghost; but he remembered the stories.

The hair pricked on the back of his neck, and something brushed at his mind. Unfamiliar, not like Mekel at all. Dustil shivered and drew his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around himself.

*Get out of my head,* he thought dimly, through a haze of Force power that was stronger than anything he'd ever felt.

Somewhere, Mekel stirred from a dream of warrior queens and brandy and blinked sleepily.

*Dustil?*

*Mekk!*

It was like shouting across a chasm, or a well of stars. Screaming underwater. The Force presence around him swirled like a mist, questing and poking, rummaging through his mind. There were emotions too: so strong he couldn't even begin to define them. Sorrow maybe, anger, hate. Regret. And love, love for the kid, so strong it made his eyes start tearing. He wiped them away.

Dimly, he felt its surprise at discovering the Force bond.

"Get out of my head," he whispered out loud.

"He says he can't talk to you," the kid said, frowning. "He's trying, but you don't listen. He says he's sorry to scare you: maybe I should tell you what he says?"
Dustil opened his mouth but nothing came out. The Force presence withdrew, and it was like surfacing in a lake. Dustil gasped for breath.

Korrie took his silence for agreement and started talking, words coming out in a rush. "He says something’s wrong with your father—my Grandfather did something to him. Grandfather can be very mean sometimes. He wants to know if you want to leave. Run away and go hide?"

"I'm not leaving," Dustil muttered. "I'm not leaving Father."

_Dustil? Are you ok?_

_Mekk? The other boy's mind was a confused blur of images and a raging hangover. Women in battle armor singing and drinking; an astromech droid beeping; Mission's voice; the gleam of a yellow 'saber’s light reflected off dark sewer walls; a crowded train; a golden face and falling—and then Mekel slammed his own thoughts shut, leaving Dustil more muddled than ever._

_Are you with Mission? What's happening? Where the frack are you?_

_I'm fine. Where are you?_

_With that sithkid in his room in the Senator's house. The kid he's—he brought me here to talk to his father._

_His father. Mekel's thoughts seemed as careful as glass. His father's dead. Right?_

"He says talk to Mekel Jin later! He has important stuff to tell you!" Korrie's voice was impatient.

"No."

Korrie frowned. "You'd better convince Grandfather you're not going to be a problem. Grandfather's not very nice—except to me sometimes—" the kid interjected. "My father wants to know where Mekel Jin is."

"Doesn't he know everything?" Isn't he some kind of all-powerful part of the Force?

_Mekel, Darth Malak wants to know where you are._

Suddenly it was as if they were both looking out of Dustil's eyes. Mekel was right there, in his head, staring at the kid. With some emotion that was almost... _hope?_

"He only sees what I see...." Korrie tried to explain. "And he talks to Mother sometimes, but he says it's harder to talk to her. She doesn't always listen, and she doesn't tell him anything; but she remembers me now and he says she's coming to get me."

_Tell Him, I serve Him, as always._ Mekel's thoughts were quiet and small.

_What? What is Darth Malak to you, Mekk? Serve him? Since when do you serve anyone? You never even said that to Uthar._

_Shut up, Telos. Tell him. Please._

Dustil opened his mouth. "Mekel says he serves you, Malak." He couldn't help making a face. Part of him was getting really angry. "He also says you’re a frackhead." Where's Mission? Is she ok? Where are you?

_She's.... confused jumble of images, a droid—a T3? The taste of dry bread in his mouth and_
climbing down an endless ladder. *Don't freak out, Telos. If I tell you, please don't freak out.*

Dustil pushed, really hard at Mekel and suddenly there it all was, all of his memories, everything that had happened to the boy since the Library. It was all a blur, but one thing stood out. Later, it would be the only thing he could remember.

The only thing he could see.

*She's dead? Mission's DEAD?*

*She... sort of. But—*

Korrie watched him silently, and the two action figures danced their circular battle on the thick white rug.

Mekel didn't think of her as dead exactly, not anymore. Just—changed. Mekel was more than a little frightened of Mission somehow, and being Mekel, that made him respect her. Maybe even like her.

*First rule of the Underground, Telos. It's just like the Sith. If they're stronger than you, they call the shots.*

It was a lesson Dustil had never—completely believed.

*Revan did this, Darth Revan did this. She killed Mission. Father wasn't lying... she did something to him too.*

*This is all her fault.*

Her son looked frightened. "Why is Dustil so mad?" he asked the Force shimmer around him.

Dustil stared hard at the tiny figures on the rug, feeling the Force build inside him. Rage, cool and pure. *Power...* The Force rippled around the kid, he couldn't touch the kid, but he could show him how it felt. The dolls shattered, they blew up, a million pieces of plasticore and circuitry and the kid started crying.

*What the frack, Telos?*

"I just want my father," Dustil said coldly. Mekel was pushing at him, in desperation, trying to tell him something but he didn't listen. He blocked it out, feeling the threads of their bond snap, one-by-one. A bond formed when they'd had nothing else; but now he had Father, and he didn't need this, didn't need some sithspawned kid and some murdering scum from the Underground telling him what to do—or some Sith Lord's ghost.

*I'll kill her for this, I'll avenge you, Mission. You and my father. And Telos.*

*No! Telos?* Mekel's voice was faint and far away.

Dustil pulled, and the bond snapped. Gone.

"I'm not telling him anything!" the kid said angrily, voice rough with tears. "He blew you up, and you were all I had. No! I don't care, I'm not telling him that!" The kid got up from the floor and threw himself on the bed, beating it with his fists. "Make him go away! He's not good, he's not going to help us, he hates me! He hates you!"

Then the kid's head lifted, and he stared at Dustil with tear-stained eyes. But they were cold and
gray as stones. "I could tell Grandfather you tried to hurt me," Korrie hissed. "Then you'd be sorry."

The Force presence swirled and flickered. Dustil wanted to get up and run away, but he couldn't move. He just sat there, hugging his knees to his chest, feeling the hate burning all through his guts. Feeling the power of it.

Mission.

Maybe when this is all over if you don't hate me already—we can have that third kiss.

We never will now.

"Use your hate," Uthar had advised. "Use your hate and your loss and your passion. Through your emotions, the Force will serve you."

XXX

"Why are you sticking with me?" Selene's voice was hoarse and rough with tears. "They say I'm a traitor's daughter. Don't you hate me, for what they say my father did? Everyone else does."

They were hiding from the others. They had to hide from the others. The Sith were coming and he'd seen the intentions of the crowd as clearly as lines on a holo-map. They thought they were going to die, and they wanted someone to pay. They'd kill Selene if they found them. If Admiral Karath gave the Sith the codes to disable the orbital defenses, then Admiral Karath betrayed them. Admiral Karath's daughter.... Selene kept saying it was a lie, but he could tell she knew, as sure as he did, that maybe it wasn't.

Neither of them said that out loud, but they both thought it.

"You're not your father," Dustil said quietly. He kissed her clumsily on the lips. They were salty and wet with her tears. And his. "When the Sith come, tell them who you are. Maybe—"

"Tell the Sith?" Her voice squeaked.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe they'll let us live."

XXX


"What's Telos?" Korrie whispered. His head was cocked, as if listening to something only he could hear. "Oh. That planet in the vid. Are you from there?"

"Your mother destroyed it," Dustil said harshly. "She destroyed everything I had. My mother died there."

He'd felt her slip away, sitting in a cold gray room on the ill-named Samaritan, not even realizing then what he felt was the Force; but he'd felt his mother die. The next day at breakfast, he looked at Sith Admiral Armon Wu and expected to feel hate, but all he could see was Selene. Selene safe.

Everyone was very nice to them in the weeks that followed. Transport to Korriban, Korriban where they'd be safe.

No," Korrie said. He shook his head. "Not Mother." His chin dropped, and he put his hands over his eyes. "He says she didn't do it. Father did."
"That doesn't make it better." Dustil clenched his fists. He realized he was rocking back and forth slightly on the soft white carpet, rocking like a little kid, like he was no older than Malachor D'Reev. "Why," he said flatly. "Why Telos?"

"I dunno," the kid whispered. "He doesn't want to tell me, he says I'm too little to understand."

"Was it a test for Saul Karath? Like my father said? Bomb Telos, prove his loyalty?"

"I don't understand! Tell him yourself! I don't understand...." Korrie said to the air. The kid was crying again, softly and hopelessly.

xxx

"Why?" Dustil asked the Sith Admiral, trying to sound like his father would have. The Admiral looked startled "Why?"

Various aides and guards moved closer to him, somewhere he heard the snick of blasters drawn. The air was so thick with tension you could cut it, and Selene was shaking her head at him. Don't ask, don't ask, we don't have to know, we're safe now.

"Orders," Admiral Wu said. "I followed them. You'll need to learn not to ask the wrong questions."

"Frack you!" Dustil ran at him, got up from the table and ran at him. The cold sting of the stunner hit him before he'd gotten more than two paces. Dropped him to the floor. He spent the last week of the journey to Korriban locked in the brig.

XXX

"Was it some kind of stupid test?"

"N-not a test...a—sacrificuss—sacrifice, he says." Korrie pulled the blankets over himself, shivering. "I don't understand. Father was evil then, and Mother too and they went away from me and they couldn't come back, and Father thought maybe—Telos—because of Mother—he thought...."

Korrie shook his head. "I don't understand. He says he thought... it could stop it. But he says he's sorry, really, really sorry. Please Dustil, they're not like that now. Please?"

XXX

Selene came to the brig, she brought food from the officer's mess, better food than they'd seen since it all happened. "Please, Dustil—don't—don't make any more trouble." She tried to smile. "It's not so bad. We're going to go to a school, a school for kids like us. They'll train us, the Sith will make the galaxy safe. No more wars." She smiled. "That'll be good, right?"

On Korriban he advanced much faster than she did, on Korriban, she wasn't Saul Karath's daughter, she was just an indifferent student. Three months after they reached the Academy, she disappeared.

Students disappeared all the time, and Dustil never let himself feel anything more than a vague pang of regret—until Father and Revan and Mission came and made him face the truth.

A sacrifice. No more wars.

XXX

"Telos was a sacrifice?" Dustil's voice cracked. "Tell Darth Malak it didn't work."
Was Selene a sacrifice too? Was Mission?

"It didn't work," the kid echoed sadly. "I want my mother," he whispered, almost to himself. "She promised she'd come back."

Dustil got to his feet. The kid was cowering on the bed and the Force presence beat over them like a wave. Just emotions, desperate ones. Somewhere very far away, Mekel was calling for him.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said coldly. "And I'm not going to help you. Don't bother me again."

It was a relief, to walk away, to step through the doors and feel the Force vanish again.

He walked back to his and Father’s rooms.

Blindness like a safe white blanket.

XXX

7 days to Coruscant

The fracking huttspawn stood her up. Again.

Lena swirled the glass of firewater and fizz-pop in her delicate, manicured hand and considered her options. In the immediate future, the ones hidden in the murky depths of the Tatooine Sandblaster seemed like the best ones.

She gulped it down and waved a lekku at the Human waiter for another.

Around her, the other patrons of Motta's Oasis murmured careful conversation. Most of them were local, and careful not to look at her too closely; but a few greenhorns two tables away were gawking. She batted her lashes at the Iridonian male, an almost reflexive gesture, and was pleased to see his head spikes flush.

At least you've still got it, kid. Even if some people are too stupid to notice.

Lena adjusted the straps of her starspangled gown and exhaled, beaming at the human who brought her the drink. Jin's head was bent deferentially and she mused about how much things had changed.

You've come a long way since you were a joygirl on Ryloth, kid. And some banthashit pissant swoop jockey from Tatooine made good isn't gonna change that.

Even if he does pay your salary.

Lena was lost in her own gloomy thoughts when the overly-waxed lekku brushed the back of her neck.

He'd stolen up so softly behind her, she hadn't a hint of warning. His hand pressed the soft skin between her skull ridge with a lover's touch.

An ex-lover, that is.

Lena whirled around, nostrils narrowing at the familiar scent of cheap cologne and bad cigarras. Even rich, you're still cheap, Griff Vao. You always were cheap, you bastard.

"Keep your tentacles to yourself," she hissed.
"You're looking well, Lena," Griff said. His eyes were staring at her chest and she flushed. "Dining alone?"

"I'm waiting for Nico," she answered coolly, regaining her composure.

His smile looked predatory. "Another late night at the office? I hear business is going well."

"Well enough," Lena answered, trying to catch the waiter's eye. The Jin man was more than a waiter of course; back in the old days he'd worked for Motta. Now, he was muscle for Nico. He was *supposed* to be protecting her; but instead he was chatting it up with one of the joygirls working the stage.

*Men.*

XXX

The laser welding torch jammed and sputtered, and he growled at it, resisting the urge to bash the obstinate thing into the bulkhead. The Lin was sitting across from him doing nothing to help as usual, fiddling with the board game Canderous had given him.

*Chess,* the Mandalorians called it, but Zaalbar thought it was a waste of time. Back on Kashyyyk when he'd been but a cub, they'd played something similar with stones and twigs that had as much *more* complexity as the variation of leaves on the trees—or the scents of the forest in different seasons.

This *chess* was a dry, dead thing, and he had no interest in playing it.

Besides, there was work to be done, but the Lin considered himself above creation. He assumed the boy was still sulking about his armor. For someone born to greatness, he seemed to have no idea about the sacrifices required for the cause.

Zaalbar poked a sliver of metal in the offending nozzle and was rewarded with a sullen pulse of yellow light. The fur on his palm singed, and he growled softly under his breath.

"I don't know how you're planning on taking it apart," the Lin said, in that infuriatingly smooth voice. "Mandalorian battle armor isn't made to be broken."

"It's the same as a forest crab in the Shadowlands," Zaalbar groaned back. "Crack the shell." He ran the sputtering torch back across the curiass's seam. It burned red-hot but refused to budge.

"That armor belonged to my father," the Lin added, reproachfully. "In times past, no barbarian outworlder ever saw it and lived to tell the tale."

Zaalbar had had better luck with the helm. It lay on the floor cooling, beskar split and sliced along the back, widened and lengthened by strips of blue corusteel cut from Canderous' set.

The warrior was not pleased with this part of the plan either, but at least he was man enough not to sulk. He and Polla-Revan were in the other room, going over scenarios. They'd taken HK-47 with them.

Polla-Revan was spending a great deal of time with her droid lately.

Zaalbar assumed that in a way, the droid was another one of her ghosts—something she looked for to make the pieces of her past make sense.
Humans could be so strange. Compared to the future, compared to rescuing her cub and the pilot and the pilot's cub, the past meant nothing. What's done is done. This was how he had been taught, long ago, when little more than a cub himself.

Of course, from the missives he'd gotten through the Mission-ghost from his father, their people seemed to see things differently now. Things were changing on Kashyyyk, and Zaalbar wondered uneasily if they would change for the better.

"Polla-Revan ordered it done," he reminded the Lin. The boy had picked up Shyriiwook as easily as slipping into soft water; but that was not surprising, many Force users were like that.

Canderous and Zaalbar still had trouble communicating, but they were working hard at it on both sides.

Besides, after more than a year of fighting together, few words were needed between them. They knew the chase and the hunt, and both things would be important in the days to come.

What other tools would be needed, Polla-Revan and this Lin cub would provide.

The seam bubbled under the laser ray, and Zaalbar put the chestplate on the workbench, setting the torch aside for now. He picked up the large hammer they'd found in the supply closet and brought it down sharply across the blistering seam. The metal gave slightly with a faint creak.

Across the room the Lin sighed. "For five hundred years the Mandalore wore that armor in battles of sand, air, and stars. You should treat it with more respect."

"It's been altered to fit before," Zaalbar argued. This was true. As he cracked the shell open, he could see the underseams, layered like old scars, places where the carapace had been patched and fitted several times. "It's a dead thing, Fett-cub, you should place less importance on dead things."

"Like your computer-god?" the Lin shot back.

"That's different," Zaalbar barked. He wouldn't expect an infidel to understand. Things on Kashyyyk were changing. He hoped they would change for the better.
It wouldn't be long now before Junior was born. Maybe another week.

Polla frowned to herself, hugging her belly as she leaned over the desk, trying to remember the codes for the FTL transmit. Traditionally on Deralia, a birth was a time for celebrations and gift-giving; but she'd been so caught up in her own misery and her family's subtle tortures that she'd completely forgotten to get Seiran anything at all.

It had to be something special, something really nice. She had a few credits stashed away, and there was one place in the galaxy to spend them. Maybe some specs for engine design, to help with his work. That wasn't the most romantic thing in the universe, but Seiran was a practical man. He'd probably like that more than the book of Alderaanian love-poetry her mother had so thoughtfully suggested, or—Polla gritted her teeth—Cousin Vaya's suggestion: an uncut copy of the Coruscanti Underground Version and matching Darth outfits.

Most people would duck when you threw a thisla globe at their head.

It wasn't Polla's fault Vaya was so slow. The black eye would heal up just fine, if she kept the ice pack on it.

Welcome to Suvam's Emporium. Please enter your username and password for access.

Polla typed them in, frowning.

Spicegirl3 9 76 3 8 Deralia … was that right? The console beeped, and she tried again. 9-76 38 Deralia.

User account is on credit hold. Please see the management.

"Credit hold?" Sure, she lost that spice shipment to mites, but they cleared that up before she came back to Deralia. Suvam had docked two months of the wages he owed her and called it even.

Polla typed in the request for visual transmit, wincing at the sight of her swollen fingers. Pregnancy was not a blast. She couldn't wait for this to be over. A faint smile crossed her face as she thought about Junior in her arms. Soon, very soon.

Her former boss's face appeared on the screen. His round eyes blinked at her, with a complete lack of recognition.

"May I help you?" the Rodian said, politely.

"It's me!" Polla said. "Remember? I don't owe you any money, Suv—why's my account on hold? I should have four thousand credits plus interest at this point. It's been over two years since I drew!"

"The account was closed," Suvam Tan said flatly. "I don't know who you are, sentient, but I can't provide you with any more information."
"You lying cheat!" She sputtered indignantly. "Look, is this about the spice? Those mites weren't my fault, and we settled that before I resigned."

His ear stalks twitched. "You Humans all look alike," he muttered. "Who are you?"

Polla sighed and gritted her teeth. "Polla Organa. The Deralian you hired for the Corellian spice run. I worked for you for seven years, you stupid hessi mud-raking flapper!"

"Polla?" His skin turned a lighter shade of green, or maybe it was the fuzzy feed. Cheap FTL was cheap. "Polla Organa?" His cone-shaped ear stalks trembled. "Verify your identity."

"Bloody nine dash seven six three eight. Deralia. On Corellia I had to meet a Hutt named Uggash to deliver the goods. The passcodes to the starport were seven charming niner oh fifty-three—" she paused. "No one but you and me know this crap, Suv. You change the codes for every runner. Why the hell do I need to verify anything? Who else would know—?"

The Rodian peered at her, glancing down at something on his desk. Probably a portable, cross-referencing her picture with one in his files.

"You humans all look alike," he repeated uncertainly. "You appear to have gained mass. And your coloration seems altered."

"I'm pregnant," she snapped. "I wanted to buy something special for my husband."

"You're married?" The Rodian dropped his suspicions almost instantly and beamed. "Congratulations! I don't pretend to understand human love, but the pilot seemed quite taken with you. Regrettable, that you were indisposed at the time. I was quite looking forward to another one of our chats."

She laughed. "No—not Therion," Polla said.

_Thank the stars. Therion was an ass, even if he was one of the best pilots I ever saw._

"I married Seiran, a boy from back home. We live on Deralia, now."

Suvam nodded at her, winking slightly. "Of course you do. Don't worry; I won't breathe a word to anyone."

"Um—good?"

The Rodian shrugged. "You spent all the credits on the Hawk's first stop here. On the way to Tatooine? But I have no trouble extending more credit. Did the pilot tell you about my offer? There are several members of my organization that are… most eager to assist—anything that you need. Anything" His skin mottled, deep rust. "I've been following the newsvids! You've got them all running in circular orbits! Rumor has it that you're bound for Coruscant—or maybe Ziost? Clever, having Captain Onasi speak against you like that… I don't presume to understand your grand plan… but this subterfuge hides your true purpose most admirably."

Polla froze, the casual grin on her face melting like Deralian mud.

No. No, it can't be.

"My… plan..." she said, stalling, while her mind began to reel.

Junior kicked inside her belly and she hugged him tighter, arms around her stomach like a shield.

Suvam nodded eagerly. He'd always been an odd trawler, so child-like on the surface, bad with
details, but underneath that he had a lot of power. You don't work for someone for seven years and not notice things like that. She'd always been a little afraid of him, actually. And he'd never been this nice before. Not to her.

"There's something I've always wanted to ask you," Suvam said, deferentially. "If you don't mind my impudence, Lord Revan."

Polla swallowed. No. No no no no. Her pulse pounded in her throat.

"Ask," she whispered.

"It's a little thing, but I have always wondered… what did you do to the real Polla Organa? She was a little flighty, but I was rather fond."

"Nothing," Polla whispered. *Fond of me? You don't even remember what I look like, you moron. "I didn't do anything to her. She's probably alive somewhere, you know. Doing something. Smuggling maybe. Or—retired. Definitely *not* on Deralia. I have no idea."

The Rodian shrugged. "No matter." He chuckled. "You know, the pilot had me fooled completely. I thought the little Twi'lek was dead, but she's been nosing around my systems for the last month. She hacks the same way she plays pazaak—I'd recognize her signature anywhere. Let her know I'll give her anything she wants—with your approval of course. She doesn't have to play games."

*The little Twi'lek...* Polla shivered. "I'll tell… um, Mission Vao that. Uh—yeah. Yes."

"If she wants to play more pazaak though, I'd enjoy a game." Suvam tapped his temple in thought. "Oh! There's another few things I wanted to tell you. I keep getting tracers on the data drop she set up for Dustil Onasi. The boy accessed it, and ever since, there's more ice than I can keep freezing off. Coming from Coruscant, from high up on Coruscant if you get my meaning...." He blinked at her meaningfully.

"Right. Okay. Thanks."

"So, *are* you going to Coruscant? Are you there now? I'm impressed that you've actually routed this transmission through the Deralian grid. Your resourcefulness was always a thing of beauty."

"That'd be telling," Polla made herself smile. *He's traced my call. He knows where I live. Shit. I don't want him to know I'm me. If he's been in touch with Her…. Suvam's been in touch with her… she must have gone to Yavin… the damn bitch went to Yavin and stole my money!*

Polla's outrage was reflexive but short-lived. *I don't want to remind Her about me!* "Shit. Shit!

"I'm sorry, I forget myself. It gets lonely up here, and I have so few visitors. What was it that you required, Lord Revan?" Suvam Tan chuckled. "Really, asking me if you could access your old account! It's a story to tell my grandspawn, if I ever am so fortunate."

"Forget it, n-nothing for now. Um… I have to go, Suvam. Emergency. There's… this… thing I have to go do. You know… important… thing… because..."

*Because I'm Her and that's what Dark Lords do. Important things. Important Dark Lord of the Sith… things….*

"Of course, Lord Revan. Please let me know if I can assist you in the future. Your credit line is—of course—*infinite.*"
Polla punched end transmit with trembling fingers.

Maybe the book of Alderaanian love poetry's not such a bad idea after all.

Infinite credit line.

No. No no no no no.

They had family on Alderaan, on her father's side. Traders that had done well, set themselves up like aristocracy. They'd get her a good deal. Uncle Boon thought she was the cutest thing ever, that time her parents had taken her there when she was ten.

XXX

5 days to Coruscant

Vrook's intervention had one immediate effect—they'd been moved to better quarters. True, soft couches and Holovid access didn't make detention cells any less a prison; but at least now they were together, and they could talk. Even if everything they said out loud was monitored—Yuthura didn't think it mattered. What they said was the truth. And it was time the truth was known.

Vrook came when he could, but Master Ferrin came more often, his eyes cold with dislike.

"If you sought redemption," the Zabrak said softly, "Why didn't you return after the Mandalorian wars?"

Gharen spat on the ground. "You know why, Jedi," he said. The grizzled war veteran was the only one of them without the Force, but he'd seen the same atrocities as the others. He'd been part of Revan's personal guard, long ago. "We won your war… only we weren't supposed to win—were we?"

"That is not for me to say," the Jedi folded his hands and paced back and forth. Ten pairs of eyes looked at him accusingly. The others—the twenty-two former soldiers who had joined them on what Yuthura still thought of as their victory march—were detained elsewhere. She'd heard from Vrook that some of the ordinary soldiers had been released, after swearing allegiance to the Republic.

Nothing that simple for us.

"Malak used to say that the Republic was rotten to the core," Lukash Vair's melodious voice twisted. "He told me that the Jedi Order was only a bandage hiding the festering sore beneath. Malak would have known… wouldn't he, Master Ferrin? I see nothing has changed." The Falleen's Sith markings overlaid his scales like a pattern of dark promise, and his eyes were burning with golden hate.

She was losing control of them again, losing her own resolve locked in this place. It was hard to believe in the good of the Republic, after hearing what she had heard.

"You served with Nomi Sunrider, and Cay Qel-Droma, didn't you, Master Ferrin? You and Vrook?" The scarred half of Sheris's face was covered with a dull metal mask the Selkath had fashioned to heal her burns. Sheris's voice through the mask was cold and eerily like Darth Revan's own. Yuthura had only seen <i>Darth Revan</i> once: the Revan she’d met on Korriban was entirely different; but she would never forget that voice.

Ferrin's eyes dropped to the floor. "I did," he said quietly. "In the battle for Coruscant, when we
thought all hope was lost."

"And Yavin IV?"

"I was not there."

"The Sith Wars...." Sheris Darkstar mused. She sat on one of the couches, next to Beya Organa. The Deralian squeezed her hand comfortingly and muttered something under her breath. "Exar Kun and Ulic Qel-Droma. Ulic caused more collateral damage. And yet, he was given another chance?"

"It was a different time." Master Ferrin crossed his arms and turned away from them, staring at the restraining field. "And we learned from our mistakes. After the Sith War, we changed the way Jedi were trained. We learned caution, prudence, and reserve."

"You learned nothing," muttered Beya Organa. "You cast us out."

"We let you go. To find your own peace with what you had done."

"We came back with our peace," the former Sith Admiral Armon Wu mumbled. His pudgy hand was shaking, and he took a long swallow from the bottle of Althiri firewater that Vrook had brought them. They had an entire case, but they were going through it quickly.

*Get drunk, that solves everything.* Yuthura drained her own glass and poured another.

On the couch beside her, Vikor Tio made a rude gesture with his lekku at the Jedi Master's back. Yuthura poked him with her elbow and he flushed a deeper green. The Ryloth native made jokes and flirted with her incessantly. He wasn't bad-looking—*not that we'd have any privacy here—not that some of the others care.* She'd woken up on more than one night, shifting uncomfortably on her narrow couch, listening to the night sounds. She didn't know who and she didn't want to know. Privacy was more precious than credits to a former slave. Now, the Republic had taken that too.

"My parents raised me on stories of basilisk war droids raining fire on Iziz," Davad Arkan interjected, almost conversationally. The brown-skinned Onderonite was sitting on the floor. He was the only sober one among them. Sith he may have been, but he had never lost his Jedi reserve; an inner calmness that seemed to radiate from the core of his being. Yuthura tried to take strength in it and not think of slaves penned in cages.

*We will not be in this cage for long. Vrook promised.*

*Empty promises,* a part of her mocked. *The Council is divided. Vrook does not speak for the majority, he admitted that much. And all of them care more about Revan than us.*

"The Mandalorian invasion of Onderon during the Sith War was a tragedy," Master Ferrin admitted.

Davad shifted his long legs. "And yet, you let it happen again forty years later. Many tragedies have happened on Onderon," he added. "But we knew the Mandalorians were a threat that would not go away. The real tragedy is what I learned too late, and what my people never knew."

"I was on Denoba when the Krath war droids came for the Council," Master Ferrin still seemed lost in the past. *Easier for him to face the past than his complicity with the present.* "We fled to Ossus until the light of a dying star sent shockwaves across the galaxy. We fled to Dantooine...."

"You fled," Beya's voice was high with scorn. "Your old wars mean nothing to us. You weren't even at Yavin IV. You had no part in the end of that war. Tell me, Master, how many Jedi from
Yavin IV still live? How many of them came back from the destruction of a world for your greater good?"

"That is why you should never have acted!" Master Ferrin spat, losing his composure. He turned around again, head lowered slightly, and his horns glinted in the merciless fluorescents. His face flushed red. "You learned nothing from us! You repeated the same mistakes, the same history, the same fall...."

"Revan used to say the Council set her on her dark path," Beya shot back. "Tell us, Master, is that true?"

"Given time, and more training, she would not have fallen. You would not have fallen. She was untested, and you were all so young. To stop Exar Kun, the Jedi acted as a united body. It took all of our strength to keep our resolve—and our sanity. It took the wisdom of ages—"

"There was no time," Davad interrupted him. "No time for Onderon. No time for Cathar, no time for Eos, no time for the other systems already groaning under the Mandalorian leash. We did what we had to do."

"We fought the war the Senate wanted," Vikor said softly. The usual mirth was absent from his voice. "We provided the Fleet with their advantage. But you underestimated our power."

"If you had just returned after Malachor. If you had come before us—instead of going farther into the Unknown Reaches—"

"I heard someone did come to the Council," Yuthura Ban found her voice at last. "Where does she walk now, Master Ferrin?"

He would not meet her eyes. "That one made her choice."

She made herself yawn, made her voice cultivated and unconcerned. "I would prefer to speak of more pleasant things, but for all of Vrook's kind words, and your veiled threats, I see little action and no resolve."

"The Selkath Authority has asked for an extension," Ferrin admitted, grudgingly. "They wish more time to gather evidence regarding the death of the Progenitor."

Yuthura laughed. She meant to laugh carelessly, but it came out wrong. Wrong and choked. "Are you going to blame that on us too? Revan's pilot told me the truth about that, when they were on Manaan. The Republic built that harvesting plant...."

"—and Revan killed their god," Master Ferrin said.

"Following the orders of a Council that destroyed her mind!" The anger was so sweet that she could taste it, mingling with the numbness inside of her to make a cold dark place that was safe and strong.

"One fate for one such as Revan," Sheris said. "Fallen Dark Lords can always be redeemed." Her good eye burned yellow through the rim of the mask. "Another for their followers." She swallowed more firewater. "When is our trial, old man? How long is the delay?"

"We will let you know." Master Ferrin sighed and rubbed his temples.

"If I asked you to burn my past from my mind, would you do it? Would I be redeemed then?" Sheris suddenly sounded young and uncertain, and painfully sincere. Sheris had been young, very
young, when the Mandalorian Wars began. One of the youngest Padawans to answer Revan and Malak's call.

"I will leave you now," the Jedi said.

_No answer at all. Of course not. We have to live with our sins._

Master Ferrin pulled out his commlink and spoke into it. The primary restraining field dropped for a moment and he stepped through. It shimmered into life again, vibrating blue. The secondary one dropped, secure as any airlock and he passed from their sight.

"Well, that was productive," Vikor said acidly. "Shall we play another round of pazaak now? Or perhaps Mandalorian chess?"

Beya Organa got to her feet, stretching slowly. "There's a few more Deralian drinking games I haven't taught you. We don't have any knives, but we can make do. Besides," she said, glancing up at the ever-present eyes of the holocams that tracked their every move. "I haven't told you all about my latest letter from home...."

XXX

_4 days to Coruscant_

He sent her flowers every day, although of course Motta picked them out. She could tell by the selection. Viscous phrene lilies from Nar Hutta, dripping Degoban roses, and a bouquet of something white and lumpy that smelled terrible—whose origin she couldn't even guess. The white and lumpy bouquet came with a sack of raw bantha meat and feeding instructions.

She'd dumped each offering in the disposal, until the unit backed up and broke. A repair tech was supposed to come, but in the interim her house reeked.

Griff Vao would have used her own credit chips to buy her flowers, but at least he had taste. Well, no—not _good_ taste; but at least he didn't have a Hutt's olfactory glands. Lena had blown him off easily enough, that night at _Motta's Oasis_. All she'd had to do was keep mentioning Nico's name. Griff Vao had always understood the importance of saving his own hide. Eventually he got the hint and left.

But Nico himself never showed.

Lena did a good job of avoiding her boss and newly ex-lover for a Tatooine week before Nico Senvi sent Jin and another goon after her.

"Boss wants to see you," the tall, scarred human said. He had a Mandalorian accent. Mercs were the worst.

"Now," Jin added.

"Nico knows where I live." Lena said disdainfully, trying to slam the door in their face.

"See... now most people would worry if the Boss knew where they lived, but you... you're different." Jin grinned at her, smoothly pushing his shoulder in the way of the door. He shoved it back open and the two of them trooped in, tracking sand all over her immaculately polished floors.

"Who do you think set up his Exchange contacts in the first place?" Lena shot back.
Jin laughed. "Motta. Don't give yourself too much credit, kid."

"Hutt's not looking so good, lately, ever since he tried double-crossing the boss," the merc added. "Flipper's so swollen he needs an extra grav-lift just to carry it around."

"Do I look like I care, scuzz-face? Tell Motta not to send me anymore flowers."

"He's just tryin' to help Nico... now that he sees things more clearly...." Jin shrugged. "I worry about you, Lena. You don't see the big picture, but Nico really wants you bad. He needs you. When we left him, he was trying to balance the accounts for last quarter." He grimaced. "Wasn't going very good."

Involuntarily, Lena shivered at the thought. She'd never seen anyone as undone by simple arithmetic as Nico Senvi.

"He stood me up," she said sullenly.

"He's sorry, that's why he has Motta sending you flowers." The merc wrinkled his nose. "That the flowers I smell? In my clan, we would give you the heads of the beasts we slew. I think the odor would be an improvement over this." He shrugged. "I have mated with many Twi'lek women, but I don't understand your culture."

"On my part of Coruscant, we'd just give you cash." Jin winked at her.

"Nico should know better!" Her voice sounded shrill.

*Don't be such a shyrack, Lena.* Griff used to say that, whenever she got mad at him. Which was most of the time.

The merc laughed. She'd seen him around, but never caught his name. He'd been here as long as most of them, from the beginning. "What Nico knows and what he doesn't know. Not really a good thing to talk about, babe. That's how Motta got in trouble."

Lena sighed. "You're right." He was right—the man Nico Senvi was now—better not to ask too many questions. And the thought of him doing math all on his lonesome....

She looked down at her clothes. She was dressed to sprawl out on the couch and watch the vids. Not really suitable at all. "Give me a second to change and I'll come with you."

Lena went into the other room and put on a red silksynth dress that hugged her curves like armor. It was the dress she'd worn when she'd first met the new and improved Nico Senvi. His favorite dress. She had more expensive ones now, but one thing you learn as a joygirl, there's no reason to change a working formula.

The art of seduction was a lot like arithmetic. Just make everything add up.

The original Nico wouldn't have noticed the dress. Original Nico Senvi was just a kid who cared more about engines and his swoop racing record than women. But new Nico was different.

*"What Nico knows and what he doesn't know. Not really a good thing to talk about."* Truer words were never spoken.

When they got to the offices of I.E. Limited, Nico was locked in his suite. He lived in those damn rooms now.
Jin and the merc left her at the door, muttering something about pressing business elsewhere. She couldn't blame them, she could hear the string of babble that sounded like curses from all the way down the hall. It wasn't Twi'lek and it wasn't Basic. Wasn't any language any of them had ever heard before. But that was another thing, you just didn't talk about. Not if you were smart.

Lena Wee had always been smart.

Hesitant, she opened the double doors emblazoned with the I.E. Ltd. crest and stepped inside. Nico sat at his desk surrounded by white stacks of printouts. Geological charts tacked on the walls were covered with more scribbles in his indecipherable shorthand.

The orange Twi'lek looked up at her, mouth crinkling into a smile of relief. "Lena! Finally! You've come!"

"I waited for you for five hours at Motta's, you huttspawn," she snapped.

He ignored that, Nico was great at ignoring what he didn't want to hear. "The Exchange rep wants us to do a bond issue, something about building up more capital and there were… numbers. I need you to look at the numbers. They seem large, so I imagine that's good, but I really need you to check." His lekku curled awkwardly. They looked dull and unkempt without her around to wax them. "We've had some setbacks. Okay, we've had some catastrophes. I don't think Tatooine is going to work out." His face was tragic.

Lena sighed and took the stack of paper he handed her automatically, running her pink-nailed hand down the calculations. As usual, Suvam Tan was trying to shave off percentages where he could. She frowned. You couldn't trust a Rodian. If she called him on it, he'd just act dumb. Son of a mynock might think he could fool other people with that, but Lena Wee wasn't born yesterday.

"What do you mean not going to work out?"

He looked at her sadly. "Tatooine's dead, Lena. And the mines are all played. Czerka was right, the ore was tapped out long ago. It had no way to sustain itself...." He shook his head sadly. "So much time has passed, but I had such hopes!" He unfolded a map in front of him, a star chart promotional poster from the Official Coruscant Version. He'd even gotten the thing autoprinted by the original cast. The holoimage was marred now with red ink where he'd scribbled more notes, half in Twi'lek and half in his own shorthand that no one else could understand.

Lena gritted her teeth. More mad schemes. I.E., Limited was a house of cards built from a bad sidedeck and Nico was completely oblivious. "We've signed guarantees with the Exchange! We can't just back out. Look, I explained it to you, we don't have to make money: we just have to get more investors and keep spending it."

"You're beautiful when you talk about capital." His lekku curled around her upper arm in a possessive gesture. His head was close to hers now, and his voice was soft. "If you want, we could do a little more work on founding the dynasty...."

"I'm not in the mood."

Her lekku betrayed her, flushing a deep pink. He raised a brow ridge. She pulled away. Damn him.

"Tell me about your latest plan. I'll tell you if we can make it work." She folded her arms and stood there, waiting to hear it.

Nico nodded thoughtfully and turned back to his map, putting it down on the projector screen so that its image floated between them, a black veil speckled with stars.
"I need to get just one working first. Then deal with the others. This is Tatooine," he said, pointing at the planet with the large red 'x' drawn through it. "No good."

"Manaan." The ocean planet had another 'x' drawn through it. "Manaan would never work. I hate water, and the natives are far too sensitive, especially with the kolto gone."

Lena tapped her foot. "Yeah and? Next, you're going to say, Korriban, Dantooine, and Kashyyyk. Nico, I know you're a fan, but this plan makes no sense. You can't just buy the Star Maps." And I still don't understand what you expect to do with them.

Not that I'd ask you, that was Motta's mistake.

"The Star… maps...." Nico chuckled. "Not the maps. Kashyyyk or Dantooine, I think. Will have to be." He looked thoughtful. "Kashyyyk's not open to travelers, but we could make a pilgrimage to Dantooine?" He gave her that grin that she'd never been able to resist, sort of hapless and innocent, only with a scoundrel's flash of pearly whites. "I've never taken you anywhere. Lena, would you like to go on an expedition with me?"

"Dantooine's not the vacation spot I had in mind." Then again, Dantooine's gotta be better than this bloody banthacrappping desert, even if half of it was bombed to hell. She pondered. "Land would be cheap there. If we could find some resources to exploit. It’s farmland? Still viable? They must be trying to rebuild."

Nico nodded eagerly. "This is what I love about you, Lena Wee. Your practical, number-loving, calculating, little mind."

Lena batted her lashes. "You love me for my mind?"

His hand closed over her t’chun. “Among other parts.”

So yeah. In the end she did fold like a cheap sidedeck. It wasn't just the size of the salary he paid her. Whatever he was, whatever it was that he'd become, Nico Senvi still had a huge… amount of charm.

XXX

-Three...

"It looks fine," Carth said to the contractor. The Bothan nodded at him, wiping a dusty hoof on the side of his coveralls. "You've done a great job," Carth offered, when the sentient didn't leave.

Am I supposed to tip him? I thought D'Reev was covering all of the costs.

The entranceway still needed to be painted and they were installing the hook-ups in the 'freshers, but the luxurious conapt that D'Reev had given them in the heart of the Chancellor's District was almost ready for occupancy.

As always, Dustil was a silent shadow at his side. Carth really thought the boy was getting better—or at least he wanted to think that. The anger had faded from his son's eyes, to be replaced with something like wary resignation. He didn't bother to hide his dislike for the Senator; but to Carth's relief the old man only seemed amused by it. Carth was more saddened by the strained relationship between Korrie and his son. He had hoped that they'd get along like—brothers.

No. Why even think like that? Carth shot the thought down almost effortlessly.
It was getting easier not to think of her, or anything to do with her. He would not let himself think of her.

*Not yet.*

His talks with Korrie had been painful, but necessary. As always, he felt detached sadness when he thought of the boy. He was too young to face such terrible truths. But in times like these, even children could not remain innocent.

*I'll keep you safe, son.*

"You have some mail," the Bothan said finally. "Papermail. A uniform came by with it yesterday. Lots. You want me to get rid of it?"

"Mail?"

"You're famous, Dad." Dustil said. His son threw him a half-smile, but it looked pasted on. The boy was still so tense.

*Famous….*

The past week had been a blur of invitations and meetings with Telos ambassadors and Fleet personnel.

Along with fame, came countless offers he had to reject: each more absurd than the last. Represent Telos in its Senate plea; take a place in the Fleet… they still call it the Fleet even though we have almost no ships; meet with the Jedi Council— reasons unspecified—D'Reev counseled against accepting ; have dinner with a few wealthy Senators; attend the opening of an art gallery; visit an exhibition at the Jedi Archives; sponsor a new line of Corellian disc ships— don’t think about the Hawk it leads to thinking about her; meet with some Manaan lawyers regarding the pending trial there— I have nothing to say, what could I say; and a hundred other requests of the same ilk.

What Carth had done, what he thanked the stars he'd been able to do, was spend time with Dustil.

It was slow, and it wasn't always pretty, but Carth was optimistic. The morning after, when Dustil woke him up and they talked about Mission had been a real breakthrough. It broke his heart to see Dustil finally accept what couldn't be changed, but that was part of the healing process.

There was a lot they still didn't talk about: Revan; what Dustil had been doing on Coruscant for the last six months; what the future would bring— my son has the Force; does he need training? Is he going to be all right? But these things would come. The longer the days passed without Darth Revan's appearance, the more Carth wondered if it was only his own paranoia that made him so certain that she would come. D'Reev dismissed his fears when they spoke of them, and Korrie had stopped asking about his mother.

The child only smiled at him now and asked polite questions about starships. He was a sweet kid— none of it was his fault.

A part of Carth knew this was only the calm before the storm. A part of him knew all of these plans for a future were a lie.

That part of him was making other plans. Plans he'd need, before the end.

*Before the end, I have to make sure that Dustil is safe.*
The Senator and his grandson had been a great comfort. In some ways, the child made him see the woman Revan might have been if the Force and the Jedi and the war hadn't twisted her into the monster that she was.

Carth sighed. *Regret is too simple to explain what I feel.*

Side by side, father and son walked through the rooms of their new home, seventy-three levels above groundside, with a view of the glittering skyline from every panoramic window. The building had high security, and a reputation for discretion. D'Reev assured him that no one would bother him here with the irritating demands of his newfound notoriety.

*Well, no one except the Senate, the Fleet, the Jedi Council, and the Telosian Embassy. They all have the address.*

The stack of mail forwarded from Fleet HQ sat on the floor, almost a meter high. Dustil bent down, peering at it curiously. Carth pulled him back.

"Has it been checked?" he asked the Bothan.

"Checked?" the sentient said, shrugging his heavy shoulders.

"For bombs, explosives, poison...."

The Bothan just looked at him. "Fleet uniform brought it and said, give to Carth Onasi."

Dustil pulled away from him, frowning in concentration. "I—think it's okay, Father," he said.

*Can he tell with the Force? Call me Dad, Carth thought to himself. You call me Dad again sometimes now, but when you're angry or worried you call me Father.*

*"When you're angry you call her Revan."*

*Old ghosts...* He would never be free of them.

His son was rifling through the stack carelessly. "Fan mail. From all over the galaxy." He opened one at random and Carth bit back his words of caution. One thing he'd learned, Dustil hated being told what to do.

*I guess I was the same way at his age.*

"Business proposition: invest in Byss mines. Byss makes, the galaxy takes...." Dustil shrugged and threw it down, opening another. "Marriage proposal, an elderly widow from Naboo." He laughed. It was good to hear him laugh.

Cautiously Carth sat down next to his son on the floor and began opening letters himself.

They sat there for what seemed like hours before he reached one near the bottom of the pile, a print-out from an old Systech printer, the paper folded and refolded before being sent priority express. Priority express wasn't cheap—unmanned ships hopping more hyperspace points than a living body could endure—all the way from... Carth's smile faded slightly—Deralia. The thin film crackled as he unfolded it.

XXX

*Dear Captain Onasi,*
I feel like I know you, even though we've never met. I'm not sure how a great man like yourself could be mistaken, but our Polla would never be the Dark Lord of the Sith—and since your Revan is practically her, I'm sure that's a lie.

You know, I can see why our Polla admires you so much. And Revan too. You looked very handsome in that awards ceremony! But you seem so sad.

Anyway, I'm writing to you about Beya Organa, my cousin several times removed. She served the Republic in the Mandalorian wars, and now is on trial for her life in Manaan. Bendowen, her father, is just beside himself with worry. We all are.

I may be an old woman, but I know terrible things happen in wartime. Perhaps you could use your influence to clear Beya's name? After all, she's an Organa. You know firsthand that we Organas are quality people.

I hope you forgive my informality. I’m an old woman, and I was never one for polite nothings. But you know what? I’ve seen many things in my time, but I’ve never seen anything so sad as what’s gone wrong between you and Revan Starfire. Polla doesn't want me to write to you, but I think she’s still just upset at what those Jedi did without her permission. She takes it personally, you understand. But she’s a good person, Polla is. And since your Revan is her, she must be a good person too.

Please help poor Beya. She's a war hero just like you are. She deserves to be treated like one.

Respectfully,

Mita Organa

(You can call me "Auntie Mita"—after all, we’re practically family.)

"Here's another one with pictures… Twi'lek twins? Hey, they're in Coruscant too." Dustil elbowed him. “What do you think?”

Carth reached out a hand and grabbed his son's shoulder for support.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

The Bothan was long gone, and it was just the two of them, sitting in this echoing empty conapt.

XXX

"You should meet my Auntie Mita," Polla said sleepily, moving closer to him. "She has to approve of you or you'll never get anywhere with me."

"Where else could I get to with you?" Carth murmured softly in her ear. They’d been at it for an hour; still half-drunk from the cantina on Tatooine.

Something he’d thought dead and gone had melted inside of his chest at her easy acceptance of him, their intimacy. Everything.

Polla’s green eyes slanted and she blushed. "This?" Polla waved her arms in an expansive gesture: taking in the disordered bunk, him, the pile of their clothes and weapons torn off and strewn all over the floor. "Naw. Auntie Mita always told me, this isn’t what matters. It’s what you build with it. The sweat, and the arguments, and the love, and the tears. They’re what makes a marria—a relationship," she amended hastily, blushing.
"You Auntie Mita sounds wise," Carth sat up and nuzzled her ear softly. The smell of her skin was sweeter than Tatooine wine.

"She's a pain in the ass, but I miss her. What I said about love—you know I didn't mean... don't get any ideas, flyboy. I'm just drunk."

"Shhh. It's fine." He turned her around gently and kissed the tip of her nose. "How long have we been together now, on this crazy mission from hell?"

"More than four months," Polla said. "But I feel like... like I've known you forever." She giggled. "Auntie Mita also always said all Organa women have a weakness for pilots. But... you know, Bastila is going to freak."

"If I have to choose between Bastila's approval or your Auntie's, I think I'll go with the Deralian every time. They seem to have a better perspective."

She answered him with a kiss: wet and open-mouthed and then he moved against her and it turned out they weren't finished at all—

XXX

"Dad?"

His hand crumpled the fragile paper. The letter has to be some kind of trick, some kind of trap. Polla Organa isn't real, she never was.

But I could find out. The trial on Manaan. Beya Organa. I could find out.

Dustil took the paper from his hands and scanned it. The look on his son's face was closed and still. "I don't understand. Some old woman wants you to help her cousin? We're read a hundred letters like this, we've read ten letters written by people calling themselves 'Revan' or 'Darth Revan', there's a stack over there of letters from people claiming to be her long-lost relatives. It's just another novajob."

His mouth was dry. "I know, son. But this one might be real."

"Revan?" Dustil's face was angry. "Of course she's real. " He looked away. "I won't let her hurt you again. You—you do know that she's coming here, Father, don't you?"

"That—the computer's message you told me about wanted us to think she's coming here," Carth chose his words carefully.

One of his friends in the Fleet had given him access to the explosives depot, no questions asked. It was like living in two worlds: in one, he could pretend that she was gone forever; but in the other he was stockpiling enough weaponry to kill her. Most of it was stashed at Fleet HQ—he didn't want to involve D'Reev or Korrie—but they'd deliver it here later, when he asked.

"I used thermal detonators on Malak. And without the verpine shielding I'd have been dead a dozen times over...." Her voice haunted him again. It always would. He was a fool to think he could escape.

"Dustil, whatever happens, I promised your mother to keep you safe. I just want you to be safe. Do you understand?"

"I understand more than you do, Father." Dustil's voice was cold and distant. He crumpled the
letter in his hand. A blue ball of lightning flickered above it, lighting the paper. The flames caught. Dustil made a face and dropped the letter onto the floor. His fingers flexed, and the fire went out again, leaving a pile of ash. "I understand what we have to do."

*Oh, my son, no....*

Carth willed himself not to reach out to the boy, not to make any sudden movements. "No, Dustil," he said quietly.

"You planned on facing her alone." His son's expression did not change. "But she killed Mission. Malak destroyed Telos... for her. Mekel keeps trying to lie to me; but I won't let him. Not until she's here. Then he'll tell me where she is, because he thinks I'll help her, and we'll go to her. We'll face her. And then I won't let her hurt us, ever again."

*It was all lies, lies we told to each other, Dustil and I, this past week. Pretending we had a future together, pretending to enjoy things. But this—this is the truth.*


"Promise me—"

Dustil shook his head. "No," he said in that dead voice. "Malak did it for her. He called it a sacrifice or something. A sacrifice for her. Not her orders, but it doesn't matter."

Carth didn't ask his son how he knew that. And it didn't matter. *War changes things, changes even my son.*

*I fell in love with a woman named Polla Organa. It doesn't matter if she's real or not. Revan is real, and I have to destroy her.*

"You're not getting involved in this." He'd made arrangements. Captain Ekkumi asked no questions, when he'd asked her to witness the will, to let Dustil stay with her for a time.

His son's eyes were so dark. *Morgana's eyes.* "How old were the men who served under you, Father? The fighter pilots that didn't come back?"

"Eighteen, nineteen... you're not—you're still just a kid."

"I was seventeen last week, right before you came." Dustil traced the ashes on the floor, marking a pattern in them that looked like one of Carth’s old flight badges. "No one noticed, no one cared, but I was. You and Mom joined the TSF at seventeen. Mission was fourteen. Mission was fourteen—and you took her with you."

"We shouldn't have—I was wrong to do that. I wish I—"

*I'm not a kid, you old geezer!"

"I'm not leaving you." Dustil looked at him, and suddenly his expression was eerily like Revan's. The same blank coldness and concentration. "I can make you forget about that idea, Father." His jaw tightened. "I can make you do anything I want. I'm good at it too. Master Uthar said I had a gift."

"No. You will do as I say." Carth met his son's eyes squarely, unflinching.
'Don't show any weakness, don't back down. The deck of the Star Forge and the alarms ringing. With a mechanic's certainty he knew they didn't have much time. Her Sith-damned face....

"I'll do what I want." Dustil's voice was soft. "And what I want is to see her dead. Make her dead. Dead like Malak."

Carth made himself nod. His teeth pulled back. "If that's what you want."

_Mission drugged you and stuffed you in a supply closet once. I was shocked, I only told her to make sure you left Korriban, but she was right to do it. I'll figure out a way to make that old trick work again. You're going to be safe, son. You and Korrie both._

Dustil had the Force. But he was not Revan.

_Thank the stars, he can't tell if I lie._

XXX

_Two..._

Revan stared at her reflection in the mirror again, hesitating, before going back outside. Green eyes stared back at her from a pale face under a short cap of red hair. The Sith lines were gone, as if they had never been.

_Does that mean I've changed?_

She smiled bitterly. She didn't feel changed. She gave her robes a final tug and walked out of the 'fresher. Her companions were waiting on the former bridge. They'd been living on a vibroblade's edge, these last few days, waiting for Mission's transmission and trying to come up with a plan of what do if it never came.

The docking codes were taken care of, and the first stages of the plan they'd mapped out should have been initiated. But until the computer contacted them, they had no way of knowing what waited for them on Coruscant.

"So nice of you to finally call, Mission. We've been wondering...." Oerin Lin's voice dripped ice. Even HK was here; already half-assembled with the cheap armor plating Zaalbar had welded on his frame to change his appearance. Her droid expressed his objections incessantly for days until Zaalbar switched off his voder. Now his red metal eyes tracked her movements. Revan was probably imagining it, but she almost thought those eyes looked imploring.

Mission wasn't using a hologram this time, only a stream of encrypted characters. The bridge's computer spat out a translation in toneless Basic.

"We've gotten the allies we needed, and the docking stuff is still good to go," the computer droned. "But there's a few snags. Sis? You here? You'd better sit down."

"And don't blow anything up, okay?" it added.

"Did you find Dustil?" Revan made herself walk calmly to the couch and sit between Canderous and Zaalbar, back straight, the perfect image of composure.

"D'Reev got Dustil... but... at least he's with Carth." Maybe Mission's own voice would have made those words cheerful. The computer just made them sound dead. Like a fact she didn't want to face.
Revan stared at her hands and willed them not to turn into fists.

_I will not win them back with fists or swords or blasters. I will win them back with D'Reev's own weapons. I will win them back on his grounds. But I will win them back._

She swallowed hard. "And my son?"

An image flickered, a red-haired boy's face streaked with tears. Revan frowned, there was a red shadow striping across his face, a red light... almost as if..."Pan out the image," she commanded.

There was a pause and then, almost as if it was reluctant, the image panned out. Malachor was bigger—_his face—my son's face now... my son...._

Her son was holding onto Dustil Onasi for dear life, and both of them were clutching at a Sith lightsaber. They appeared to be surrounded by several troops and some Jedi. There was a bright light fanning out on one side of the screen, it looked like an explosion.

_There is no emotion, there is peace. And that is a big fracking lie._

"Mission?"

"Don't worry, sis—that's an old holo. From last week. They all got out okay. It was all that nerf-herder Dustil's fault; but it’s cool now. I promise."

Canderous glared at the computer. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"I was lucky to be able to patch into a security cam," it said, not really answering the question.

For the thousandth time in the last week, Revan wondered what she had done, reactivating the Rakatan computer and installing Mission Vao's holocron in its core. They'd needed the tactical advantage; but after viewing the holos in the HK's memory banks, Canderous had agreed with her assessment. The thing could not be trusted.

_I don't dare talk to Zaal about it. I don't know what he thinks. But we need the computer—we need Mission. Without her—without it—_

Her, it... Revan wanted to believe it was Mission, but....

_Later, later._

"Sis, Mekel Jin says Dustil's really mad at you."

"Mekel Jin?" Revan frowned, reaching for a memory.

_That boy in the tombs with Jorak Uln? Carth was hurt badly in that fight. Was Mekel one of the names Yuthura mentioned? Dustil went off with someone else, she said. Was it Mekel?_

_I could fill a hundred datapads with what I don't know._

She'd tried to dream of Malak, but he and all of the other ghosts from her past eluded her. Strange. Her dreams now were usually Polla's. The Deralian sky and family. Racing a glider through a canyon, riding hessi. Piloting a rickety freighter through the Corellian spire. Polla's relatives giving her lectures about love. Polla's memories, false ones blurred with real. Carth. Carth saying he loved her. Carth's arms, and his face, stubble rough against her cheek. Carth calling her Polla. The way things had been between them before they knew the truth.
It was the only happy time in her life that she knew was truly hers.

Funny. My happy memories involve an insane desperate quest, and Dark Jedi out to kill us.

Force, I miss you, Carth.

The worst thing about watching him denounce her was that the things he said might be true. They were the things she'd worried about, had nightmares about ever since the Leviathan. Revan made herself watch the broadcasts, all of them. His face on a hundred networks across the galaxy. Always saying the same thing. Always hating her.

"Where is Mekel?" Revan asked finally, untangling her emotions with a sharp and brutal tug.

"He is unharmed," the computer said.

"Mekel's with Carth and Dustil?"

"No, Mekel's with me and our allies. The Jedi are after him. He hurt some Master… and I'd assume they're bright enough to link him to you. But he's on our side, don't worry!"

"What do your projections show the Jedi Council will do?" Revan asked.

"Your old self left the Order, I think. And Polla-Revan was never officially entered into the scrolls as a Padawan—or if she was, the records were destroyed on Dantooine. I don't think they have jurisdiction."

"You think? I'd prefer something more definitive."

"They've been in lots of meetings. From what I've been able to catch from local net gossip, they seem undecided. Split. Vrook's statements from Manaan are causing three hundred banthas' poo doo worth of flack."

Revan's mouth twitched. Thank you, Uncle Vrook.

He'd gone on record, stating that she was not Darth Revan, could not be Darth Revan. He was representing the fallen Jedi and Yuthura on Manaan. The wreckage I left behind in the Embassy. There was nothing else I could do. Guilt pulled at her, and she banished it. Focus.

Of course, then a transmission from Ziost had named her as one of the official leaders of the Sith Empire….

Which is no Empire, only a few broken star systems with no ships, no trade, and barely any infrastructure; but I guess that wouldn't matter, not to my enemies.

"Aside from our allies, are there any other worlds that might recognize my claim against D'Reev?"

We don't need to win that battle, but we do need them to acknowledge it. Hell, I don't want to win. Winning would cause more trouble than wild hessi in an eridu patch.

"Possibly Onderon. You saved them in the Mandalorian Wars and didn't invade them later. They still have a statue of you in Iziz. On Onderon, remaining venerated with a public monument is no small achievement."

Revan looked at Canderous, frowning.

The Mandalorian coughed. "Considering your allies, I wouldn't count on Onderon."
"Candy might be right, sis. But Onderon does have trade agreements now with the Malachor system, so maybe it's okay."

*Only Mission could call him Candy and live. But that's not Mission.* Revan watched her friend's face. He was too much of a tactician to take the bait.

"Trade agreements." the old warrior scowled, ignoring the computer. He shook his head slowly. "To be reduced to trade agreements."

"Hoth?" Revan asked, almost hopefully.

"They deny you were born there. They claim they've never heard of you. Or rather, never heard of you until you became famous, first as a Jedi and then as the Dark Lord of the Sith."

"When they thought I was dead they—" her voice rose, indignant.

*Don't, don't bother. You don't remember Hoth and it doesn't remember you. Let it go.*

"Things change," muttered Canderous. He patted her arm awkwardly. It was uncomfortable when he did that. He was trying to comfort her, but it felt wrong on both of them. She pulled away.

"My people will back your claim, Polla-Revan," Zaalbar growled. Revan leaned up against the Wookiee, taking comfort in the clean smell of his fur. From the nearby chair, Oerin Lin made a face and rolled his eyes. She glared at him.

"One colony system and one interdicted protectorate," the computer stated tonelessly. "You'll need more than that. But geez, I can't exactly take a poll. This isn't easy. You'll need to convince them. I hope you can handle it."

"I sent out the invitations," it added. "As discussed, based on what I could dig up about who might be sympathetic to the Mandalorians—or you. Or weak-willed."

If it had been Mission's voice it might have sounded aggravated.

"Mission… are you—" Revan swallowed her words. *All right? Evil? Dangerous?*

"I need to talk to you."

"We are talking." Revan raised an eyebrow.

"Alone. It's personal."

"I have no secrets about my life from my friends. You can say whatever it is." *And if Lin teases me about it later, I'll knock him down again in combat practice.*

"It's not about your life. Not everything is about you. Make them leave, switching to text."

Revan shrugged.

"We're going," Canderous said, lumbering to his feet. He glanced back at her, more concern etched in his granite face. "Careful," he said, and that one word was enough. Revan nodded, they'd talk later.

The others followed him out.

"Go ahead, Mission, they've gone," Revan said quietly.
I have to trust you on that, my consciousness is so small right now that I can't tell. I can't tap into the ship's sensors and still transmit.

The words were written in Rakatan.

"You're still taking no chances; none of them speak Rakatan, let alone read it."

Seeing the ancient script reminded her too much of the holo-vids of her younger self. That thing manipulated me. It made me into something it wanted. There'd been more of them, more young Revans meditating in front of an ancient console, but no more images of her son. In several places the vids cut out. I told it to not show me anything harmful to sentient life and it obeyed.

In the last one she'd been wearing the mask. In the last one, according to the time stamp, she'd been Darth Revan. Almost all of the sound was gone. Whatever the computer had said was lost. Whatever teachings it imparted were gone. Thank the Force.

The Rakatan symbols scrolled green across a black backdrop. Dustil didn't take the news of Mission's death very well.

"Is this about Dustil? Is he all right? Y-you didn't harm him, did you?"

No. You don't trust me, do you, sis? Can I ask you a question?

"Of course, Mission." Revan made her voice sound compassionate, although she wasn't sure why that should matter.

Did you ever think, we're sort of alike, you and me?

"You used to remind me of myself, as a tweener...." the lie was automatic, although Polla had thought that once, about Mission. But neither of them was Mission or Polla. "You're not Mission Vao." Revan said flatly. "Stop pretending. You're not Mission and—" I'm not Polla.

There was a long silence, where the computer did not respond, and Revan was forced to think.

"Oh," Revan said quietly, almost to herself.

I didn't tell you, but I met one of the Genoharadan on Kashyyyk. His name was Rulan Prolik.

"The shapeshifter Hulas told me about? I never did find him." Her eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you tell me? Is there anything else you've concealed from me?"

I planned to use him to help us. Hulas was unpredictable.

"Was unpredictable?"

He's dead. There was a broadcast yesterday from Manaan. Unnamed Rodian found dead in 'fresher. Poison. Was definitely Hulas, they've changed the Genoharadan codes there already. I assume Rulan moved against him. The Genoharadan will not interfere, don't worry I paid them off.

"You paid them off... with what?" We don't have any credits... do we? " How much do you act outside of my command, Mission?" Revan rubbed her arms. Suddenly the room felt very cold.

I help you. I help you, and Freyyrr and Big Z. I help you just like I always did.

"Which you, Mission? You, the computer—or you, Mission Vao?"
Both of us. To the Builder's installation you were a miracle, one born from a slave race with the strength to make the old ways right again. To Mission Vao, you were a friend, a sister—maybe even a mother.

"I don't want the old ways again." Revan ignored the rest of that. It hurt too much.

You did, although you had no name for it, at first. I was built to serve one such as you, part of me. And the rest of me is the Twi’lek child. Anyways, sis, Rulan left. He couldn't move against D'Reev so the best I could do was the non-interference thing. Geez, that was expensive, but it's fine.

But before he left, we had this talk. The Genoharadan are funny, Polla-Revan. They don't believe in much, except this thing they call luck, but they send all their profits to these religious orders across the galaxy. He asked me if I believed in the existence of a soul.

"A soul?"

The Jedi would call it part of the Force or something. But here's the question he wouldn't answer. If I had a soul, would it reside in my sentient core, or in my memories of being Mission Vao?

"I don't...." My sentient computer wants to discuss to discuss theology. "You said to me once, if I didn't remember being Revan, it was as if I wasn't Revan." Her voice was empty, as her mind made the inevitable conclusions.

There was a long silence.

"I can see why you ask if we are alike."

Are we?

Revan closed her eyes.

"I guess we are."

It was a long time before she dared open them again and see Mission's response. What she read made the room even colder.

Mekel wears a collar with a subvoder so we can talk. There's an explosive charge on it that I didn't tell him about. Short-range, but it would work. D'Reev wants him now too. I'm not sure why. Maybe additional leverage on Dustil. I think Mekel could get close to D'Reev. Close enough and then I could detonate the charge. I could solve all of our problems that way, Polla-Revan. Easy. Your claim would be undisputed. It's not easy to get close to D'Reev, but I have the key. And Mekel trusts me. He likes me. He considers me a friend.

Her mouth was dry. "Malachor wouldn't be safe with D'Reev dead. The other Senate families...."

He would be if your initial claim is accepted. If we get that far, you could protect Malachor. If we get that far, D'Reev will be the only obstacle.

"Are you telling me this because you're going to do it, or because you want my permission?"

I want your advice. Mekel is nice to me. He doesn't treat me like a thing.

"He's your friend. You don't sacrifice friends."

"No. I'm not—" her voice broke and she stared at her hands. "I understand, Mission."

I thought you might. I just wanted to talk about it with someone that might understand.

"If I order you not to do this...."

Are you ordering me not to do this? If the text had Mission's voice maybe it would sound hopeful. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

Revan took a deep breath. "Not yet. But I—might. I command you not to act without my direct order. Is that understood?"

About Mekel, okay, the computer qualified.

"About Mekel, yes," Revan agreed. She stared at her hands, half-expecting to see blood on them. This is what being a leader means. Making the decisions that no one else wants to make.

Thanks for listening, sis.

"Mission...."

Sheesh, stop worrying, everything will be okay! I feel much better.

"Great," Revan muttered. My evil Rakatan computer feels much better.

XXX

-One...

"Hulas is no longer with us. I am your new contact, Senator."

The pink-skinned Zeltron smiled at him seductively, managing to convey the typical pheromonic attributes of her species even across light-years of encoded FTL transmission.

Malachi D'Reev frowned. An irritating development. "I assume you have Hulas's notes regarding our contract?"

Another power struggle among the Genoharadan. Well no matter, as long as they still have the information I need.

"Hulas told me everything, before his—retirement. You can call me Chax. I believe I do have something here about you." She made a show of looking through the stacks of datapads in front of her, but D'Reev wasn't fooled.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, tapping his fingers against the cold stone of his desk.

She raised a delicate black eyebrow and her red-irised eyes widened in protest. "Certainly not! Only you must understand, Hulas left his affairs in some disorder. We're still trying to clear up the loose ends."

"I need to know the time and the docking bay that my—package will be arriving."

He planned to send a squad of CorSec civilian guards to intercept her, with orders to shoot to kill. He didn't expect them to succeed, but the resulting body count would only serve to improve his cause. Darth Revan reborn. And if they did manage to kill her... well... he was hoping for a more iniquitous end, but an end was an end. Hulas had been stringing him along regarding the details for
weeks, but the time was soon.

Tomorrow, if the original estimation was correct.

Onasi and his son were safely ensconced in their new home. He'd had no luck finding the Jin boy, but Mekel Jin was only a curiosity, of no strategic importance now that Dustil was firmly entrenched in the right camp. A happy surprise, the boy's change of heart. Mission Vao's death had served a noble purpose.

*I almost want to thank you, Revan Starfire, for making that so easy.*

The conversation between the Onasis the morning after their arrival marked a turning point with Dustil. The Senator was very pleased. Vengeance was such a predictable tool. And the boy could be useful to him later...if he survived.

And Malachor... his heir seemed restless, but silent. There had been no more signs of rebellious behavior. He seemed to accept his mother's treachery, at least outwardly.

The boy spent a lot of time in his room, when he wasn't at school.

"I need to know the time and the docking bay," D'Reev repeated.

"Yes." The assassin raised a six-fingered hand to her heavy black hair and shook it out slowly. "Coruscant. Port 23, docking bay 12. Groundside station. Estimated arrival time: fourteen hundred hours, thirty minutes, Coruscant standard. The name of the ship is the *Girl From Hoth.*" The Zeltron sighed. "However, I must inform you my organization's involvement is now concluded. The Genoharadan can be of no further assistance. Personally, I wish you luck. My homeworld was devastated in the recent conflicts—but professionally..." The smile reappeared, enticing and apologetic. "Professionally, my hands are tied. Orders, you understand."

"Has something changed?" D'Reev pondered the implications. He didn't expect to need the Genoharadan again. Subtlety was not what he required. But Hulas had offered further assistance for an increased fee at the time of their original negotiation, should it become necessary.

"With new management, things always change," the Zeltron replied crisply. "I do wish you luck."

D'Reev nodded. *The Genoharadan are but one tool of many. As long as they cannot act against me, they are no matter.* And they could not. His original contract was very specific.

"End transmit." D'Reev clapped his hands and the Zeltron vanished. The room fell silent. Silent except for the sound of an indrawn breath, and the pad of feet moving towards the door.

D'Reev tensed and spoke quickly.

"Defensive. Activate stasis." At his command the fields activated, disrupting the stealth generator and encasing its wearer in a field of red light. The small figure jerked and then froze, as the field stopped its movement.

"Grandson." The Senator breathed a sigh of relief.

*Initiative, my heir shows initiative...but why? Surely, he can't still believe in his mother?*

Captain Onasi's 'private' talks with the boy had been gut-wrenchingly emotional, and, the Senator had assumed, conclusive.
The old man got up from his desk slowly and circled his heir, frowning. The child's face was pale and terrified under the veil of red, his hands clenched into small fists.

"Defensive. Release stasis." The field vanished, and the boy fell to the ground, gasping for breath. Senator D'Reev expected tears and protestations, but the child was eerily silent.

"Explain yourself, Malachor."

"Are you going to kill her?" His grandson got to his feet slowly. The terror was gone, replaced by an expressionless mask the Senator knew only too well. There was much of Malak in the boy's features, but that expression was entirely hers. And where had he gotten a stealth belt? D'Reev frowned, looking at the simple gray band around Malachor's waist. It was a small unit, and oddly familiar.

"She will not hurt us again." He watched the child's face carefully.

The boy bit his lip and his chin trembled, the reserve cracking. The gray eyes widened. "I-I j-just wanted to know...what...was gonna happen. I'm sorry, Grandfather!" Small arms locked around his waist and the boy buried his face in the old man's robes sobbing. "You'll keep us safe from her?"

He ignored the emotional outburst, hands moving down to examine the stealth generator more closely. He unsnapped the catch at the back and pulled away from Malachor, holding the belt up in front of him. It was familiar, too familiar. Long ago, he'd had it constructed to teach his son some of the games the Senate families played.

"Where did you get this?"

The child wiped his eyes, sniffling through a reddened nose. "I f-found it..."

"Where?"

The boy looked at the floor. "I-in the vaults."

*He broke into the family vaults? Showing initiative?* The old man was almost pleased.

"Is there anything else you wish to tell me, Malachor?"

The boy started crying again, his frame shaking with the tears. "I'm s-scared," he whispered. "Wh-what if she comes here and wants to hurt me?"

"She has no memory of you, Malachor. And I will not let her hurt you."

"It's gonna be tomorrow?" the child's voice was a frightened squeak.

"Going to be tomorrow. Yes, I think so."

"I should stay home from school. We should hide, Grandfather. Stay here and hide so she c-can't get us..."

D'Reev had considered that, but it was important to keep up appearances. And his grandson must learn not to show fear, even if the emotion itself was completely understandable. "No." He folded his arms and looked down at the boy sternly. "You will go to school. I will go to work. Don't worry, I've taken measures to contain her." He made his voice sound gentle. "I will not let her hurt you, Malachor. Not again."

The boy's head nodded slightly, and he rubbed his hands into his eyes, face twisting.
The child is overly-emotional, just like his father, before I had the Jedi pound it out of him. Or was he? Was that calculation in the boy's eyes? Subterfuge?

No, surely not. He may be a D'Reev, but he's only eight years old. Almost nine. We should do something for his birthday. Show him some kindness. Win back his love. The child had been altogether too quiet lately.

"When this is over, perhaps you and I will take a vacation. Visit our estates on Corellia. Would you like that, Korrie?"

"Y-yes."

"Go to your room, now. I have work to do. We'll speak more at dinner."

Malachor nodded again and walked away. His steps were hesitant, as if he wanted to run, but was afraid to. D'Reev watched his grandson leave, still wondering. He was almost tempted to keep the boy home tomorrow—just in case.

"Get me the Eglatine Institute, Director Chalmers."

Almost instantly the man's face appeared. Not surprising, he was paid well to be at the Senate families' beck and call.

"Senator, it is an honor."

"Triple the security around my heir tomorrow. And the entrances to the Institute."

"Surely, but you know, our defenses are impregnable already."

He wants compensation. Some games were always the same.

"Send me the bill."

The man nodded, his hesitation gone. "Certainly, Senator D'Reev."

XXX

**Boom**

The small ship coded in the Coruscanti landing registry as *The Girl From Hoth* landed at port 23, docking bay 12, groundside at precisely fourteen hundred hours, thirty minutes, local standard time.

Almost immediately, there was chaos.
Chapter 17 / The Lady of Situations

XXX

_The small ship coded in the Coruscanti landing registry as The Girl From Hoth landed at port 23, docking bay 12 groundside at precisely fourteen hundred hours, thirty minutes, local standard time._

_Almost immediately, there was chaos._

XXX

13:00 CGST (Coruscanti Galactic Standard Time)

Thalia trotted behind Master Jopheena, trying to keep up with the old woman's long strides. Periodically, the Jedi would stop and wait for her.

Thalia wasn't sure exactly what was going on. Ever since that hisspat Mekel Jin had maimed Master Iridel, she'd been running on autopilot to hide her grief. But then, this morning Jopheena had summoned her. They sat in the Jedi Master's meditation room for hours, while the woman scanned the nets.

Suddenly, she'd jumped to her feet and told Thalia to follow her, stay close—and most importantly—not ask any questions.

The last part was easy. In some parts of the galaxy, not asking questions was a given.

They were almost to the Jedi Temple's private hangar when Master Quatra's acidic voice called out behind them.

"Jopheena, where are you taking the Padawan?"

"To feed the poor," Master Jopheena said. Thalia thought she was probably lying, but she did it very well.

Quatra's eyes narrowed. "That one is not to leave the Temple today. Nor are you. You know she is very close."

"Master Iridel knows you're taking her Padawan?"

"Of course," Jopheena spread out her hands. "Would you like to come with us? We could use your strength."

Master Quatra looked uncertain. "I—would. But—I am not as brave as you, Jopheena. I will stay
here and see what comes.” She took a deep breath. “Letting go of hate is never easy. For some of us, it is a daily struggle.”

Thalia looked at the floor. Quatra was Juhani the Cathar's Master. Revan killed Juhani. Iridel said Quatra didn't speak for days—after. But... she blames herself somehow. The guilt was like a mist, when she looked to see it, half-blinding the woman's senses to all else; almost darker than the other mist that surrounded the Jedi—surrounded most Jedi.

The shadows yet to come.

A voice cut into her thoughts. Move faster, Thalia. Jopheena does not have time to wait for Padawans who fall behind.

Master Iridel's voice in her head startled her. M-master? Already Jopheena was walking again, so fast it had to be Force-enhanced. Thalia broke into a run to keep up. They reached the Temple’s hangar, where a number of ships were stored for Jedi use. Jopheena headed straight for a small planetside a small one and pulled the hatch down with practiced ease. Still not speaking, she nodded at Thalia.

Thalia got in, without hesitation. Master?

But if Master Iridel had further wisdom, she did not share it.

They were speeding down one of the orbital freeways, heading down towards the groundside ports, when Thalia finally dared to ask. "We're not really going to feed the poor, are we?"

"It would be a good lesson for you. But—no." Jopheena laughed suddenly, a hearty burst of laughter that seemed so inappropriate coming from her lined face that Thalia nearly jumped out of her skin. "Revan Starfire's ship is landing today. We are going to meet it."

"You felt her, through the Force?"

It was the day Thalia had been expecting for weeks, the day that made her wake up screaming with nightmares no matter how much she meditated. She'd felt the woman's fall to darkness as if it were happening to her. She’d dreamed of it. Blood on the sand; and rage and hate more powerful than anything her old Sith Masters had ever shared.

She'd expected to feel Revan through the Force when the Dark Lord landed on Coruscant. But right now, Thalia felt nothing: the Force around them was still and calm, like a windless sea. Only the shadows ahead hinted at the pain that would come.

Jopheena shook her head. "It appears she's learned something. The old Revan shone through the Force. She never had to hide her presence. I doubt it ever occurred to her to do so. But now I've resorted to more pedestrian means: friends of mine in the CorSec civilian guard. A squad has been sent to a certain port, a certain docking bay. Their orders’ origination tells me much.”

The lines on her face creased. “Do not rely on the Force for everything, Thalia May. When you need it most, it will fail you."

"We're going to help take her into custody?" Thalia shivered. She remembered standing off against the woman and her companions in the shyrack caves with 'Phile and Odoo. The woman's polite concern had been completely at odds with the whorl of dark energy that surrounded her.

I don’t want to face her again. She's too strong, too powerful. Too terrifying. Her future is too—uncertain. Everything pivots... for the rest of us—on the choices she will make.
Jopheena shook her head. "I hope it will not come to a confrontation—for your sake and mine. The CorSec guards have orders to shoot to kill. The orders would be a death sentence—for the guards. Indeed, I believe that is the intent."

"We’re going to stop them? Why me?"

“Why not you?” Jopheena smiled at her. “You have shown yourself to be a very capable Padawan.”

*I asked her to bring you. You will be my eyes. Consider it another lesson.* Iridel's voice was like a dry whisper in her thoughts.

Thalia wasn't sure what lesson this could be, but she didn't dare ask more questions. She'd asked enough as it was. Not asking questions was as easy as breathing for a child of Ziost, trained in Dreshdae.

XXX

14:00 CGST

Captain Erik Qan'Jin, Coruscant Civilian Guard

The docking bay was still empty, and Captain Erik Qan'Jin tried to compose himself and think of something he could say to his squad before the end.

Again, he cursed the chain of events that led to this moment. *You were worried about being shipped off to the Outer Rim, or a prison colony. But this….* He had no illusions. Whatever was going to land in this docking bay was meant to be their deaths. *They'll send me to sub60 in a Captain's Bars; my wife will get a Captain's pension. Only fifty credits more than a Commander's wife would get.*

Half of the troops behind him still didn't understand. Cally had her usual moonstruck look, fidgeting importantly with the sights of her rifle. His eyes met a few of the others, those that remembered things as they'd been once—who knew whose path they'd crossed that day.

Liko gave him a resigned nod, his head tails curled tightly around his neck, and his jaw set for action.

"Our orders," Captain Qan'Jin began, "are to shoot whatever comes off that ship. Shoot to kill. I just want to let you all know that it's an honor working with you, and I'm proud, very proud of each and every one of you." He paused. "Are there any questions?"

If he didn't look at her, maybe she'd get the hint.

"Sir, yes sir! I have a question, sir."

"Of course not."

"Shut up, Cally," Liko muttered, but even his automatic response seemed half-hearted.

"Permission to speak, sir?" She glared at the green Twi'lek and then looked up the Captain.

"Go ahead, Cally." Suddenly, Erik was tired of all this formality. He relaxed his shoulders, trying to roll the tension out of his neck kink by kink.

"Sir, we're all good shots. We have good weapons. We were sent here by the Republic to do a job.
We’re working for the greater good. Why are you so certain that we'll fail?"

"Since we're about to die anyways, sir. I'd like to answer that question, sir. Permission?" Liko stepped forward and saluted him.

"Granted." Erik's stomach rumbled, and he felt queasy. *The bantha bun I had for breakfast... and the caff.*

"*The Girl From Hoth* is entering final docking sequence," chimed the docking computer. "Five minutes to atmospheric entry, ten to landing. "The blast doors in front of them rumbled close, sealing with an ominous clang.

"Give her the short version," Erik sighed. A sharp pain stabbed through his gut.  

* Nerves or breakfast, it doesn't matter. Tell my wife I love her very much.

"That day in the Library, that kid we found was Revan and Malak's son," Liko began, "and Malachi D'Reev's heir. You do understand one of those facts might be a closely guarded secret?"

A frown sketched across her simple Dantooine farm girl features. "No," Cally said. "It's not the kid's fault who his parents are."

"His grandfather is a very powerful man, you've heard of him, right?"

"Sure," Cally shrugged. "But Senators don't send people to their deaths..." her voice trailed off. Green she was, but they'd been on Eg duty for six months now. "Not without really good reasons! It's not like we'd betray him or anything—either of them! I mean, we all got promotions! We've got clearance! Why would they kill us?"

Liko rolled his eyes. "Since we're about to die, I'd also like to say that I've always found your body attractive, Lieutenant Cally Lee. But not your mind."

"No one will die here," said a voice behind them. "Put down your weapons."

XXX

14:15 CGST

"Are you ready? It's almost time."

"Yes."

The robe was too short and tight across the shoulders, loose across the chest, tailored for a different woman. Her Star Forge robes were out of the question, and they'd needed the larger ones for the men. Their supplies included many weapons; but they’d left most of the armor behind back on Manaan, due to its bulk. The two sets of Mandalorian battle armor and Lin's own that they’d had were already reassembled.

Revan adjusted the robe again, pulling the hood over her face. Between the hood and the bulky visor that hid her features she felt half-blind. She buckled her own saber to the belt, shivering a little as her fingers brushed its long hilt.

*On Kashyyyk I vowed never to use it again. On Manaan I only had to carry it into the Sith Embassy. May this be the same.*

*I don't want to use it. I don't want to use it ever again for anything more than a prop.*
"Now, Revan?" Oerin Lin was being frighteningly solicitous, which meant that he was furious. She'd learned to read him some, over the past few weeks. There was an old scorch mark on the beige robe that he wore. The sight of it made her dizzy.

Canderous cleared his throat and stubbed out the cigarra he'd been smoking on the corusteel floor. "It's time."

There was something heavy in the pocket of her robe—Bastila's old robe. Revan pulled it out.

The holocron sparkled, bright as brittle tears.

XXX

14:20 CGST

"I didn't think you'd come." She took another drink, tension easing slightly as the comforting harshness burned the back of her throat. "I didn't think you'd care about a woman's problems, or a woman's grief. You must be very busy now; I can't turn on the vids without seeing your picture everywhere."

The man slipped onto the bar stool next to her, and sat down, hands resting uselessly on its scarred surface. Well-shaped hands that were made for action, and not for this.

"You were ill. Are you better now?"

He looked at her, and she tried not to think about what he'd see. Her once-beautiful face, ravaged by the years, too-bright suns, the stims, the cigarras and the drink. She looked at his hands. They were strong capable hands. Square-fingered, and neatly kempt. His life would be like that too. You could tell a great deal about a man by looking at his hands. She really wasn't much older than he was… perhaps five years, perhaps seven. Maybe ten. She'd been very young when her daughter was born. Too young really, for all of that responsibility.

"My health has always been poor," she said. "And my nerves are very bad."

"Juma won't help with that," the man muttered, signaling to the bartender.

He ordered Degoban moss whiskey for himself and drank it down fast.

"I didn't think you'd come," she repeated. "You never really liked my daughter, did you?"

His voice caught. "It wasn't that I—I liked her. She was… she was a good person. We were friends."

"But not lovers. Have you ever thought that you picked the wrong woman to save that day? Perhaps you just picked the wrong woman to love?"

The muscles in his jaw twitched underneath his visor, but he did not respond.

Helena Shan took another sip of juma.

"What is it that you need?" he asked. His assured voice suddenly roughened with a touching vulnerability. She couldn't see much of his face through the dark ferraglass of his visor; but she suspected his eyes would be glistening. They were brown eyes, she remembered. How sweet, she'd made a war hero cry. "Is it credits? Doctors? Just a place to go? Or just more juma to finish killing yourself?" He brought his fist angrily down on the bar and several patrons around them jumped.
"Whatever you want, Helena. I owe it to you. I owe it to Bastila."

"I want to know what happened to her," she said quietly, when it seemed like his rant was finished.

"She died," the pilot whispered. "She died."

"Did you think she was attractive? When she was young, people used to say she looked just like me. I was quite a beauty in my youth—but she threw all that advantage away when she joined the Jedi. Did you ever notice her? I remember that woman; she was a stick next to Bastie. Loud and careless and uncouth. I don't know what you—I don't know why—you chose— her. "

Terribly awkward, but she found that she was crying suddenly. The dimly lit cantina room blurred, and she rummaged through her purse for her handkerchief. When she pulled it out, a few stims fell on the floor and rolled under the bar. The man got up hastily, bent down and fished for them. Helena Shan watched him, delicately dabbing the corners of her eyes with the handkerchief.

He got up slowly, eyeing the stim caps rolling in his hand. Then he handed them back.

"You don't own the market on grief." His words were accusing. "Your loss is terrible, and I'll help you any way that I can, but what you're doing now is worse. Do you think Bastila would want to see you like this?"

"It's how she'd remember me best," Helena Shan said. The words were bitter in her mouth, but she was used to that.

"Nine hells.... When I think of a world that took a mother like Morgana and left you alive."

Helena Shan took another sip of juma. As always, it helped with her nerves. Her nerves were very bad. The light above the bar was one of the old ones, Byss ironwork. She blinked at it blurrily. Byss had been a lovely planet to visit. She and her husband had quite enjoyed their time there, although the child had complained often. It was shortly after that that they'd sent her away to school with the Jedi.

“I think that was the last happy time,” she said, trying to explain.

He didn’t answer.

When she looked at the barstool next to her again, it was empty. The pilot had gone.

XXX

14:29 CGST

The Girl From Hoth was many things. Iggis leased it for transport from its rightful owners, an organization so shadowy that he dared not say the name it went by in Core Space; although in his line of work he couldn't help but know it.

But its latest cargo, if the Underground scientists that hired him could be believed, would simultaneously save the galaxy from the crippling kolto shortage and make him a very rich Hutt. When he'd been little more than a tad swimming in the sunken city marshes of Nal Hutta, Iggis had always hoped for a great destiny. Now, it was in his grasp.

The landing bays around them bustled with activity. Iggis pushed the levers to move his grav lift into third gear, and patted his latest acquisition, a young Twi'lek he'd named Mara, on the head. Obediently, she settled herself up against him on the lift.
A group of portside guards and two robed figures stood at the blast doors that would remain closed until the Girl's jets cooled. He frowned at the sight of them. Customs could be trouble, and Hulas had promised him weeks ago that there would be no trouble. Their captain appeared to be arguing with one of the robes—his eyesight wasn't the best but as he got closer, he could see—Jedi. And—actually, the guards didn't look like customs guards at all.

A CorSec civilian squad. Why would they be here?

Iggis tapped the commands on his console to fire if provoked and set up the shield. Mara drew hastily closer to him, her soft skin smooth on his hide. She was learning quickly. In his line of work, there was often trouble.

XXX

14:29 CGST

[[Keep that robe over your head. And stop fidgeting.]]

"I am not fidgeting," Mekel hissed.

Millifar chuckled and he blushed, which was not an improvement. "Talking to your gods again, barbarian? The voices in your head?"

"Leave me alone," Mekel muttered, to both of them. Dustil's absence in the Force ached like a pulled tooth, a phantom pain that should have been long gone.

"Your master will reward you well, for bringing us the news, yes?" The blonde Mandalorian grinned at him, making dimples in both sides of her cheeks. "It's an auspicious day for the Mandalore's arrival, I can't wait to meet him! I hear he's unmarried."

"It isn't seemly to discuss your bridal prospects with a man outside your clan." Her mother Gwenarius shot them both an amused look.

"Mekel's not really a man, Mother… he's just the Lin slave."

[[Don't open your mouth and say anything, Mekel Jin. Just...don't.]]

Gwenarius Ordo broke into a stream of incomprehensible Mandalorian and her daughter replied in kind. Both of them started laughing, laughter echoed by Mission's collar grating on his spine.

Mekel wondered again why he'd insisted on coming along for the ride. They hadn't wanted him to, Mission hadn't wanted him to, but he'd been stubborn. Behind him, the three half-blooded warriors, (Half-blooded meant they'd only killed in the battle of sand—whatever that meant—not that they were half-Mandalorian: and how amused everyone had been when he'd made that gaffe two nights ago.), tramped steadily along in full regalia, bristling with weapons. No one was expecting a fight, but the general mood seemed to be that battle wouldn't be unwelcome.

[[You stupid nerf-eating idiot boy.]]

"Hey! What was that for?"

[[That was what for?]]

"That insult," Mekel whispered. The collar thrummed against the back of his neck.

[[Do I need a reason?]]
"Generally, not, Blue."

He'd started calling her Blue. It was what Dustil called her. And it was safer than calling her by name. Rationally, Mekel knew he was talking to a computer; but Mission was like no computer he'd ever known. Except for a few errands she'd sent him on, they'd been laying low these past days—surrounded by a bunch of Mandalorian mercs who called themselves an embassy and constantly chattered in a language that he couldn't understand.

Mission was his only link to the outside world. She'd been a street kid once too. They understood each other. There were realities she understood that Dustil never could.

[[Sheesh, this is important, Mekel Jin! Pay attention, please. And don't die. If they start fighting or something just run away, okay—?]]

"Sweet of you to care." Mission didn't answer. Probably caught up in whatever else she was doing. She hadn't clued him on the big plan, but he'd picked up pieces here and there.

Revan was coming. For the kid and her lover and Dustil. The mercs seemed to be expecting something quite different, some kind of leader—or savior, depending on which one you talked to. They'd clued in pretty quickly that he didn't understand the Mandalorian words he'd said to them, and after that they stopped even trying to explain what was going on.

Whatever the plan was, it was better than rotting in the Underground hiding out from the Jedi—and someone had to get Dustil out of this mess. Although Mekel didn't want to admit it to himself, he wanted to see the kid too. Malachor. He wanted to see the kid because—because I want to see Him.

They reached the docking bay. Docking bay 10, port 23. The blast doors were still closed, although the ship they'd come to meet had docked ten minutes ago.

XXX

14:30

The blast doors to docking bay 12, port 23 slid open. The ship's ramp was already down, and a red-haired figure emerged wearing a long black robe. She was accompanied by what appeared to be some kind of protocol droid. One look at her and Captain Erik knew with sad certainty what his fate was to be.

The Jedi could protest all that they liked, but this was her. And he and his men would be her first sacrifice of Republic blood on Coruscanti soil.

Unless we kill her first. It was her. Revan Starfire. This would be a good way to die.

He raised his rifle and closed his eyes.

Tell my wife I love her very much.

"No. Put down your weapons." He heard the clatter of their rifles and blasters falling to the ground around him, as his men were caught again in the old witch's spell.

He'd been Special Forces once, in the Mandalorian Wars, before insubordination cost him a few ranks and a grenade landed him a desk job. Working around Jedi—especially there towards the end when all the Jedi went mad—there were things you learned to do. If you had a talent for it—and he did—and if you were expecting it—and he was—you could resist those mind tricks they played. It
had been a long time since that skill had done any good, but it did now.
He had her in his sights. All it would take was one shot.

"Put it down, Captain." The old Jedi's voice was softer now. Standing there, at his side. A request, not a command. "That isn't her," the Jedi said. "That's not Revan Starfire." She sounded so convinced that he lowered the gun.

"I don't...." his voice trailed off. "I don't want to die today."

"No one will die today," the woman said softly, almost hypnotically, and he wondered if this was some strange Force compulsion after all. Her eyes were a washed-out blue, like the Coruscanti sky in the two-week spring when the clouds vanished. Her face was creased with lines and her hair was gray and cropped.

The woman that wasn't Revan and her droid walked down the ramp to meet them.

"We have to die today," Erik said stupidly. "Because we know about...."

Malachor. The Eg's name was Malachor; but to Erik that word would never be a name.

Malachor was the end. Malachor was where the whole mess finally fell apart. Malachor V. Her orders. He hadn't been there of course, but neither had she.

There weren't many people that had been there still alive. Not very many people knew the truth. It was the Fleet's little secret, the one that no one spoke of.

Some things are too terrible to speak of.

And she gave the orders.

"Captain...." the Jedi was talking to him again and he was startled to see a tear in her eye. She shook her head slowly. "That isn't her, Captain. Put down your weapon and find peace. That isn't her."

"What the frack is going on?"

"Shut up, Cally," Erik murmured, staring out at the hangar bay. Almost absently, he lowered his gun.

The woman reached them. Her face was marked with a thin tracery of black lines, rayed out from her eyes. It was Darth Revan's face.

"That is not my ship," rumbled a voice behind them. Erik turned to see a Hutt on a grav lift, the traditional Twi'lek chained to his side. Lido muttered something and spat on the ground. "Where is my Girl From Hoth? She's supposed to be docking here."

The smaller Jedi, the apprentice, was nearly as wide-eyed and hapless-looking as Cally. She shook her head, restless.

"M-master Jopheena?"

"Yes, Thalia?"

"Mekel's close. Really close. I think." Her face bent in a frown of concentration. "But also, there are more people coming."
The woman who looked like Darth Revan had reached them. "What I asked for," she said, words ringing out like a bell, "was a decent stylist, some holo photographers, and a masseuse for the in-flight ride to my hotel. What you've given me are...." her eyes scanned them all incredulously. "Two Jedi, a pack of CorSec civ guards and... a Hutt? And a Hutt's slave," she added. "I hate slavery. It's very distasteful to me. Do you realize that I've been waiting on ground clearance to land for three days now? I had surgery for this role! If Senator D'Reev thinks I'm going to stand for this—"

"Recommendation: Mistress, we need to contact Juut and demand better terms on the contract. This type of excitement is not good for your delicate nerves." The protocol droid's voice dripped artificial concern.

"Indeed, it's not!" The woman rolled her green eyes at them all. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"People are coming," whispered the younger Jedi. She seemed barely out of her teens, if that. "Lots of them. Fleet, I think."

"Most certainly Fleet," said the older Jedi. "I'm not a bit surprised. I'm not the only one with friends in the Civilian Guard. Three different branches at least. Fleet factions make the Jedi Council look united."

"I demand to know where my ship is," rumbled the Hutt. "I have all the proper permits. The Girl from Hoth, from Manaan. I'm a law-abiding citizen."

The old Jedi laughed in a manner that was disturbingly un-Jedi-like. "From Manaan?"

Captain Erik Qan'Jin found his voice at last. "You're an actress," he said to the woman. "Of course, you're an actress."

His gut twisted. Did D'Reev send us here to kill an actress or die trying to kill the real Darth Revan?

Either way, D'Reev will find some other way to kill us. Stang, he'll blame this on us too somehow. Bloody kid. Bloody Revan. Bloody stinking Senators and their sick games.

"An actress?" the woman sounded shocked. She threw a hand across her brow, a gesture he'd never seen in real life. "I'm Seriina Starr, you imbecile. Where is my masseuse? My stylist? The holo-cams? Did I mention I've been orbiting Coruscant for three days? The landing computer kept insisting I didn't have the proper docking permits!"

The Captain tried to regain control of the situation. The Hutt was still mumbling his outrage, but quietly— he doesn't want trouble, that one, show me a Hutt that ever has wanted trouble, or has not been wallowing in it.

"They're coming...." the younger Jedi intoned. Her eyes were glassy, like some oracle from Dathomir.

The old Jedi looked amused. "I'd give my 'saber to know how she arranged this," she murmured. She shot Eric a complicit glance, as if this was all some kind of cosmic joke they both had shared.

Seriina Starr was demanding to speak to someone on her holocomm in ringing, imperious tones.

"Captain." The old Jedi's eyes scanned his face. "I sense a great sadness within you. Come speak with me at the Temple sometime. Perhaps we should talk."
"Y-yes," he nodded. His head hurt and his gut ached.

"Revan Starfire!" called a voice from down the corridor, "Surrender yourself to Naval Custody! By High Admiral Rensha's command!"

The red-haired woman looked terrified and furious. "What is the meaning of this?"

"We have you surrounded, Revan Starfire!" called another voice. There was the sound of several blasters clicking into readiness.

_We're going to die caught in the crossfire with some ancient floozy actress from a holovid. Why don't the Jedi...?_

"I really don't understand!"

"Shut up, Cally."

_"I am NOT Revan Starfire!" Old as the Reef, and probably as full of silicate as a Thranari, Seriina Starr still had a powerful set of lungs. Her voice boomed across the hangar. She waved her arms helplessly as the Fleet troops—crack special operations experts by the look—encircled them all._

The Captain opened his mouth to say something else to the Jedi, but they were gone.

_How do Jedi do that? How do they just vanish into thin air?_

_Stealth belts, the practical side of him thought. Jedi aren't above using a scoundrel's tricks._

He waved a hand at the Fleet troops and their commander saluted him. Erik sighed and turned back to his men. "Since we're all still alive. I suggest we move back to base."

"Thanks for holding her down, Captain," one of special ops team called out.

_"Yeah, no problem. Seriina Starr is a real threat to the galaxy._

Portside was hopping with activity. The actress's ship hadn't been the only one delayed. The landing grids screwed up all the time, but usually they weren't quite this bad. They passed two more squads of Fleet, the Alderaanian ambassador, a herd of Ithorians involved in some kind of quarantine dispute and three more sets of brown robes. One odd thing stuck in his mind. Later, when Erik told his wife the story—when it was... safe... to tell his wife the story, he made sure to mention it.

One of the flocks of Jedi was walking with a large, very heavily armed band of Mandalorians.

Still, it could have been a coincidence. All sorts of strange combinations wash up on the shores of the Reef.

XXX

14:35 CGST

The blast doors opened, and their escort stood on the other side. Revan kept her head low, flanking the towering figure dressed in battered silver and blue armor, patched and soldered in many places, as if scorched by some terrible war.

_Or a very patient Wookiee with a laser torch._
Canderous hung back, she could feel him at her back with something that wasn't the Force, just the awareness of someone who had always been at her back, and always would be.

Revan didn't expect this reunion to be easy on him. One of the Clans here on Coruscant was Ordo, and ever since Mission had told them the name of the woman who led them, her warrior had grown very quiet. She hadn't asked him why. If he wanted to tell her, he would.

Lin was on the other side of the towering set of armor—the armor concealing Zaalbar.

Oerin Lin was going to do most of the talking, at least at first. The initial ruse was important—if they wanted to get Zaalbar through Customs and PortSec. There were more holes in this plan than an eridu blanket ravaged by moths, but she hoped they'd get through. Somehow.

HK trailed behind them, clanking slightly in his patched-together disguise. She'd turned his voder back on; after giving him strict instructions not to use it except for the express purpose for which he'd been instructed. Zaal's Mandalorian really wasn't very good, and under the circumstances… well it would look strange if he didn’t understand. Her assassin droid's translation of Mandalorian into Shyriiwook went on in the background, a dull drone that sounded like almost nothing to human ears—unless you knew what to listen for.

Revan took a deep breath. Air and space oil and that peculiar smell that was uniquely Coruscant: rotting metal and mildew tinged with ozone and the scent of rain.

She'd been fourteen when she first—came here. The memory came so naturally she almost jumped out of her skin.

I was fourteen, and Malak brought me home. Home, to meet his father. There was a party in the D'Reev ballroom, and we were the guests of honor and there was the clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation and we danced until the old man called us over and he then he asked, he asked me—

Her step faltered.

I was fourteen and I snuck out of the house with my cousin Sara, and we went to the cantina. We drank fizz-pop and pretended it was whiskey. There were pilots there, and then my cousin Beya saw us, and she was older; she was eighteen and she called Ma, and I was grounded for a week. I was fourteen and I used to race my glider in the canyon I wanted to grow up to be a pilot and I did, and I crashed my glider in the canyon wall—

I was fourteen and I wanted to be a Jedi Knight.

I was fourteen and I wanted to be a pilot—pilot a sweet ship and see the galaxy.

You're losing it, Rev. Oerin's voice brushed against her mind, soft as a feather. Reflexively she reached out with the Force for him, like an arm to steady herself. And for a brief second, there was something else—someone else reaching back, like a hand clasped in hers—and then Lin slammed her back into her own mind so hard that she saw stars.

Revan staggered and almost fell down.

"Don't," he said out loud. "Not now. My apologies, Mother Ordo," he continued smoothly in Mandalorian. "My Jedi Master is ill."

"She does look frail," the woman answered him, pulling back her own hood to reveal a sun-lined face, grown pale under Coruscant clouds and silvering yellow hair coiled in braids. A beautiful
"Hail Mandalore," chimed the three warriors in battle armor. They spoke in unison, as if they'd rehearsed it. The girl and the boy dressed in hooded robes moved aside. The girl in one smooth movement, and the boy a little more hesitantly. The boy was wearing black goggles over his eyes, but then she looked, and Revan recognized him, with a sinking sensation—

**Mekel, that's Mekel. That's Mekel Jin.**

Of all of them, Mekel was the only one staring at her and not at the towering suit of armor that concealed a three-meter high Wookiee.

The Mandalorians all knelt in unison before the towering suit of armor.

"We will have more time for ceremony back at the Embassy," Oerin said smoothly. "Perhaps you could show us to your transport? I sense a great disturbance in the Force."

*How does he do that? Does he really sense anything—or is it a bluff?* Revan couldn't sense anything at all, not and hide herself at the same time.


He frowned and shook his head, shivering. "We didn't need a distraction," he whispered. "Why'd you have to be so dramatic, Blue?"

"Your slave talks to his gods frequently," the golden-haired girl said, grinning archly at the towering silver suit of armor. "Is he mad?"

HK droned a series of soft growls and the towering silver armor made a noncommittal gesture.

"The lad is Force-touched," Oerin shrugged. "We do need to leave."

Somewhere not far away a woman was screaming something, it sounded like...

"...NOT Revan Starfire!!"

*I will not react to that. I will not wonder who that is. We need to get out of here. Mekel can talk to Mission because of that collar. She could see it now, glinting silver on his neck. That collar that's a bomb. I hope he's not—no, she promised. Is that woman her distraction? Bloody hell, fracking hell, what the hell did she do?"

Canderous was being so carefully silent that it worried her. Revan glanced back. The mask hid his face, and Jolee's old robe covered the rest of him—mostly. The arms were too short, and the leggings were a little… tight. Actually, he looked ridiculous with a battered lightsaber dangling from his belt instead his swords and his rifle.

Their luggage transport—belatedly she noticed the script that read "Property of Ahto City Port Authority" stamped on the side—hovered obediently behind them all, piled high with the rest of their possessions—*weapons*—like a faithful kath hound.

"Why does the Mandalore let Jedi speak for him?" the older woman asked, ignoring the commotion off in the halls. "A set of armor does not rule us. Is this some trick?" Her hands went to the hilts of her swords.

The Mandalorian girl frowned and looked down the long corridor that led to the other docking bays. From that direction came running feet and more shouts. The warriors seemed restless, hands
on their blasters.

We need to get out of here. Now.

Revan swallowed hard and stepped forward. Until the words came out of her mouth, she had no idea what she was going to say.

XXX

14:33 CGST The Eglatine Institute

"How many votes are required to place a motion before the Galactic Senate?" Teacher Biny's voice sounded like a broken motor engine. Korrie slumped further down in his chair, so the Althirian wouldn't call on him.

He stared at the cracked surface of his desk. It was very old, like everything else in the Institute. Someone had carved an 'M' on it a long time ago. He liked to sit here because of that. He liked to pretend that Father carved it when he was a little boy. Father said he didn't remember, and he probably hadn't, but Korrie liked to think it might be true.

Father wasn't here right now. He was almost never here at school. Only when Korrie got into trouble. Or once, when Thrap Mik'alan started teasing him and they had a fight and they both got detenshun. Father came and sat with him in the little round room and told him stories about the pranks he'd played when he was a boy. Before Father's mother died and the Jedi took him away because he had the Force.

"Eglatine Phin." Isabait Phin lowered her hand and sat up very straight, proud to be called on. She was sort of a dimbulb, the Phin family was pretty inbred. Grandfather said that was bad. But Grandfather thought most of the Senate families were all maffasomethings.

That meant weak.

"Five," Isabait simpered. "Five votes."

"And how many to pass the motion?"

The class was silent. Half of them weren't paying attention anyways. Leeshy poked him under the table, and Korrie grinned at her. Father said don't be sad and pretend everything was fine, so he was trying to do that. Seventy-three was the answer. It was a funny number: once it had been half the number of planets in the Republic or something. Korrie wasn't sure if it still was.

The number of planets in the Republic changed a lot.

"Eglatine Makeon?"

"Lots," Angis Makeon said. "Seventy-three. My father says that's why we never get anything done."

"Without commentary, please. Next question, how many—"

The air smelled like spaceships and there were people in armor and robes and for a second her hand closed around his and he looked up and she was wearing brown and something that covered most of her face, but he knew it was her and Korrie took her hand and she looked down—

Something slammed in his head so hard he felt stars.
Korrie was on the floor. Something tasted salty in his mouth. Blood. He'd bitten his tongue.

"Eglatine D'Reev?" Two of the security guards from the door helped him get up again.

Father said don't do anything unusual, Father said, you are not going to sneak off and meet her. Father said, pretend that everything is okay. But Father hadn't said what to do about this.

Korrie's legs felt bendy; like he wasn't sure he could stand up on them.

"Mother," he whispered. Father said you are not going to sneak off and meet her; but Father was dead, and she was here. Angis giggled. One of the guards pulled his hand away from Korrie like he was scared. Korrie looked up at them. He bit his lip, so he wouldn't say anything else.

Teacher Biny was frowning. "Infirmary," he told the guards. The Egs always had to go to the infirmary every time anything happened, even if it was just a stubbed toe.

XXX

"By sand, by air, and by stars… I—I seek your tent."

XXX

There were more words, words she was supposed to say. Phrases she'd studied before they even left Coruscant, phrases to account for every contingency. She and Malak had studied them. With Vrook.

Her uncle had seen Mandalorians before.

"Ke barjurir gar'ade, jagyc'ade kot'la a dalyc'ade kotla'shya," Vrook had said. “If they honor you with an invitation to meet the women of their clan; respond formally. The phrase means—”

“I know,” Revan had interrupted. “It’s not a very complex language.” She smiled at Malak across the table.

Not a complex language; but now, months later, her mouth was dry, and her stomach cramped. Her skin was burned and peeling, and her body weakened by days without food or water.

The women surrounded her. With their hoods and sand masks, they looked almost like Jedi. Except for the blades in their hands.

Now that she needed the words, they failed her.

XXX

“I… hope you have strong… daughters. I seek their alliance.”

The blonde woman scowled at her, now completely on guard. “You have no right to seek anything, Force-user,” she said, voice sharp. “Your mere presence is an offense.”

Revan tried to remember. “No. Family is more than blood. A clan knew my name as their child.”

Behind her, Canderous grunted something that sounded like approval.

Mother Ordo's mouth twisted. "Whose tent sheltered you, daughter of sand, air and stars?" Her voice was acid, as if she did not expect the proper response.
"Clan Lin," Revan said quietly. "By the blood of my son. May our sons—" I can't remember....

Oerin Lin stepped forward and finished the formal phrase for her. "May they win many battles. May they be blooded against our enemies; may they return to our clans and father many daughters."

"There is no Clan Lin, its blood was spilled and trampled in the sand." The woman did not back down. "This is some kind of Jedi trick." Behind her, the warriors muttered, and the blonde girl glared. "We are not fools. Your emissaries' instructions were suspicious from the start. Bringing us the Mandalore? Instructing us to court favor with the Coruscanti vermin?" She spat on the ground. "Know this. We came prepared for battle on this day. We play their hellspawned games only as much as it serves us, and Mandalorians do not serve Jedi!"

"I—I'm sorry," Revan stammered, knowing immediately that an apology had been the wrong thing to say.

"We do have the Mandalore—and his armor." Canderous stepped forward suddenly and grabbed the woman’s arm. "Let's get out of this maffa-stinking hellhole, Gwen and I'll explain."

At the sound of that gravel-rain voice, all of the Mandalorians froze.

The warriors' hands went to their blasters—until one glance from the younger woman stopped them.

Then the older woman—Gwen—began to laugh, and to move, very quickly. She waved a hand and they her followers fell into formation behind her, followed by the luggage carrier.

"You're going to have much explaining to do, Canderous Ordo."

"I know. And I will explain everything, when we get out of here." His hand slipped around her armored waist.

"We have a new daughter," she added, almost conversationally.

Canderous did not break step. "I am pleased for the continuation of our clan. Has she been named?"

"Not yet. And Aemelie bore a son."

"A double blessing."

Is this Clan Ordo then? Is that... Canderous's wife? Revan followed.

A squad of Fleet soldiers marched past them, and they all edged to the side. They surrounded a red-haired woman dressed in black robes and a shrieking protocol droid.

Her face was... mine. My face.

"I tell you this is a mistake! I know Senator D'Reev personally! When my agent hears about this, you'll all be fired! You'll all wish you were dead!"

I'm not even going to be curious. But later, I am going to get very angry at Mission. We needed a distraction... but did she have to find another version of Darth Revan to give us one? And, where did she?

They passed a few more squads of Fleet, heavily armed, and one troop of civilian guards, as well
as a mass of confused travelers from a hundred different worlds. There had been, Revan gathered from the snatches of conversation, landing delays due to grid failure all over the port.

*Convenient.*

The hallway wound around a featureless stretch of gray durasteel. Her legs felt oddly light. The *Hoth*’s gravity had been stronger—not much—but just enough to throw her off-kilter. A temporary signboard next to an archway scrolled a message in blue Basic script.

*Due to unusually heavy traffic, all customs clearance is at the main desk. Please have your docking clearances and citizenship chips ready.* Words chimed the same message overhead, in Basic, Ryl, Rodian, Aqualish, Iridonian, Huttese, and a dozen other languages.


*Thalia May, the leader of the rebel students in the shyrack caves... why is that important? Why is she here?*

"Don't," Oerin Lin said softly from her other side. He said the word before she even did think of it, think of reaching for the Force.

"Delays," Revan mumbled. She felt ready to jump out of her skin.

"You can blame Blue," Mekel whispered back. "She thought this was all a good idea."

"Stop using the Force, boy," hissed Oerin. "You're almost as bad as *she* is."

"I know how to hide," Mekel shot back. "And who the hell are *you*?"

Oerin Lin chuckled under the folds of his robe. "I'm special."

"Later," Revan snapped.

XXX

The guards took him to the Infirmary. There were lots of guards around him today. More than regular, and Grandfather always had lots.

"I'm fine," Korrie insisted. "Honest!"

"The Senator wanted to be notified if the boy did anything unusual," one muttered.

"And that's new?"

"Today, especially, he said."

"Why today?"

"Well, you've heard the rumors, right?"

Father said be very careful. Father said look stupid so that they talk in front of you. Father said cry in front of Grandfather because he can't stand it. Father said she'd come and take him back. Father said maybe Captain Onasi and Dustil weren't going to help them after all. Father said Dustil was dangerous and he was sorry about that. Sorry about something. Father was trying to reach her, but he couldn't. Father said be very brave and I'll keep you safe.
Korrie was sick of being brave. His plan had been better. Father said don't sneak off and meet her, but Father was dead, and she was here.

He stopped walking. "No," he said.

"Don't do this, Mal."

Father was taller and stronger than any of the guards. His black cape billowed around him and he had his scary Sith face, the one that didn't scare Korrie because that was how Father was supposed to look.

"I just want to see her!" Korrie wailed.

"Oh, hell," one of the guards said. She was standing where Father was standing, so that they sort of melted together, but she couldn't see him. If she could see him, she'd let him go, Korrie was sure. Nobody messed with Father, back when he was alive.

Korrie crossed his arms like Father was doing and glared back at him. The guards weren't important—they were just men who worked for Grandfather. They were going to tell Grandfather and then he was going to be in trouble and he'd never get to see her. "I don't care!" Korrie screamed, loud as he could. "I want to see her! She's here! My mother's here!"

One of the guards was saying really, really bad words. Another one put his hand on Korrie's shoulder, like he was afraid Korrie would bite him. "Come on, kid." he said gently. "We'll take you to Nurse Gin and she'll make it all better."

"Do we—do we have to give a full report?" Another guard sounded really scared. Scared of Grandfather, because no one was ever supposed to talk about who Korrie's parents were or what had happened to them or why they went all evil and away.

"Make them take me to her," Korrie said, crying. "Father, make them!"

"Father?"

"The kid's nuts. I mean, all things considered, is that surprising?"

"Malachor." Father came to him, and for a second, he could almost feel Father's arms hugging him, as he bent down and placed his arms around Korrie. "Be very brave now. Can you do that?"

"Can you see her? Can you talk to her? When am I gonna see her, when?"

"Who's her?" someone muttered.

"Who do you fracking think?" someone else said back.

"It's true? the kid's really... theirs?" The guards were whispering.

They always whispered around him; always had ever since he could remember. Everyone. Sometimes Korrie thought it was because he was special; but other times he thought it was because his parents had done something bad, or because everyone was scared of Grandfather. "I want my Mother! " he said out loud.

Nurse Gin was coming down the hall now. Normally, he liked her, but today was different. She had a derm-pak in her hand, like the ones Ache Kay made him take because Grandfather said he had to when he felt her being bad and it would make him go to sleep and he didn't want to go to
"Malachor, stop it!" Father's eyes were very mean, like he was trying to scare Korrie.

"No!" Korrie was sick of being brave. None of Father's ideas had worked out. Dustil and Captain Onasi weren't going to help. If he had something like the Force everyone would have to do what he said, but he didn't, and no one was listening, and no one cared.

Nurse Gin smelled like mints and antiseptik like she always did. She pushed up the sleeve of his robe and pressed the derm on it before he could stop her. The world was getting very small and fuzzy very fast. Father was sitting on the ground next to him. "She won't talk to me," Father said. "I'm trying to reach her, but she's shut me out."

"Make her hear us," Korrie said. "Make her hear us!"

Then the derm worked and the world went out.

XXX

They came to a large room filled with sentients. They were not the only ones in armor, or the only ones hooded and masked. They weren't even, Revan noticed with a chill, the only Jedi.

*Which is good, because we won't stand out, and bad because… if they look at us too carefully, they might notice that we're not exactly Jedi.*

There was a rambling line that curled around itself, and the babble of a hundred different languages. Most sounded completely outraged. At the end of the room, one exhausted-looking uniformed Rodian was trying to process the mob through customs. One sentient at a time.

Canderous had been talking softly to Gwen while the blonde girl rather pointedly ignored him. Gwen nodded at something and then glanced back at the rest of them, her eyes going straight for Revan's.

Her expression was cold and furious, and she spoke in Mandalorian. "I warn you—if you play us false, we will settle this like Coruscantis, and not with the more honorable ways. Don't *think* I can't guess who Canderous brings to our tent. Everyone in the galaxy knows the name of my husband's female companion."

*Husband?* Revan met the woman's gaze steadily through the comforting barricade of her visor. "We're not—companions. Canderous and I aren't… ."

Gwen spat on the ground and turned back to Canderous. His mask hid his expression completely and he turned his back on all of them with slow, deliberate grace.

Oerin laughed softly and poked her elbow. "Barbarians." He chuckled. "She's not jealous—she just doesn't like you."

*Canderous never mentioned any family, only his clan. Will this change anything? Is he—okay? Is this an advantage? The woman mentioned a new daughter—but it can't be his. We've been gone for more than a year. I don't understand.*

Revan could tell nothing from the set of his shoulders.

They'd joined the line now, and she moved back to the luggage carrier, Oerin and Mekel at her heels, sitting down on it carefully so that her legs obscured the Selkath script. The three warriors in
Mandalorian battle armor moved in front of her, following Zaalbar and HK.

There was a commotion at the front of the line where a Trandoshan was arguing with a security team. His companions, two masked humanids and a Wookiee, were being retinally scanned. The Wookiee's coat was dull and matted. He was in chains.

*Getting any Wookiee through customs on this day wouldn't be easy. Which is only one reason we can't afford to risk going through customs.*

The Wookiee was in chains. Revan put her hand lightly on Zaalbar's arm. He stood directly in front of her, a silent towering figure. She wished there was something she could do—or at least say to him.

*There was a time when I would have just cut a swathe. That's what I did on Kashyyyk to the Czerka.*

"Blue says wait for it," whispered Mekel in Basic. He looked at her and bit his lip, then looked away again. "Soon."

Behind them voices were demanding diplomatic processing in patrician Alderaanian tones.

Canderous reached out a hand to the Mandalorian girl. She pulled away from him and joined the rest of them at the luggage transport. Her face was twisted and sullen.

The girl was maybe sixteen or seventeen standard. She had Canderous's eyes, like chips of gray-blue ice. And she was glaring at Revan. "I almost hope you're lying about the Mandalore," she hissed. "It would be a pleasure to throw you to the Coruscanti dogs."

"We're not lying," Revan said. "I would not lie to a Mandalorian about such things. Nor would your fa—" she hesitated, not sure if she could offend the girl more, not even sure if her conclusion was correct, or what it meant, in their culture.

*I should know this, why didn't I ask Lin and Canderous more questions? Why can't I remember something useful?*

A mechanical voice crackled over the comm.

"All sentients with diplomatic standing please proceed to room 43 for clearance. We hope that this will help alleviate the congestion."

The outraged Alderaanians behind them stopped in mid-rant.

"That's us," Mekel murmured, standing up. They, and several other large groups of richly-dressed sentients, split from the line. A side door slid open. Inside, a more lavishly appointed room, another desk, another uniformed Rodian. To his left, an open gate and beyond that—a slice of pale Coruscanti sky, the color of milk.

*Diplomats don't have to be screened with the same thoroughness. They can't risk offending them by making them wait through a retinal check and a luggage search.*

Revan kept herself warily next to the luggage transport, wondering if doing so was like painting a huge target sign on it, or if she was, in fact, obscuring its origin. Their ship's false registry codes were from Endar, not Manaan; and beneath the Selkath script, the words 'Property of Ahto City' were also stamped in Basic. HK had taken up his position on top of it and temporarily powered down: just another piece of machinery amidst a stack of crates and containers. Zaalbar moved to
the front, standing with the others in battle armor. If he hadn't been a meter taller than them, and if his armor wasn't a patchwork of blue and silver, his mask a curious and very ancient design; he might have blended in.

Still, in a room full of sentients from a hundred worlds and cultures, he didn't exactly stand out either. Canderous and Gwen were still whispering furiously in Mandalorian near the front of the line. Mekel stood in front of Revan, keeping his head down, shoulders hunched. Oerin Lin had taken the blonde girl's arm and seemed to be talking to her in Mandalorian about the Jedi Code.

I'm glad he knows it, since he's supposed to be one.

"There is no passion, there is serenity," Oerin began. "Many scholars have discussed these words, and their possible interpretations. "Is it base physical desire they eschew in favor of enlightenment?" Or is it..." his voice dropped lower, and he blushed. His head leaned closer to hers. Unbelievably, the girl giggled.

Is he... flirting? Revan frowned.

"I don't believe we've met," murmured an accented voice from behind her. Mid-core, Widek maybe, or Archon V. "What business does the Order have with Mandalorians? Are you part of the relief efforts?"

Revan turned around slowly, very, very slowly. She kept her hands folded under her robe neatly in front of her. I am a Jedi Knight returning home after a long journey.

"We are not permitted to discuss it, Master...?" She wasn't sure what she would have done if the man's face had been familiar; but it was not. He was Human and wearing master's brown. Behind him trailed a Twi'lek Padawan, and a group of Mon Calamari. Jedi escorts for diplomatic parties were quite common. They all seemed to be together, but she wasn't sure.

"Master Drez," he said calmly. "And you are?"

If she let herself, she'd feel the Force around them. But she didn't dare. The man's expression slowly changed to something like puzzlement—as if he was reaching for her presence and finding nothing.

A good trick, Oerin Lin. Except if he starts thinking I'm a Jedi imposter.

"Knight Eras Dawnrunner," Revan said, trying to think about how Bastila would say the words, and make her voice mimic that cool—and yet unthreatening—assurance. "We've had a long journey, Master. Excuse my exhaustion."

"There is something odd—" he peered at her, as if trying to see her face under the robe, under the visor. His Padawan came closer, a green Twi'lek boy who was—

One of the other students from the cave. I never knew their names. Thalia May and the two others. That's one of them. Thalia is here too, Mekel said. Are they...are they hunting for me?

Oh hell.

The man's head jerked past her suddenly. Oerin Lin came towards them, pushing back his hood, and pulling off his visor. His eyes were a disturbingly vivid shade of blue— they should be yellow- and he had a delighted smile on his face.

"Master!" he said happily. "It's been a long time!"
"My apologies, Padawan, I don't remember where—"

Oerin seemed bright as the sun, as if suddenly he was the only person in the room. *What I would give to know how he does that,* Revan thought, with a dull sense of wary relief. She stepped back slightly, bumping into Mekel who was deliberately looking very hard in the other direction. Mekel looked as if he were trying to melt into the floor.

Ahead of them, Gwen was speaking to the Rodian port official, and flashing her diplomatic credentials. Canderous stood, a hooded figure in brown at her side. His stance was more warrior than Jedi under those robes, even though he'd folded his hands in the sleeves just like she'd taught him.

"On Dantooine!" Oerin's voice boomed happily. *A guess? Or can he read the man's mind? "*

Perhaps you wouldn't remember me. I was much younger, but I always looked up to you. And I will never forget those meditation exercises you taught us!"

Now everyone in the room was looking at them, or rather, looking at Oerin Lin.

"Perhaps I remember now… Naran Fee was it?" The Jedi Master seemed dazed. His eyes were almost glassy, as were the eyes of the boy beside him.

"Well it was, yes. Naran Starshine now..." *Starshine. I should be happy he didn't go with Gamemaster, or Darkside. Or simply Mandalore, like he threatened. The part of the plan that involved Zaalbar being the Mandalore had not sat well with Lin. But how else could we get a Wookiee through customs?*

Oerin launched into a long elaborate story that hinted at why the Order would be escorting Mandalorians into Coruscant, without actually giving any reasons.

"...and then we were attacked by pirates, but we managed to convince them to free us, as well as bringing an end to the slave trade in that quadrant of the Teeta sector."

"We are free to go," Mekel whispered, words so faint she almost didn't hear him. He started to move to the door. Ahead of them, Gwen was going through the gates already. Canderous turned back, and nodded, a quick jerk of his head. The Mandalorian could say quite a bit in one gesture. Right now, he was saying; *get the hell out of here now!*

*My thoughts exactly.*

But Zaalbar had moved back to her flank, which wasn't really the right thing for the Mandalore to do, although she could understand why he did it. The Mandalorian warriors followed him back obediently. "Go on," Revan murmured softly. "Go."

It was like herding hessi. Now Mekel and the girl and Canderous and Gwen were already through the gates.

*Politely say farewell and follow them.*

"Excuse us, Master Drez," Revan began. "We must take our leave now. My Padawan would keep you here for hours, with more of his rather… exaggerated tales of our adventures."

Behind the dazed Jedi two more robed figures pushed through the crowd. Both faces were familiar, but she could only put a name to the younger one. *And here is Thalia May.* The older woman looked right at her with pale eyes that seemed to pass through the flimsy visor right into her very soul.
"There you are, my prodigal Knight!"

Fracking hell.

Revan tensed, so much that even Force-addled Master Drez frowned. The crowd around her ceased to be lines of sentients waiting for processing: it became an obstacle course, and she plotted trajectories towards the exit, and the possibilities of getting out of this intact and—although that possibility seemed really dim—somehow undiscovered. She turned away from the woman and gauged the distance to the exit.

From somewhere behind them, came the sound of an explosion, followed by frightened screams.

_The permacrete detonators on the Girl From Hoth. Mission set them off. And now we really need to move._

Her voice came out, completely calm and reasonable, as if all of this was normal.

"My apologies, Masters. We're in a hurry." With that she turned away from the Jedi and started walking, Oerin Lin trailing obediently at her heels. And the luggage transport too.

Running steps behind her and the old woman caught her arm. Revan kept walking, her head held high, as if all of this was expected. Her free hand shifted down to the hilt of her 'saber. Behind her she heard Oerin mutter an old Mandalorian curse.

The woman’s voice was soft. "Did you know that krayt dragons are actually very peaceful creatures, as long as you don't corner one in its lair? Any cornered creature will fight for its own survival, no matter what the odds. Its companions too. Tell yours I mean you no harm."

“How do I know if that’s true?”

They passed through the gate. She didn't dare turn around. The groundside air was soft and smelled like fuel and metal and rain. Ahead of them stretched the plain of visitor parking. Open ground. Cracked duracrete under her feet. Ahead of them stood Zaalbar and Canderous and their Mandalorian escort. Canderous already had a rifle in his hands, and Zaalbar had unsheathed the vibrosword strapped to his back. The Mandalorians had their blasters drawn. The younger blond woman even had a faint smile on her face, as she fiddled with the casing of a grenade. And standing in front of them all was her final defender. Mekel held a double-bladed yellow saber, ignited in trembling fists.

His hood had fallen back, and his face was very pale underneath the black goggles of his visor.

_He's holding it wrong, he'll be lucky if only loses an eye and not an arm trying to swing it like that._

And of course, the parking lot wasn't empty, or unguarded. An alarm went off somewhere, and a toneless voice droned from a hovering security drone, shining a bright beam of light straight at Mekel Jin.

"Sentient identified: wanted by CorSec security and by orders of the Jedi Council. Underground denizen Mekel Jin, sub-level 47, please put down your weapon."

The cool voice beside her spoke. "I am Master Jopheena of the Council. My companions and I will take Mekel Jin into custody, please stand down."

_Her companions?_
Revan turned her head. Oerin Lin was at her back, his face very smooth and calm. HK stood on top of the luggage transport with a disrupter rifle in his hands, metallic eyes glinting a happy red. He had the old woman in his sights. Thalia May looked absolutely terrified. There was no one else behind them.

She has no other companions. She means us.

"Stand down," Revan called out. To all of them.

"Mekel Jin is considered armed and extremely dangerous, Master Jopheena. Port security recommends that you accept our offer of additional assistance."

Fingers tightened slightly on Revan's arm. "I think one untrained boy is no match for a Jedi Master, a Jedi Knight, three Padawans and our hired mercenaries, don't you?" The Jedi's voice carried, and ahead of them, she saw Canderous, lower his rifle, the others following his lead. "This is Council business," the woman continued. "And we have the situation well under control."

The expression on Mekel Jin's face slowly changed from desperate defiance to a blank calm that could have been relief. A hiss and his 'saber deactivated.

Canderous stepped forward and smoothly took it from him, pinning the boy's arms behind his back.

"An old friend, perhaps?" Oerin Lin whispered behind her. "Are you going to introduce us?"

"To do that, I'd have to be able to remember," Revan hissed. She would not let herself be angry, their position was too precarious. Whoever the woman was, they'd find out.

"Master Klee's here too," the old woman said. "And some of the others. You are fortunate it was Drez that caught you in the customs line, not Klee. I don't think your Padawan's Sith tricks would have worked on Klee, dear. If you have some transport, you need to get to it. Soon. That explosion will not throw them off for long."

The others had reached them. "Cruiser's this way," Canderous muttered through his mask. "Not far. Move. Talk later." He strode off through the lot, dragging Mekel behind him. The others followed.

"So, the Council is divided," Revan said quietly, quickening her step. The old woman's bony fingers clutched her arm. "The Council is divided regarding my case. And you are..."

"One of your uncle's friends, dear. We served together in the Sith Wars. How did you manage all of this without the Force? No—no, don't tell me. Perhaps there are some things I should not know. I want to ask you a question."

"Ask it."

The planetside cruiser was an old model, and a little battered. The docking ramp was down. The others stepped aside to get the luggage transport into it.

"Why are you here?"

"There was something my uncle didn't tell me," Revan swallowed and wondered how much the old Jedi knew, how much it was safe to tell her.

"And you have learned it now?"
"I know." A part of me always knew. I just didn't want to—it wasn't safe to remember—I wasn’t safe. Not for him, not for Malachor.

"I see that you do." The woman stared into her eyes, nodding slowly. “But a warning: where there is one secret, there are usually more. They may not all be as—pleasant.”

"That doesn’t matter. Did the Jedi..." her voice trailed off and she thought of a hundred questions to ask. Did you do something to Carth's mind like you did to mine? Are you with D'Reev or against him? Did you send me to die on the Star Forge or redeem myself? How could you take away the memories of my son? Are you my allies or not?

The old woman's face was kind and sad and it should be familiar, she was certain it should be familiar, but there was nothing where a memory should be.

Because they burned it from my mind.

"Do you hate the Council for what we did to you?" A bald question. Of course, they wonder. They wonder if they need to worry about saving their own skins. They'd stopped at the loading ramp. The old woman had dropped her arm and stood facing her, Thalia May at her side.

"Carth Onasi," Revan said. "Did you have anything to do with taking Carth from me?"

That wasn't really an answer, and it was only one of a hundred questions.

Master Jopheena shook her head. "No," she said softly. "In that, at least, we are blameless." She sighed. "I saw your Captain, and his son, and—and—yours. I do not know what was done to the pilot, but it was not done with the Force." Those blue eyes scanned the perfect mask of her visor, as if searching for answers underneath it. "You do not seem fallen now, Revan."

"I—I don't even remember how—or why—or what." Her voice was shaking, and she stopped speaking.

The old Jedi smiled sadly. "Did you ever think that might be a mercy?"

"Is the old woman coming with us or not?" Canderous' gravel voice came from the top of the docking ramp, with Zaalbar looming behind him. The rest were already inside.

Thalia May grabbed the old woman's arm. "Please," she whispered, "can we just go back to the Temple?"

Revan's eyes moved to the girl's face. Stark terror. Wide eyes, round and frightened. She felt a strange exasperation.

What have I ever done to Thalia May? I saved her from the Sith students who made a sport out of hunting her and the others down in those caves. Why is she scared of me?

"No, we're not coming," Master Jopheena called back to Canderous. "The Mandalorian makes a rather absurd Padawan," she murmured more softly, raising her brows. "And I do wonder, about your plans—how do they involve Mandalorians? Thalia and I must return to the Temple." she considered for a moment. "But I'm leaving Mekel Jin with you. I hope you take the responsibility seriously. He is a troubled young man."

"Mekel is mine," Revan said quietly.

He has to be, because I hold his life in my hands. A leader must make the decisions that no one else
can live with.

"Yours?" The wrinkled face frowned slightly. "I hope you've learned more than that, Revan."

"Who are you?" Master Jopheena, I don't remember a Master Jopheena. I remember nothing.

"My name is Jopheena Sundancer. I'm a member of the Jedi Council."

The name meant nothing. The woman was watching her so carefully. Revan wanted to draw on the Force, to see what lay behind that serene facade, but she didn't dare. "I mean no harm to the Council." She made the words flat, trying to bury that part of her that wanted to harm the Council very badly.

Revenge on them does not serve my purpose. Walk away, Carth said to me once. Just walk away.

Take what is mine and walk away.

"You will not be able to remain hidden from the others long. Malachi D'Reev knows of your arrival. And many suspect it. Soon, they all will know. And when they cannot find you with the Force, they will try more mundane methods."

"I don't have to be hidden long." Just long enough.

The old woman nodded, as if a question was answered. "The Mandalorians," she mused, as if to herself. "So loyal to Ulic, long ago."

After he defeated their leader, the Mandalore. When they helped him sack Coruscant.

"I am not Ulic," Revan said quietly. "Or Exar Kun."

And these Mandalorians are no army. They are refugees seeking Senate recognition for the Malachor system. They are a different tool entirely.

"No, you are not." Those blue eyes scanned her face again. Revan resisted the urge to pull back her visor and stare back, eye to eye.

"Revan," Canderous said quietly. He'd come down the ramp to her side. "We need to go." His voice was muffled under the mask.

"I do not intend to—to—fight—" Revan began.

"I can guess some of your intentions." The old woman looked sad. "I once said to my Padawan that sometimes a quick strike does less harm. Your peace could cause more injury to the Republic than the alternative."

"You were my—I was your Padawan?" Revan frowned.

"No, dear. You were Vrook's. And Zhar's. And Kae's. You had many Masters, during your training, but you were never mine. My Padawan was Malak." Master Jopheena sighed. "And in the end, as so many did, I failed him."

"Revan, we need to get out of here," Canderous took hold of her arm.

Revan clenched her hands. "I will not kill again," she said quietly. I don't want to find out if I'd feel every death or not. Bastila made me feel them. But now... I don't want to find out if I'm still... what that computer made me. I don't want to be that. I just want my son. And Carth, andcarth.
But still, a spark of anger, flickered, like an old memory. But killing D'Reev. His death would be sweet. It would be a song.

"Go," Master Jopheena said. Suddenly she looked very old and frail. Just an old woman wearing a brown robe. Her hand trembled and Thalia May took her arm, supporting it. Thalia was very careful not to look their way. She still looked terrified.

Terrified of me.

"Thalia?" Revan said.

The girl nearly jumped out of her skin, her dark skin turning ash with fright.

"Thalia, I'm not— " evil, a Sith Lord, dangerous.

"We need to go." Canderous was pulling her away now, dragging her up the ramp. There was a squad of soldiers trooping out of the port. "Fracking Jedi," he hissed. "Did you ever think they might be stalling for time?"

Revan let herself be dragged. "I don't think—that woman—she didn't mean us any harm."

"Mean us harm or not, we can't be captured now. They'll know we're here soon enough, but they have to find out on our terms."

"May the Force guide you, Revan Starfire," Master Jopheena whispered. Somehow, she made those words carry.

Revan turned her back on them and went into the ship. The docking hatch closed behind them, and the cruiser took off.

The cruiser's cabin was one big room. Canderous pulled off his mask and dropped it on the floor. Zaalbar groaned at her underneath the suit of armor. One of the Mandalorians muttered a curse. The ship's engines hummed. The blonde girl glanced at them briefly, and then turned back to the controls.

Gwen Ordo stared them down from one of the couches, sandwiched between two of the warriors. "You spoke truly, husband. You brought us the Mandalore." Behind her, Oerin Lin beamed happily. "But the whelp is still unblooded, and, if his story his true— " Canderous grunted an assent "—you've brought us two Mandalores, not one. How does this serve us?"

Revan swallowed. Facing down the Jedi Master had been easier. "The Senate has always acknowledged local governments, yet they ignore your requests for aid." Mission had given them the reports, weeks ago, on the Mandalorian situation on Coruscant. "If you appoint Lin as your Mandalore, they will be forced to recognize your sovereign status."

"He's unblooded," Gwen said. "He cannot rule us."

Revan pulled off her visor and stared the woman down. "I am blooded," she said, trying to make the words more of a command than an apology. "Sand, air and stars. And the Senate cannot ignore me. "

A faint smile crossed the woman's face. "Drenched in blood," she replied. "Not since the ancient times has a woman of our people gained so much honor in the men's world… but, you are also hunted, Jedi. Your own people seek to make an end of you."
"If you accept Lin as Fett, and then appoint me regent, they cannot—openly—move against me," Revan said. "Not without causing an act of aggression against a sovereign people." We hope.

The Mandalorian considered. "So, offer them Lin, get them to accept our status and then give them you. It would be interesting to see how the barbarians would react." Her mouth curved in a smile that was sharp as a sword's blade.

"I am also heir to one of the most powerful seats on the Senate," Revan said. "And I could use that to our mutual advantage."

"Are you?"

"A Coruscanti Senator's term is fixed at one hundred standard years. I married Malak D'Reev on Mandalore and bore his son. By Coruscanti law, I am a D'Reev. Senator Malachi D'Reev has held his seat for one hundred and two years. He's only still in power because my son is a child." She took a deep breath. "His Senate seat is rightfully mine."

My father hates you, Red. You are a threat to him in ways you can't even imagine.

I don't want the damn Senate seat, but we don't have to get that far to win.

"D'Reev...." Gwen spat on the floor. "He's played us false. I wouldn't mind seeing him fall."

"Played you?" Revan frowned. She knew of no connection between the Mandalorians and the Senator.

That was one of the reasons we thought this plan would work.

The Mandalorian shrugged. "His agents arranged for our diplomatic status, and he promised us trade with the Core worlds, relief shipments… promises that he has not delivered."

"Why?"

Behind them, the blonde girl gave her an incredulous look. "Why? You of all people should know why!"

Revan gritted her teeth and glanced at Canderous. He shrugged unknowingly.

How I love surprises.

"Why," Revan repeated. "Why does D'Reev support Mandalorians?"

"It's women's business," Gwen said, glaring at the girl. "And something we do not speak of. D'Reev owed us a favor, and he has been lax in paying it. That is all you need to know." She frowned. "His heir is your son; the Lin whelp says." Her voice trailed off thoughtfully. "By the old ways, we are sworn to help your clan reclaim him."

"Yes," Revan said quietly. "You are. Malachor is Lin too."

She would not look at Canderous or wonder if things had changed. This was his Clan and his wife. Did that change things? How can I ask him to risk his family to save mine?

The Mandalorian warriors whispered among themselves. With their helms off, they were very young, barely more than boys.

"I only want my son," Revan admitted quietly. And Carth, andcarth.
"And once you have him, where does that leave us?"

"With a Mandalore, and whatever else you can wrest from the Senate in the power vacuum D'Reev's absence will create."

His absence. I want to make him permanently absent.

"A Lin Mandalore. We are Ordo. But the idea has its merits, if Ordo was tied to Lin."

For some reason Canderous sighed. "Gwen…"

"Ordo is pledged to Lin," Revan frowned. "Canderous swore—"

"Blood oaths, men's ways!" Gwen eyed her speculatively. "I would not have an Ordo daughter marry an unblooded whelp. But you yourself would be an asset to our clan, if Lin and Ordo were pledged."

Revan didn't even want to think about what that might mean. Does she want to marry me off to an Ordo?

"I'm blooded in sand," Oerin Lin broke in, indignant. "And air."

"With no fleet, you will never be blooded in stars," the blonde girl sneered. "You and all the rest of them. Boys—you'll be boys forever. Not true warriors."

"The Clans will rise again," said one of the young warriors behind her. "Canderous is here. He will lead us to victory and honor against a worthy foe. You should shut up, Milli; it's none of your business."

"With what ships?" the girl shot back. "She destroyed our fleet. Revan left us with nothing; made us into a race of beggars and thieves. The blooded men are gone, scattered across the galaxy trying to earn back their honor for the tune of a few credits. And we're left with this, begging for scraps from the maffa-stinking Republic. Scraps to feed the few that are left on the home worlds. Old women, children, more unblooded pups like you, Kex!"

"There's a season for all things, daughter," Canderous said quietly. "And we will rise again."

Daughter. I was right. Canderous' family. Revan wondered if that changed things. She could tell nothing from his face.

XXX

"When we leave Coruscant," she'd said quietly, "your people will be in danger. Are you sure you want to risk this, Canderous?"

The warrior looked up at her from the rifle barrel he was polishing. It didn't need polishing. Everything was ready, had been for days. They were only waiting on Mission's transmission, and the Hoth's arrival.

"From the computer's reports and what we've seen on the nets we know that they're dying now," he said. "A slow, quiet death. Famine. Diseases we no longer have the technology to treat. And no kolto for a cure. That is no death for Mandalorians."

"I meant the ones that will help us on Coruscant," Revan said. The plight of the Malachor system was gossip on several star systems. No one was sure how bad things really were there; but there
was much speculation. The fifth planet had become unstable in its orbit; causing ecological catastrophe on the three inhabited worlds.

Canderous glowered. "Better for them to fight than beg as they do now. They will thank us for bringing them back their honor. I wouldn't worry about the consequences, Revan. My people can take care of themselves."

"And they'll have me," Oerin Lin added, with a gleam in his yellow eyes.

Revan clenched her hands on her lap. "Canderous?"

"Nothing has changed," Canderous said. His face was frozen like ice, like rocks. Fixed and unchanging as the stars. "A season for all things." He glanced at Revan, but she couldn't read the expression in his eyes. He got up from the couch and crossed his arms, every inch a Mandalorian, even in the ridiculous Jedi costume.

"My people, Clan Ordo." He looked at them all, his wife, his daughter, and the three half-grown warriors behind them. "By the honor of our forefathers I ask you to join us in this worthy battle. What I ask for is not your sacrifice. For this venture is not a sacrifice." A faint smile crossed his thin lips. "It is a gamble."

"And how will this battle begin, husband?" Gwen still sounded skeptical, but the look in her eyes was almost fond.

Oerin Lin chuckled, interrupting. "With a party."

XXX

"You left early this morning." Her voice was light, and she looked up from her desk terminal, giving him a cool and neutral smile. Beside her spun the holomap of the Core worlds, with Fleet positions marked in red. Only a few red points, now. Far too few for the war to come. "I thought we'd have breakfast."

"I had to get back to Dustil," Carth said. "Before he woke up, I didn't want him think I was—that we were—"

Captain Rew Ekkumi smirked. "Think his father didn't come home last night after his date? Carth, Dustil's not a child anymore. He knows how the world works."

"He's been having nightmares. I worry."

"And he was fine, wasn't he?"

Carth tried to grin. She'd expect it. "He slapped me on the arm and called me an old dog. Congratulated me. I think he likes you, Rew."

"That's nice," the Admiral said dryly. Her brown eyes considered him. They were remote, not like they'd been the night before. Her hair was pulled back tightly in one long braid that ran down her back. Last night, it had been loose, hanging to her waist. Morgana's hair was the same color; but it had never been so long. Her voice was like Morgana's too, and he thought they had the same build, lush and curved under their uniform.

He thought they did—his wife's face, her body was like a faded hologram kept too long in the sun. Flicker of a memory, or an echo.
"Where were you this afternoon? We had a meeting with the Telosian Reps." She was still talking.

"I had to meet someone." Carth swallowed. "Bastila's mother. She's in bad shape."

"Still drinking herself to death? Helena Shan has three pensions. One from the Council, one from the Senate and one from the Fleet. Jiya sent her to a hospital a few months back with his own funds too. You know, he served with Bastila, on the Ascendant, before the Endar Spire. "Rew shook her head. "It's a shame, it really is. I hope you didn't lend her any credits."

"No. I just left. The great hero Captain Carth Onasi ran away from a sad drunk."

"Good. When you didn't turn up for the meeting, I thought maybe… you'd been down portside."

Carth frowned at her, something sinking in the pit of his stomach.

"Portside? Why?"

"There was some trouble. Someone started a rumor that Revan landed on Coruscant. Then the grids went down—the commercial ones have been spotty for days. Fleet was there, CorSec, Jedi; but the only thing they turned up was some old actress who'd had revan surgery for her latest comeback. Seriina Starr. The silly bantha almost got herself shot."

Carth remembered Manaan and the Revan pretenders. "They're sure it wasn't—they're sure it's just an actress?"

Captain Ekkumi laughed. "They're sure now… dragged her off to be genetically scanned. Senator D'Reev is up in arms; it was one of his productions: Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith, the Real Story, or some other blaster crap. There were rumors about the two of them a long time ago—Malachi and Seriina, I mean. Not—Malachi and Revan."

_Her. She's here. The actress was a feint. She's here. It has to be her. That computer could do it: bring down the grids, change docking codes. She's here, Revan's here._

Suddenly the spacious Fleet office seemed claustrophobic. He was stifling. Carth's wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"You know, even if Revan does come… there are folks in Fleet who don't think it would be that bad." Captain Rew Ekkumi's voice was so light that he couldn't tell which side of the minefield she stood on.

"She's Sith."

"Her uncle the Jedi Master doesn't think so. Have you seen the reports from Manaan?"

"I was there." _Blood on her neck where the collar bit so deep, that rattle of her breath in her lungs. I thought she'd die before the trial. I didn't want to lose her… I said I'd be right back._ Carth clenched his fists.

_Rew sighed. "You've changed." Her commlink beeped and she frowned at it, tapping in an irritated command. "Look, I'm busy now… but, the day after tomorrow, would you like to escort me to a party?"

"A—party?" Carth's mind was elsewhere, thinking about the explosives cache. He'd have to move Dustil, convince Ekkumi to take his son for a while, think up some excuse. But after what she said about Revan—could he really trust her? Perhaps Dustil would be safer with Malachi. The old man
would let nothing happen to Malachor, and he could keep Dustil safe as well.

Carth could tell Dustil it was part of the plan, part of the trap to lure Revan to them.

*But it's me she'll come for. It's me she knows about. Me and the Jedi Council.*


"Sure," Carth replied, running on automatic. "Tell me the details tonight? Over dinner? I don't want to keep you." He could borrow a lift to get the explosives back to the conapt. No one would ask questions, half the Fleet already treated him like the walking dead. When they didn't think he noticed, he could see the pity in their eyes, hear their soft whispers.

*What she did to me. She destroys everything. I must destroy her.*

Would it be tonight? he wondered. Would she come to him tonight? His breath caught in his throat.

"Actually tonight, I can't do dinner tonight," he said apologizing. "Dustil and I—" the lie was stiff on his lips.

*I'll have to get Dustil out of there. How will she know where to find me? She'll find me, she always finds me. In my dreams she always finds me.*

"I didn't ask you to stop by tonight," Rew's military reserve was back. She hesitated. "Look, Carth, last night was wonderful, you were wonderful; but I don't think this is good for either of us. I've gotten over Jasin's death, been over it for years; but I think you need more time." Her olive skin flushed "It's awkward to say, but..." Her eyes met his. "I think you understand."

Carth tried to pretend the emotion he felt wasn't relief. It shouldn't be relief, she was a beautiful woman. "I'm sorry," he tried. "Morgana's death was very hard on me. Perhaps you're right, it's too soon—"

*It's been four years now. No—five, almost five. He tried to remember her face.*

"Morgana," she echoed. Rew looked at him, a frown sketched between her straight brows. She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again. She looked away.

Carth changed the subject. "Where's the party?" he asked. He didn't expect to be alive to see it.

"The Mandalorian Embassy. Something about the heir to Mandalore coming here to plea for his people's lives. They're trying to drum up support. It'll be interesting… and you speak their language, don't you? I thought you could be my interpreter—unless—" a frown shadowed her face as she remembered where he'd probably learned it.

*"Repeat after me, pilot. Ik'ny'ya republik achin'var infi."*

*"The Republic dogs sleep with whores,' nice one, Canderous.' Don't your people have any curses that don't involve the Republic and whores?"

The old warrior cracked his knuckles and stretched. "Not that we'd share with outsiders."

"I don't—I don't really speak much of it," Carth lied.

*Months in space on the Hawk. I learned Mandalorian, some Shyriiwook, Ryl, and twenty ways to say 'you don't have to apologize' in Cathar. Juhani was always sorry about something or other,*
something she thought we'd all take offense at. Almost a year, all of us, together in that ship. Sometimes I thought we'd kill each other, but then Polla would come into the room with her bright smile and make a bad joke. Her jokes were always so terrible; but we all laughed—or maybe that was just me because I loved her, I knew I loved her.

I loved her as early as Taris, but she never knew. No. She—she always knew.

"I always knew you loved me, flyboy," Polla said softly. Carth stirred beside her, stroking the silk of her hair, loose from its topknot, tangling his fingers in it. They were on the floor of the cockpit, doors locked and sealed from the inside. He was pretty sure the others knew what they were up to, but he didn't care.

"I'll always love you, Polla," he said.

"If this is awkward for you or painful, you don't have to come." Captain Ekkumi looked almost apologetic. "Maybe it was a silly idea. It's fine. I'll go with Jiya."

"N-no. I'll escort you." Carth cursed the paranoia that made him associate 'Mandalorian' with Canderous—and therefore with Revan. "It's just a bunch of refugees at the Mandalorian Embassy, isn't it?" Carth asked. The ache in his chest was guilt, maybe. That was better than regret.

Rew nodded. "Women and children, for the most part, yes. A delegation from their homeworld." Her eyes met his in complicit understanding. Captain Ekkumi had been at Weis.

_They'd carpet-bombed Weis, targeting civilian populations, before the Fett's armada drove them back out of the sector._

_Back to Althir where the tide turned again._

He remembered Dustil's words to him on Korriban.

_"How many mothers have you killed, Father?"_

"I'll come," Carth repeated. _If I'm still alive. _"Rew—I'm sorry that things didn’t. I like you. I really do, it’s just—I’m sorry."

"Sorry that you're still in love with someone else?" Her voice was cool. "You said her name, Carth—when, you know." A blush tinted her olive skin.

"Morgana's death was—I loved her so much."

"Right. I know you did. Love Morgana. I loved Jasim." Rew Ekkumi blinked her eyes suddenly, very hard. "Look, I consider you a friend. If there's ever anything you want to talk about, anything at all, I'm here for you." She tilted to her head to the side and stared him down. "It wasn't Morgana's name you said."

"I have to go." The room was claustrophobic, he was sweltering. He felt like he was running a fever.

"I'll send a car for you around sixteen hundred, day after tomorrow." Rew said. Her attention was already back on her console. "Take care of yourself, Carth."

"You too."

He left her there. If he'd stayed, he'd have asked whose name he had said.
This was supposed to be Dustil’s new room. His new room for this new life he and Father were never going to have. The Senator and his father and his father's friends were very generous; but Dustil hadn't bothered to unpack most of the new things he'd been bought. He had a closet full of new clothes, an Ophini Mach VII in the garage downstairs, a shiny new console, chips of all the latest vids, and a room full of subtle, expensive, black lacquered furniture.

Everything in their apartment was new and beautiful and cost more credits than he'd ever known existed.

It wasn't very clear why they were suddenly rich, but Dustil assumed it was another one of the old man's games. That Senator. That Senator gave him the creeps almost as much as his dead ghost son and the kid. Or his own father… at least Father was finally… getting back into the cockpit, as it were. He hadn't come home last night.

Probably, Captain Ekkumi was the lucky lady. She'd been friends with them back on Telos.

Her son was in the same class as Dustil and Selene. When the bombs dropped, he got a piece of shrapnel caught in his skull.

It had taken him a week to die.

Dustil closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had a—call it a hunch. A feeling. Maybe it was from Mekel, or maybe not. He'd felt something this afternoon. Just for a moment, just for a second, like a stone falling in pool of still water. A ripple and then gone.

Mekk?

Mekel?

Now, nothing. Dustil closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

xxx

Feel the Force around you. Feel the swirl of emotions; feel rage and hate like chords in a familiar song. Feel them sing, with every life and every death, and take their power for yourself. Let the Force build: then you can use it, shape it. The Force is your path, your blade, your weapon, your pride--

Finding a life, one particular life in the Force, isn't so hard—not if you know the note that it sings.


xxx

Reaching out was like flying in the wind. Somewhere, Dustil could hear the right note, like a chord, or one bright thread in a cloth—and once he'd found it—it wasn't so hard to reach the other
boy.

Not at all.

*Mekk?*

*Dust?* A wary mix of emotion; surprised hope, maybe a little fear.

*Where are you, Mekk?*

*I'm fine. Are you—are you okay, Telos? Great.* Dustil tried to make that thought enthusiastic. *We just moved into our new conapt. So, listen, where are you?*

*You're as subtle as a Zeltron in season, asshat.*

Dustil pushed harder; he was stronger than Mekel, and if he pushed, he could see through the other boy's eyes. He pushed—and was rewarded with the view of a blank, featureless wall. It could have been anywhere. White. Plasteel maybe. Or plimfoam.

Dimly, he felt Mekel's amusement. *What do you want, Telos? You know, she wants to talk to you, right?*

*Revan?*

*Huh? How would I know? I meant Mission. Dustil, Mission wants to talk to you.*

*She's dead!* Dustil took a deep breath and tried not freak out again. Tried to burn all of the emotion away into a pure net of rage and power—just like they’d been taught.

That was getting easier.

But somewhere Mekel cowered under the assault. *Poor Dustil.* He could feel Mekel's head hurting—he'd pushed the older boy too hard, but Mekel wasn't frightened, he was just angry. *Poor fracking Telos. Sitting in the clouds and plotting his revenge with his braindead father. You're a fracking idiot. You've upset her, and she wants to talk to you. How can you be so fracking dense that you don't get that?*

*How can you? That isn't Mission. It's a thing!*

*Whatever you say. Look. Meet us at Mom's. Tonight. Give me... four hours. You still remember the way, right? All that time in the uppers hasn't made you completely stupid?*

*Yes.*

*Try not to dress up in your new duds, Dustil; I wouldn't want you to get rolled.*

*Frack off. You're with Revan. I know you are.*

Dustil pushed again, pushed harder, and Mekel fought back. Somewhere, Mekel bit his lip so hard that Dustil could taste the blood; feel the sharp pain of it—and someone was asking Mekel what was wrong; a girl's voice with an accent he couldn't quite place, and Mekel was slamming his fist on the floor and the pain hurt so much, it felt like broken bones—

The barriers slammed shut between them again and—and Dustil opened his hand. The knuckles were white, darkening to a bruise already, and it hurt like hell.
"I said, the Senator wanted you to come for dinner tonight. Dustil? Were you listening to me?"

_How long has he been standing there?_

Dustil stood up and turned around. Dear old Dad looked a lot better; he'd shaved and was wearing a more normal uniform; meaning much less gold braid, so he looked like less of an asshole. He was smiling too; but his eyes were dead, and his aura pulsed around him, dull and black and full of pain.

That aura had looked a little better this morning, Dustil thought, as if whatever he'd been up to the night before made him almost happy; but now it was rotting and bad and black again.

Looking at it made him feel sick.

"What were you doing, son?" Voice trying to be normal, as if any of this was normal.

"You want me out of the way for a hot date, Dad?" Dustil made himself smile.

"Something like that." Carth shifted uncomfortably. Their eyes locked.

_I don't want to leave him, but Mekel knows where she is. I know he does. Revan's here—and that Mission... thing too. She's just a droid._

_I can make Mekel show me where Revan is. I'm stronger._

"So. Captain Ekkumi, huh?"

"Yep," Carth stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor. "So, listen... tonight at the Senator's. You—you be kind to Korrie, okay? He's just a kid. It's not his fault that everything—"

"I know."

"I love you, Dustil." Carth swallowed. "You're a good kid, yourself."

"I'm not a kid."

His father shivered. It wasn't exactly pleasant making your old man shiver.

"The Senator's sending a car for you in an hour. You... you probably shouldn't walk there, security's kind of tight right now."

"I'd like to take the Mach; I don't really get to drive her much."

He'd only had the speeder for four days. They'd driven it twice together. Once upon a time, Dustil had dreamed of having a speeder like an Ophini Mach VII. Now, he didn't really care. The Mach was a means to an end.

_Can't really drive to sub47 anyways. I can park her in the tunnel-park on twenty, I guess._

"If that's what you want, it's fine." His father smiled. "She's fast, so be careful."

"Of course."

"What's wrong with your hand?"

Dustil pulled it away and shoved it in the pocket of his jacket so fast that it hurt. Hell, it felt like
he had broken something.

It was going to swell up, too. He could tell.

XXX

"What's wrong with your hand, Mekel?" the former Dark Lord of the Sith sounded worried.

Oh shit.

[[You dork, what did you do?]]

"Shut up, Blue, please."

Mission did. The conversation with Dustil had left Mission a little freaked, Mekel thought. He'd been whispering Telos's responses to her, and hearing both of them shrieking in his mind while he stared at that damn wall until he thought he'd go insane.

"Millifar came and got me—when you started screaming." Revan looked like she gave a frack. It was really weird, seeing that expression on her face.

I was screaming?

"Your lip is bleeding." She took a piece of cloth from the pocket of her robe and wiped it away.

"Thanks," he said, pulling the cloth away from her quickly. The expression in her green eyes was creepily concerned. He backed closer to the wall.

"What did you do?" she repeated, reaching for his hand. It was bruised where he'd slammed it into the duracrete floor. Felt like some of the small bones were broken. Small bones in the hand were great to break, they'd learned in interrogation class. Small bones in the hands and feet.

Mekel opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Revan frowned, a delicate line between her two red, arched brows. "Whatever it is, just tell me. Was it one of the Mandalorians? I can't tell them you're not a slave, but they won't hurt you… if they do, they have to deal with me."

"Why can't you just tell them I'm not a slave?"

Revan grimaced. "Mandalorian slaves have more rights and more access than Mandalorian guests. As a guest, you couldn't move this freely. As a slave… they’ll let you earn your right to be one of them."

"Wasn't them, okay?" Mekel pulled his hand away and shrugged. A shooting pain went up his wrist. He tried not to grimace. "I did it to myself."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"To break a Force bond." Mekel felt like kicking himself for telling her, but Mission knew, so maybe she knew anyways. He wasn't sure. Blue was being helpfully silent. He didn't think he could deal with both of them.

"Dustil."

It wasn't a question. He nodded, hesitantly.
"To stop him from knowing…?"

"He knows you're here on Coruscant—I think. I think he wants to kill you."

"Because he believes I did this to his father?" The smooth calm in her face vanished. Suddenly Revan looked really vulnerable, and not much older than he was. Of course, that was a lie.

"No—he's not that dumb." How could she be this dumb? "Because of Mission."

"Oh." She stared at her hands. "No wonder he hates me," she said, almost to herself. "Maybe all of this is a fool's game."

"He needs you. The kid, Malachor."

"Did you see my son?" Her expression was fierce, almost hungry. Mekel shrank back.

"N-not exactly, Dustil was there, with the kid and—and you know."

"I don't. Know. Anything."

"Malak."

Her face was a frozen mask. The face she'd had in the tombs on Korriban when Jorak Uln made them taste the lightning, over and over again.

Mekel took a deep breath. "It was really Malak I saw, more than the kid, I don't know the kid—your son—I mean we saw him once in the library but—Malak was—Malak is—"

"Dead."

"Yeah. But I think he can't get through to you, he's tried but he—" Mekel didn't want to tell her how many times he'd called for Darth Malak when everyone else was fast asleep in the Embassy. But the Dark Lord never answered. Not him.

"He's dead. I killed him." Her words sounded dead too. "I hated him. I killed him. He's dead."

"Yes, but—"

"I had dreams about him, but they were just dreams, just my mind making sense of shattered memories, memories I was too frightened to face. Do you understand?"

"No, he's real. Malak and the kid. He's with the kid. I think."

She took a deep breath. "Did you know my—did you know Malak?"

"He sponsored me at the Academy. He found me on Coruscant and took me to Korriban."

"He was important to you."

"He was, he—was kind to me. H-he founded the Academy and I was one of the first students, I always hoped—" Mekel swallowed. It sounded so stupid now. So stupid and pointless. "I always hoped someday I'd be his apprentice."

*But he picked Bandon, the asshole.*

"Looking back, I mean I'm not dumb, I was just a Force-sensitive kid he recruited into the Sith, but
I never had a father and he—I know he was—what he was, but he—"

I'd never seen the stars, and sometimes, when he was in a good mood on the way to Korriban, the big man would tell me about them. The worlds he'd seen. The hole in his jaw festered and it got harder and harder for him to talk. All that power, and we couldn't do anything, couldn't mend anything. And sometimes, sometimes, the big man cried.

Her eyes scanned his face. "You couldn't have been very old, when this happened."

"I was twelve."

"Gods, that's young for Sith." Revan closed her eyes and clenched her fists.

"The Jedi take kids even younger than that."

When her face grew pale you could see shadows on it, almost like scars, where the Sith lines had been. Faint, like a tracery of silver. In some strange way, Mekel thought they made her beautiful.

"They don't teach them to kill," she said softly. "Not the ones that haven't already learned how." She blinked, as if bringing herself back to the present. "You hurt your hand."

"Yeah, I'll be fine, I'll just..." put some ice on it and pretend it's kolto.

"Let me see." She reached for his hand, and spread out the fingers, ignoring the hiss of pain that he tried to quell.

"No." Mekel said flatly, pulling it back. He remembered the tombs and Jorak Uln, and that man—Dustil's father. Carth Onasi.

Didn't she know her power... wasn't the healing kind?

"Do you know any way I can keep Dustil out of my head besides breaking my fingers?" Mekel gave her a twisted smile, trying to distract her.

"Stop him from reading your thoughts through the bond, you mean?" Revan was still staring at his hand. She ran her own nervously through her short cap of red hair.

"Yes."

"Do you speak any languages? Obscure ones, complicated ones."

"Only ancient Sith."

"Conjugate verbs in it."

"Huh?"

"Laa'kai mmm tchevno. Laa'kai mmm techevna. La'kai mo tchev...and so on."

"I am strong. She is strong. They are strong. I don't get it."

"Doesn't matter what you say, just make a noise. A noise like a wall that they can't get through. Sometimes I'd recite the Corellian Spire jump points, over and over again."

"It this some kind of Jedi thing?"
"I don't know. I—came up with myself. To keep Bastila out of my head." Her expression was remote. "I nearly gave myself a concussion slamming my skull into the bulkheads before I thought of it."

"Oh." Mekel didn't know what to say. She was holding something in her hand that she'd pulled out of her pocket, staring at the floor, as if he wasn't even there anymore.

[[We need to go, chuba face. Make some excuses.]]

"I have to go," Mekel got to his feet.

"Go?" Revan raised an eyebrow, standing up herself. "Go where? The Council and D'Reev are after you, Mission said. You can't leave, it's not safe."

Mekel laughed, nervous. She made him nervous. She was hiding the Force now so completely that he couldn't even sense her through it; but there was something about her that was still... her. "They won't find me, I've been hiding out here just fine for the last six months—and where I'm going, they don't even know how to look. I have to see some friends."

He hoped Moms wasn't going to be mad again. Or ask for the credits he'd promised to pay her not to turn him in.

"We need money," he murmured to Blue.

[[Hard currency is a little difficult for me to come by, but don't worry, Big Z is bringing some.]]

"Big Z is coming?" He'd said that louder than he meant to. Revan frowned.

"Hey, sis!" Mission herself rolled into the room, her chassis freshly polished, followed by the Wookiee. Zaalbar had two vibroblades strapped to his back, and a bandolier harnessed across his chest. And a blaster.

All dressed up for a night on the underground.

The former Dark Lord of the Sith crossed her arms and shook her head. "No," she said. "Whatever mad scheme you've planned, Mission, the answer is no."

The T3 rattled something at her in a language Mekel didn't know, and Revan responded in kind. Mission's voice got louder, and more argumentative, and Revan flinched, suddenly.

"And if you get captured? If they get killed? This is an insane risk. You can't go after Dustil!"

Zaalbar interrupted, groaning loudly and gesturing with a heavy claw. Revan's hand closed around whatever she was holding, white-knuckled, and she looked at the floor. Whatever the Wookiee said made the former Dark Lord of the Sith look absolutely defeated. "Fine," she said. "Go. But if any of you get hurt, I swear I'll flay the flesh from your bones."

"I'll-flay-the-flesh-from-your-bones," Mission said, in a perfect imitation of Revan's voice. "Nice one, I'll have to use that. Get your coat, Melk."

"Sure thing, Blue."

Mekel went back to the room they'd given him to grab the things they'd need. He wrapped his hand with an ice pack and some bandages from the infirmary and slipped on the heavy bantha-hide coat Mission had made him buy, still wincing at the pain in his hand. The coat was a little too nice for
the Underground—but *Mom's* saw all kinds, and he figured they wouldn't get rolled on the way with the Wookiee. Wookiees were rare on Coruscant, but there were a few, here and there. They were legendary muscle. Anyway, no one really noticed you twice unless you looked like an easy roll. With the Wookiee, they wouldn't be.

He slipped the print-outs from the library in his pocket. Maybe, if things went well, Dustil would like to see them.

When he came back to the front room of the Embassy, Revan was still standing there. The expression on her face was almost wistful. "I should come with you."

Mission beeped at her. "No way, Polla-Revan. It's like Bastila walking into the Sith Embassy on Manaan. If any of us get caught, we're small fish."

Revan shook her head, pacing. "I don't like this." From the other room came the sound of cheers. Someone had won another fight. That meant there'd be another fight. And then another. The Mandalorians were tiresomely predictable. Her head jerked in that direction and she sighed.

"Don't you have more Mandalorian butt to kick tonight anyways, sis?"

"Oerin's fighting them all now," Revan said. "It'll be a while. I don't like this." Her eyes rested on Mekel's for a moment and then she looked away too fast. She looked guilty.

[[Want to lay a bet, Sith-wannabe? Don't answer that, not in front of her, just move to the door. What do you think: is she gonna follow us or is she going to sneak out and go groundside?]]

"Be careful," Mekel said. It wasn't what he meant to say, the words just came out.

Revan looked startled. And even more guilty. "You too."

Zaalbar growled something and they went to the doors. The automated sentry droids clicked and the corusteel plating slid open. The Mandalorian Embassy was just the fifteenth floor of an old office building full of colonial embassies on the down and out; but they'd fortified the inside like a bunker.

"You think she's going to follow us?" Mekel frowned, glancing back nervously.

Zaalbar groaned and shook his head.

"Big Z thinks she'll go groundside. He's probably right."

"Groundside, where?"

"Either to Carth or D'Reev's building."

"But—I thought, but that's...."

"Insane? Yeah. Don't worry. We've accounted for it. And I mean, she is *her.*"

"It just seems rash. I mean, she's—*Revan.* Mekel lowered his voice, even though they were in alone in the elevator now and Mission had already scanned it for bugs.

"No." Mission's voice was colder suddenly, almost mechanical. "Revan wouldn't have let us walk out of there. Revan might storm the gates to take her son or Carth; but not without some kind of plan. She's not just Revan, she's Polla too. Polla—it's *exactly* the kind of thing she'd do."
"You're not worried?" Mekel didn't really understand what she meant. Mission was talking about Polla as if she was another person.

"Didn't I mention it's taken care of? We won't let her screw this up. That's like, our job."

XXX

"You will not ask her." Telling Gwenarius, first wife of Clan Ordo not to do something was like pissing in wind on the plains of Hrukar, but Canderous had to try.

"It's none of your concern, husband," Aemelie snapped. "This is women's business." Deftly, she adjusted her son in her arms, so the babe could nurse from her other breast.

Gwen just folded her arms and glared at him. Their daughter, still too young to be named, was sleeping in the crib at the foot of their sleeping pallets.

Both of the children were strong and would probably live to their naming days. Canderous felt a sense of pride in that.

**Even though I had nothing to do with it.**

*You've been among the barbarians too long, Ordo. There was a time when you wouldn't have even wondered, wouldn't have even thought. Bringing children into the world is women's business. These are your wives; and so, these are your children.*

*Where the seed came from is irrelevant.*

Their son wrinkled his face and started to squall. Canderous put down the tray of tea on the low table. "Let me calm him," he said, taking the boy from Aemelie. The babe was dark-skinned, with a fuzz of curly black hair and blue eyes that were changing to black. He let the child curl a fist around his finger and bounced him on his knee.

This was no time for a proper tenting—and the girl-child was too old for that anyways; but it was his responsibility to stay here with them, as much as he could, to learn these children and re-learn these women he had taken to wed. A thing for all seasons, tenting was a celebration of life and the continuity of Clan.

*Of all things I expected to find on Coruscant, I did not expect this.* He pressed his lips to the babe's forehead, and held him against his shoulder, patting the boy's back until he burped.

Gwen watched him, a faint smile on her face. "The outlander Lin would have strong children, Canderous. Children for Ordo."

"She owes us lives, for the ones she took," said Aemelie.

"She won't understand." Canderous didn't know why he bothered debating the issue--their minds were set. "She's pledged to another."

"Barbarians remarry, after their mate dies," Gwen argued. "We've been here long enough to know that. Surely, enough time has passed."

"She's pledged to the pilot, Captain Onasi. The man you've seen on the nets."

Aemelie shrugged uncomprehendingly. "Onasi spoke against her. He hates her, doesn't he? Surely, that negates any vows."
Canderous sighed and stroked the boy-child's tiny back, shifting his weight on the floor and crossing his legs.

Gwenarius Ordo smiled at him fondly. "I'll ask her tomorrow. If she says no, she says no."

It had been hard enough getting Gwen not to challenge Revan—and therefore Clan Lin—for the title of Mand’alor in the middle of the starport. Canderous supposed he should be grateful his wife's thoughts had moved on to a different, although no less predictable, path. "Don't forget your place. This business is between her and us."

*May the gods place me elsewhere when you ask Revan to join Clan Ordo as my third wife. Please.*

"She's not unattractive, for a barbarian, and she fights like one of our own. She defeated Fett Cassus Lin. She defeated all of us… even if her ways weren't entirely honorable. Tactically, they were brilliant. If she beds like she fights she'd be enjoyable for you. You've followed her for over a year, Canderous of Ordo. Surely you can't tell me you've never once—" Aemelie's voice trailed off.

"You think he's never bedded her?" Gwen looked shocked.

"Of course he hasn't—you can tell that by watching them fight. But surely he wants to."

He'd fought Revan to a draw in the battle circle. That was something they'd pre-arranged, after she beat the Lin whelp in it. And then she'd fought all of the others—unblooded boys and no real challenge. But among the men, that was enough to tie Ordo to Lin, and therefore all of the other sub-clans, and the remnants of Rialis and Zal.

But women's business was a different thing entirely.

"You haven't suffered any injuries, have you?" Gwen squatted down next to him and reached for the belt on his robe.

He batted her hand away. "The babe is sleeping! No. I am intact. And what I think about Revan—as a woman—is irrelevant. She does not desire me, do you understand? She and I settled that long ago."

*On Taris.*

XXX

*The Deralian spun, twisting her double-bladed vibroblade to meet his counter with a clash of cortosis steel. Sparks flew from the impact. Her feet moved in a dance he knew only too well.*

*Women were smaller and faster than men, and their patterns in the battle circle reflected this. What surprised Canderous was to see a barbarian who knew these steps. And yet, a part of him was pleased.*

Somewhere, the teachings of my people live on, even after we have passed from memory. Someone must have taught Polla Organa the old dance.

"Are there Mandalorians, on Deralia?" he asked her, moving more slowly and solidly to meet her attack.

"Huh?"

*They were in Davik Kang's estate, with her companion the pilot; in the training room off the guest*
suites. The pilot sat on the sidelines. The man swore he was a good pilot, and he was a good shot; but he was no match for them with blades—and he knew it. Out of the corner of his eye, Canderous noted the scowl on the man's face, and the way his eyes never left her lithesome figure. She was attractive; there was no question. Her breasts heaved becomingly under the bodice of her jumpsuit. Her waist was narrow, and her hips flared beneath, tapering to muscular legs. She was more slender than any of his wives; but it was a slimness built for battle, not weakness. Her topknot flared in the air as she leapt towards him again, a grin on her face as their blades met one more time.

"You fight like one born to it," he said, wondering if she would understand.

"I trained with blasters and rifles and throwing knives since I was a kid," she answered, pausing. She wiped the sheen of sweat from her face with the sleeve. "All Deralians do, in case someone tries to invade us."

"Those things have their uses," Canderous said approvingly, "but it's the sword you wield like a true warrior."

A puzzled frown crossed her face, and she stared down at the double-bladed vibroblade in her hands as if she'd never seen it before.

"I guess I'm talented," she shrugged and looked at him. "Are all Mandalorians so… so—polite?" Her green eyes glinted.

He hesitated, unsure if he'd misunderstood. Barbarian women were odd, one had to tread carefully. Of course, among the Clans, only women mated with outsiders. But Canderous had been exiled for so long. And she was not unattractive, this barbarian. She moved like a Mandalorian. In a way, she reminded him of home. A home lost to him forever, and a way of life that was ground into dust.

"Perhaps you'd like to join me in the massage room?" he said politely. "Davik has a good supply of oils and your muscles must be stiff. We've been at this for hours. You know, my people have made an art of massage—as well as fighting."

"Huh?" Her attention had wandered past him already, and she was looking at the pilot. And the pilot was looking at her.

Oh.

She sheathed the vibrosword in the strap across her back and tugged at her jumpsuit, smoothing it down. Her fingers fiddled restlessly with the tail of hair that hung from her neatly-shorn scalp. A faint frown crossed her face and she tore her eyes away and back to his.

"Are you… are you hitting on me, Canderous Ordo?"

"Your choice," he said. His voice came out rough, filled with more desire than she wanted him to see.

"Um…" She looked uncertain suddenly. Behind them on the sidelines, the pilot scowled. He got to his feet and came over to them, his hands curled on his blasters. Canderous noted the automatic soldier's stance in the man's walk, the alertness in his eyes.

Captain Carth Onasi, was the man's name. Not just a pilot at all. Well, that made sense—after all, the man had been tasked to rescue that Jedi woman, Bastila Shan. He'd seen the man in battle--
some of what was said in that cantina song was certainly true.

"Is he bothering you, Polla?" The pilot glowered at him. Ever since he'd met the man, the man had been glowering at him.

"None of your business, Republic," Canderous shot back.

"You say that like it's an insult, Mandalorian." The man's hands were on his blasters, half-drawn.

Polla looked oddly apologetic. The tip of her nose blushed pink. "We were just practicing, Carth. Not that I have to explain that—or anything to you, you Gamorrean pigman."

The pilot grinned at her, "Don't get frisky with the help, beautiful. Mercs can't be trusted. Especially Mandalorians."

She grinned back. "Frisky?"

"Frisky." The man nodded. One side of his mouth pulled up. "I think you're getting frisky."

I'll show you frisky, you hairless Wookiee!" Polla reached behind her back and drew her sword—one smooth movement.

Even though his chances of getting anywhere seemed increasingly slim, Canderous couldn't help but admire the simplicity of her form, the perfect balance of her stance. It had been a long time since he had been home, since he had seen the grace of a woman's body with a blade in her hand.

He felt a dull shock of surprise as he realized what she was about to do.

Her sword point grazed the edge of the pilot's cheek, etching a faint half circle, just a small scratch that didn't break the skin. The man didn't budge, but his eyes widened.

"What are you doing, gorgeous?"

"Marking her claim," Canderous murmured. Someone had trained her well. He could understand her reticence in discussing it; but the dance was as old as the stars that had once been their Empire.

"I'll be going now," he said to the empty air.

The pilot and the smuggler stood there, eyes locked. Canderous might have well have been in a different galaxy.

A week later, on the way to Dantooine, he had asked her politely if she wanted his assistance in counseling the pilot for the marriage bed. He'd gotten a right hook to the jaw and a stream of Deralian curses for his efforts.

XXX

Of course, he realized now, she really did have no idea what he was talking about.

"I will ask her in the morning," Gwen continued. "We need to finish the preparations for this accursed festival the Lin slave said that we have to hold. I really think that would be the perfect time for her to mark him—once the barbarian Coruscanti dogs leave—if she agrees to the union."

"Of course she'll agree!" Aemelie said. She looked speculative, almost dreamy. "Captain Onasi's rather handsome. Do you suppose—?"
"You'll embarrass her," Canderous broke in, gritting his teeth in exasperation. It was hopeless. Some things they would never understand.

A soft knock on the door saved him from further humiliation.

He'd been expecting it. Canderous got to his feet; shifting the weight of his son in his arms and feeling his joints creak with the familiar stiffness. "Enter."

His daughter Millifar opened the door. "Five minutes ago, Father, as you said. She took the larger droid with her, the one that keeps growling in that Wookiee's tongue." Her chin lifted, pride in having an assignment overcoming her dislike of him. "We're ready to move out, at your command. Kex, Shadrak and Abatar and I are going. I chose them because they're the best hunters. I hope that meets with your approval."

"The tracking devices?"

"She found and disabled the one in the droid; but she carries her lightsaber and she's wearing the holomask the Lin slave bought. So, we have two." She handed him a comm link with a map of Coruscant scrolling across the screen. A green light flashed on it. From his studies of the city's systems, it appeared to be in one of the underground tubes the people of this world used for transport.

"The Lin slave and the Wookiee left shortly before with the smaller droid," she added.

Canderous raised an eyebrow but kept his thoughts to himself.

*What game are you playing, Zaalbar? The computer has been useful to us, thus far—despite my concern about its loyalties. Zaalbar can keep the computer in line. It listens to him. The Sith boy doesn't look promising, but he's inconsequential.*

"Follow Revan, as I instructed. Use stealth, don't be seen—but if she tries to enter either address, hit her with the trank gun and get her out of there fast. The droid..." Canderous frowned. HK might prove to be a problem. Although they'd disabled his lethal capacity, the droid was good at improvisation.

"I'm not afraid of a droid, Father." Milli's lip lifted with the arrogant sneer of youth.

"Then you are foolish. That droid slaughtered all of Clan Lin, save one."

"Save two," Millifar corrected him. "Revan and Oerin Lin." She was much like her mother. Once they'd accepted Revan was Lin, they thought she was one of them. He didn't think they understood how much she did not—would not—understand.

"Go—" Canderous said. "Be swift and silent, and do not overstep my orders."

"The dosage you gave us for the gun is far too much for her body mass." Millifar's eyes narrowed and she pulled on her braids. "Did you want me to recalibrate it?"

"It's the right dosage. She's a Jedi, they're hard to drug." *As I learned on those weeks on the Hawk.* "Go—in this you bring honor to our Clan."

His daughter was a capable girl, and the pups weren't bad warriors. The door closed again, and he glanced back at his wives. Aemelie reached out her arms and he gave their son to her.

Gwenarius pulled out an old battered shipping container from under the bed and unsealed it. "Your
brother's armor, husband. I assume you'd like to wear it when you go after them?"

Even after all these years, she knows me so well.

"I can talk the droid down," Canderous muttered, ashamed for doubting his own blood's abilities. "Probably." He slipped out of the robes he wore and began to put on the armor. Gwenarius gave him a slow lazy smile, as her eyes scanned his body.

Still impressed, after all their years.

"That thing really slaughtered all of Lin?" Aemelie looked thoughtful. "Such a device would be an asset to Clan Ordo."

Canderous strapped on his swords and the battered old repeater that had always brought him luck. Considering, he selected a small ion blaster from the stack of weapons they'd brought from Manaan and strapped it to his thigh.

"I'll ask her in the morning," Gwenarius said again. She came to him, cool fingers tracing the line of his jaw. Her lips met his with a small spark.

He kissed her deeply, in the formal style of two tongues locked and a small bite on her lower lip.

She shivered. "Come back soon, husband."

"You have our permission to go," Aemelie added formally, watching them. Her chestnut hair was loose on her shoulders, like a soft cloud.

"Just try and manage to come back," Gwenarius said. "We've missed you, Canderous Ordo."

XXX

The conapt felt so empty with Dustil gone. Carth watched the sun fade through the clouds, an orange glow darkening to a red, vivid as her hair. The tumbler of Corellian brandy—a gift from the Senator—was half empty. He thought about poor, drunk Helena Shan and did not refill it.

He'd been so sure that Revan would come.

Restless, he paced.

I loved a smuggler named Polla Organa. She turned into the Dark Lord of the Sith. And she'll come for me.

In his dreams she always came. Sometimes looking like the Deralian he'd pulled from the escape pod on Taris; sometimes looking like the Sith Lord he'd saved on the Star Forge. Sometimes she looked like the woman he'd loved on Kashyyyk, growing thinner and paler and weaker, until it made his heart break.

Like Morgana in the hospital on Telos. And nothing I could do.

No, nothing like Morgana. I should have let her just die on Kashyyyk.

In his dreams she always came for him and said the same lying words. "I love, you. Someday when this is all over—"

He made himself try and think about Rew Ekkumi instead. She was clever, and their sons used to play together. She was beautiful, like Morgana had been beautiful. She was everything he could
want in a woman.

*And she told you to take a hike, Onasi. She said you're in love with someone else.*

*Because I am in love with someone else.*

Carth stared at the comm terminal. Would the doorman announce her? Or would she burst into the room? He fingered the hunk of permacrete in his pocket, hand resting lightly on the detonator key. It would be quick, it would have to be quick or she'd destroy him.

The commlink beeped and he nearly blew up the conapt.

Heart in his throat, he went to the terminal and sat down cautiously in front of it. General Jiya Sand's face appeared on the screen. The Seroccan's lined features were grave, as they always were, but his eyes were kind.

"Rew asked me to call you," he said. "Are you—?"

"I'm fine," Carth muttered.

"She said you might want to talk to another man about things." Jiya looked uncomfortable.

"I don't."

They both looked relieved.

"In any case, I wanted to let you know that the Jedi Council has requested that we meet with them. It's really you they want to see, but they seem to be going through several Fleet branches at once trying to get to you."

*The Jedi.* Carth clenched his fists.

"I'm not interested," he said, trying to keep his voice cool.

"Master Vrook gave a speech a few hours ago to the Selkath newsvids. It didn't get wideband broadcast—it won't get wideband broadcast—but—he mentioned you."

*Revan's uncle. Was he a traitor too?*

Carth kept his voice steady. "What did he say?"

"That you've been brainwashed as part of some conspiracy to discredit the actions of his heroic niece." General Jiya's eyes didn't blink. "I thought you should know."

Dull laughter bubbled in his throat. "He's calling her his niece now?" *He never admitted it publicly before.*

"Yes." As with Ekkumi, Carth felt a twinge of unease, as if the man was watching for his reaction a little too carefully. The twinge of paranoia was reflexive.

"She's *Darth Revan,*" he said angrily.

"I was there when we stormed her flagship, Captain. I know what she was."

"What she *is,* you mean."
"Yes. Of course." The General looked down at his desk, thumbing through some paperwork. "Ekkumi asked me to check on you, and seem fine… so… I don't want to keep you, Captain. You're coming to that Mandalorian thing with us?"

"I'll come, yes. Is—" a thought occurred to him. "Is Ekkumi okay?"

General Jiya Sand frowned. "She's fine, Carth."

Another hour passed, and somehow, he finished the tumbler of brandy, despite his earlier resolution; staring out the window at the Coruscanti moons and the kilometer-high spires that soared around him reaching towards the stars.

He'd changed out of the Fleet uniform and pulled on some battered, familiar clothes.

Somehow, that seemed like the right thing to do. Something tugged at his thoughts, memories he didn't want to recall.

XXX

The moss was soft on his bare back. She lay across his chest. She was snoring, gently, and her eyes moved under dark-lined lids. She was dreaming.

"Revan," he whispered in her ear, drinking in the smell of her skin. The towering trees soared above them; they'd been here on Kashyyyk for a week now.

"Not Revan," she mumbled sleepily, nestling her head in his chest. Her neck looked so pale and fragile above the weight of the Baragwin collar.

"Polla."

"Mmmm?" She rolled off him and curled against his side. The sunlight filtered down, bathing them in green and gold.

"Polla," he murmured again. "Freckles."

"Cool your jets and let me sleep, Flyboy." She sprawled out next to him on the moss, still not opening her eyes. His hand traced the line of her spine--

"I love you, Polla," Carth said. It was true. Even after everything, it was still true.

XXX

It is still true, Carth acknowledged. I fell in love with a woman named Polla Organa.

"And Polla Organa is real." He said the words out loud, as if they had just occurred to him, but in reality, it was a thought he'd had more than once this past week.

Before I face Revan. Before I kill her, I have to know.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Carth found himself in front of the comm terminal.

"FTL transmit," he said to it. "Deralian directory assistance."

The screen wavered, and resolved into a flat holostill, a yellow plain under a red sun. Farmland, simple and clean.
"I grew up on a kissra sheep farm on Derra, that's the biggest continent. We lived in the middle of it. It was boring, and I knew that someday I'd get off that rock. I always knew I'd have this grand destiny and meet a handsome pilot....."

"Ah, so you do think I'm handsome! Finally, you admit it!"

"And vain," she murmured, staring him down so frankly that he almost wanted to blush. "Let's get this serum back to the doctor. I hope you realize he's gonna pay us in gizka or something equally worthless." She rolled her eyes, but he'd already learned it was more for effect than actual sentiment. "The Exchange guy offered us a better deal, but we have to make these sacrifices for the bloody fracking Republic."

"Hey, you signed up to this mission, sister!"

Polla made a face. "I had a head injury, it shouldn't count. It was under duress or something!"

XXX

Try as he did, he couldn't remember the name of the town. Maybe she'd never told him.

Welcome to the Deralian Directory, Sentient. Please type in your request.

Carth's hand shook. Polla Organa, Derran continent.

A stream of names filled the screen. He scrolled down through them, looking for something that would give him a clue.

Polla Organa, Jinnistown, Derra; Polla Organa, Keene, Derra; Polla Organa, Keene, Derra; Polla Organa, Listi Lowen, Derra; Polla Organa, Listi Mall Derra; Polla Organa....

The total at the bottom of the search counted 3,865 results. Popular name. One of the founders of the original Outlier colony had been named Polla. She'd told him that once.

Mita Organa

There were 402 results.

This is ridiculous, what would you say to her? She probably isn't even there. Why would Polla still be on Deralia? You're chasing a woman who never existed. A woman you've never met.

What would you even say?

But there was that letter. Carth got up suddenly and rummaged through the stack of fan mail. He found it crumpled near the bottom and unfolded it.

Beya Organa, on Manaan.

"FTL Manaan. Commlink request, Visual transmit."

"Greetings Sentient," a mechanized voice said in Basic.

"Visual request, commlink: Beya Organa."

The screen resolved to an orange-gilled Selkath. "That sentient is in custody, and not available
without clearance," the Selkath said. Its translator repeated the words in Basic.

"This is Captain Carth Onasi," His jaw clenched. This was insanity. "Captain Carth Onasi."

Just once, let my so-called fame be good for something. Stars, they banned me from the planet once, they must have my voiceprint on file.

There was a long pause, while the Selkath tapped things in the console in front of it and looked distressed.

"You have clearance, sentient. Please realize that this call is being monitored. The Deralian citizen Beya Organa is currently imprisoned awaiting trial for murder."

For killing Sith—how can that be a crime? They let us off with a slap on the wrist. And the Sith kill each other all the time. Something stinks about that Manaan trial. Something isn't right.

I don't care. I just want to know… know if she's real.

The image resolved into a room, a blue forcefield in the background. The terminal was located in one corner of it, and the woman who appeared in the foreground had her black hair in a Deralian topknot and golden skin. Her eyes were a dark blue that was almost black, and her face was heart-shaped but hard. A soldier's face, with an expression he knew only too well. He saw it in the mirror every morning. Flat and hopeless.

"Captain Carth Onasi?" The edge of her lip curled, incredulous. Off-screen, someone laughed harshly, on the edge of hysteria. Beya's accent was more pronounced than Polla's had ever been. Real Deralian, as flat as farmland. "And so, we meet again. What d'you want?"

She was, Carth realized, drunker than he was.

"You're Beya Organa," he said stupidly. "I don't think we've ever met—"

"I know you don't." She winked, the closed eye twitching just a little too long for comfort. "But I know you! You're Captain Carth Onasi. What d'you want? Is this about our mutual friend? Too much to hope you'd be takin' an interest in our case… but did she ask you--" she glanced at someone offscreen and made a gesture, too fast for him to follow. "Tho, guess she doesn't remember, either."

"Your aunt—she asked me to look into it," Carth hesitated. He hadn't been thinking helping her, but how could he not? What could he do?

Beya’s eyes narrowed. "My aunt?"

"Mita." Auntie Mita.

"Mita?" She blinked and then laughed again. "Oh. She's a cousin, but… figures. She's been writing to everyone. Da's pretty embarrassed, so I hear. Still, it's funny… the way things work out." She chuckled, but her eyes were hard as stone. "So… how is old Revvie doin'?"

"Revvie?" It was so unexpected that Carth was confused.

Beya made a face. "Your girlfriend? Stang, your face!"

"Revvie," he repeated. "I-I don’t—call her that--"

She laughed. "Someone sure did a number on you." She shook her head back and forth, wagging a
finger at the cam. “Wasn’t me! Not this time! They mindwipe you too?”

Off-screen someone murmured something in a low voice, in a language he didn't understand. Beya turned her head away and muttered back.

"You know Revan?" he asked stupidly.

Of course, she would. She was Sith. All of them, fallen Jedi that Yuthura redeemed if you believe net gossip—or Sith spies if you believe the newsvids.

Beya smiled a hard smile. “Know her? Do I know her? Our Dark Lord of the Sith? The redeemed one? The one who gets off star-bloody free while the rest of us rot with the fish?"

"I didn't call about Revan." Carth suddenly realized how this was going to sound. I just want to know if the woman I fell in love with is real.

He took a deep breath. "I wanted to ask you about Polla. Polla Organa."

Beya Organa snorted inelegantly and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Polla Organa," Carth repeated. "She-she's real, isn't she?"

"I have six cousins named Polla Organa," Beya said. "But I think I know the one you mean. Yeah, she's real. Da says she's real pissed too. Oh, and she just had a baby. It's a boy." She snorted again and rolled her eyes. "You want to send her a present or something, Captain?"

"I don’t—is she...." Carth's voice trailed off. He wasn't sure what he wanted to ask.

Is she happy? Is she well? Married?

Beya frowned at him. "Revan and I were Padawans together. Revan and Malak and I were Padawans together. On Dantooine and Coruscant. I left the Order for a few years, went back home—but when my friends called for aid against the Mandalorian threat, I came back. I think I've met my cousin Polla about five times in my life. I wouldn't even remember her if I hadn't heard about what happened. On the other hand, Revan and I trained together. Fought together. In the war. Do you remember the war, Captain?"

"Both of them," Carth muttered.

"From my perspective it was one long war—you want an apology for the part of it where we fought on different sides? Would that help?" Her voice was mocking.

Carth felt like a fool. "Look, sister—maybe this was a mistake."

"Mistake?" Beya’s voice cracked. "You could help us, Carth Onasi. Force, you should help us. Make her help us. If it wasn't for her, we'd be...."

"You'd be dead, Beya," said a smooth even voice from off-screen. A familiar voice. The last time he'd heard it, he'd been—no, don't think of Revan in your arms, don't think of the hopes you had. "You would be dead by now if it wasn't for her. And for me."

Beya Organa stepped back, and then Yuthura Ban regarded Carth, smooth and calm, her violet eyes hard as stones. Only her head tails betrayed her discomfiture, curled tightly around her neck.

She pushed the Deralian out of the way and sat down at the console. "So," the Twi’lek said, that expression betraying nothing. "How are you feeling?"
"I'm fine," Carth said.

Yuthura frowned at him. "You've looked better. I didn't expect you to call."

_I didn't call you; I only wanted to know about Polla._ But he couldn't say that, he couldn't just say that.

"How are you?" he asked. It was something to say, meaningless. _On trial for your life? In jail on Manaan? How did things go after you abandoned my son in the Coruscanti underground? You gave interviews and joined the Jedi. Did you save these Sith or join them?_ 

The Twi'lek gave him a grim smile. "Holding up. It's not always easy." She took a deep breath. "We should talk...."

XXX

"[Query: Master, are we going home?]

["We're just going for a walk, HK."] _Or rather a ride._ The tube was crowded, and she was smashed against the clumsy silver plates they'd welded over HK's copper chassis. Both of them were sandwiched between two Bithan street musicians and a Duros dressed in a well-cut suit that looked out of place in this part of the tube.

There was a strange sense of familiarity to the scene, although Revan was hard-pressed to imagine the woman she'd been ever riding public transports.

They were speaking Rakatan. It was the only language she could think of that no one else would understand.

["Tactical Analysis: A well-placed surgical strike into the heart of the D'Reev compound could win us the primary target. Suggestion: Our odds would be better if you'd let me bring more armaments, or some of those Mandalorians. They owe you loyalty and they are efficient fighters, for meatbags."]

_No. That's exactly what he'd expect. We'd have the entire planet gunning for us. Malachor wouldn't be safe. I can't risk going anywhere near there. Not yet. But I want to see—I need to see him._

The window behind them was black and blank and in it, Revan could see her reflection. Straight yellow hair; garish and artificial; wide blue eyes; and a pouting pink mouth. The lips matched the tight fuchsia jumpsuit; which left so little to the imagination that she'd had to stuff her lightsaber in the matching pink bag, emblazoned with the logo of some fashionable designer. She'd strapped two blasters on her hips, mostly for sentiment.

After more than a year of trying to be the marksman that Polla Organa was in her memories, Revan had finally given up trying to shoot anything.

_I used to think it was the head injury that made me not be able to hit a black trawler in a blizzard in front of a thresher door... but it's not._

_I look ridiculous. I look like the ideal human woman, according to a fourteen-year old Twi'lek girl's taste._

Mission had sent Mekel on shopping expeditions for all of them.
Revan couldn’t stop thinking about what Zaalbar had said to her.

“Your tree is not a graft of mine.” He told me it was none of my business. That what they had to do was between them and Dustil. Zaalbar said I had to respect that because his hand killed her—not mine.

For a Wookiee it’s that simple.

They said that Dustil wants me dead.

I should go after them. How can I leave them to deal with Dustil alone? But I don’t even know where they went.

But Mekel said that Malak spoke to him—Revan closed her eyes. Going down this road was like falling off a cliff into hyperspace.

Malak’s not real. He’s just my subconscious, telling me truths that I was afraid to face. Maybe it’s the same for Mekel—

["Master? If we are going to the Chancellor's District we need to transfer here."]

["Clear us a path—without shooting or disabling anyone, HK."]

Her droid clanked in disappointment, but complied, pushing through the crowded train with his repulsors. They transferred to the crosstown tube and got off a few stops later at Chancellor Station.

There was a maildrop next to the tramway.

Revan reached inside her purse and pulled out the package she’d prepared. The hastily scrawled address on it made her pause again. The address had been easy to find from the nets. It wasn’t one of the better areas of the planet, some part of her remembered. The name on the front made her bite her lip again, and made her hands shake.

She dropped the package inside the slot, and it fell with a heavy thunk.

That was stupid, the rational part of her mind said.

They’ll know I’m here anyways, she answered it. I owe her that much.

You think she’d have wanted that?

I don’t care. It was the right thing to do.

The back of her neck pricked, whether from unease or the odd familiarity of being in a place she knew but couldn't remember. The walls were tiled in pastel mosaics and they rode the tramway up to groundsibe. The air here smelled sweet, piped in with fragrances. Many of the shops were still open, and richly-dressed sentients milled around. Hovering sublims whispered.

A small discrete billboard in the window of a bank building flashed scenes of Republic warships: Invest in Kuat shipyards and rebuild the Republic. Defeat the Sith threat.

She stopped and stared at the image. It dissolved into a picture of an orbital shipyard; turning slowly above a brown world slashed with white.

XXX
Kuat was important. The main shipyards for the Republic Fleet. If we could hold Kuat, we'd have a position in the Core. We could strike Byss and then Alderaan. The way to Coruscant would be clear.

But my Apprentice disobeyed me.

I should never have left him alone, should never have trusted him with such an important task. We only had one chance to catch them by surprise and he wasted it on an outer-rim backwater, spun me a fable about tests of loyalty.

Once alerted, we had no chance of reaching the Core without fighting our way in.

XXX

But I did it for you, Red. Something brushed against her cheek, like a hand caressing her face.

Revan froze. Her purse hit the ground with a clank and she knelt, reaching for it with shaking hands.

You're not here, Malak. You're just in my head.

"Master?"

"Citizen, are you ill?" A CorSec civilian guard touched her arm tentatively. Automatically, Revan quelled the reflex to strike the woman down.

"I'm fine, Lieutenant. At ease," She straightened up, her hand clenched around the 'saber's hilt through the fabric. The words came out before she thought about them, not really the right thing for a Coruscanti pedestrian to say at all; but the girl—she was barely more than a girl—complied, reacting automatically to the authority in Revan's voice.

"Come on, Cally, she's probably just tipsy. There's a fine for public intoxication, citizen, please don't loiter in this sector." The green-skinned Twi'lek looked bored, barely glancing at the droid behind her.

"Thanks, I'm okay." The world tilted oddly, everything seemed too bright under the streetlights, lit by a strange glow.

Force. Ripples in a pond. Sink to the bottom and just be a stone.

Revan started to walk away, aware that the two guards were trailing her, whispering to themselves. A prickle on the back of her neck, and she realized they weren't the only ones following her.

["HK?"]

["Observation: Four humanids wearing stealth generators. The modulation of the frequencies is Mandalorian. Extrapolation: as we discussed, Canderous did not let you venture out unaccompanied. Probable Analysis: They are your escort and are of non-hostile intent. Regrettable. Insubordination among the meatbags of that culture is far too common. I advise you to make an example of one, to show the others it will not be tolerated."]

["An order: you are not to harm them. Under any circumstances."] Canderous had me followed. I thought he would, and I guess I can't blame him. There's more at stake here than just me.

["Master, I could be wrong. There is a point 0987 percent chance that they may be assassins. I
advise you to allow me to eliminate that potential threat. Also, those CorSec guards are still behind us. Surely, you are not going to tiresomely plead for their lives as well?

["I don't plead, I tell,"] Revan snapped. ["You forget yourself HK. I've disabled your lethal capacity."]

If they'd gone the other direction they would have passed the Jedi Temple, and beyond that the Galactic Senate. But this road looped into a residential district, full of expensive high-rises and exclusive shops.

["Compliance: Yes, Master. In addition to my extensive assassination programs, I also have been most fortunately programmed as a protocol droid. Running subroutine: Tour Guide."] Only HK could make those words drip with sarcasm. In Rakatan.

["To your right is a renowned Rylothian dressmaker. When I was owned by Senator Thomasi, he had me eliminate one of his opponents in that store. The rival senator was in the dressing room, attempting to squeeze her bulk into an eridu evening gown three sizes too small. I used a small and extremely cunning poison grenade to knock her out, and then garroted her with the gown's scarf. This action was observed by the shop's staff and I was forced to eliminate them as well. But it does appear that the Rylothian has hired new staff since then. Would you like to go shopping?"

["No, not really."]

["On your left is a grocery frequented by several senators' kitchen staffs. On yet another assignment for the Senator, I injected a slow-acting neurotoxin into several stuffed pomatos that had been set on reserve for a rival's dinner party. I managed to eliminate not only the primary target and his immediate family; but also, the ambassador to Alderaan and a member of the Jedi Council who had been invited at the last minute. The neurotoxin acts directly on the cerebellum of most sentient races. A slow and painful death. Although I did not get to witness it, I have imagined it many times."]

["You know, for an assassin droid, HK, you're not very subtle."]

["Statement: You did not program me to be subtle, Lord Revan."]

Even in Rakatan, the word 'Revan' was still 'Revan'. It made her shiver. A passing Durosian couple gave her an odd glance but continued on. She looked behind them nervously. The CorSec guards were now walking in the other direction, much to her relief.

["Expression of Appreciation: Thank you for bringing me, Master. It pleases me no end to revisit a place that holds such fond memories. The glittering lights of Coruscant are just as I remembered."]

["Do you remember anything from when you lived here with me?"]

100 Thanos 3," he'd said. "Master, are we going home?"

["Regrettably those memories were erased. Still, the destination is programmed as 'home' in my central core."]

"Is it in mine?" She mumbled the words to herself, but HK answered her anyway.

["Clarification: Was that a question, Lord Revan, or are you having another emotional disturbance? Do you think you might become violent?"] Only HK could make that question sound so hopeful.

The strolled past a sidewalk café where three young Jedi dressed in Padawan beige were sipping
caff. Revan felt their clumsy Force presences wash over her like waves on the sand.

They did not react. Good, I'm in control. But one of them whistled appreciatively as she walked by, and underneath the holomask, Revan blushed, suddenly aware again how tight the coverall she was wearing really was.

_I didn't think Jedi were allowed to ogle. Bastila said—_

_Jedi are sent just like anyone, Red. In the old days, they loved and married and had children and lived among their people, just like everyone else. No one ever told Nomi and Ulic not to fall in love, or go to war._

Almost a voice, soft in her ear.

_It's not real. He's not here, my mind plays tricks—_

XXX

_The tables blurred, and a girl in Padawan beige kissed a boy dressed in the same. His hands tangled in the red braids of her hair, loosening them._

_Do you want the whole planet to find out about us?" the girl whispered, coming up for air._

_I want the whole galaxy to know how much I love you," he said. His eyes were warm and gray._

_"Keep carrying on like this and the whole galaxy will know." Their companion, a golden-skinned girl with black hair in a Deralian topknot wore a Knight's robes. She rolled her eyes._

_"Frack the galaxy," Malak chuckled. "We leave for Malachor tomorrow with Vrook and we'll be cooped up on a ship for weeks."_

_"We'll have to find some way of entertaining ourselves," the red-haired girl laughed, raising her eyebrow. She'd practiced for ages in the mirror to do it._

_"I'm going to find Davad and 'Tina," the Deralian said, getting up from the table. "If I don't see you before you leave, good luck and may the Force guide you."

_"May the Force keep us from getting sand in places there should be no sand," Revan wrapped her arms around Malak's shoulders. "From what I've read about Mandalore, that will be the real test of our Knighthood."

XXX

"Master? This seems an inadvisable place to stop."

"Yeah—yes." Revan made her feet move. The Padawans behind them were talking and laughing, different Padawans, none of them red-haired or Deralian—or—or Malak.

_Malak._

_Listen to me, Red. This is important. Why won't you listen to me?"

"Because you're not real," she muttered out loud.

["Master?"]
"Because you're dead. Because I killed you. Because I—"

The building was slim and silver and white. New construction, luxury conapts. There'd been a feature for *Coruscanti Style* on Captain Carth Onasi's new quarters. Of course they didn't publish the address, but it had been easy to extrapolate with a map of the sector.

And—D'Reev owned the building. It seemed fairly obvious this was where Carth would be.

She stopped in front of it and stared. *I don't know the floor. And this is a trap. This is D'Reev's trap. I had to see but I know. This is a trap.*

["Observation: My sensors detect several hidden cameras equipped with retinal and brain scanning devices. If you move another meter forward you will trigger them. In addition, ports on the side of the doorway may contain hidden sentry droids, or explosives. The doorman inside is Echani by his stance, and I am reading several life-signs behind him, concealed by that tinted ferraglass partition."]

["We expected this."] Revan took a few steps back, and felt the prickles at the back of her neck again, as her hidden escort followed her lead. ["They'll let us in, but we'll never come out."]

["Proud Approval: Your analysis of the situation is as always, commendable for a meatbag. However, I am sure we could overcome these obstacles, although practically it would be better if we had more weapons. Perhaps the Mandalorians that are stalking us have some we could borrow?"]

"A terminal," she muttered, in Basic. "Maybe I can call him or—"

["Imprudent, Master."]

["I'm not an idiot, I wouldn't tell him I was me. If there was some way I could lure him outside, talk to him—if I could only talk to him. See him...."]

"Are you a fangirl too?" The voice behind her was young and spoke Basic. Revan whirled around to see a pair of tweener girls, wearing matching lavender outfits cut similarly to her own. A modified Republic uniform, she realized, seeing it on someone else.

"You're out late," one of them said. "Usually he stays inside after nineteen hundred, but sometimes he goes for walks. He always looks so sad." She sighed. Her hair was dyed bright red, and she'd lined her eyes with so much liner that they looked bruised.

"Leesa has five autoprints already, I just want one," her companion said. Her hair was an artificial black and pulled up in an imitation of a topknot. She wore a red visor over her face.

*I'm dressed like them. Maybe this isn't just bad Twi'lek taste after all. Maybe it's fashion.*

"Have you seen his son? Dustil's totally dreamy," the redhead giggled.

"This is the right building, then. Do you… know the floor?" Revan asked, trying to young and casual.

"Seventy-three, but security won't let you anywhere near. Trust me, we've tried everything. Yesterday we pretended to be delivering flowers. And the day before that, Aramis tried to get her father to let us come to the Telos talks, so we could see him."

"Yeah, well, Papa said no," the redhead sulked.
"Haven't seen you around before, you from the Uni? You look kinda older." The girl laughed nervously. "Not like in a bad way. Just most of us fangirls are still Amas."

"Um, yes. The Uni." Revan tried to think of what that could be.

*The University of Coruscant. Damnit, Red. Listen to me, you have to listen to me!*

Angrily she pushed back with the Force. "You're dead," she whispered.

"Excuse me?"

Somewhere a child was crying. Not very far away.

*What are you planning, Red?*

"Malak! Shut up!"

"Uh… you like Malak, too?" The black-haired girl made a face. "Wow. Usually, it's like, Carth or Malak. Although my mom thinks Canderous… but you know, she's old and stuff. Malak's kind of creepy, but have you seen the Coruscanti Underground Version? My younger sister thinks Malak's cool, but she's only eight and she's just an Eg. Besides her best friend's—well, uh… you know." She frowned. "I mean… you probably don’t. It is kind of a huge secret."

The red-haired girl poked her friend hard.

Revan tried to collect her scattered thoughts and translate them, apply something that they were saying to her present situation. *Eg, what's an Eg?*

*Eglatine. I was one. Malachor is one.*

"Malachor," Revan whispered.

The black-haired girl paled beneath her tan. "You shouldn't say stuff like that out loud, I mean we don't even say stuff like that. Who are you?"

She pulled the Force back inside herself and tried to look perfectly harmless. "No one." *Just a woman who saved the galaxy losing my mind."

"Hey!" The redhead pulled her friend's arm and pointed. "Is that him?"

A man wearing a battered orange jacket and a heavy visor over his face stood in the building lobby arguing with the attendant. His hair was cut short, brutally short to her eyes. His broad shoulders were hunched, and his pants hung slightly loose as if he'd lost weight since they were fitted.

"Don't be silly, he always wears his Fleet uniform. That's some kind of janitor or something."

"But the jacket?"

*Everybody* has jackets like that now, and that's so six-months ago Star Forge. No, that's not him."

There was a rip in the sleeve of the leather that had been patched with a careful cross-stitch of yellow thread. A rip from a vibroblade back on Taris. One of the Vulkars. The seam was coming undone a little.

XXX
"You look sort of cute, sewing up my clothes. I wouldn't have thought you had it in you."

"Don't expect me to make a habit of it, flyboy. I just don't want the Sith to pick you up as a transient."

Revan stood and watched him. He was armed, she noted, shiny and unfamiliar blasters at his side. They looked expensive and dangerous.

Her hands brushed the pair she wore on her hips. The ones he'd left behind.

Whatever the guard said didn't please him. Carth came out of the building, walking in their direction. The visor hid almost everything but his mouth. It was white-lipped, and every line of his body was tense. He looked older. He looked tired.

"I think it's him."

"It's not him, he looks totally better than that!"

He walked past, nodding politely. "No autoprints today, girls."

Revan closed her eyes and then opened them again. This was madness. She watched numbly as the red-haired girl ran up to him to ask for an autoprint anyway, watched him flinch and shake his head and walk away fast. He was in a hurry; she could see it in his long strides, the tension in every part of his body. He was halfway down the block before she let herself whisper his name.

"Carth."

The black-haired girl was still standing beside her. "You've got it bad! Wow. I mean, he's cute and everything, but you're like, shaking."

Revan tried to give her a noncommittal smile. "Am I?" She motioned to the droid and they began to follow.

["Happy Affirmation: Master, I am so pleased you brought me with you to stalk your target. The pilot deserves punishments for his betrayal. I hope you will let me assist you."]

["No punishments, HK,"] she said quietly.

There was a light mist in the air that smelled sweet, like night-blooming flowers, piped in from the atmospheric generators overhead. The street gleamed in the overheads, set with crushed crystal that caught reflections and sparkled.

"His strong arms caught her from behind and his lips nuzzled her neck. "We should go back to the party; my father will wonder where we've wandered off to."

"All right, Mal—take me home." The white hem of her gown swished against her bare legs, and his hand enfolded her arm. She was a little tipsy from the champa, and she leaned against him. This was nothing like being a Jedi—and a part of her—a part of her loved it.

Revan. Listen to me.
No. You're not real. Just my subconscious trying to make sense of this--

Carth was halfway down the block. Revan wondered what he'd see, if he turned around. She quickened her step. It was important to keep him in her sights. She knew where he was going.

He's going to see my father. Dustil was supposed to come for dinner and he didn't arrive. The old man's on alert. You shouldn't do this, it's not safe.

XXX

"Why did you bomb Telos, Malak?" Her girl's voice giggled the words, made them a joke, but it seemed to Revan that she'd asked the question in an entirely different tone, once. "Do you know how much you cost me? The Sith almost fell apart because of my Apprentice's clumsy mistake. Do you know how much it cost me to let you live? They were like a pack of drajak at my heels, snapping, watching for me to fall."

His lips nuzzled her ear. They felt cold, like the steel plate of his jaw. "I wanted things to fall apart."

"It's too late. The holomask felt like cold metal against her lips, amplifying her breathing to a harsh hissing sound in her ears, or was that the thrum of her saber? She gripped the hilt harder, frowning at the pink fabric that concealed it.

That isn't right.

XXX

Talk to me, Red. What are you planning?

Carth was just ahead of them, disappearing into a towering building of blue and gold metal and glass. The guards stationed at the entrance nodded at him as if he was expected.

["Statement: Master, the defenses ahead of us are more fortified than they appear. There is a stasis field generator enabled at the front desk, and retinal scanning devices within twenty paces of our current location. I would advise you to begin aggressive maneuvers now. The complex of Thanos 3 is designed like the hulls of several starships, built on top of each other so that each compartment can be self-contained. During our assault, at any time our enemies will have the capacity to seal off the levels above and below. We are not presently equipped with any tools to breech these hulls."]

I could use the Force.

Revan felt it ripple around them, like a slow, still lake.

XXX

He opened the balcony doors and walked outside, the forcefield was a faint silver gleam to keep him from falling off and going splat. Downbelow everyone was little, like tiny bugs. His eyes were sore from crying so much, but at least Grandfather was leaving him alone now, wondering where Dustil got to. He leaned against the forcefield. It made his fingers tingle, and he looked down.

Her eyes were looking up, under a mask. He waved.

The feel of him in her arms. Solid, secure, safe. His thoughts weren't words, just emotions, so much hope in them she could die from it.
An armored hand grabbed her wrist and Revan screamed.

"Miss, are you all right?" From her other side, two CorSec guards approached, hands on their blasters.

Revan jerked her head, staring at the suit of Mandalorian battle armor that had appeared beside her out of nowhere. HK seemed completely unruffled. "I-I'm fine," she whispered.

The suit of battle armor patted her arm awkwardly, trying to gentle a nervous hessi with a quarter ton of durasteel. "Time to go," Canderous' voice said.

"I-I'm fine," Revan repeated. "My… escort startled me, is all."

"Apologies, Citizen, but there's no loitering here." The Trandoshan guard frowned his brow ridge at them, skin flushing a dubious brown. "And I'm afraid I will need to see some idchips. Security in this sector is very high at the moment."

His companion was eyeing the Mandalorian, with suspicion that could only too easily turn into something else. Revan felt the prickle of movement behind them, as if her unseen escort was moving into some kind of formation.

"You don't need to see our idchips." She kept the words soft, and felt them almost bounce back—resistant, they've been trained—but Revan pushed harder—hard as she could—and their minds bent.

She tried not to feel the dull thrill of satisfaction at that.

"We don't need to see your idchips," the Trandoshan nodded, unhappily. His human companion was frowning.

Good, because we have none. Her hands moved nervously on her absurd pink purse.

"Have a nice evening," Canderous said gruffly to the guards and pulled her away.

XXX

No words, but an emotion like hope, it hurt so much she wanted to scream.

The small hand slipped away from hers, and she was crying under her mask. The lie felt thick in her throat.

We can never come back, not after what we've done.

The old man laughed. "Did you think to disappoint me, my son?"

Her own voice, cold as stars. "We'll see you in ashes, Malachi."

XXX

A block away was a parking garage, it's squat structure at odds with the architecture around it. They entered the gates and behind them, stealth fields dissolved.

"You didn't have to follow us, Father." Millifar's voice sounded disgusted. She and the three boys with her were all clad in nondescript black coveralls, and armed with rifles.
Canderous turned around. His voice sounded amused. "You did well."

The girl snorted. "We didn’t need you!"

"A tracking device," Revan made her voice cold. It brought her back to herself. She crossed her arms and tried to make the gesture look authoritative, instead of like a shiver. "Where'd you put it?"

Canderous chuckled. "We're not going to tell you."

"I wasn't going to do anything stupid." Probably.

"The computer said the odds were twenty-two-to-one that you might," his tone was so light she couldn't tell if he was joking or not. “Thought you needed the chance to… see this place. But that doesn't mean we'd let you throw your life away."

"I know it's a trap, I just wanted to see."

"And you saw." Canderous patted her arm again, gesture made even clumsier by the full body armor. They'd reached a small, nondescript speeder. It was a tight fit, but they all clambered in. Millifar took the controls and eased the vehicle down the ramp way. A mechanized machine at the docking bay scanned the seal on the windshield and beeped. The garage doors opened, and they spun into the Coruscanti night.

"There's an irony in this," Revan said quietly, sandwiched between Canderous and his daughter. The night wind rippled through her hair, it was cool on her face. In the back seat the boys stirred restlessly, whispering. HK sat, implacable and sulking in their midst.

No one answered her. Irony was not a Mandalorian trait.

"Your people destroyed everything that I could have been." She kept her voice small, speaking almost to herself, let the words be lost on the wind, but Canderous heard them anyways.

He laughed. "I could say the same about you, Revan. And so could your pilot. But what do you want to do about that now?"

XXX
"Hey there, Mekelkins. Who's your big hairy friend?" Katti Bais purred at him, dangling from the gilded cage hanging over the round doorway. Her tail curled through the bars of the cage, flicking his face like a hologram kiss.

The lurid pink holosign tilted overhead, painting her striped fur in vivid relief; bathing them all in flashing neon lights. It lit the words, one after the other: **Mom's. Brothel. Open.**

Mekel knew it was Katti because she always flirted with him; but the Cathar holosuit covered her from head to toe. Those weren't cheap. Moms had come up in the world. Of course, real Cathars didn't have tails, but never let it be said that Moms lacked imagination.

[[Don't take this the wrong way, Mekel Jin, but your mother's brothel gives me the creeps.]]

Mekel sighed. Mission sounded oddly subdued. Zaalbar growled something at them, but it must not have been important, because Mission didn't bother to respond or translate. The growl sounded like disgust.

*It may be gross, but it's the only place I have an edge over Dustil. I hope.*

"We're expecting someone in about an hour, Katti. You remember my friend—Dusty?"

"Heh. You mean Dustil Onasi?" Katti winked. "I saw the newsvid interview with his father. You granslug, you never told me your little friend Dusty was the savior of the galaxy's son! He looks just like Carth Onasi too." She sighed, dreamy. Her eyes were glassy with glitterstim and she kept talking, really fast. "There's a picture of them in the *Subterranean Star* eating at *Madoo's* with some Fleet brass. Dustil's all in black and looking so broody. He looks good in person too, cleaned up r-real nice." Katta gave him a once over, taking in the bandaged hand, swollen lip, and gray coverall that he wore underneath the long banthahide jacket. "Unlike *some* people."

*Great. Dustil's rich, famous and better-looking than me. Not to mention stronger in the Force.*

The jealousy wasn’t new.

"Looks good in person?" Mission interrupted. Her lights flashed red. "Is Dustil here already?"

Katti blinked at the T3. "It's a talking droid!" Some vague idea seemed to percolate behind her glazed yellow eyes. "Is that a T3? Hey Mekk! Why're you meeting Carth Onasi's son with a Wookiee and a T3?"

"I'm not a T3," Mission said, coolly. "You must be mistaken, Cathar."

Katti giggled. "I'm not a Cathar, silly!" She turned back to Mekel, dangling her legs down through the slats of the cage and kicking her feet. Her shoes were high-heeled and red.

“Katti?” Mekel cleared his throat, reminding her he was here. “We need to know—did Dustil—did he get here first?”
"Yeah, he's here. Your moms gave him the Starbuckler's suite. Didn't want any company though."
She blinked slowly, as if another idea had occurred to her. "Oh. Is that why you brought the
Wookiee?"

Zaalbar groaned. It sounded like quiet outrage.

Mekel didn’t dignify. Growing up here, you learned. "Later, Katti, have fun. Good tricks." He
pushed open the swinging doors and walked inside. If they were lucky, they could get past the
bouncers and up to the suite before Moms asked him for the credits.

The Gamorrean goons waved them all through the first level of meat’n’greet; but then their luck
ran out.

"Well, well, well. Look what came in with the tide."

"Moms. Hi." Mekel dug into his pocket, fishing for the credits Zaalbar had given him to give her;
trying to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Deeka Jin had been a common street treat when he left for Korriban, but she'd come up in the
world since—and her tastes with her. Her once-thin frame was padded sleek, and she wore a silver
mesh dress that highlighted more than it concealed.

Mekel winced and dutifully kissed her rouged cheek, pressing the credits into her outstretched
hand. She had feathers in her black hair and her eyes were sharp and alert.

"So, Dusty's already here?" he began cautiously.

"So, Dusty's already here?" she mimicked, echoing the patrician tones he'd taught himself when he
was finally given the means to climb out of this hell. "'Dusty' is Dustil Onasi! Why didn't you tell
me that whelp was worth something when the two of you came trawling in here looking like
schuttas from the sewers?" Her eyes narrowed as she took in his companions, and her plucked and
artificially green eyebrows rose. "Where'd you find the Wookiee, Mekelkins?"

"Just hired muscle." Mekel tried to keep his voice bland. She snorted at him, not fooled for a
second. Her eyes passed over Mission's chassis as well. Moms fingered her chin thoughtfully.

"Come up in the world, have we?" He could see the gears turning like credit chips behind her flat
black eyes. "You might consider sharing some of it with your old Moms. The Jedi have been
around twice, looking for you. It breaks my heart to tell them they have the wrong Moms, and that
I have no son at all."

"Has anyone else looked for me?" His bandaged hand ached.

"Who were you expecting?" She gave him her mercenary smile, and her gold tooth glittered.

"CorSec."

"No." Moms frowned. "Should they be?"

[[That was dumb, Mekel Jin. Your mother seems like the type to turn us in.]]

No. She wouldn't want trouble with CorSec either. He couldn't come out and say it though, not
even as a whisper.

"It's fine," he said out loud. "Look, we'll be going upstairs now, I'll see you, Moms—after, okay?"
Her attention appeared to be distracted by the two Fleet uniforms that had pushed in behind him, but Mekel wasn't fooled. She really hadn't changed much since the old days when she'd worked curbside and he'd waited for her on Beggar's Row. He hoped she wouldn't offer him a job working here again.

"Make sure to stop by the office before you leave, honeygizka. There are some things we have to talk about."

I'm sure there are. But facing down Moms and her Exchange goons will be cake compared to raging Telos angst boy.

"Let me go in first," Mekel whispered to Blue and Zaalbar as they climbed the stairs to the Starbuckler's suite. "He's going to try something, and I can stop it."

The Wookiee groaned something like a protest.

Mission growled back at him. [Yeah okay, but don't hurt him, Mekel Jin.]

"Right," Mekel said. Dustil's mind brushed against his, like a knotted spring of rage and hate and power. I'll try not to hurt him. And I'll try not to die too.

XXX

Dustil sat on the slick, synthhide couch, as that seemed preferable to sitting on the large, star-shaped bed. The suite was small and dingy, and he'd dimmed the lights, casting all of it in shadow. He'd gotten here two hours early and he'd fixed his eyes on the door ever since. His good hand kept twitching on the blaster he carried, and he wished he had his 'saber. His left hand still hurt, a persistent throb in tempo with his pulse and his anger.

When he let his mind drift he could catch glimpses of Mekel; but Dustil didn't push too hard. This would be easier if Mekel was off-guard when he came in.

Finally, he heard footsteps and the clack of something metal coming up the stairs. Mekel's mind poked at his tentatively, like testing a minefield.

Are you going to play nice, Telos? Or will this be a scene, like with the Echani sworddancer?

"I'll play nice," Dustil hissed out loud.

The door opened, and a yellow beam of light ignited, bisected by Mekel's hands. It lit his face from below, casting his features into shifting shadows. Dustil watched his stance carefully. Mekel was a better fighter than he was, but he looked uncertain with the double blade.

"Nice 'saber," Dustil said, winding his thoughts for a strike. The Force sang around him, like a rush of power. Sweeter than a kiss.

"It was Bastila Shan's," Mekel answered. Behind him, still hidden by the door something growled. Something else beeped.

That thing's here with him. The droid.

Dustil coiled his mind like a spring and pushed.

Mekel staggered a little, but kept moving into the room.

Dustil called the lightning and the air built like a slow, sweet charge. Mekel bared his teeth, like a
challenge. Dustil raised his hand and the blue flame crackled. He sent it into the other boy's body, watched him jerk and twitch; until the 'saber fell from Mekel's nerveless hands onto the floor, hissing and burning the dingy carpet. Dustil felt the other boy's pulse in his chest stagger, he smelled something like singed hair.

The walls between their minds began to crumble.

"It's okay, Blue," Mekel whispered. "I'm fine."

And then the loop fed back into Dustil's own body. It hurt—it hurt more than anything he'd ever felt before, more than any Korriban punishment; because it wasn't just his own pain, it was Mekel's too.

Enraged, Dustil pushed harder. The world tilted into a red haze. He'd fallen on the floor somehow, gasping and twitching just like Mekel. There were no thoughts, only the burning pain. It felt like the blood was boiling in his veins.

The carpet smoldered and burned. He hoped it was the carpet. It smelled like scorched hair and skin.

*I don't want to die like this.* Dustil wasn't sure if it was his thought or Mekel's. *Don't... want... to... die like this.* His vision blurred. Dustil pulled back, pulled away. *Stop it, stop this—*

The Force guttered and died.

They both lay on the floor gasping for breath, the yellow particle blade scorching the carpet between them.

"I-I thought we'd have it out with blades," Mekel whispered. His lips looked blue in the dim light, and his eyes were like black pits against white skin. His hand shook, and he twisted his fingers. The 'saber on the floor deactivated with a click. Around it, the carpet still smoked.

"I lost mine," Dustil's mouth was dry and his chest burned. Painfully he felt his pulse return to something like normal.

Mekel stared at him, coughed in a way that should have been a laugh. “Dumbass.”

The door opened the rest of the way and a Wookiee and a T3 droid came into room.

"You have got to be the most pathetic excuse for a sithboy that I've seen, you asshole," the droid said.

"If you've caused any permanent damage to Mekel Jin, I'll flay the flesh from your bones," it added in a different voice: words crisp and decisive and threatening.

The Wookiee just started growling, a whole string of words in a language Dustil didn't understand.

XXX

*On Kashyyyk, the natives speak Shyriiwook. They are a peaceful, forest-dwelling race, with an agrarian society based on harvesting the bounty of their arboreal planet.*

*Lessons from civics class on Telos. Xenosociology 102.*

XXX
"You're Zaalbar, the one that killed Mission," Dustil said accusingly to the Wookiee. His voice was a croak. He tried to sit up, but his limbs wouldn't let him.

The carpet was burning. The T3 spat out a stream of white foam from one of its jets and the fire died out.

The Wookiee waved his arms in the air and gesticulated at the droid.

"Okay, okay, Big Z—I'll translate. Geez. Don't you think I should get to talk to him first?"

The Wookiee barked something that sounded like a negative.

"Sheesh, I mean he was my friend!"

"You're not Mission Vao," Dustil snapped, trying to get his arms to work again. His hand was killing him. Mekel had the trace of a smug smile on his face. He wanted to wipe it off and grind it into the dirt.

The T3 beeped, and the lights on its top flashed blue.

"I'm the closest thing left! You nerf-herding stupid piece of bantha... turd! I knew you for like a month, and you get all sithy again over me? How could you be such a fracking idiot that day in the Library? Why didn't you just run away? I arranged a perfectly good distraction and you just stood there blinking like a tach in the overlights!"

"A distraction?" Dustil frowned.

"Nevermind."

The Wookiee made more gestures with his paws. They looked threatening, and the T3 rolled back into the corner of the room. Zaalbar stood over him, barking. Dustil scrambled to his feet, willing his numb legs to hold him up again.

The Wookiee was huge, he'd never realized how huge he was the few times they'd met on Korriban.

"Translation," the T3 said in a different voice. A mechanized one, like you'd hear over a commlink making public announcements. "It was my blade that slew Mission Vao. But the dead are dead, son-of-Carth, and you are only a small cub. When the leaves fall in winter, or the hunter misses his mark and is eaten; we mourn, but then prune the dead wood, so the other trees grow. Your father and Revan's cub need our assistance. The Mission-ghost is not the one that we loved, but she has her memories—"

"—I think of myself as Mission," the T3 said in Mission's voice, interrupting its own translation. The blue lights flashed.

Zaalbar shook his furred head slowly and groaned. Behind the Wookiee, Mekel was getting slowly to his own feet, his face pale and covered with a light sheen of sweat. Dustil could feel every ache in the other boy's body. He pushed at Mekel's mind again, hoping to catch him off guard.

Mekel flinched and sat back down heavily on the floor, his head spinning. You suck, Telos.

This was all a distraction. Dustil wanted to get what he'd come for. He wanted to know where Revan was. So he could make her pay.
You fracking idiot! Do you think you'd last two seconds against her? You know who she was. You know how powerful she is. Mekel was in so much pain it was hurting him to think. There was a power in that too.

Show me. Dustil pushed harder.

"'My fleas are your fleas, my hunt is your hunt, your tree is my tree.' Mission Vao is dead, but the cub she was learned this poem from me. She thought of you as part of our family, and when you were both older she hoped that one day the two of you would mate—"

"Whoa, slow down. I never said 'mate'—I just said I thought he was cute!" It was Mission's voice, coming from the T3's chassis. "I mean, of course he was part of our family, 'cause Carth and Polla-Revan were like, practically married and stuff, with all of their 'we-have-to-lock-the-cockpit-doors-because-they-slide-open-during-hyperspace-jumps-and-someone-might-get-hurt—but I mean, I just had a crush! I thought he was cute! It wasn't major!"

The Wookiee waved his hands and growled.

"Fine. Whatever. Big Z says I loved you, Dustil Onasi." The T3 whirred to itself.

Dustil closed his eyes. He felt Mekel trying to draw strength from the bond, felt it slipping through the other boy's fingers, felt Mekel's pulse grow thready and weak, felt his breath falter. He pushed harder.

Mekel's thoughts scattered like leaves before his assault—and Dustil reached to catch them—but what he found made no sense.

"The big star is the Serrano system, and that's Wayland and Bandomeer, twin worlds in its orbit. Twin worlds line the gate to the Hydian Way. When we get to Junction Station we'll stop for supplies. You'll have to go... get more kolto—I cannot be seen. Not far away is Dathomir, which has its own version of Force-users; witch women who call it 'magic.' Fools, who only scratch the surface of true power. I—I studied them for a time. Before—when I was—when I was one of the Jedi."

Mekk?

"The Sith are only a tool she keeps saying, only a tool to achieve our true purpose, but we've changed. My father always said that power corrupts but he never tasted true power. My father plays games in the ballroom with Coruscanti politicians and makes worlds burn for the sake of his sport. We'll make worlds burn to stop it. Sometimes I ask myself if there's a difference."

Mekel? Dustil pushed harder.

"She said think of something else to keep him out, think of languages but I can't concentrate, I try and think of Him, but he never answers me. He called me insignificant—grist for the machine, but it's better here and she said she used to crack her skull on the bulkheads to keep Bastila Shan out of her head. She's Revan and I'm nothing and don't talk to me Blue, it hurts—and I can't keep Dustil out of my head—he's stronger—and—Dathomir, and after Junction Station comes Toprawa, and then Thule. On Thule, they'll recognize me as their Lord, but not their Master—she says it must always be like this: always a Master and Apprentice. She says to keep him out we must present a power that they understand. That is the way of the Sith. And then Korriban, where they will teach you, Mekel Jin. Coruscanti son. Little killer. We'll teach you to kill for a cause instead of bread; teach you real power, and how make worlds burn to save them."
"Stop it," Dustil whispered.

*Get the frack out of my head.* On the floor, Mekel’s body flopped backwards and began to twitch.

"What the frack are you doing to Mekel? You're killing him!" The droid's fake voice sounded frightened. The T3 had blasters in its appendages and the Wookiee growled and moved closer, his hand on the hilt of one of his swords.

He couldn't focus on two things at once. Dustil released his grip on Mekel's mind and reached for his own gun.

"Frack you, Telos." Mekel’s eyes opened. He took a deep, shuddering breath and poured the pain back through their bond like a whiplash. "How can you be so fracking dense?" His breath hissed out painfully. “At least your father has excuses. He's brainwashed. You're just an idiot.”

Dustil's concentration splintered. The blaster fell on the ground. The Wookiee growled, and the computer was rattling at it in Shyriiwook.

"How can you live with what you did? How can you let her live after what she made you do?" Dustil yelled at Zaalbar.

The Wookiee groaned.

"He says they were both madclaw and since they did not die of it they must let the dead be dead. He says you should understand. We watched you, at the Academy. And Polla-Revan asked around. What about those prospective students you half-fried, Dustil?" It was Mission's voice coming out of that thing now.

If he closed his eyes he'd think it was really her.

"*Some of the stuff I did, Blue—wasn't very nice. Maybe we wouldn't be friends if you knew.*"

*Her head tails twitched, and she looked at him with those big round eyes. *Then don't do them anymore,* she said. *Don't be Sithboy.**

*Mission made it sound that simple. And I believed her. But now she's dead.*

"W-what about Erimac, Dustil?" Mekel whispered. There was a faint smile on his lips, and he pushed himself up to a sitting position again. The effort made him cough, and Dustil felt it too, like an ache in his lungs. “What about those prospies at the bar?”

"You were worse than me!" Dustil shot back. Mekel had been worse than him. *Those kids were weak. I had to kill them to get prestige. If I didn't get prestige someone would kill me.*

"Yeah, but I'm not the one trying to m-make excuses now. W-why don't you tell Blue how you won your s-saber? T-that was a f-fair fight?" Mekel's teeth were chattering and his lips looked purple. The T3 rolled over to him and an appendage shot out. There was the hiss of a kolto pack unsealed and Mekel jerked as the injection stung his arm.

"D-don't waste that, Blue," he whispered. "I'm f-fine." His fingers scrabbled at the high neck of his shirt and he unbuckled it. He was wearing a heavy silver necklace, it looked like a slaver’s collar. The skin on his chest looked burned.

*In Dreshdae, lightsabers weren't constructed, they were won. Simple to get one: all you had to do was kill someone else that had one.*
Of course, the harder they were to kill, the more prestige for the act. Erimac was the best duelist in school. Dustil could never hope to beat him in a fair fight.

But it was child's play to convince three out-of-work Iridonian mercs in the cantina that shooting a Sith student was their best chance of getting hired by the Sith Academy.

After that, all Dustil had to do was pick the lightsaber up off Erimac’s cooling corpse. And he didn’t let the mercs down. They mercs got the jobs they wanted. In the dueling room.

He picked one of them out of the cages later himself.

"That wasn't the same. If I hadn't someone would have killed me!"

"You know I helped with Selene," Mekel shot back. "We don't talk about it, but you've been in my mind, you know I did. Master Uthar told me get her into the caves. I showed her where to hide. I was with Lashowe when she killed her." He smiled crookedly. "I watched."

One of those things we don't talk about. Ever. Like why four months ago we got jobs in Lusha's cantina, because killing was all we knew how to do, and it scared us to like it so much. It felt like madness. It felt good, it felt like power.

"I took her into the caves," Mekel went on, his face twisted, lips white with anger. "I told her we'd go looking for artifacts. She thought I wanted to get in her pants, but she came with me, Telos. Maybe she thought I was hot. Lashowe was waiting for us there. We split the merit points."

The anger was like a fire. Like flames burning around them. If he let it go, he could practically see Mekel twisting in agony again on the floor, and feel the pain again himself. I'd kill us both.

Dustil clenched his fists.

"Revan destroyed worlds," he muttered. "How can you compare what we did to that?"

"You want her dead for the life of one Twi'lek, how can you be such a fracking hypocrite?"

"I loved her!"

"I'm right here," the T3 said, its voice subdued.

The Wookiee groaned again, waving his arms.

XXX

"Your grandfather said I might find you out here." Carth kept his voice light and careful, trying to bury the worry that gnawed at him. Dustil just ran off to get drunk or something. Do whatever it is that boys do. It doesn't mean he went after Revan. He could be anywhere.

When I was his age I stayed out once until dawn and my parents grounded me for a month.

Malachor turned and looked at him, his mouth round with surprise. When he'd come in the child had been leaning up against the force field that surrounded the balcony, whispering to himself. The Senator said the child had been upset at school. He was worried about him. The old man was busy and distracted, and he'd asked Carth to look in on his grandson.

"He looks up to you, Captain Onasi. If you could speak with him again? He won't talk to me. And get him to come off that balcony before he catches a chill."

D'Reev had been very comforting about Dustil.
"Boys will be boys, Captain. And I'm sure it's not— her. There's been no sign of her, no sign at all." His lips curled in an embarrassed smile. "Just that little incident with Seriina at the ports. Seriina is rather upset with me. We're friends, you know."

The night air wasn't cold, the atmospherics took care of that, but the boy was shivering. Carth wrapped the blanket he'd brought with him around the small shoulders.

"I was just standing out here," Malachor said. "Sometimes you can look down and see people. I saw a lady in pink." He wiped his nose. His eyes were still red from where he'd been crying.

Carth looked over the edge of the balcony. From this height the pedestrians were specks. You couldn't tell what they were wearing at all.

"He cried all afternoon, when the derm wore off," the Senator said. "I feel so helpless when he cries."

"Do you want to go inside, Korrie? We could get you some hot choca."

The boy shook his head. His eyes were very wide, and he frowned, biting his lip. "Captain Onasi, if I ask you something will you tell me the truth?"

Morgana and I always prided ourselves on telling Dustil the truth. But he's eight, Malachor's eight.

"Sometimes the truth hurts, Korrie." Carth knelt down and took the boy's hands in his own, trying to dull the ache in his throat. He blinked his eyes.

The child swallowed. "There's a lot of stuff I don't understand. Because it's bad. Bad stuff that they did." His eyebrows wrinkled. "I guess it's sort of like Grandfather and the Senate. Sometimes he does bad stuff too, because he has to. For the greater good."

"Your grandfather just wants to protect you." What can I say to him?

Malachor bit his lip. "Y-you loved your wife and son more than anything. He says it was your strength. He says he could feel it like a star inside you." The boy's head drooped, and he stared at the ground. "M-maybe my mother loves you like that too? You do love her like that, don't you?"

The boy's eyes pleaded with him.

"It's not your mother's fault," Carth began automatically, remembering the first talk they'd had about her. It's not your mother's fault. But sometimes people get broken and they can't be fixed. Like your mother. Like me. Like Helena Shan. Like Telos. Gods, but please, not like Dustil.

The boy blinked hard. "That's not true," he whispered. His eyes seemed old in the young face. "S-she made choices. They both did. Maybe they were wrong. B-but my mother got a second chance. B-because of you."

Carth didn't know what to say.

"Y-you came in on a ship called the Republic Pearl. That's one of High Admiral Rensha's and my grandfather gives her money. Sometimes I listen, and sometimes I see stuff. Like when Grandfather says to Wann keep the Selkathten in jail because they could cause trouble."

Selkathten. The Selkath ten. Yuthura tried to talk to me about them. Tonight.

XXX
"The woman I saved on Manaan was not the Sith Lord, Captain Onasi," said Yuthura Ban. Her brow ridges frowned at him, fuzzy through the holofeed. "She was only a woman who had suffered as we all suffered. When I looked at you, I saw her hope. Do you ever wonder who has the most to gain by denouncing Revan Starfire?"

"We're pawns," the Twi'lek continued, when Carth couldn't find any words to answer her. "Vrook doesn't tell me much, but at least I know I'm being used." She smiled coldly. "This call is monitored. Have you ever wondered who listens?"

The commlink flashed with another incoming call.

"I have to go," Carth said. His head was pounding and all he could hear was her broken voice again, in the cockpit of the Ebon Hawk.

"Promise me….

He cut the connection with Manaan and opened the incoming.

The Senator's face was grave. "Dustil never arrived for dinner. I've checked the grid reports for signs of an accident, but there's nothing. I'll put all of my resources at your disposal to find your son. But Korrie's inconsolable about his mother. I need you. Here."

Carth didn't hesitate. "I'm on my way."

XXX

Something still bothered him, there was something he should think of, something important.

"Your grandfather would never let anything happen to you, Korrie. The guards, the defenses—they're all here to keep you safe."

"Captain Onasi," the little boy's voice was tight and oddly formal. "Do you love my mother?"

"You're eight, Korrie, how can you understand?"

Carth took a deep breath. "When I look at you, Korrie I see the good in her. I see what she could have been."

"She is good," the child said fiercely. "If you found out she was good would you stop hating her?"

"I—I don't hate her."

"You're eight; you can't understand what I feel. Sometimes I don't understand it myself."

"I don't understand!" Malachor's voice shook and he pulled away from Carth. He went back to the edge of the balcony again, leaned his palms against the barrier and rested his forehead on it. "I don't understand, why can't I just tell him? Why can't I just tell him everything and then he'll help us?" He stared at thin air and screamed. "You said he was good!"

He's hysterical. Poor kid. "Choca," Carth said emptily. "Come here, Korrie. We'll go to the kitchens and see if Savona can make us some choca."

He held out his hand, and Malachor took it. "You love her," the boy said stubbornly. "I know you do."

XXX
The cubs screeched at each other and the Mission-ghost squawked until he thought that the cacophony would drive him to madness. The room was too small and smelled like bad mating and it was too hot. Carth's son was white-eyed and rabid. In the forests his people would have just driven him to the Shadowlands until he died or came back to his senses; but there was no room for such an exile on this tiny planet teeming with so many different kinds.

No room for green places here.

Mekel Jin smelled like hurt still, and Carth's cub smelled like pain. The Mission-ghost didn't smell like anything; but he could tell she was angered by the tone of her voice, shrill and grating against his ears.

"I'm right here!" she said again, and Carth's son just looked at her with loathing.

"You're not Mission!" he insisted again. "You're not Mission, you're a thing! A tool Revan can use to do whatever she wants with."

"Polla-Revan doesn't tell me what to do!" the Mission-ghost shot back. If she'd been the real Mission she'd be crying. The real Mission had been very fond of the son of Carth. More fond than the boy deserved, he'd thought, although really they had only met the few times Mission brought the boy aboard the Hawk.

Korriban had been a bad place, dry and dead; and Zaalbar had happily stayed in the ship for the month they'd spent on the planet. After the unfortunate incident with the Czerka representatives on Tatooine, Polla-Revan had thought it safer for him to stay out of sight on planets where the enslaving infidel corporation held sway.

"Tell the boy what Polla-Revan wants to do," Zaalbar growled at the Mission-ghost. "Perhaps if you can make him understand that she is no longer madclaw, he will stop biting his own tail trying to hurt her."

"I can't trust him with that information," the Mission-ghost said back, in Shyriiwook, interrupting her own rant of curses. "He's not dependable and he's too close to D'Reev."

"But you trust Mekel Jin," Zaalbar waved his hands uselessly. Both of the cubs had that sick smell, the death smell he'd learned to associate with the Sith; although he had to admit the Jin boy had done everything that had been asked of him without question.

"I have Mekel on a leash," the Mission-ghost responded. "Anyways, he treats me like a person, unlike some people."

Zaalbar groaned unhappily. She wasn't a person; she had no smell and no skin and no blood anymore. His own role in that struck him like a sharp thorn, not for the first time. "You're a wind in the leaves," he said, trying to make her understand. "But you don't grow, you don't change. You're a machine used to make things, with the memories of my old friend. And daughter-cub, he thought to himself sadly, remembering her bright laughter and gentle teasing.

"That's not how your father or your tribe thinks of me!" she shot back.

"Now isn't the time to talk about that, Mission," Zaalbar groaned. The cubs were still screaming, and it hurt his ears. He let out a roar of protest, loud enough to drown it all out.

He was roaring so loudly that he didn't hear the footsteps on the stair, didn't sense the men with guns until they broke into the room and started shooting.
"Analysis: Based on current psychological reports, Captain Onasi's reconditioning will fracture. Projection: The recordings of his time spent with Captain Rew Ekkumi, and his interactions with other Fleet personnel, as well as the latest Manaan transcript, recommend initiation of an accelerated timeline."

The Senator chuckled. "I wasn't aware we were on a schedule, HK." He scrolled through the datapad again, tapping a few of the more pertinent facts into tabular columns for further study.

"Perceptive Extrapolation: If your organic assumptions are correct regarding Dustil Onasi's current whereabouts, the Captain's utility as a weapon may still be salvageable. Observation: for most sentients, few things in life are more motivational than a dead son."

Malachi D'Reev laughed out loud. "Don't try and bait me with that, your bucket of bolts." He stared at his droid fondly. Its red eyes gleamed.

"Of course not, Master. You are not like most sentients. That is why we get along so well. Observation: Rew Ekkumi and Jiya Sand are a destabilizing influence on the Captain. The recordings show a regrettable ambiguity in their loyalties. Much like the pilot himself, they may be untrustworthy allies."

The old man chuckled, "I could have told you that, HK. All allies are untrustworthy, by their very nature." He swirled his brandy. "There are no allies, there are only pawns."

It was hard to decide which would be better: a dead Dustil Onasi at Revan's hand, (assuming he was correct and that the boy had some means of tracking her through the Force); or a live Dustil that he could use later, for some other scheme. Either would suffice.

As a boy, hawking with his father on their Corellian estates, Malachi had learned that sometimes the best way to hunt was to untie the jesses, and deactivate the bird's homing device. Wild things hunted more naturally free. So it might prove with the Onasi boy.

The game pieces were already in place—although events were moving more swiftly than he'd expected, and in unfamiliar directions. Vrook Lamar certainly wasn't helping matters and Manaan itself was becoming more trouble than it was worth.

But Revan is on Coruscant now... somewhere.

You didn't need a thing like the Force to know that. It had been an almost brilliant move, using his own pawn against him. Seriina Starr was still refusing to take his calls—although as long as she wore that face, perhaps it was for the best.

The surgery was good for realism on the holovids; but in a more personal sphere it was rather distasteful. He'd heard Seriina was wearing a holomask of her own face now while she tried to renegotiate the contract with Juut. She'd have no luck there.

But Manaan… frowning, he tapped the recording of Yuthura Ban and the pilot's conversation again. Their images appeared on a split screen, glowing above the surface of his polished desk.

"We should talk," the Twi'lek said.

"I'm all ears," muttered the pilot. He looked distracted.

"I've seen the broadcasts," Yuthura Ban said. "You've been speaking about the scourge of the Sith
and the rise of Darth Revan—but you know that's a lie."

"What I know is that Darth Revan has to be stopped." Carth was rubbing his head as if it pained him.

"The woman I saved on Manaan was not the Sith Lord, Captain Onasi," said Yuthura Ban. "She was only a woman who had suffered as we all suffered. I feared her, but when I looked at you, I saw her hope."

Typical Jedi nonsense.

"Do you ever wonder who has the most to gain by denouncing Revan Starfire?"

That was more dangerous.

"We're pawns," the reformed Sith continued. "Vrook doesn't tell me much, but at least I know I'm being used. This call is monitored. Have you ever wondered who listens?"

The Senator shrugged to himself, and poured another glass of brandy. He'd interrupted the call before Yuthura's last words went through.

"Do you ever wonder who started this? Do you ever wonder who started the Mandalorian Wars?"

It always came back to Mandalore. How fitting the Mandalorians had found a kinglet somewhere to drag out to beg on bended knee; but of course, that was a sword that cut both ways as well.

Revan and Malak named their son more aptly than they knew.

"Stop replay," he said to the console. "Query: Have you collected any more data on this Oerin Lin and his petition?" There were half a hundred bills before the Senate, but the Mandalorian measure was one he had a vested interest in. More than an interest. Like many things, it was a thread to weave into the cloth, another piece in the game.

"Affirmative: Master Klee has released the files from the Jedi Archive as you requested. The claim is legitimate. The leader of the Mandalorians, Fett Cassus Lin, had six sons. Oerin Lin was the youngest. Issue of his seventh wife, Jana Novasun, a native of Ossus."

"Native of Ossus?" Malachi frowned. That was unusual. Mandalorian men rarely married outside of clan. And Ossus—either she'd have to be ancient or—Sith.

"Query: Jana Novasun."

The console whirred. "Native of Ossus, deceased. Married Fett Cassus Lin on Malachor IV. One child. The place of her death is not recorded; but from the time stamp it can be inferred that she was killed at the same time as the rest of Clan Lin. Five years ago."

"Interjection: The HK-47 model was grossly negligent to let Oerin Lin survive."

Malachi laughed. "Perhaps, HK. But it serves us well now that he does. If he was dead, the title of Mandalore would pass to some other clan."

He tapped his fingers on the desk. "Novasun," he mused.

It was fashionable years ago, for Jedi to take new surnames when they joined the Order. Sunrider, Clouddancer, Skywalker... a pack of ridiculous prancing fools. He was glad the practice had fallen out of style by the time Malak was knighted. Revan herself bore the unfortunate moniker her father
must have chosen during the wars with Exar Kun. Starfire. He wondered idly if the man had felt foolish for choosing that name later. After the Cron cluster's implosion, Starfire would have been in poor taste. As terribly inappropriate as 'Novasun,' actually.

"Was Jana Novasun registered as a Force user?"

"There are no records from Ossus," the console murmured.

_I know that. All the Jedi records were destroyed, and the Sith are too smart to keep any._

Officially, the planet was uninhabited to this day, although as with any place rumored to be a repository of ancient secrets that was a polite fiction. It lay in Sith-occupied space now. One of the useless prizes captured during the last war. By my idiot son. Malachi sighed.

"Hmmm." Even if this 'Novasun' had been a Force-user, her son most certainly was not. Mandalorians were not Force-sensitive—they were one of the few races where the trait did not breed true.

It was something he'd always admired about them.

_The old Rialis woman had asked me about that, once. Long ago. But I had no answers._

"Master? There is another part of the recording from the Onasi apartments tonight that you might find interesting. Do you wish to view it?"

It would be impossible to wade through the hours of vid footage he'd collected of Carth Onasi himself; but the HK did a commendable job extracting the highlights—although sometimes there was no substitute for an organic mind.

"Certainly." The Senator sat back in his chair. Captain Onasi was with Malachor in the kitchens having choca. He'd asked the pilot to put his grandson to bed. It would distract him for a time from worrying about Dustil. And they seemed fond of each other. That could be useful, one way or the other.

The next part of the recording was from the beginning of the tape. Watching it, he felt a spark of the old thrill. Always pleasant, even after all this time, to be capable of surprise.

He knew the Deralian, of course. She'd served under his son, years ago. One of the troublemakers, constantly spewing her vitriolic nonsense about the Mandalorian Wars. Automatically, Malachi weighed the simple option of eliminating them all again. It would be prudent to wait a few more days first and see what Revan did. Having a group of her Sith allies already imprisoned could satiate the public's appetite for justice.

"Know her? Revan? Our Dark Lord of the Sith? The redeemed one? The one who gets off star-bloody free while the rest of us rot with the fish?"

"I didn't call about her. I wanted to ask you about Polla."

The Deralian laughed.

"Polla Organa," the pilot said. "She—she's real, isn't she?"

"What's this?"

"Reiteration: Master, this is the part of the dialogue I thought you would find interesting."
"Indeed," the Senator said softly. "I do." He took another sip of brandy.

"I have six cousins named Polla Organa. But I think I know the one you mean. Yeah, she's real. Da says she's real pissed too. Oh, and she just had a baby, it's a boy." The Deralian made an unpleasant face.

Once Beya Organa had been attractive, Malachi remembered. But the years had not been kind. She was coarsened now, rough as the peasant stock she came from.

"You want to send her a present or something, Captain?"

Malachi set his brandy down and leaned back in his chair. His laughter echoed through the room. Once started, he couldn't stop. Great booming laughter echoed off the marble walls.

"Sentimental Appreciation: It is good to see you so pleased, Master. I thought you would find this amusing."

"By their own standards of morality what the Jedi did to Revan was questionable enough. But... they used... a real person's memories to do it? Maffa-licking fools! " The old man shook his head, still laughing and tapped the console. "Now I understand why they hid this from me. Find her. Find this Polla Organa."

The terminal responded. "There are 3,865 denizens of Deralia registered with that name, cross-referencing for approximate age—"

Malachi snorted. "Cross-reference with any Republic ties." That ought to narrow it down, Deralia is not a world known for its loyalty. They hang onto their colony status only for their own profit. He pondered. "The Polla persona was a smuggler. Cross reference again against the index of registered Deralian pilots, and any recent registered births to mothers named Polla Organa."

The console whirred to itself, and a face appeared on the screen. Remarkable. Despite the difference in coloring there was actually a physical resemblance.

"Polla Organa Wen, registered smuggler." Only in the Outlier systems would they have registered smugglers. You almost had to admire that. "Registered address: Glory Road Farm, Adaston, on the continent of Derra. The sentient suffered a head injury approximately two point five years ago and was treated aboard the Republic capital ship, the Ascendant, one month after Darth Revan's capture."

Which is when they asked my permission to wipe her mind. I doubt they asked Polla Organa's permission.

Fools. I could rip them apart if the people knew their precious Jedi were stealing memories from Republic citizens—or Republic protectorate citizens. He frowned, trying to remember his last briefing on the Tammuz sector. Nominally Republic, at best.

Even better—for my purposes.

"Get me as much information as you can on her." One way or another, it would be useful. "And… he pondered. The girl just had a son. "Send an anonymous gift. Something appropriate for the baby."

"Suggestion: perhaps a blanket? In his infancy the young Master was fond of his."

"Yes, HK, a blanket would be fine. Send it priority express."
Malachi D'Reev smiled. Revan had not taken the most predictable path; but that only made the game all the more interesting.

*In a war, each side stockpiles what munitions it can before knowing the time and the place of the battleground.* Polla Organa was a sword he could hold over more than one neck, should the need arise. Poor girl.

*In the right hands, even the weakest piece on the board can turn the game.*

XXX

*These are not Moms's usual goons.*

That was the last coherent thought Mekel had for a while.

There were six of them, dressed in black and masked and armed with blasters. They came in firing. He'd been yelling at Dustil when the first bolt struck the wall, leaving a smoking hole in the cheap plimfoam. Zaalbar let out a howl and charged their assailants immediately, vibroblades unsheathed and flashing in the dim light. Mission opened fire too; but her energy bolts glanced harmlessly off their shields.

Mekel called to the 'saber on the floor, as he ducked behind the bed. The silver cylinder flew clumsily into his hand and ignited, searing the edge of the mattress and nearly taking off half of his face. *Double blade... shit, I don't know how to use this!* His coat was heavy and awkward, and he slipped out of it. His injured hand hurt like hell, and even with the kolto injection he still felt like shit. He made the swollen knuckles close around the hilt anyways, so he was gripping it with both hands.

*Focus, focus, don't die.*

[[*Don't die, Mekel*]]

Dustil was just standing there in the middle of the room, gaping like an outer-rim plebe.

A blaster bolt caught him full in the chest and he staggered, like a spark going out.

A vise gripped Mekel's heart too.

*No!*


Dustil's mind dimmed. Without thinking, Mekel poured the Force back into the other boy with everything he had; leaping across the bed and charging their assailants himself. They'd switched to blades now, and four of them were on Zaalbar.

Mekel cut one from behind with the edge of his 'saber. Half the man's torso fell cleanly, divided by the bright yellow light.

The man died instantly and somehow, behind him, Dustil was still standing. The air *rippled* and a hard red light bathed their assailants, like pure power. Dustil was channeling their energy back into himself, draining them. *How does he do that, how can he do that?* Even as he had the thought, the power rushed through Mekel too, exhilarating and pure and wonderful.

One of the women advancing on Mission's chassis faltered when the red light licked against her
and Mekel threw the 'saber at her, felt it sever her spine and then snap back again, cool and calm in his hands.

The world became slow and focused. Calm and strangely beautiful. More men at the door with disruptor rifles. A beam of energy shot at him, arching slowly and he deflected it with one side of his blade, sending it back. The doorframe splintered and burst into flame. Dustil called the lightning again. He was laughing, Telos was laughing, and so was Mekel—and their enemies kept dying: lights winking out like an overtaxed grid. Each one was a whisper, each one added to their power.

*This is what we were born to do. This is what we were made for.*

Was it his thought or Dustil's? Mekel wasn't sure.

Zaalbar was already charging the reinforcements crouched in the doorway, with a wild bestial howl of pure rage—and Mekel followed him, almost jealous of the Wookiee for the two his swords dispatched. Their blood was slippery on the cheap carpet. A blade came out of nowhere at the side of his peripheral vision and he met it with the beam of his saber, turning to face his assailant. This one was good, but he was no Force-user. Mekel was faster, and he drove the point of his saber into the man's wrist, severing it. The swordsman looked at him in dull shock—and Mekel laughed and twisted the blade across the man's torso, smiling as the beam cut through the light armor and the man fell down.

My hand's stopped hurting. The thought was oddly mundane. Was it his or Dustil's? The bandaged one didn't hurt anymore.

The air was still and quiet suddenly, except for the sound of their breathing. All of their attackers were dead. Mekel realized Mission had been yelling at him through the collar for some time now, but he hadn't heard her.

[[I said, leave one alive you stupid sith-wannabe! We need to find out who sent them! What the frack was that, Mekel Jin? What's wrong with you?]]

"Are you okay, Big Z?" she said out loud. The T3 rolled awkwardly over the broken bodies on the carpet and came to the Wookiee. He had a bad blaster wound in his side, and a vibroblade slash on his arm. A deep one.

"Someone's coming," Dustil whispered. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were glassy and strange.

"Heal Big Z with the Force or something!" Mission said.

"We can't," Dustil muttered, barely glancing at her. He blinked and held out his hands, a red ball of light flickered into existence in it, and he looked at it dreamily, longingly. "More are coming, though—two more. " He had a faint smile on his face. Expectant. Excited.

Mekel smiled back. More. Two of them. Mekel heard their footsteps on the stairs. He reached out with the Force—and Zaalbar was already pushing away from Mission and heading for the door with his blades in hand. Dustil still had that creepy smile on his face he glanced at Mekel with that old camaraderie they'd had in the bad old days, rolling marks in the alley, and moved forward, raising his hand again—

"Wait!"

Dustil turned back at him questioningly and Zaalbar groaned something unintelligible.
"Don't! It's not—it's Moms...it's my moms.... The thought was a scream. It wasn't just Moms either. The other presence slid around his attempts to identify it. Moms and someone—someone strong.

Stronger than us? Dustil's thought was cocky, almost scornful.

Wait. Mekel realized his knees were bent, that he was crouching, almost ready to spring.

"Well, son." Moms looked almost proud as she came into the room, but a mock frown crossed her face. "You're going to have to pay for the damages, you know."

The figure behind her was cloaked and robed in black, its face covered by a gold, lacquered mask. It was taller than Moms and it stepped forward, lifting black high heeled boots fastidiously over the layer of broken bodies stacked in the doorway.

"Your son has grown powerful, Deeka." The voice was tenor and husky. It sent chills up Mekel's spine. He knew the voice. Everyone in the Underground knew that voice.

"My son is good at surviving." Moms beamed, as proud as she'd been when he rolled his first mark.

"As are his companions." The robed figure regarded them one-by-one. "Lord Revan's emissaries. I am pleased to see you." It—she murmured something formal to Zaalbar in Shyriiwook and nodded at Dustil.

"Arca," Mekel found his voice again. He tried to make it sound angry and not terrified. "Why did you send your goons after us?"

"Ambassador Arca," the robed one corrected. She removed the mask, revealing the golden-scaled face beneath. Falleen, like Master Iridel; but with black Sith lines etched like bars across her face, and burning damned eyes rimmed with red. "I'm pleased to see that your time among the Jedi didn't soften you entirely." The woman shrugged. "It was a test. If you'd fallen, Lord Revan would have been forced to send more of her followers to discover your fate. Or perhaps… come here herself. Since you live, you can deliver my message in person."

"I knew you'd be fine, dear," Moms smiled at him, and fluttered her cold black eyes. Mekel wondered how much she'd been paid to betray them. He'd been stupid to trust her.

I should have known better. Credits mean more than blood, they always have.

"Ambassador to what?" Dustil spat. Mekel wished he'd shut the hell up. You didn't mess with Arca. Everyone in the Underground knew that. Arca could be the ambassador to anything she wanted. You should nod and say yes and then get the hell out.

The Falleen smiled. "Ziost. They've asked me to represent them. In an unofficial capacity, you understand."

Mission whirred. "Arca Trinii. A near-legendary Underground Coruscanti figure with ties to the spice and slave trades, as well as black-market currency markets."

"I'd hoped to become more famous for my work with the media," Arca murmured softly. "We're working on a sequel to the Underground Coruscanti Version, you know." Her pointed teeth bared in a smile. "We're going to call it The Return of the Sith."

What the frack is this, Mekk?
"Shut up, Telos, shut up and nod, and let's get the hell out of here.

"Mekel, honeygizka, Arca was just asking me, where's Darth Revan now?" Moms had that bright glittery smile on her face. The one that meant: *Tell me or I'll send you to level 60. Or I'll make you wish I sent you to level 60.*

"Darth Revan would not be pleased that you tried to harm us," Mekel ventured. His pulse thudded painfully in his chest.

The Wookiee opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it again. He groaned uneasily.

"Darth Revan wants your loyalty, Arca Trinii," Mission hissed back. Somehow she managed to say those words in a voice that sounded as scary as Revan's own.

The Falleen raised a brow ridge. "Of course she does, and she has it. As long as she is the Dark Lord of the Sith, she has our loyalty; but the officials on Ziost are wondering why hasn't she been in contact? Her absence has created some regrettable instability. Certain factions vie for power and those of us who are loyal—even we begin to wonder."

Her eyes were burning red and yellow. They were, Mekel realized with a chill, just as mad as Jorak Uln's. Just as mad as Lord Malak's.

"This is where the dark side leads. Madness and death. This is the gift I give to you, Coruscanti son. We'll make it all burn."

The big man was laughing like he did sometimes after he cried. Mekel plugged another kolto pack into the hole in his jaw and backed away fast before the big man hit him again.

"Revan would not be pleased you tried to harm us," Mission said angrily. Moms and the Falleen looked at her as if she was a piece of furniture that had decided to talk.

"Let me handle this, Blue," Mekel whispered.

Dustil's eyes were still glassy and vacant. Those deaths had hit him pretty hard. For all that Telos liked to talk tough, for all the raw power he had, he wasn't used to this. He didn't really understand how to handle fracking insane Sith sents.

*Let me handle this, Dustil,* Mekel thought at him. *Trust me, don't mess with Arca.*

The Falleen looked at him curiously. "I can understand what the Dark Lord would want with the Onasi boy, and the Wookiee has proven his worth, but what does Darth Revan want with you?"

[[Asshole, she didn't even acknowledge me at all. Tell her to frack off. She's nothing but a cheap holovoid version of a Sith wanna-be Lord. Polla-Revan could eat her for breakfast if she really was a Sith again.]]

Mekel tried to shrug carelessly. "Dark Lords of the Sith seem to like me."

Moms grinned. "He's a handsome boy, I suspect he has his uses. I know I've had patrons asking about him ever since he came back from Korriban; but Mekel's too good for Moms' little club now, too happy with his powerful friends to care about his poor Moms at all."

Even in the Underground, it was considered bad form to hit your own mother. Not to mention Arca would probably kill him before he took two steps across the floor.
"She is what she is," Mekel whispered. "What's the message for Lord Revan?"

"We are poised to strike against the Jedi Council, at her command." Arca smiled coldly. "Of course, if her command does not come soon, we will strike regardless. A dozen Darths vie for power now that the Manaan games are finished. There is little accord, but we all agree, the Jedi must fall."

"You have no fleet," Mekel echoed. "How do you plan on striking?" He had a sinking feeling he knew. Maybe Mission didn't. Not everything the Sith did was done with soldiers.

The Falleen laughed. "If Darth Revan cannot answer that question herself, the Jedi have truly shattered her." She spread her hands open, mocking the Jedi gesture of peace. "And she will die with them."

Dustil looked at him, uncertainly. Almost like the old days, when he'd been a fish out of water, and Mekel had to teach him to walk.

_This is what happens with all your killing and angst, Telos boy. Mekel thought at him coolly. You go madder than a Sullustan in a dairy farm. Trust me, just agree with whatever she says, and let's get out of here._

"I'll tell Lord Revan. If she wants to be in touch, how can I tell her to contact you, Lord Arca?" He tried not to put too much emphasis on the 'Lord' title, but he saw her eyes flash in pleased recognition of it.

"Okay. Listen. You're not going to tell Polla-Revan about this, Mekel Jin."

"Huh?" He said that out loud. Mekel tried hard not to look confused.

"Your mother's establishment is as good a place as any, and Deeka will not mind carrying our messages, will you, pet?"

"Of course not," Moms said. Right then Mekel hated her, hated the obsequious groveling tone of her voice with a rage so black that it scared him.

"You're not going to tell Polla-Revan about this. Big Z isn't gonna tell her and I'm not gonna tell her. Understand?"

Mission's voice in his head was toneless, but the words reverberated along his skull with an ache that shot up his spine.

"Okay," Mekel said out loud, still trying to hide his confusion. He took a cautious step towards the door and slipped on something. A dead person, half-eviscerated by Zaalbar's blades. He refused to look down.

_Come on, Telos, follow us out the door. Now._

"Mekel, dear?" Moms coughed. "You've made a mess in here, I will expect compensation."

"You have a bank account registered on Duros with the Coruscanti branch of Intergalactic Federal Savings Loan. Its balance has increased by ten thousand credits," Mission's voice was crisp. "Don't
frack with us, Deeka Jin, we are far more powerful than you can imagine."

"That remains to be seen," Arca murmured.

[[Fracking pathetic nutter Sith-wannabes. We need to move, Mekel Jin. This place is going to get raided. And soon.]]

Mission beeped a series of short, sharp chimes at Zaalbar and the Wookiee growled uneasily again, gesturing. Dustil still had that blank confused look on his face. Mekel wished he could slap it off. Instead, he grabbed the other’s boy’s hand, half dragging him away.

"Come on," the T3 said out loud in Basic, and rolled out the door. They trailed behind her, leaving Moms and the Ambassador to Ziost behind in the trashed suite.

Outside Katti Bais was still in her cage. She purred hopefully at them—no at Dustil. But Telos ignored her completely.

The dazed look was finally off his face and the sullen angry one was back. Big surprise.

"What the frack was that, Mekel?"

Mekel glanced warily at Katti and dragged Dustil farther down the street, out of her earshot. "That was the Sith, you dumb pleb! Is that what you want to be?"

Telos turned pale. I—couldn’t control it. The Force. It felt like—

Did we even go to the same school, Telos? I know what it felt like! You want to be like that? You want to be like Arca?

She was... powerful, she was—

Insane. She was insane. She sent Sith assassins after us for fun. That's what it's like Telos. They all go crazy. You're going to go crazy too if you don't stop this banthashit!

"Move. Now." Mission was using Revan's voice. She must have it recorded somehow. There was no questioning the command in the tone. They moved.

Somewhere behind them, Katti called out a good-bye.

Steam from the pipes overhead cast the street in shadows and fog, lit only by the lurid holosigns of the joy district. Mom's was only one in a long row of brothels on this street, a street nearly deserted... which is odd, because this time of night, normally there'd be tricks and marks and pervs all over the place....

"Sithboy," Mission chirped. "Are you coming with us or not?" Blue lights flashed on her dome.

Dustil whirled and faced her, staring down at her chassis with pure hate in his eyes. "Coming with you? When you go back to your Sith Master?"

"Polla-Revan is not a Sith, you stupid nerf-sack!" Mission's voder sounded exasperated. "And that's why we're not gonna tell her about this. You can do whatever the frack you want, Dustil Onasi—I don't care." Her voice turned ugly. "But if you hurt Polla-Revan, or Mekel, or Big Z, or the child, or your own father—I'll make you suffer punishments that make Sith teachings look like an Ewok party."

"You? you're nothing! You... thing!"
Dustil raised his hand threateningly at her and Mekel shoved him as hard as he could, knocking him back. Telos swayed on his feet, suddenly, and his hand went to his chest, where the fabric of his jacket was scorched and blackened. His face was very pale, it almost gray in the dim light.

"I’m out of here," Dustil said. Underneath the surface his thoughts boiled.

Mekel didn't want to see the shape of those thoughts. He realized suddenly he'd forgotten his coat upstairs. His hand tightened around the hilt of his saber that he was still clutching in his hand. At least I remembered this.

Dustil stared at him. For a second he looked just as lost as he had the day he'd showed up on Korriban. Or the day Mekel had to explain to him that Moms's offer of a job didn't just mean serving drinks to the patrons, and that was why they weren't going to take her up on it: why they had to sleep in a squat and roll pervs in the alley instead.

_Are you okay, Telos?_

_Leave me alone!_ The rebuke was like a slap in the face.

Dustil turned and walked away. Fast. The sides of his long coat billowed around him like a cape.

Zaalbar growled a long series of sounds that sounded like questions. Mission answered him in Basic.

"He doesn't know anything." It was Mission's voice, but it sounded oddly strained, almost metallic. "There's no jeopardy to our plan. Maybe—maybe he'll get over it." It almost sounded as if she were trying to sound unconcerned. If she'd been real, Mekel could have read her emotions. As it was, he tried to catch the nuances in her voder.

Zaalbar growled something that could have been disagreement. Mekel could sense the Wookiee's intentions, dimly, like through a mist. The Wookiee disagreed with Mission about telling Revan about the Sith, he thought. Mekel didn't understand what Mission meant about that either.

"If there's a plan against the Jedi Council, we should... warn them or something," Mekel stammered. “Shouldn’t we?"

"It's none of our business," Mission responded. To both of them. "Polla-Revan's got enough to deal with now. I'm not adding to her concerns. The Jedi can take care of themselves. Besides...." Lights beeped on her dome. "Jedi and Sith fight, that's what they do. I will not allow our primary objectives to be compromised because of some silly religious war. Historical projections show that the Jedi always win. They don't need our help, and they don't need to frack with Polla-Revan anymore!"

"That's an order, by the way," she added, in Revan's voice. "Don't tell her about the Sith thing. Or I'll flay-the-flesh-from-your-bones."

Zaalbar growled, warningly.

"Listen, Big Z! Do you _want_ your people to go on being slaves? Did the Jedi ever lift a finger to stop that? Any resultant instability can only serve to _help_ our plans for Kashyyyk! Don't be dumb about this—please?"

The Wookiee sighed. In the direction Dustil had gone, searchlights flared to life suddenly, cutting through the mist like beacons. An alarm went off and there was the sound of sirens and shouts.
"Hey! Looks like a sector raid," Mission chirped. "Come on, there's an access panel to the sewers in the next alley over. We need to get out of here before they seal it off."

"CorSec never raid down here," Mekel muttered, already moving towards the alley towards the square metal plate in the ground. His mind turned the tumblers of the lock automatically and it sprung open in front of them.

Mission rolled along beside him, beeping softly to herself. It almost sounded like laughter. "I guess someone wants the distributor of the Coruscanti Underground Version real bad. It's—let's just say possible—that an anonymous tip might have been sent regarding her location... and your moms is gonna have to pay a big fat fine, Mekel Jin. Not to mention how she'll explain all those dead sents—hope she can afford it."

Zaalbar groaned something that could have been a curse as they started climbing down the spiraling stairs to the sub-sub level. Mission's treads slid awkwardly on the narrow steps and her metal chassis slammed into Mekel's back. She was heavier than she looked.

"Wait. Let me." Mekel pulled on the Force, held out his hand, and levitated her a few inches above the steps, moving her chassis with his mind until they reached level ground. Mission splashed down softly in the muck of the sewers.

Zaalbar groaned again. It sounded like a protest.

"I know it smells bad, Big Z! So does your breath! Come on, we need to keep moving."

"Thanks, Mekel," she added. "That was nice of you."

Her treads rolled awkwardly through the slime. A beam of light from her dome illuminated the area in front of them. Mekel ignited his 'saber again to add even more light. The granslugs were huge down here, but they didn't like the light.

XXX

"Have some more dewback." Aemelie beamed at Revan, leaning forward across the table with the meat-covered plate.

It was just past dawn and the last thing Revan wanted was a dripping bloody haunch that looked barely cooked, but there was no polite way to refuse. She nodded and selected the smallest chunk she could find, spearing it with the blade of her dagger.

Gwenarius had given her the dagger with great ceremony at the beginning of the meal. Canderous's two wives—she was still trying to register the fact that Canderous had two wives; not to mention two children who were still in the cradle and couldn't possibly really be his—sat across from her, looking as expectant as a herd of tame trawler deer waiting for lumps of sucralose.

"Great caff," Revan said finally, when they failed to make more conversation. She'd barely slept at all, worrying about Zaal and Mekel and Mission who still hadn't returned.

I'm sure they're fine. If they weren't Mission would have sent word. I promised Zaalbar I would not interfere.

"Clan Lin should join with Clan Ordo," Gwenarius pronounced, weighing her voice with the authority of a Clan Mother. "Will you accept our proposal?"

"Ordo and Lin are already pledged," Revan said. "What other terms would you require?" The meat
stuck in her throat and she forced herself to swallow it down.

"Blood ties are men's ways. Clan Lin adopted you in the old traditions; we would do the same."

"The same—you mean you want me to bear a child for Ordo?" Revan tried to think of a polite way to decline, even as part of her imagined the look on Carth's face when she told him that their as yet unborn and completely imaginary offspring was actually going to be a Mandalorian.

*Of course, this is in a world where Carth doesn't hate me.*

The brief flash of amusement turned to ashes in the back of her throat. She drank another swig of caff quickly. Gwenarius' daughter was stirring restlessly in her mother's arms. Revan smiled at the small, round face surrounded by curls of brown hair. The little girl—maybe almost a year old—beamed back at her.

"Can I hold her?" Revan asked softly.

"Of course." The Mandalorian passed the child across the table and into Revan's arms. She squirmed there uncertainly for a moment and then settled in.

Revan bent her head and buried her nose in the sweet smell of the baby's hair. *This seems so simple. If I could hold Malachor like this. But he's older, he's eight. Would he still let me hold him like this?*

"We would hope you would have many children for Ordo," Gwen said, eyeing her. "And at least some of your husband's stock. He's good breeding material. You know, Millifar is one of the brightest young warriors here on Coruscant. Comely too. Among our clans, Canderous is well-regarded. As am I. Joining us would erase some of the inevitable doubts that will arise... regarding your outlander status—and the way you bested Fett Cassus. " She raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

The baby squirmed in Revan's arms and she dropped the piece of flatbread she'd been trying to feed her, almost dropping the little girl too in her shock.

"You want me to marry Canderous? Your husband? " Try not to sound so shocked; try not to make them think you are insulted. Don't offend them; this is delicate as walking on razors as it is; but he's already married! Twice! And he's....

*He's my friend. And he's not Carth.*

"Have you asked Canderous?" Revan ventured, trying not to imagine what his response would have been.

"He says you'll refuse," Aemelie broke in, scowling. "But he's just a man; they don't really understand these things."

"I'm in love with someone else," Revan protested.

"We know. Milli told us you went to see Captain Onasi last night. If you wanted the pilot why didn't you just take him? Surely, the woman who defeated Fett Cassus and scattered our people across the stars could manage a minor abduction on a Coruscanti street?" Gwenarius raised an eyebrow. "Or have rumors of your prowess been exaggerated?"

"It wasn't safe," Revan said. "Until I have my son, I can't risk trying to get to Carth. Malachi D'Reev has brainwashed Carth somehow. Until I have Malachor I can't risk—upsetting that balance—" she realized she was babbling. The little girl cooed in her lap and batted her cheek with
"Malachor," Aemelie interrupted. "You're going to have to do something about that name. How would you like it if I named this one Serroco? Or Althir? Or Dxun" She rocked the small boy in her arms, soothing his fretting.

*Revan felt like the words should mean something more than that, but they were only words. Facts she'd read.*

_We didn't lose Dxun. Although sometimes I think we were supposed to. What are you planning? Listen to me. What are you planning? I can only see you. You shut me out. You shut out both of us. Listen to me, Red. Please._

She was getting better at ignoring Malak's dead voice in her head. It was easy. Like the points on the Corellian spire, like banging her head against the bulkheads.

_Just think about something else._

Mission had promised to look into what had happened to Carth on the *Pearl,* but they knew nothing yet.

Mission and Zaalbar and Mekel. Where were they?

*Mission can tap into the communications grids. If there was trouble, she'd have sent word. She didn't, so they must be fine.*

*But she's kept things from me before. She's a computer.*

*No, they're fine, they have to be fine.*

Gwenarius' daughter nestled in the crook of her arm. Revan buried her nose in the baby's sweet-smelling hair.

"From what my husband has told us, the Jedi took your memories away from you. Perhaps in your ignorance of civilized customs you misunderstand the importance—and the honor—of our request?" Gwen asked. "The title of Mandalore is not hereditary by default. Lin has held it only by strength for the last century—by older traditions, there is no reason why Mandalorians would automatically owe you, or Oerin allegiance. But with Ordo's support, your rule would be unquestioned. Our clan and our husband have the strength of arms to hold it for you. No other clan can offer you as much."

"By the customs of your people you owe me allegiance regardless," Revan answered, trying to keep her voice cold. "I defeated the Fett and your armies. And Ordo is allied with Lin already. Oerin told me this. Canderous told me this. I don't need to marry someone to hold my claim."

Their sullen silence told her she was right. Gwenarius glared at her and dropped her dagger across her plate.

"I don't understand your reticence," Aemelie argued, pouring more caff for them all. "Canderous is quite skilled in every arena. And we are willing to put up with whatever barbarous mating customs you have—within reason." She frowned. "Although I do have to ask, Gwenarius and I watched a vid? *Revan's Private Lessons at the Academy* —do the Jedi really use their lightsabers—?"

"Aemelie, you're embarrassing her. Don't bring shame to us" Gwen mercifully interrupted. "Look at her—she's blushing like a man."
"I want to marry Carth," Revan said quietly, realizing it was true. Horribly, depressingly true.

Aemelie shrugged at Gwenarius. "Canderous said she'd refuse. I really thought she'd listen to reason." Her eyes narrowed, and she sighed. "If Oerin manages to get blooded perhaps Millifar would consider him."

"My daughter seems overly fond now," Gwen said. "We're fortunate he was raised properly. We'll have to raise your son properly" she said to Revan. "In the old ways. Perhaps in time Aemelie's babe might consider him, if she lives."

"I will decide how to raise my son," Revan answered. I have no idea how to raise a child. I have no idea how to be a mother. The little girl wiggled on her lap and stuffed a hunk of bread into her mouth from the table. Revan wondered if a child so small was supposed to eat something so large but the Mandalorians didn't raise an eyebrow.

Gwenarius shrugged and began to describe Mandalorian weddings. Naturally they involved blood and knives.

Naturally, Red. I thought you'd take off my jaw.

Malak's hollow laughter echoed in her head.

Not real, he's not real. Revan focused on Gwenarius' descriptions as if they were the most important thing in the universe.

The door opened and Millifar came in, braids loose and hair down her back like sheaves of yellow wheat. "We've set up fire circles on the roof, Mother," she said. "For the stupid festival. And the hired slaves are waiting in the ballroom." She glanced at Revan. "If she is going pass as one of them, she should disguise herself and join them soon, lest the others wonder where she came from later. Did she agree to our suit?"

"She did not," Gwen said, with a faint smile on her lips, watching her daughter's face.

"Then you'll need to tie Ordo to Lin in some other way," the girl said, too blandly.

Gwenarius got up from the table. "I'm sure we'll think of something, daughter."
"You look good, Dad." Dustil adjusted the ice pack over his black eye.

It's not every day you end up bailing your son out of an underground CorSec jail—the kind of place where posting 'bail' is more like paying a bribe—but Carth realized he couldn't push Dustil any farther.

*Whatever happened, at least it had nothing to do with Revan. At least he's safe now. Force, I can't believe he's been living down in hellholes like that for the last six months.*

The squalor of the Underground had shocked Carth; and he'd seen a lot of things in his time. But it was the contrast in extremes—the clean luxury of life up here versus the raw desperation in the Underground that shook him to his core.

*Coruscanti sublevels make Taris look like paradise.*

XXX

"Boys will be boys," Malachi D'Reev had said, almost jovial, when they got the call early that morning.

*It had taken half the day, even with the old man's influence, to get Dustil out of that stinking cell. The charges were something about property damage and inciting a public riot on sub level 47.*

"Trumped up," the old man sneered. "They know who he is, they know who you are, and they just want to dip their proboscises." He seemed annoyed.

*It was odd; but for a second, Carth thought the old man looked almost disappointed to find only a sullen Dustil sitting in the corner of a cell—as if he'd expected more.*

No. He was just worried. Worried we'd find Revan. Worried it was some kind of trap. Not disappointed—worried.

XXX

Carth fiddled with the buckles of the elaborate coat again, frowning at his reflection. "I look like a paper Admiral," he muttered. He wished he could get away with wearing something less formal, but Ekkumi had warned him, Coruscanti society expected its most glittering lights to… well, glitter.

"So you really like Captain Ekkumi, huh?" Dustil rubbed his swollen knuckles with his uninjured hand. His ankle was wrapped in bandages and splints and propped up on the couch. Only a sprain, D'Reev's medical droid had assured them. A faint smile played around his son's lips. For a boy who'd spent twelve hours in stir, he looked entirely too pleased with himself. Carth frowned at him again.

*I could kill you for making me worry like that last night. "She's—she's a good woman," he said out loud.*
"Rew's nice, Dad," Dustil said. "And it’s cool you're getting laid. Hey, if I did something bad, would you give up on me like you gave up on Revan?"

"It's not the same thing," Carth tried not to wince at the abrupt change of subject. "I'm proud of you, Dustil."

The boy's smile turned crooked. "No matter what I've done? Or do?"

"You're still my son. No matter what." Even if I still want to kill you for making me worry. "But if you ever pull a stunt like this again, you'll be grounded until you're forty."

Dustil's hand picked at the splint on his ankle. “Yessir,” he muttered. The smile faded from his face.

In its absence, Carth realized how artificial his son's smile had been. “Dustil—is there anything…” he fumbled for words. “Anything you want to tell me?”

His son looked up at him. His eyes were very dark. Eyes like his mother’s. "Do you know anything about Force bonds?"

Carth blinked. That wasn’t what he’d expected. "I've seen them before."

"Revan and Bastila had one, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that's what made them fall?"

"I—I don't know."

XXX

Carth kissed her harder, and they rolled over on the floor of the cockpit, fingers scrabbling at the thin layers of cloth between them.

They’d blasted through the Sith barricade, watched in horror through the rear viewscreen as Malak’s fleet encompassed Taris. Blasted into hyperspace.

They'd left all that death behind them. All that destruction.

They were on the way to Dantooine now—and they'd locked the cockpit door.

His hands ripped her shirt open. “Beautiful,” Carth said, and pulled her back on top. He kissed her shoulder. Her hands tugged at his belt, and her leg slipped between this thighs.

He groaned.

And then, she froze. “Go away," Polla muttered.

Carth pulled back, touched her bare arm tentatively. "Polla?"

" I said, go away!" she hissed. "Get out my fracking head!" Her face twisted. It was as if he wasn't there at all. Her eyes were unfocused, as if she was talking through him, talking into thin air—to no one at all.

" If this isn't what you want, it's okay. I—I understand."
It's too soon, he thought. Too soon for both of us.

“What?” Her eyes were open, staring at him, but it was like she couldn’t see. Her eyes were unfocused, looking past him, looking into thin air. Her lips moved, mouthing words so softly that he couldn’t catch them.

Then, before he could stop her, Polla slammed her head against the durasteel wall of the bulkhead. The sound was horrible: crack of bone against metal. Her head rolled back on her shoulders, loose, a thin line of blood tracing down her temple.

"Go away," she whispered again. "Get out of my head! This is none of your damn business! Some things are fracking private!"

Carth held her tightly, stopping her from doing it again. She twisted in his arms—so strong—but he outweighed her. He rolled over her, held her down. Outside, someone was hammering on the door. He heard Bastila's voice, and behind her, Zaalbar's alarmed growls and Mission's protestations.

"Open the door, please, Carth. I need to speak to Polla now."

"They're busy," Mission giggled.

Polla slammed her head again, this time into the floor. She screamed, a thin, high sound of pain and he heard Bastila gasp.

"Get out of my fracking head, Shan!"

"Slice the lock, Mission," the Jedi ordered. "Slice it now."

Carth pulled Polla onto his lap, wiping the blood away from her eye. She'd reopened the old injury from Taris. Her face was so pale he could see the faint dusting of freckles on the tip of her nose.

He found his voice, somehow. "Security: disengage."

The door slid open.

Polla's eyes opened, green and cold and furious. She sat up in his lap, rubbing her forehead.

Bastila stood in the doorway, arms folded, glaring at them both. "Through our bond I feel what you do. And I told you that Jedi do not form… casual attachments. You must not continue to act like a hormone-crazed adolescent."

The Wookiee growled something too, gesticulating at the Jedi.

When Polla blushed, her nose turned pink. It was pink now. She disengaged herself from Carth's arms and got to her feet, absently pulling the top of her coverall back up over her bare chest. Carth stood up too, realizing his own clothes were in a similar state of disarray.

"I don't know about your Force, sister," he said coldly. "But whatever you just did to Polla, back off. This is none of your damn business."

"I only wish that were true." Bastila's blush gave her two high spots of color, red on her cheeks. "For better or for worse, Polla Organa and I share a Force bond. What one of us feels so does the other. And she is untrained, which compounds the situation. Attachments are dangerous for Jedi, and Polla must learn control before she engages in any… carnal… activities."

"I am no Jedi," Polla interrupted, her voice low and furious. "And I didn't ask to be bonded to you,
Bastila Shan. Even if I do have this Force thing, I'm still me—and I'm an adult. What I choose to do on my own time is none of your business. I don't need you peeking in my thoughts, spying on me…

coming into my dreams...."

Her dreams were always nightmares. That was one of the first things Carth had learned about her. Bastila's expression was grim. "Passion can lead to the dark side and you are woefully unprepared. Irresponsible. You endanger us both." There was a sheen of sweat on the younger woman's forehead.

Carth suddenly had the sensation that behind all their words another battle was being fought between the two women. Out of sight, through the thing they called the Force.

"I dunno," Mission said. "Seems to me this is really none of your biz, Bastila. I think they're kind of cute together."

"Mission, go away," both of them snapped. Their heads turned towards the Twi'lek. Almost in unison.

"Geez, whatever! c'mon Big Z, let's go see what Canderous is doing." The Wookiee waved his arms and followed the Twi'lek girl away down the hall.

"I can do whatever I want," Polla said sullenly.

Bastila flushed more. "You—broadcast your feelings. What you feel, I feel. Do you understand? What you are doing wasn't private. At all."

"Then don't fracking listen," Polla said. "I didn't ask to have you in my head, I didn't ask for the Force. I've lived perfectly well for twenty-eight years without it, and I don't intend to start becoming some kind of celibate, robe-wearing, gasbag now—just because it's awkward for you if I frack Carth."

"I can see your thoughts," the Jedi said, her artificial composure cracking. "You're frightened of what's happening. You cling to the pilot like a child clings to a stuffed toy. Do you think that's the basis for a relationship? Even if I wasn't involved in this—and make no mistake I cannot help but be involved in this—is this really a rational choice? Think of his best interest, if not your own."

"Naturally, you're the expert," Polla snapped. "You're… nineteen standard? Wasn't killing Revan, like, your first Republic mission? First time the Jedi let you out of your cave?"

Bastila paled. "Just—wait. Please, that's all I ask. When we get to Dantooine... perhaps the master's will think of some way to… teach you control. But for now—what you feel, I feel. For my sake, please. Restrain yourself."

"Restrain myself? It's not my bloody fault you're saving yourself for some Jedi hero right out of a holovid," Polla shot back. "I can see him in your damn dreams. Tall guy. Gray robes, brown hair? You dream about him all the time. I thought you said Jedi don't have base urges? Some of the things you imagine him doing seem pretty base to me—" Her eyes narrowed. "And you're jealous. It's not you he likes, is it? He's in love with someone else." She snorted. "Don't blame me for your own shortcomings, Bastila!"

"Our—bond makes things… confused," the Jedi whispered. Her lips tightened, and she pulled out her lightsaber, igniting it. Carth moved forward, protectively, but Polla pulled his arm back.

"Stay out of this, Carth," she muttered. "It's between us." Her voice was cold and strangely empty.
His girl stepped in front of him, facing Bastila. She crossed her arms, and shifted her weight, assuming a defensive stance.

Bastila grimaced. "You cannot win."

Polla’s lips pulled back from her teeth. “We’ll see about that. Not like you’re gonna kill me.”

The Jedi rolled up her sleeve—and brushed the blade’s yellow beam against her own bare forearm, gritting her teeth and pulling it back fast.

The air smelled like scorched skin. Bastila flinched; but it was Polla who screamed, Polla who crumpled to the ground, cradling her arm to her chest.

A hiss and the blade disengaged. Bastila's face was pale with shock, but expressionless. She held out her arm, almost proudly, displaying the angry red weal of the burn stamped on her skin.

"What one of us feels so does the other," she said, through gritted teeth. Healing white light floated like a cloud in her hands, washing over them both. The angry red burn faded. "Do you understand, now?"

"I'll go before your Masters, Bastila." Polla's voice was hoarse and furious. "And I'll learn how to sever this bond. I don't want you in my head."

Carth knelt down to comfort her, but she pushed him away, getting up to her feet again, painfully. Something unspoken seemed to pass between the two women and Bastila moved aside.

"I'm sorry," the Jedi whispered. Polla ignored her and went past, almost at a run. The door slid shut behind her.

"You've got a lot of nerve, sister!" Carth snarled, turning on Bastila.

"I don't expect you to understand." There was an expression of fixed serenity on her face now, as if nothing had happened. "But, as the commander of this mission, I expect you to follow my orders. Stop this—affair, now. It is more dangerous than you realize. For both of you." She stared at the floor as if it was the most interesting thing she'd ever seen. The two spots of color burned in her cheeks. "And for me."

"When we get to Dantooine, you and your masters better have a good explanation for all of this." Carth warned her, furious.

“Trust me,” Bastila murmured. “When we get to Dantooine, I will demand my own answers as well.”

From somewhere down the hallway they heard a man's grunt of surprised pain, and then the sound of something heavy crashing to the ground; followed by a stream of curses.

"You weenka-eyed, mud-flapping fracking kissra! Mind your own damn business, Canderous! Doesn't anyone on this bloody ship have anything else to do, besides think about what Carth and I might—" Polla's voice shifted into another language, Mandalorian, maybe.

There was the sound of running feet, and Mission's excited voice, echoed by Zaalbar's growls of indignation. Another crashing noise—and then the sound of blaster fire.

"This isn't finished," Carth muttered, pushing past Bastila and breaking into a run down the hall.
The Jedi was right behind him.

XXX

On Dantooine, Polla and Bastila came to some kind of accord.

But Polla kept her distance from him after that—until that night in Tatooine, when they were both drunk, and Bastila was already asleep.

"What about the bond?" Carth mumbled, as they lurched out of the cantina. Their feet locked in step, and his arm was around her waist. His lips felt cold, since she’d stopped kissing them. She nuzzled the warmth of his neck.

"Frack it," Polla whispered. "I've learned something since Dantooine. Bastila hides things from me and I can hide things from her." She sounded smug. "I've been waiting for this for a long time, flyboy. No Jedi princess is gonna get between us."

But she had gotten between them.

Afterwards, after the Leviathan, when Bastila fell—when the timbre of Polla’s nightmares changed. When Polla changed to Revan….

XXX

"I've seen what a Force bond can do, son." Carth repeated. His memories were treacherous, his thoughts were traitorous.

Dustil looked away from him and shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "I know. What one person feels, the other one feels too."

"Revan felt Bastila fall," Carth said.

_Sometimes I wonder if that's why she fell too. Sometimes I wonder if it was her fault. Sometimes I wonder if it was mine. Bastila warned me, warned me to stay away from her. She warned us both, but we didn't listen._

"Why are you asking me this now?"

The flat look in Dustil's eyes was painfully familiar. When Morgana looked like that Carth had never known what she was thinking. The look meant that she wasn't going to tell him.

"No reason," Dustil said, shrugging. "Just... you know, Mekel and I can sometimes tell what the other one’s thinking." He rubbed the back of his neck. “It happened on Korriban—the first time. We were roommates. I—I don’t know how."

_Mekel Jin went to meet that computer. Mekel Jin could be with Revan now. Dustil said he was going to use Mekel to find Revan._

The commlink chimed, four chimes, his ride was downstairs.

"You going to be okay, here, son?" Carth stifled his growing feeling of unease.

_D'Reev sent more guards to the building, but this place is a fortress. Dustil won't be able to get out and no one will be able to get in._

Dustil gestured at the tray of snacks on the table, the stack of holochips. "Going to have myself a
party. Sure beats Underground lock-up."

"Did you go to meet Mekel last night, Dustil? Is that where you went?"

His son's eyes opened wide, black and empty like space. "I went to a brothel, Dad." He shrugged. "You know...."

"Boys will be boys," the Senator had said with an amused chuckle.

The commlink chimed again.

"When I get back, we're going to have a talk," Carth said. "Places like that—there are some things... you're too young."

"I'm not a kid," his son said. "I just turned seventeen, remember?"

"I'm not a kid, you old geezer!"

"We're going to talk about this," Carth warned him again.

"Sure," his son said carelessly. "Have fun at your party, Dad."

XXX

The head waiter surveyed his charges, a faint sneer on his lips. "One of you needs to stand by the reception line, offering drinks," he said. "Any volunteers?" The row of liveried staff shifted uncomfortably. None of them seemed very fond of the Mandalorians.

"I'll do it," Revan stepped forward.

The man frowned at her, checking her face against the list on his datapad. "The new girl," he said. "Iphee Daks. Are you sure that you can handle this? I was going to put you on dewback duty. " His nose wrinkled, and Revan had a vision of herself standing by one of the pits turning the spit.

That wouldn't work at all.

"I'm sure," she said calmly, pulling at the Force to ensure the certainty in her words. She'd been working on the calm all day.

This is only a dry run; this is the easiest thing I will have to face in the days ahead.

It was a relief to be anonymous, hidden under the absurd holomask that made her feel like a cheap starlet. She shook her head, and almost felt the yellow hair move around her face. The face might be vapid, but it was a very good holomask. She smiled, and the mask did too.

"Fine," the head waiter said. "Take the tray, the kegs are already set up." His nose wrinkled again at the word 'keg.' Obviously, the man preferred champa and wine; but they were serving Tarisian ale. It packed quite a punch, and intoxicated people were easier to influence.

Gwenarius had wanted to serve something more traditionally Mandalorian; but fermented moffa milk and blood was an acquired taste and it would do no good to hand out something that no one would drink.

The atmospherics kept the air on the roof still and quiet under the blanket of stars. It was one of those rare, clear Coruscanti nights; and the shimmering nebula of Core stars melted into the skyline, almost as bright as day.
The Mandalorians had set up fire pits: one for each clan. The clan banners hung above: Lin, Ordo, Rialis and Zal. The flames burned merrily, crackling around the roast carcasses of dewbacks imported from Tatooine. In the center of the roof, a spiraling staircase led to the ballroom below. This banquet area at the top of the building's spire was shared by all of the embassy tenants; and most of the staff were hired help. Coruscanti natives, dressed in formal black and white uniforms, carrying trays of champa flutes and Mandalorian delicacies on silver trays.

The Bothan reporter for the diplomatic channel of Coruscant HoloNet was setting up his equipment. Three camera drones hovered above his head. His Rodian stylist surveyed the scene with a slight sneer on her snout. The Mandalorians weren't a big story in terms of the press, and both of them looked bored and irritable.

The headwaiter clapped his hands. "Ten minutes to showtime, people. Ghow and Mia, you're on spits."

Revan picked up the tray smoothly, balancing it with one hand as if she'd been doing this all her life. The crystal glasses clinked.

*Clink of glasses and the murmur of conversation....*

She did not let her step falter. She made her way down the spiral staircase, trying not to think about another staircase and another party, long ago.

Xxx

"So, this is Revan Starfire. The little Jedi you've been telling me about?" The old man's eyes were hooded and gray like his son's.

"Surely, you've seen her picture in your intelligence reports, Father?" Malak held her arm lightly, fingers resting on her pulse in a way that made her heart race. She'd dreamed of being in a place like this with him.

"The holos didn't do her justice." His hand was warm when it took her fingers, and brought them lightly to his lips.

"It's an honor to finally meet you, Senator D'Reev." Her cheeks felt hot, and suddenly she felt clumsy, trying to return his intricate bow.

The old man drew them both into a corner of the room, making it seem the most natural thing in the world. "I'd like to know more about you, child. My son is utterly besotted." He chuckled. "Should we worry he might forsake his Jedi vows?"

"We're Jedi together," she said. "So I don't think so."

Malak was only holding her arm with the lightest of fingers, but she could feel his pride in her overwhelming his dislike of his father.

The old man seemed harmless to Revan: careworn, with the responsibilities of the Galactic Senate weighing heavily upon his shoulders.

Xxx

You must remember this, Red. It's important.

XXX
The tray slipped, and the crystal glasses slid dangerously, then righted themselves as if steadied by an invisible arm.

*You're not here.*

Her step almost faltered on the stairs and one of the Mandalorians wearing full battle armor standing in a line along the wall of the entranceway looked up. His head nodded slightly, and Revan regained her balance.

"Ah," said Oerin Lin brightly, from his place in the reception line at the door. "Here's our server now." The Coruscanti party planner they'd hired looked up from her datapad, frowning a little at Revan's appearance.

"She looks cheap," the Donovian said flatly, "really *not* the right thing for a first impression."

Revan pulled at the hem of her short bell-shaped skirt with her free hand, and wondered again why she hadn't followed her first impulse and made Mission get her another holomask. One with a face less like an adult vid star.

"I think she looks charming. And harmless." Oerin's smile burned like a nova.

Revan bobbed a quick Coruscanti courtesy, automatically keeping her back straight and her head high. "Thank you, Citizen Lin," she murmured.

*Don't do anything stupid, Rev.* Oerin's thoughts in her head were cold.

No one had bothered to tell him about their excursions the night that they landed until they came back. He was still sulking about this, and about her refusal of the Ordo proposal.

"No one looks at servants anyway," he continued blithely, brushing the Donovian's arm with his hand. Millifar frowned at that and poked him with her elbow.

The two of them were clothed in cloth of gold, stiff and formal adaptations of typical Mandalorian festival wear. They looked, Revan thought, rather like a prince and princess from some exotic land, transported to a Coruscanti dreamscape.

The lights above them on the black domed ceiling twinkled constellations from different parts of the Rim, and the plain walls had been transformed with holostills of typical Mandalorian life.

*Or rather, the parts of typical Mandalorian life that do not involve basilisks, sacking worlds, and clan blood feuds.*

On the wall where the kegs waited, a train of dewbacks ambled over a sandy dune. Across from that, an image of Mandalorian women dancing the traditional sand circle, their swords flashing in a pattern that looked more decorative than lethal.

Mekel was already standing near the keg, wearing a suit of red battle armor. His face was light brown and his hair sandy blonde. His features twisted under the holomask.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Nineteen," she said back.

"Nineteen?"

"Your nineteenth. Apology. It's okay," Revan told him. Again. "I shouldn't have let you go alone. I
should have come with you."

"That would have been worse," the boy said. "But I don't think Dustil's told anyone anything."

"And you don't think he knows anything." Revan continued filling the glasses from the tap. If this plan fails, maybe I can get a job as a cantina waitress. On some world where they've never heard of Revan Starfire. Like maybe in the Unknown Reaches.

"Zaal's going to be fine. It wasn't your fault. At least you all got back here safely."

They'd made it back a few hours after dawn, filthy and covered in blood and blaster burns. Mission had taken down part of the transportation grids to cover their tracks. Dustil had been arrested, Mission said. He'd been their distraction—willingly or not, Revan still wasn't sure. Mekel and Zaal had been in bad shape. Neither of them would let her try to heal them with the Force, and Mekel was only standing up now thanks to the amount of stims Canderous had given him.

Their kolto reserves were almost exhausted. And we haven't even reached the part of the plan where my enemies start sending assassins after me.

"You—you aren't what I expected," Mekel muttered, ducking his head.

"Why are you helping us?" Revan asked him. She handed him a glass of ale to fabricate a reason why they'd be talking, and stood with her back to the kegs, surveying the room.

The Mandalorian drummers were sitting at the far wall, the great brujaril drums between their knees, and the horn players behind them began to tune the rujaks, creating a cacophony of booming notes. Later, there'd be dancing.

Three more holocams were set up down here to catch the footage.

"I told you," he said, looking at the floor. "Because of Him."

Him is Malak. For some reason Mekel is loyal to me because he was loyal to Malak. Malak, whom I killed.

"I killed Malak," Revan said bluntly, wondering why she always felt the need to point out painfully obvious facts to remind people of things that she'd done that it might be better if they'd forget.

My new speech to the Senate: Yes, I was the Sith Lord Darth Revan who started a civil war, attacked Republic worlds, stole a third of your fleet, destroyed the kolto, and devastated the galaxy; but now I'm a nice person. Please give me my son and let me be a Senator. And Carth Onasi, your favorite war hero—I want him too.

"I know," the boy said. He took a cautious sip of the ale, and Revan frowned warningly at him. Don't get drunk, she thought at him, pushing with the Force. His mind was a blank wall made of paper and she couldn't tell if he heard her or not. But she wouldn't break that wall. What it concealed was really none of her business. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what lay behind it.

I don't understand you, Mekel Jin. Even under the holomask his eyes reminded her of a kissra lamb's going to the slaughterhouse. Is that just my conscience bothering me? Because of what
Mission told me about the bomb in his collar?

I don't want to use it.

"Places!" The Donovian moved to the center of the room clapping her hands. Her voice cut through the band's warm-up, thanks to the headset she wore slung over a pointed ear. The Mandalorians milled around, sorting out suddenly into precise, almost military lines. Gwenarius and Aemelie moved over to Oerin's side, followed by the Rialis headwoman, the oldest Clan Mother in attendance. All of them were dressed in simple clan robes, in stark contrast to the opulence of Oerin and Millifar's dress.

Simple people happy to have their true sovereign returned to them.

In such a setting even the warriors in full battle armor didn't seem that out of place. There were only five of them, the valiant efforts of a once-proud people to show honor to their lost way of life. Or at least, that was supposed to be the impression.

No one was visibly armed.

It begins, Oerin said in her thoughts. He was already speaking charmingly to the first guest, the secretary to Byss's senator. None of the senators would attend themselves of course. Senators were not supposed to be swayed by open displays of currying favor; but several had sent representation. The Fleet and diplomatic invitations had been much easier to choose. There were several ambassadors from worlds that might feel some sympathy towards the Mandalorian cause. As well as some that would come to gloat over their former conquerors' suffering.

The best intentions and the worst, Revan thought. All we need to do is bring them both to the same cause. Our cause. She reached for the Force, ducking underneath Oerin's mind like an underlay of cortosis and let the peace and goodwill radiate outwards.

Gwenarius had wanted to show holostills of suffering children on the walls, but Canderous had convinced her that subtle reminders were better.

Mekel's mind brushed against hers tentatively, and she glanced at him.

"Let me help," he mouthed. He gave her a rueful smile. "I can help."

Revan nodded at him, and felt his strength in the Force join to theirs.

Mechanically, she stepped forward and offered their first guests glasses of potent Tarisian ale.

XXX

"Sorry we're late."

Carth slipped into the door of the luxury cruiser and sat down on the couch beside her. Rew was beautiful, clad in a gown of fabric that looked like silvered black mist, her hair coiled and speckled with jewels.

"It's fine," he murmured, kissing her cheek.

"I wanted to thank you, Captain Onasi." The woman sitting next to Jiya Sand was almost unrecognizable. Two days ago she'd been wearing a faded dress two decades out of fashion, her graying hair lank and loose around her ravaged face. But now, Helena Shan was dressed in a conservative orange gown with a choker of Corellian starflowers, and a fringed black mourning
shawl tied around her shoulders. Her hair had been dyed a lustrous brown and cut into simple, yet elegant shag around her cheeks. "I wanted to thank you for sending me the holocron. It means..." she dabbed at her eyes with an embroidered swatch of eridu. "It means more than you will ever know."

Jiya smiled at Helena indulgently. "She's like a new woman," he said to Carth, squeezing her hand. "I want to thank you too."

"The holocron," Carth echoed, thinking of Mission and Revan and the Kashyyyk computer.

"Seeing those memories of my husband! Talking to him again! It was as if—as if he was really there with me. It gave us a chance to say things, things we should have said long ago—before she came between us."

She. She means her daughter. Bastila. Helena Shan looked better, but those lines of bitterness were still there, etched around her mouth as deep as scars.

"The holocron of your husband," Carth echoed again. His mind skipped like a scratched disc.

Xxx

Tatooine. In the Krayt dragon's cave.

"Well, Bastila?" Polla shot the dark-haired Jedi a look and tossed something that glittered in the air to her. The shorter woman’s hand reached out and caught it, almost automatically. Her fingers tightened in a fist and she slid it into her pocket.

"Don't say it," she said crisply, turning her back on all of them. "I'm not giving it to her. She doesn't deserve it. She doesn't deserve his memories."

"She's your mother," Polla argued. "Doesn't matter if she drives you nuts or not. You still owe it to her." her voice trailed off suddenly and she rubbed her temples. "It's here—" she said, moving deeper into the cave. "It's—different than the ones on Dantooine and Kashyyyk, almost dead but—can you hear it, Bastila? It's singing."

"I hear it," the Jedi murmured, face twisting in distaste.

"Are you okay?" Carth asked. Bastila shot him a wide-eyed glance; as if she'd forgotten he was there at all.

"I'm fine," Bastila replied, swallowing hard. She straightened her shoulders and followed Polla into the shadows. The smuggler's delighted whoop of glee echoed through the cavern and ahead of them a now-familiar globe of blue light sprung into view, bisected by new coordinates.

"Observation, Master: While dancing and combat training are close cousins in several cultures, you may want to stop jumping up and down and screaming before the hostiles get closer. Such actions make you an unchallenging target for ranged attacks."

"Hostiles?" Polla stopped trying to make Bastila and Mission dance with her and moved closer to Carth, her hand going to the saber at her belt in one smooth motion.

"Dark Jedi," Bastila whispered. "I should have sensed them before, but I was too unfocused. I shouldn't have let my emotions blind us like this—I should have realized they'd come."

"Shh," Carth whispered, drawing his blasters and trying to get in front of Polla. She moved to
block him stubbornly, the silk of her topknot brushing his chin.

"They feel like I should... they feel familiar—how?" Polla sounded scared.

"Our bond," the Jedi said flatly. "I know one of them that approaches. He—trained with me. He is very dangerous. Whatever he says. You must not listen."

HK began to lob grenades at the cave's entrance. The explosions lit up the advancing figures—five of them—but seemed to have no other effect. Shielded. Carth began firing, and the hiss of red blades began deflecting the bolts.

The two women moved in, smoothly twirling their double blades. Behind them, Mission activated her stealth belt, slipping into the shadows.

"Bastila Shan." The man's voice was amused. He was smooth-shaven, with a narrow dark beard, and his metal breastplate glinted red in the light of his saber's blade. "Lord Malak will be pleased when I bring you to him."

"You cannot win, Bandon," Bastila hissed, charging him head on.

Polla faltered, and Carth moved in to cover her.

"We already have won. But what I don't understand—" the Dark Jedi said, countering Bastila's attack, and pushing an advance, "—is how you found the Star Map in the first place."

"Who are you?" Polla's voice rang out through the cavern. She sounded confused. Her lightsaber dangled loose in her hands and she looked at it as if she had never seen it before.

At the sound of her voice, Bandon froze. He stared at her.

Then he began to laugh.

His laughter was terrible—but short-lived. Bastila cut him down in a heartbeat then advanced on the others. Carth started firing too.

In the subsequent chain of events on Tatooine, the one he remembered most vividly had nothing to do with the Shan holocron.

"I think always loved you, flyboy," Polla said softly that night, tangled in his arms. "From the second you shoved me into that escape pod. You were like some holovid hero—"

XXX

"We found it on Tatooine," Carth said out loud. Rew patted his hand. He realized his mouth was hanging open and he closed it, struggling for composure. We found it on Tatooine, but I didn't have it. I don't know what happened to it, but I didn't have it. I didn't send it to her.

Who could have sent it to her?

Revan? I know she's here, she has to be here, but why would she do that?

"It came in the post this morning," Helena murmured. "To tell you the truth I wasn't sure I felt up to this, but Jiya was being so persistent—and—what you did, Captain Onasi, saving this for me—so kind of you."

"Carth's a good man," Rew Ekkumi said lightly.
"I hope the Mandalorians serve some kind of food that's edible," Jiya said. "I'm starving."

XXX

*Mandalorians are harmless, you love Mandalorians. See how charming Oerin Lin is? Look at their quaint and time-honored customs.*

Two of the Zals were enacting a traditional women's sword circle in the center of the room. The bells on their ankles jangled a tune that was almost lost over the din of chatter, and their golden festival swords flashed in the twinkling lights cast from the overheads.

"In my day," the Headwoman of Rialis muttered to Revan, accepting another glass of Tarisian ale, "Women's dances were never seen by barbarians. But I wouldn't expect you to understand, Outlander Fett." Her wrinkled face scowled.

*At least she's calling me Fett. Then again, she's calling a blonde woman dressed as a servant Fett in front of a bunch of Coruscanti dignitaries.*

Thankfully, the party swirled around them, and her remarks went unnoticed.

"Excuse me," a tall Eosian man smiled at Revan. "Could I have another glass of ale?"

"Of course, citizen," Revan said, batting her eyes. "It's almost as good as Eosian brandy, isn't it?" She pushed with the Force. *"Mandalorians and the Eosians are such close neighbors. Don't you think it's time, after centuries of bloodshed to find peace between your two peoples?"

His face went blank for a moment and then he smiled, his eyes a little glazed. "After so many years of war, we should have peace," he echoed, brow ridges wrinkling with the novelty of the thought.

Revan beamed at him. *Another one down.*

Mekel nudged her elbow. "Blue says he's a minor secretary," he muttered. "No real influence."

She shrugged. *It's something.*

The headwoman of Rialis cleared her throat. "Revan, after the barbarians leave, I need to discuss Ordo's suit with you. I don't think you realize how precarious Clan Lin's position is. Headwoman Octiva Lin did a poor job instructing you to our ways."

Her smile slipped. Behind her, Mekel Jin coughed.

"Did that old woman just call you Revan?"

"I'm not sure," Revan said, trying to open her eyes as wide as possible. "I don't speak Mandalorian—did she? She seems senile."

"She calls everyone Revan," Mekel broke in, chuckling a little too loudly. He moved awkwardly in the armor. *One look at him and you can tell he's not used to it. We should have put him in robes.*

But none of the barbarians—guests—seemed to notice.

"Come on, Mother Rialis, Mother Ordo was wondering if you'd check on the babes."

He glanced back once, and then led the headwoman away.

Canderous moved into his spot, smoothly and silently. The Eosian glanced at him, suddenly
nervous again.

"I think it's just charming," Revan drawled, "the way they've dressed up in their old battle armor, don't you?"

"Charming," the Eosian echoed, blankly. He blinked. "So... you're name's not Revan," he laughed. "What are you doing after the party?"

"It is considered extremely poor taste in Mandalorian culture to try and take advantage of another clan's slaves," Canderous rumbled in Eosian.

_Not helping, that, Canderous. Just shut up and stand there._

Revan tried to look dim-witted. The Force sang around them, and the people at the party were like little spots of light, some glowing more brightly than others, but she could feel Lin focusing them into a dance, a pattern of peace and harmony and balance and love. He tapped into her power and it seemed like the room was bathed in a clean blue light.

She looked over at Oerin, and to her Force-enhanced senses it was like he was glowing, brighter than a sun. She felt a shiver of fear.

_How in the hell does he do that?_

_Like I'd tell you, Rev._ His thought was amused and lazy. He seemed terribly pleased with himself, in his element in the same way he'd been in the Sith Embassy on Manaan, the same way he'd been in the Mandalorian battle circle. There were lizards on Widek, she remembered dimly from some long-forgotten lesson, which changed their skin to match their environment, grew gills to swim in water, and wings to fly in the air.

Lin was like that: no matter where you threw him, he was at home.

Now the heir to Mandalore was greeting a party of four now, with Millifar at his side.

The men were still partially blocked by the doorway, but the shorter woman, dressed in a confection of silver and black that hugged her graceful curves like a glove, turned and said something to the other one. The second woman was older, and wore a Coruscanti mourning shawl over her orange dress. Her brown hair hid most of her face and she smiled, pushing the hair back. It was a brittle smile that didn't reach her violet eyes and she headed straight for Revan, and the tray of crystal glasses that clinked with the murmur of soft conversation and—and Oerin stiffened suddenly, almost imperceptibly—but she saw it out of the corner of her vision even as her eyes registered the woman's familiar face.

So like her daughter's face, if Bastila had lived to be old. But this woman wasn't even that old. She looked better than she had on Tatooine; but her hands trembled a little, just as they had on Tatooine, and she reached for a glass.

"I've always been fond of Tarisian ale," Helena Shan said to Revan, granting her a plastic smile with a bright red mouth.

The glasses rattled because her arm was shaking.

Xxx

_Someone was asking her a question._
"Can I ask you some questions, Padawan Starfire? My son and I play games, you see. I ask him questions and he gives me answers. The Jedi play similar games. Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

Xxx

Don't lose it now, Red. What are you doing with the Mandalorians.

The blue light darkened a little, and Revan struggled for composure.

It's just Helena Shan. It's just Helena Shan. She looks... better than I expected. She has no idea who I am. If I don't open my mouth and say anything, if I just stand here and be pretty and vacant and be a servant, hired help, pour more ale, set the tray down, turn around slowly—

Oerin turned around and glanced past her at Canderous. His hand moved in an old signal that she half-recognized. It meant something like, rally to the General now, she thought—and that was her last rational thought because when Oerin turned she saw the man behind him.

The man behind him was Carth.

Carth, dressed in something absurd, that glittered looked like it might have once been a Republic uniform before some Sullustan seamstress covered it with a million tiny sequins. Carth, holding the arm of the beautiful woman in black and silver.

The other man with him was gray and balding and wore a similar costume, only with General's bars.

That's Corporal Jiya Sand, Serroco, Groundside command. Capable, but inefficient, chanted the part of her memory that only seemed to exist to taunt her with useless information.

"W-we didn't invite him," she said out loud, backing away. We didn't invite him! Why is he here? Oh frack oh hell, Carth!

She felt the Force splinter as her emotions twisted like a vortex.

His grief and hate was black and rotting like a shroud. If she reached farther she knew she'd find her name at the center of it.

"C-Carth." Her traitorous voice seemed to exist on another plane, one that she had no control of. Her hand fell back against the small table she'd set the tray on and it tilted. Crystal shattered on the floor. Heads turned. Carth's eyes, everyone's eyes.

"Drunk," Canderous mumbled. She watched Carth's eyes narrow slightly at the sound of that voice, and then he shook his head, as if he'd imagined it.

Oerin Lin appeared to be telling the woman and Jiya Sand a funny joke and the woman took his arm and leaned against him, with the familiarity of an old friend. Her accent was Telosian.

An old friend or a lover.

You are not going to spoil my party, Revan. Oerin's thoughts were like a whiplash. So, he's here, get over it.

Helena Shan's hazy eyes watched the exchange. "He is handsome, isn't he?" she confided to Revan. She spoke with the tones of someone used to confiding in everyone. Bartenders, servomech droids,
lamp posts, shopkeepers and servants.

"Mmmm," Revan said, nodding.

"He was in love with my daughter, you know," the woman continued, in a breathless whisper.

*He was not! And your daughter was only in love with herself and my husband!*

The thought was so strange and venomous Revan wasn't even sure it was her own.

Glass crunched under her feet, and she realized that several of the guests were staring at her, as if there was some reaction they'd expect from a waitress besides standing there with her fists clenched at her side gaping at the Republic's favorite war hero.

*You're not the only one. Nine hells, half the room's in love with him. I don't understand the appeal. He looks terrible.*

Oerin laughed out loud and the cluster of guests around him laughed too. Carth's laughter sounded forced, and he glanced in her direction again, a faint frown on his mouth.

*Stay out of his mind. I don't care how you twist the others, but stay out of his mind, Oerin.*

*His mind's a mess. I'd do you a favor cleaning it up.*

*An order.* Revan sent the thought at him so hard that the Lin flinched.

*As you wish, Lord Revan.*

*Go to hell!*

Oerin laughed again.

Mekel was coming back through the door now, pushing through the guests. He looked at her, edging cautiously around Carth and his date

"Are you okay?" he murmured. "Blue says she had no idea. The woman’s Rew Ekkumi. Captain Ekkumi. She’s one of the Mandalorian advocates. Telosian. Well-respected in the Fleet."

*I don't care who she is!*

C Barth was whispering something in the woman's ear and the woman smiled at him, a familiar smile. *A lover's smile.* The strange tension in the room seemed to ease, and she saw the beads of sweat on Mekel's face, shimmering underneath the holo mask as he tried to replace her strength in the Force.

Revan fought for control again, for composure.

Canderous nudged her arm. "The glass. Clean it up," he muttered in the Huttese street dialect they'd used before. She turned around and looked at him blankly. "Servants do that," he said. "Clean up the glass. And focus. We'll get him back."

Helena Shan was drinking another glass of ale.

The Donovian party planner had summoned another liveried waitress to serve the guests and was
making sweeping motions at Revan, frowning angrily.

Revan knelt, trying to keep her dignity in the too-short skirt, and began sweeping the pieces of glass onto the silver tray. She took a deep breath.

*This is all going to be fine, I'm fine.*

*Mandalorians are happy peaceful people and you all want to vote in their sovereignty. You love Mandalorians, look at their graceful dances. Look at the shining faces of their adorable children.*

Revan balanced the tray on one hand, and rose to her feet.

*Take the broken glass to the kitchen, throw it away. Get more glasses. Don't think. Don't think and don't look.*

One of her hands was bleeding and she wiped it carelessly on the black skirt.

*You all love Mandalorians. Look at what happy, peaceful people they are. Look at the shining faces of their adorable—*

She was halfway across the room when he caught her arm.

XXX

The blonde man—barely more than a kid—was telling them a long, rambling story about traditional Mandalorian dances. Helena Shan was on her third cup of ale, and the waitress who'd dropped the tray was kneeling on the floor, sweeping pieces of broken glass onto the tray with her bare hand.

*She's going to cut herself like that. Doesn't she have any sense?*

Carth frowned. There was something—off about this whole thing. Something that didn't seem right.

"What clans are represented here?" he whispered in Ekkumi's ear.

She flashed him one of her trademark million-watt smiles. "All of them except Wies," she said. "The remains of Wies went out beyond Unknown Space. They're already calling them the lost clan."

*And I suppose we had our share to do with that, Carth thought sadly. Seed bombs in their atmosphere.*

"Ordo?" he asked her. It was impossible—and yet—how was it impossible?

Ekkumi shrugged. "I suppose."

The blond kid—the Mandalore himself or whatever he was, caught his arm. "It's an honor to meet you, Captain Onasi."

Carth shook him away absently, looking past him.

"You might as well try to stop the sea, Oerin," the girl dressed in gold muttered in Mandalorian. "Some fates you can't meddle in, Fett witch or not. I'm pleased to meet you too, Republic death bringer," she continued, still in Mandalorian. "You look much better than you did the other night; although I still think she is a fool not to just marry my father."
The boy coughed. "He speaks Mandalorian, Milli."

"Really?" The girl flushed. "Oh. Well that should make things easier when he comes to his senses."

Carth looked past her, smiling politely. There was something—

The waitress got up, balancing the tray in one smooth gesture above her head. She rose fluidly to her feet. She moved like a trained dancer—a movement completely in contrast with her vacuous, blonde face. Her absurd lips were painted pink, and her eyes were wide and round, with a look of perpetual surprise. Her walk was at odds with the face and costume too: long-legged and determined. She glanced at him—right at him—and then coolly walked past, plowing a line between the guests with surgical precision.

The crowd parted before the waitress like wheat under a roto-scythe. Almost absent-mindedly, she wiped her bleeding hand on the short skirt that she was wearing. The skirt showed off her legs. They were muscular, almost too long for her torso. Despite her delicate frame, those legs propelled her forward with a fighter’s determination. The perfect combination of grace and power.

_Impossible._

Xxx

*She'd won the duel. Polla Organa, the smuggler from Deralia, known briefly as the 'Mysterious Stranger,' had killed Bendak Starkiller.*

*Hordes of screaming fans surrounded her as she came off the dueling ring floor. Her arm was badly slashed and bleeding, but she didn't seem to notice the pain. Her eyes were fever-bright, and she came towards him, parting the crowd easily just by walking as if she expected them all to move out of her way.*

_To a sentient, they all did.*

"You're bleeding," Carth said. It wasn't what he meant to say at all. He meant to say, 'how could you do anything this stupid?' But the light in her eyes and the smile on her face made that thought inconsequential.

_Nothing else seemed to exist in the room except the two of them._

*There was a freckle on her ankle. A constellation of freckles really, most faint like far-away stars, but one was larger and shaped like the map of some place he'd never been.*

The waitress had a brown splotch in the same place. She was too far away now for him to see if it was the same.

He had to see. He had to know.

It only took ten steps and he was across the room, holding her arm. He twisted it around, to see the underside.

*A thin white line ran along the wrist and disappeared into the sleeve of her white blouse.*

Carth found his voice, somehow. Thin and strained. "All those battles and only one scar."

"I think I had more, once." The same voice that haunted him in his dreams. Soft now, barely a whisper. His hand tightened on her arm. "Sometimes I remember... having more."
"I thought you'd come for me."

"I did—but I couldn't—it wasn't safe." She still held the tray full of broken glass above her head.

She hadn't stopped walking. Carth didn't let go of her arm. She didn't look back. He walked alongside her, ignoring the curious glances and whispers of the party guests. With a soldier's awareness he heard the tramp of armored feet behind them.

"Send them away," he breathed in her ear.

The lump of permacrete was in his pocket. It was always in his pocket, even when he slept. They hadn't screened for weapons or explosives at the door.

Typical Mandalorian arrogance.

She said nothing out loud, she didn't miss a step, but he heard the blonde man's voice behind them calling out something in Mandalorian too fast for him to catch and the tramp of armored feet stopped.

She pushed open a swinging door with one deft movement of her hip. Her grace made his heart ache. The false yellow hair fell over her false blue eyes. The lashes were impossibly long and black. He followed her inside. They were in a commercial kitchen. A few other black and white-liveried waitresses were stacking things on trays. Her pink bow of a mouth shook, and her chin trembled.

He didn't want to look at it.

"Holomask? Or surgery?"

"Holomask," she said quietly.

"Take it off."

He heard her indrawn breath as if he'd hurt her.

"It's not safe." She pulled away from him and put the tray down, unsteadily, on the counter. She turned back to him. He stared at her arms, they were smooth and pale and unmarked, save for the scar. They'd been marked with dark lines before. He wondered if this was an illusion too.

"Take it off, Revan."

One of the waitresses dropped something. He heard it shatter.

"Is that Carth Onasi?"

"Did he say Revan?"

She looked past him at their audience.


This was no good; they were too close to the civilians outside.

"What's upstairs?"
"The roof," she answered.

"Is it empty?"

She took a deep shuddering breath and backed into the wall. Her hands were shaking. He covered them with his own, pinning her against the wall. Their faces were so close now, and her false face stared back at his, shocked and round and vacant. There were tears in her blue eyes, only a faint tell-tale shimmer around them as evidence that they weren't real.

"No," she whispered. "More servants… some of the guests—and the children."

He couldn't stand looking at her face. It wasn't her face, and it should be her face.

"Take the mask off, Revan."

"Let go of my hands."

"You're a Lord of the Sith, since when do you need your hands?" his voice was hard, and she winced, that fake expression on that vapid pink face.

Her blue eyes closed. Then the field flickered across her features and her eyes were green, her hair a smooth red cap that fell across her brow. It had grown since he'd seen her last. Her chin was pointed, and her cheekbones were wide, and her nose was slightly broader at the base than the brow.

It was her face again. Polla's face.

Standing so close he could see faint lines of silver, almost like scars, that rayed out from her eyes like the shadow of some terrible sun. They made her face inhuman. But in some strange way, they made her even more beautiful.

"Is this another mask?" Carth asked her. "You look different than the last time I saw you."

"So do you," she whispered. Her eyes pleaded with him. Pleading, lying eyes. Keeping her pinned against the wall, he looked around the room. There was another door at the far side. One of the waitresses was still there, cowering in the corner. He ignored her. Not important.

"Where does that go?" Carth demanded, jerking his head in the direction of the door.

"Fire stairs," Revan answered. Too quickly.

Of course, she'd know. They'll have this place mapped and plotted like a battleground. This is a battle. This is some part of her plan. This is something I must stop.

"Move."

Somewhere in the background, he heard someone gasp, and the sound of running feet. That waitress, he thought to himself. It didn't really matter. He watched her eyes track the movement behind them, and her face tightened with some kind of resolve.

CARTH dropped her hands.

It would be now, he thought. Now she'd turn on him and strike him down and it would be over. No need to make the decision. Let her make it.

Let this be over.
Instead she walked to the door and stared at it. There was the click of a lock and it slid open.

"Shame you didn't know you could do that lock trick on Taris," he said.

Her head tilted back at him with the ghost of a sad smile. "Would have made petty theft easier, I suppose."

He followed her into the echoing stairwell. One flight up and countless flights down.

XXX

Carth Onasi wandered off after the yellow-haired schutta. Rew Ekkumi looked rather upset.

"Men are dogs," Helena told her, trying to be kind. The room sparkled lazily, and she felt at peace. It was nice to be at a party again, it had been several months since she'd been invited to any social events. In the beginning, after Bastila's death there had been so many invitations; but they'd dried up of late, as the Coruscanti society that had embraced her so readily at first, withdrew.

At least Jiya was still loyal.

She gave him a fond glance, and he patted her arm, absently, looking off in the direction of the doors where Carth had vanished.

The golden-haired Mandalorian man came over to them beaming. He was barely more than a child, but extremely attractive, she thought. The girl at his side would have been lovely too, were it not for her peasant features. She was biting her lip and looking nervous.

Poor dear, she's probably not used to society.

"Helena Shan," the golden-haired boy smiled. Such a kind smile, she could practically feel his goodwill.

At his side, the girl said something. She sounded concerned.

The boy shook her off and took Helena's arm in one hand and Rew's in the other.

"It's marvelous to meet you all," he said, smiling even wider.

"Wonderful to meet you too," Helena replied, politely. "What should we call you? Is there an appropriate term of address?"

"Call me Oerin," he said. "The correct term would be Fett Lin, but we're friends. You can call me Oerin." He gave her an intimate smile. They were friends, she realized. He understood her, and she felt comforted by that. Mandalorians were kind and good people. It was a pity there'd been a war and such tragic misunderstandings before.

One of the Mandalorians in battle armor came over to them. He was little more than a child too, fair hair capping a dark face. He was the only one in armor not wearing a helm.

"Oerin," he whispered, glancing at them nervously. There was sweat on his brow and it seemed to make his skin almost shimmer, strangely. "It's going to hell—fast."

Oerin backhanded him lightly, and the boy staggered, almost falling over.

"Insolence will not be tolerated, boy."
"Do something!" the boy hissed back, stumbling.

"I am," Oerin replied coolly. "Just help or get out. But stop talking if you can't be more discreet."

The boy just looked at them all.

"Oh, shit, Blue," he said, inexplicably.

XXX

The stairwell was empty, and the walls were double thick. Sealed against fires and shielded from explosives.

_Something that can work both ways_, he thought emptily.

Carth reached in his pocket and turned the switch. There was an audible click that sounded loud as a blaster bolt.

Revan's eyes followed his movement and then returned to his face. Hers was still, almost expressionless.

"How long?" she asked.

"Sixty seconds."

She nodded and bit her lip. "I can't read your thoughts. I don't want to make you do anything. But I can't let this happen." She stared at her hands. "I need to live. Not for you—for—someone else."

"The galaxy might be better off if you didn't." Carth hated his voice for saying the words, hated himself for wasting this last minute. He wanted to take her in his arms and then have it all be over.

_That's what you should have done on the Star Forge_, his inner voice mocked. _But you took the coward's way. You thought you were a hero._

"I'm sorry." Revan held out her hand and tilted it. The slight vibration of the permacrete's timer stopped.

"Fused the core," she said, her voice empty. "Detonator's useless now. But you could probably throw it at me if that would make you feel better."

"It doesn't." He just stared at her.

"How is my son?"

The question caught him off guard. _She knows, how does she know? _"He's—he's fine. He's... he's a good kid."

Her green eyes were filling with tears, darkening her red lashes. When her hair had been black he'd wondered at those lashes, the freckles on her face, why she kept dying her hair black.

"Carth, D'Reev's done something to you. You were kidnapped. And then—something happened on a ship on the way to Coruscant. A ship called the _Pearl_. Malachi D'Reev wants to destroy me. He's using you. But I'm going to win, and I'm taking Malachor back." Her eyes dropped. "And you. If you'll... if you'll have me."

"Revan." His voice was rough. He didn't know what else to say.
He could hear voices arguing about something from behind the door they'd just passed through, but the duracrete was double-thick and he couldn't understand what they were saying.

"If you betray me to D'Reev now, it will be an inconvenience for me, but in the end it will change nothing. If you stand by me, it will ruin your career in the Fleet. I think. If you—if you care about that now." She took a deep breath. "If you go to D'Reev and confront him, he might try and hurt you, or Dustil. I can make him pay for it, but I can't stop him. Not yet."

"Korrie told me that I loved you and I didn't really understand but I—" Carth stopped speaking.

Revan's face was completely blank. "Korrie?"

"Your son."

Her mouth twitched. "Korrie? I—in my head I call him Mal, in my dreams I call him Mal."

_The same name as your dead husband, Darth Malak._

Carth thought he'd gotten over that old pain, but it flared up again, like a wound.

The voices on the other side of the door grew louder. Revan took his hand. "Come on," she said, moving up the stair, dragging him up the stairs.

He glanced back down. She followed his gaze. "Captain Rew Ekkumi, Corporal Jiya Sand, the heir to Mandalore, Canderous, and his wife Gwen are having a small disagreement about whether or not to send a search party after the hero of the Republic who seems to have disappeared along with their clumsy waitress." She frowned and took a deep breath. "And... there's trouble. Others... they're not sure what they saw. They're talking. The guests...soon everyone will know. Let's go to the roof. I—I need some air."

"General Jiya Sand," Carth corrected her. "Not Corporal." It was surreal. Almost a normal conversation. "Canderous has a wife?"

"Two, actually. And three children that are here. I—I think he had more children, once but—Mandalorians are different, Carth." She smiled painfully. "I'm not ready for you to meet Canderous' wives."

This all felt like a dream. She wasn't the woman he remembered. This strange complicity, this automatic assumption she had that he would go along with her plans—all of this was wrong. "The holocron," Carth said. "Was that a trick?"

Revan frowned. "Which holocron?"

"Helena thanked me for mailing it to her—but I never had it. Did you—?"

"Yeah," she said, her voice soft. "I mailed it to her. It was the right thing to do."

"She's a horrible woman."

Revan just looked at him. She tapped a silver button pinned to her blouse, and her true face disappeared, hidden under that vapid bimbo look again. "I agree," she said, her voice tight. "But Bastila thought the same thing about me. And I thought the same thing about Bastila, quite a bit of the time." Revan closed her eyes. "It doesn't matter what Helena is. You—you don't stop helping someone because they're not good, you can't measure the worth of someone else's life against your own and you—you shouldn't try."
"How can you say that, after what you've done?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know half of what I've done. I don't know half of what I'm doing."

"Polla," he whispered.

In the next heartbeat she was in his arms. He wasn't sure which of them had moved first, but it didn't matter. They were kissing, her lips were real and solid under the holomask and her mouth was warm and demanding. She was crying, and the tears were salty.

He fumbled with the silver button on her blouse. "You shouldn't hide," Carth told her. Her face was beautiful; he wanted to see it again.

"Don't—"

Carth pulled at the button and it came off in his hand. Her lips were her lips again, and her green eyes were full of tears.

In his arms she shivered. He dropped the silver button down the stairwell and kissed her again.

The clang of the door downstairs was only another noise.

"If you don't stop pointing that gun at me, Mandalorian, there will be an interplanetary incident."

"Don't take another step Captain." The familiar voice was cool. "Trust me; you don't want to go up there."

"Carth Onasi is my escort and I demand to know what you've done to him!"

Rew.

"Uh, Rew, he's probably just wandered off—he's unstable, you know that."

"Jiya, cover me, I'm going up."

Revan stiffened in his arms. "Who is she?" she whispered, staring up at his face.

"The roof," Carth looked away, not answering her. "Come on." He took her hand and she let him lead her to the door at the top of the stairs. It opened onto a corner of a vast roof garden.

XXX

There was a scream from the direction of the doors that Captain Onasi had gone through, and a waitress burst out of them. A different waitress than the one Carth had followed: this one had dark hair and skin, now pasty with fear.

"Revan!" she cried out, over the din of the vulgar music. "Revan Starfire is in the kitchen! Revan! The Dark Lord of the Sith!"

The golden-haired man's smile did not falter.

"Revan?" Jiya said incredulously.

"Revan?" Helena echoed. Her stomach lurched. Revan was here?
Captain Ekkumi pulled away from Oerin and started walking towards the doors, only to be blocked by a hulking figure in battle armor; face concealed under one of their barbaric helms.

"You don't want to go in there," the Mandalorian said. One of their women, hair coiled in braids, came over to them, her face knit in a thoughtful frown.

Oerin sighed and regarded them all slowly. "I'm sure this is a misunderstanding," he said lightly.

A misunderstanding. Of course. That makes sense. Helena felt the fear dissipate.

The waitstaff had stopped serving and were all clustered in a corner whispering, along with several of the guests.

"I demand to know what you've done with Carth Onasi," Rew Ekkumi said coldly. Her voice cut across the room and the music stopped.

She pushed past the figure in battle armor, and went through the double doors.

The golden-haired man sighed again and called out something in Mandalorian.

"He said, salvage it?" Jiya whispered in her ear, frowning. "Salvage what?" Oerin glanced back at them sharply.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion in the kitchens?" The smile on his face seemed angry for a moment and Helena felt a twinge of fear again. Then the fear vanished as quickly as it had come under the melting benevolence of his gaze.

They all followed him into a large commercial kitchen. Carth wasn't there. Rew was already pushing at a door at the end of the room. "Locked," she said. "Open it. I warn you—you can't just kidnap a Republic citizen!"

The Mandalorian in battle armor snorted. "We leave those jobs to the Republic," he said. "You're a friend of Carth's?"

"Yes," the Captain snapped. "And I demand to know what you've done with him!"

Rew Ekkumi pushed at the door again, fishing in her pocket for something. She pulled out a security spike and fitted it against the lock. The security spike beeped, and the door swung open with a clang.

"Don't move," the Mandalorian said. He had a small blaster in his hands. Helena wondered where he'd gotten it. Her thoughts seemed oddly slow and strange.

"If you don't stop pointing that gun at me, Mandalorian, there will be an interplanetary incident."

"Don't take another step, Captain. Trust me."

"Uh, Rew, he's probably just wandered off—he—he's unstable, you know that." Jiya rubbed his temples.

"Jiya, cover me, I'm going up."

The heir to Mandalore sighed. "Ordo, if there is any truth to these accusations, as your Fett I will be bound to deliver... appropriate justice." His hand tapped his cheek thoughtfully.

The woman in braids raised her eyebrows. "Indeed." Her mouth curved in a slow smile.
"Canderous?"

The man in battle armor mumbled something in their own language.

"Canderous?" Rew said, looking at him with astonishment.

"Canderous," he growled. "Canderous Ordo. Trust me, Carth is fine."

Helena found her voice. "You're Canderous Ordo?"

"I am," the warrior said quietly.

"You knew my daughter."

The helm nodded at her. "She was a good warrior," he said. "More than that. She was a great warrior."

"I have to place you under arrest, General Ordo," Jiya interrupted. "Fleet HQ will want to speak to you, regarding the events of the Star Forge."

Canderous shrugged. "You can't."

"He's under my command," Oerin said. "Whatever clan Ordo has done, they will answer to Lin first."

The woman in braids chuckled. "So be it," she said.

"I'm pleased you understand, Gwen," Oerin replied. His hand touched his cheek again, tapping it.

"I understand perfectly," the woman replied. "See to our guests, Oerin. Canderous and I will check on things upstairs?"

"We're coming with you," Rew broke in angrily.

The woman laughed. "Of course you are." She took the Mandalorian warrior's arm and walked through the kitchens back towards the reception room. Jiya and Rew followed them. Helena started to move, but the golden-haired man caught her arm.

"Wait with me here a moment, Helena," he said softly in her ear. "They're not ready for us yet."

She looked up at him, confused. His face was so kind, so gentle.

"I need a drink," Helena said.

XXX

The air smelled like smoke and roasting meat. There were immense bonfires with carcasses of huge beasts on spits above them. Less people up here: small clusters of partygoers and a few packs of small children running underfoot. An arched railway in the center led to the stairs down below in the central ballroom. Music was piped in from unseen speakers. High above their heads the shimmer of a containment field turned the sky into a blurry swirl of light and color.

"Come over here, Polla," Carth muttered, dragging her across the roof to an unoccupied corner behind one of the bonfires. They stood against the edge of a gilded rail that surrounded the roof garden's edge.
Revan's expression was distant, but she didn't protest when he took her in his arms. "They're talking now, downstairs. Too much for us to stop. Too many of them. Not much time, I only needed another day."

He silenced her with a kiss. And then another. And there weren't any coherent thoughts, not even the hate he'd expected. There was only her, as it seemed like it had always been. Only her and only him. Nothing else mattered.

*But it will matter. It will matter.*

Far away a woman's voice was calling his name.

"Whatever comes, we'll face it together, do you understand?" He murmured the words against her mouth.

She stiffened in his arms, like a spring coiled to strike. "I hope you will," she said. "Please Carth, I hope you'll understand."

Her words almost sounded like an apology.

*How can you even try to apologize, Revan? After all that you've done?*

It didn't matter. He kissed her again.

XXX

Helena started to follow Jiya and the others, but the golden-haired man—Oerin—caught her arm.

"Helena," he said, almost gently, "I think you should wait with me for a moment."

"That man was with my Bastila on the Star Forge," she said, trying to pull away. "And if Revan is here too—don't you understand what that means?"

Oerin laughed. "That my party is ruined?"

He looked into her eyes, frankly, searchingly. He was shamefully young, but she felt her cheeks blush all the same. The way that he looked at her, it was as if he could see all of her secrets, all of her fears and even the old dreams she'd had once, long ago.

He walked with her out of the stairwell, through the kitchens, and back into the main room.

Around them, people were whispering. Some were leaving rather hurriedly, but still more were pushing up the spiral staircase, to see whatever was happening on the roof.

"I need a drink," Helena admitted. She did need a drink, but she felt... strangely calm, somehow. Considering the circumstances, she wasn't sure how that could be; but she didn't question. You take moments of serenity where you can among chaos. She'd learned that lesson long ago, trailing after Abasen and his crazy treasure-hunting schemes.

Oerin tilted his head, those blue eyes of his seeming to pierce all the way into her very soul. "Why?" he asked.

His face was so smooth and innocent, guileless. It was the face of a young prince at the beginning of his life with no idea what the worlds would hold in store for him.

"Why?" she echoed.
"Why do you need a drink?"

"You—you wouldn't understand." She pulled away and headed to the bar. The waitstaff had all vanished. They were almost the only people left in the reception room at this point. Even the holocams were gone. There was an abandoned tray full of champa flutes discarded on the bar's edge. She picked up one and drained it quickly.

"I have a soft spot for mothers." Helena whirled around. The boy had followed her, was standing right next to her. He'd moved so silently, she'd had no idea. "Don't drink anymore, Helena Shan. Can you do that for me?"

His eyes met hers levelly. They were calm and serene.

The champa tasted bitter in her mouth. She put the glass down quickly. "It's gone off," she said. "Cheap wine, not that I'd expect better from a pack of—" she broke off remembering who she was talking to.

Oerin only laughed. "Forgive my people; I didn't give them much time to plan." He took her hand. His voice was earnest. "You do forgive them, don't you, Helena Shan? Forgive all of them?"

"That man, Canderous. He was with Revan. If he's here, she can't be far behind. And Captain Onasi too, the lot of them, all of them—they killed her. They didn't save her. Because of them my Bastie's dead."

Oerin sighed. "But you didn't like your daughter—so why do you care?" His hand brushed her cheek, gently. "You spend so much energy hating yourself. Can't you find something else to do?"

"I'm dying," she confessed. Helena felt like she should be angry, but it was hard to be angry at this golden-haired man.

"Would you like to die faster?" His voice was even, almost thoughtful, as if that was a serious question.

"Of course not!" she shot back.

"Then live," Oerin shrugged and looked towards the stairs. He held out his arm to her and she took it automatically.

On Talravan, in her girlhood there had been parties and handsome escorts and dancing. Taking his arm made her feel young again, as if all of her life stretched before her like a glorious starburst once more.

"It's time," he added. "Time for us to play our part." His mouth twisted in a wry confidential grin. "For the record, and between us—I think this is a terrible plan; but it's not like she'd listen to my advice. They've utterly sabotaged the original."

Helena was dizzy. The light glimmered his hair into pure gold, and for a moment, his eyes seemed cast from the same metal. "Our part," she repeated, laughing a little. Somehow this was all very funny. Oerin laughed too. "What is our part?"

His lips curved into a deeper smile. "We're going to be outraged. Just do what comes naturally, Helena Shan. But after...." he paused for a moment on the stairs and raised the back of her hand to his lips. "Afterwards, there is one thing I want you to consider. Much as you hate Bastila, you love her too. And really, when you think about it, that gives you something in common, doesn't it?"
"Something in common? With who?" Helena frowned, confused. Her head spun, and she hid her discomfiture behind a veil of bright laughter, just as she'd been taught as a girl.

Oerin did not answer. He only took her hand and led her up the stairs.

XXX

"Carth?" Rew's voice was closer now, and there was a confused babble of other voices too.

A small child in a robe ran past them and stopped and stared, eyes wide. "Aunt Gwen," he called out in Mandalorian. "She's over here!"

"Force," Revan muttered. "Not like this."

Carth pulled her closer to him, breathing in the scent of her hair and her skin.

"Nine hells," someone familiar muttered in Mandalorian. "I told you to let me just go after them."

"We can salvage it," a woman said in the same language. "Ultimately, this plays to our advantage."

Rew had reached them now. "Carth?" Her soft Telosian voice was concerned. Then her expression froze as she saw Revan's face.

"Oh," the Captain said. She flushed. Above their heads a camera drone hovered.

"That's the one!" an excited voice behind her, one of the waitresses from the kitchen. "Carth Onasi called her Revan, and her face changed!"

Revan pushed away from him. The growing crowd around them murmured. Partygoers, Mandalorians, and the waitstaff.

"Revan," Captain Ekkumi said. Faint lines appeared around her mouth as she frowned. "This is impossible." She looked at them both. "Isn't it?"

"No," Revan said quietly. "It's not impossible." She was very still. Carth watched the crowd, saw the partygoers' faces register shock, then fear. And hatred. He held her hand tightly, seeing the hate there.

But you hate her too, part of him chanted. You hate her too.

Around them, voices broke out in an excited babble. There was a reporter wearing the HoloNet logo, who had pushed his way through the crowd. His Bothan face was slack-jawed in shock and the microphone hung loose in his hand.

Behind Rew loomed a hulking figure in Mandalorian battle armor.

"You look terrible, Republic," it said, voice gruff.

"I'm not the one hiding under a helm," Carth answered.

Canderous chuckled.

Rew took a step back. "I should have known," she said tonelessly. "When Jopheena asked me to bring you here, Carth. I should have known."

"Jopheena—asked you to bring him?" Revan's voice was very small.
"I don't know if you recall," Rew continued, her voice detached, "but I served in a squadron under your guidance, Revan. over Dagary Minor, early in the war. "You—you were a good leader."

"I don't remember."

"You have to understand." Jiya Sand stepped forward. His tone was almost apologetic. "We have to bring you in. Fleet HQ will want to take custody. You were part of our command. There are… procedures. Policies we have to follow."

"The Mandalorians are innocent in this," Revan said. Her shoulders tensed.

You're lying, my love. You always lie.

Whatever it was, it was between them, him and her. Whatever happened, it had nothing to do with the Fleet.

Carth could only think of one card to play to make them back off.

He found his voice. "You were stationed on the Ascendant, Jiya. When Darth Revan was captured. In the Outlier systems. Near— Deralia, wasn't it?"

The Seroccan's eyes looked wary. "I was one of Forn's advisors, yes." He hesitated. "And Bastila's." He shrugged, trying to look unconcerned. "I was on the bridge of the Aleema when we captured you, Revan."

"You stayed on," Carth pressed. "As an advisor. Did you help them pick out an appropriate subject, General? Or were you just hired muscle for the Jedi's dirty work?"

The man had been in the military too long to give anything anyway easily in an expression.

"You know?" Revan murmured. Her breath was hot on his cheek.

"You know too?" he muttered back. How does she know? Does she remember?

"Polla," Carth whispered to her. She flinched at the name. Are you Polla or are you Revan?

Revan's head turned back to the General and her voice was cool again. Composed. Frozen. "I don't remember seeing you there, General Sand, but perhaps I wasn't… myself?"

"What is she talking about, Jiya?" Rew Ekkumi asked.

"You tricked her," Revan continued. "I remember that."

"Blackmail isn't going to work," the General said steadily. He looked up at the holocam, which recorded everything with its unblinking yellow eye. "We have an obligation, a duty. Regardless of... consequences, I'm going to have to take you in."


We have one now." The General sighed. "We have to take you to Fleet HQ, Revan," he repeated.

"I'm afraid not." A Mandalorian woman had come up behind the others. She was wearing a plain robe and her fair hair was coiled in a nest of braids. "This is Embassy property."

"She's not a Mandalorian citizen," Jiya said.
The woman chuckled. She sounded almost—smug.

Canderous sighed.

The woman beamed. "Take off your helm, Ordo," she commanded with the authority of a military general.

To Carth's astonishment the warrior complied. His friend's face was unchanged, as hard and unmoving as Telosian granite. "I'm sorry," Canderous muttered, looking at Carth and then looking away.

"Get on with it," Revan said. "Congratulations, Gwenarius Ordo."

She squeezed Carth's hand hard and then let it go, stepped away from him.

The Mandalorian woman grinned. She tossed something bright and long through the air and Revan's hand caught it. She held her other hand up. The blade cut into her palm.

Then, before anyone had a chance to register that the Dark Lord of the Sith had a knife, Canderous had a fresh cut on his face, deep, almost to the bone. Revan clasped her bloody palm to it. He patted her shoulders awkwardly.

There was a brief silence, soon broken by Mandalorian cheers. The Mandalorians had formed a phalanx of sorts, between them and the guests. The yellow eye of the holocam flashed.

"Whatever that was, we still have to take you into custody," Jiya said flatly. "I'm sorry, Revan."

"You can't," Revan said. Her voice was toneless. "No jurisdiction."

"What just happened?" Carth asked her. She pulled away from Canderous and stood there, not answering. Her hands were white-knuckled. He noticed with concern that she still held the knife by its blade. Blood dripped unnoticed from her hand.

"As long as our case is a proposed measure before the Galactic Senate, our citizens and their families have full immunity," Gwen answered, in a pleased voice. "You cannot arrest my husband, Canderous Ordo, or his third wife, Revan Starfire D'Ree—"

"Enough," Revan snapped. "It's done. You have your alliance." Her eyes looked unfocused, as if she wasn't really there at all.

"Third wife? Canderous?" Carth's voice cracked. For a moment he felt like he was Dustil's age. He had an irrational desire to hit something really hard. Or shoot it.

"Feints and counter-feints," Jiya said. "You haven't changed much, Jedi Knight Revan."

"I am no Jedi," Revan answered. She stared at the knife as if she had no idea how it had gotten there. She took a deep breath. "Mandalorian laws." Her head looked up, regarding them all, and her gaze settled on Rew Ekkumi.

"Captain Ekkumi," she said almost formally. "Do you have any claims on the Telosian Carth Marcus Onasi?"

"Claims?" Ekkumi's olive cheekbones tinted with a pink flush.

"Claims," Revan said again. "Are you now, or have you ever born any issue that he has recognized." Her eyes narrowed. "You're not pregnant now, so I'm assuming not."
The tip of her nose was pink. Her hand weighed the knife and Carth worried that she was going to stab someone. Who, he wasn't sure.

Gwen laughed, and glanced back at their audience. "It's bad manners to speak of such things in mixed company, Third Wife Ordo."

"Forgive my ignorance of proper custom," Revan muttered. "But am I within my rights?"

"You are, although it's not commonly done these days. There's a shortage of men as it is, and many would consider it poor manners to take—"

She moved so quickly Carth didn't have time to flinch. The blade traced a line of fire across his face and her bloody palm pressed against his cheek.

"Two of them," the woman finished.

"Well," Jiya Sand said.

"Aemelie's going to be thrilled," Gwen said. "I'd better go check on the spits."

"I don't think so, Gwenarius," a voice said, coolly. "What is the meaning of this, Clan Ordo?"

XXX

"What is the meaning of this, Clan Ordo?" Every inch the young prince, Oerin parted the crowd of spectators with a wave of his hand, and the ringing tone of his voice. At his side, Helena stumbled a little in shock.

Her. It was her. Dressed as a waitress with a bloody knife in her hand standing between Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi. Revan.

Helena watched those unnatural green eyes blink at her in recognition, and that pointed face grow pale.

"A wedding, Fett Lin," the blonde woman in braids said, almost deferential.

"So I can see," Oerin snarled. "And to what purpose do you tie Ordo to an outlander barbarian? Specifically, that outlander barbarian? And where did you find her?"

"That," Canderous muttered, "is none of your concern."

"The barbarians were going to take her," the woman in braids said coolly. "And she's our prisoner, not theirs. How better to hold her than to seal her to our clan?"

"I'm… your prisoner?" the woman—Revan's—face was blank, and she looked at the ground. At her side Captain Onasi reached for her hand but she pulled away, shaking her head.

"My prisoner," Oerin corrected them all. "As your Fett, as the Mandalore, she is my prisoner, not yours."

A holocam whirred above them; its yellow eye whirred and clicked.

"You are not the Mandalore yet," Canderous said.

The air around them was tense, expectant. The crowd was silent. Helena clung to Oerin's arm, trying to make sense of the events around them.
She was so dizzy, and her thoughts felt muddled. This didn't seem real. It seemed almost like a bad theatrical production? But no, it was only too real. That woman. Revan Starfire. She shrank back.

"When I am appointed as the leader of the Mandalorians by the Coruscanti Senate I shall be the Mandalore," Oerin said softly. "Were you trying to stage some sort of coup under my nose before that could happen, Ordo? You overstep your place."

There was a clatter of armored feet behind them, and more Mandalorians in battle armor pushed through the crowd. They were led by the fair-haired boy with the dark skin. He moved awkwardly in the armor, Helena noticed, as if he wasn't used to wearing it.

"I'll take them into custody, Fett Lin," the boy said.

Behind him, one of the warriors giggled and he whirled around shooting them a furious look.

Another one mumbled something in Mandalorian.

"Please do," Oerin said coolly. He tapped his foot and they began to move forward.

The woman in braids coughed.

"Apologies, Gwenarius Ordo, was there something else you wanted to say before your imprisonment? Said to these noble people of Coruscant? Say to the galaxy that watches you, even now?" Oerin waved his hand at the crowd and at the cameras.

"I just wanted to be clear," the blonde woman grinned, baring her teeth in a defiant smile. "We've claimed Captain Carth Onasi for Ordo as well. Ignorant barbarians may not understand our ways. Will you let it be known that he must share our fate now, whatever it may be?"

"What the hell is this, Revan?" Captain Onasi's whisper carried. He'd grabbed her arm and she was leaning against him now, looking pale but strangely composed. "What are you—?"

"Now, Helena," Oerin said softly, so softly that she didn't even see his lips move. He pushed her forward.

"You killed my daughter!" The words were raw, louder than she meant them to be. They sounded like they came out of a stranger's mouth and not her own. "You! Revan Starfire killed my daughter! Bastila. You killed Bastila!"

Revan's face tightened. Her eyes looked right past Helena. "This wasn't necessary, Oerin," she hissed.

"You are in no position to judge necessity, Revan Ordo," Oerin Lin shot back. "Let the woman have her grief."

"You killed her!" Helena said again. Her hands were shaking. She wished she had a drink, wished the light wasn't so bright on her face. The camera would show every wrinkle, every crease, every line of pain.

"No." Revan shook her head, backing away. "This wasn't necessary. This is over the top, Lin, way too fricking far. " Canderous caught her arm, and murmured something in her ear. There were tears in her eyes, and she wiped them away, ducking her head as if there was somewhere to hide from the cameras and the crowds.
Captain Onasi moved towards her protectively. He looked shell-shocked, as if none of this was real.

Helena felt a pang of sympathy for the man.

None of this seemed real. Even her own voice, her own words, seemed liked they belonged to someone else.

"Did you know my daughter worshipped you? Looked up to you? She thought you and Malak were the embodiment of everything a Jedi should be, could be. And then you betrayed us all, everything the Jedi stood for—and then you killed her!"

Revan's face twisted. "I think I knew Bastila far better than you ever did," she muttered.

"She was all I had!"

"And you abandoned her." Revan's voice was low and angry. She bit her lip, struggling. Several people in the crowd backed away. "I'll see you burn for this, Mandalore," she spat.

"Take them away," Oerin responded, regal and unconcerned. He waved his hand again at the crowd and the cameras.

"Helena." Jiya took her arm and she buried her face in his coat, sobbing. "I'll take you home now."

"We need to talk, Jiya," Rew Ekkumi said.

"We will, Rew. But not here. Not now."

The prisoners and their escort moved past them, followed by the holocam's avid yellow eye. The remaining guests whispered, and the Bothan reporter, who had been silent throughout the proceedings, finally found his voice.

"This is Jokka Rai reporting. Live from Coruscant's Embassy District, history itself is made as the former heroes of the Star Forge are reunited once more. In some strange twist of fate, Revan Starfire has been captured by the Mandalorians."

"It began as an ordinary diplomatic party. But now, from the Outer Rim to Deep Core, sentients of the Republic will wonder what tomorrow may bring."

"Does the fate of the galaxy now depend on the heir to Mandalore?"

The holocam's bright light was blinding. The fire behind them burned, giving the scene the strange appearance of a battleground. Jiya squeezed her arm, reassuringly. "We'll go home now," he repeated.

"Remember what I said, Helena," the heir to Mandalore whispered. His voice sounded so close, as if he were whispering in her ear. Then he laughed.

Helena looked at him. She really wanted a drink. That woman. Revan Starfire. She killed my Bastila. Her nerves… her nerves were very bad.
Chapter 21 / All the Pretty Hessi

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Footage from the Mandalorian Embassy

Jokka Rai: "I'm not sure what the proper form of address would be."

Oerin Lin: "Among my people, I would be called, simply, Oerin, but 'Mandalore' or 'Fett Lin' are also both appropriate. For now."

(Offscreen: technician's voice: "Cutting to live feed, again in three. One, two, three....")

Jokka Rai: "This is Jokka Rai reporting. Live from Coruscant's Embassy District. History itself is made tonight, as the former heroes of the Star Forge are reunited once more. In some strange twist of fate, Revan Starfire has been captured by the Mandalorians. Here now with me is the heir to Mandalore, the son of Cassus Lin Fett—"

Oerin Lin: "Fett Cassus Lin."

Jokka Rai: (snorts) "... the Mandalore's son, Fett Oerin Lin. Fett Lin, am I correct in understanding that before tonight you had no idea that Revan was hidden among your people?"

Oerin Lin: "No idea at all. It's quite shocking that Ordo could hide this from me. When the First and Second Wives of Ordo asked my permission to welcome their husband back to our tents, I—"

Gwenarius: (halfway offscreen) "Permission?"

Jokka Rai: "Canderous Ordo is married? If you could explain to the viewers at home: are we to understand that—I am having a hard time understanding that Revan Starfire married Canderous?"

Oerin Lin: "Gwenarius, y'kleem ya nicht. (Subtitled translation: shut your craw). "Ordo's fate rests with Lin. Do you forget your place?" (turns back to the Bothan) "I must apologize for my subject, Jokka. You don't mind if I call you Jokka, do you?"

Jokka Rai: "No, of course not. As I was saying, Revan Starfire married Canderous Ordo?"

Gwenarius: "And Carth Onasi."

Oerin Lin: "Y'kleem, Gwen! (Addressing the phalanx of guards that surround them.) "Gag her."

(Muffled sounds of protest from offscreen.)

XXX

"Hush-a-bye, don't you cry,

Go to sleepy little baby.
When you wake, you'll have cake,
And all the pretty little hessi."

In her arms, Junior wailed. Polla shifted him against her shoulder patting his back.

"Hush-a-by, don't you cry,
Go to sleepy—"

"Is he supposed to cry like that?" Seiran asked, walking over to where she was sprawled on the couch.

Polla shrugged. "Hell if I know. Cousin Sara's kids cry a lot." She turned back to the miracle in her arms, lips brushing the dark downy fuzz on his head.

"Way down yonder, down in the meadow,
There's a poor dead kissra lamby.
The bees and the butterflies pickin' at its eyes—"

"Can't you sing something happier?" Seiran asked, frowning, over their son's indignant squawls.

"Maybe he'd be happier if you'd pick out a name for him," Polla cooed. "Can't call him Junior all his life."

"You haven't liked any of my suggestions," her husband began again.

Polla rolled her eyes. She had Junior's name picked out already, but getting Seiran to accept it would be another story. Maybe it was a dumb tradition, but on Deralia fathers named sons and mothers named daughters. Typically, they picked Deralian names. But Polla had something else in mind.

Her husband sighed, and she grinned. "Come here," he said.

Polla stretched her legs out on the couch, patting her son's tiny back. He gave a little burp and his crying stopped. "You come here and sit with us," she countered. In her arms, Junior gurgled. "I think he wants you to sing to him, Sei."

Seiran settled himself down next to them and she leaned back against him. Labor had been a fracking nightmare, but so far motherhood was a blast.

"Hush-a-by, don't you cry,
Go to sleepy little baby.
When you wake, you'll have cake,
And all the pretty little hessi."

"Vid frequency seventeen," her husband ordered. "Text only transmit." He smiled at her gently and Polla snuggled closer. "Let's watch the news. Once he falls asleep, I don't want to wake him up again."

"Galactic news should put him to sleep," Polla agreed. "I know it works for me every damn time."
Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Footage from the Mandalorian Embassy

Oerin Lin: "Clan Ordo planned a coup underneath my nose. By sealing themselves to Revan, who killed my father, they thought they could wrest the title of Mandalore away from Lin." (Smiles.) "As you can see they failed."

Jokka Rai: "I still don't understand, and I'm sure our viewers at home must be similarly puzzled. How does that work?"

Oerin Lin: "My people are simple folk. From times of old, we have had simple rules and simple ways. At the end of the Mandalorian Wars, the Jedi Knight Revan bested and killed my father in single combat. Technically, that gave her a claim to our highest title. Much as long ago, Ulic Qel-Droma became an honorary leader of my people... although practically speaking, the two events are really quite different. Still, like Ulic, Revan really has no claim at all to be Mandalore. She's not one of us. Were she part of Clan Lin, (chuckles), it would be entirely different. Do you understand now?" (Pause.) "I think you do understand now. Don't you?"

Jokka Rai "Yes. I think so. I do understand now."

Oerin Lin: "I'm so pleased."

Jokka Rai: "But this is Revan Starfire we're talking about here. She—is—"

Oerin Lin: "Was—"

Jokka Rai: "Was—the—the Dark Lord of the Sith. How did you capture the Dark Lord of the Sith with a few Mandalorian guards? What about her Force powers?"

Oerin Lin: "Ah, yes. She has none. Not anymore. No Force at all."

Jokka Rai: "H—how can you be sure of that?"

Oerin Lin: "Mandalorians fought Jedi and Sith alike for centuries, Citizen. We have some experience with these things. I was very young, you understand, during the wars. Afterwards... well, I certainly am aware of her reputation. But Canderous Ordo became aware of her crippled state and decided to take advantage of it." (Spits on the ground.) "The duplicity of Ordo is astonishing. My people are generally... very direct."

Jokka Rai: "Oh."

XXX

Dustil had twisted his ankle running away from the CorSec squad that had appeared out of nowhere.

The black eye was from where they'd punched him when they'd cornered him in the alley.

And Arca's henchmen had shot him in the chest. That shot should have killed him, but there was no mark on him from that fight, no mark at all.

Dustil's ankle hurt, but he could walk. The night guard looked up, deceptively unconcerned when he came off the elevator. "Going out, Citizen Onasi?" The man tapped something on the console in
Dustil paused. "And if I am?"

The man shrugged. "Your father left orders you were to stay put."

Dustil stared at him, wondering if this was going to be a problem. A part of him almost wanted it to be a problem.

The guard stood up from his desk, leaning over it and switching something off. "You know what? I have to run to the 'fresher. Perhaps in my absence you took the elevator back upstairs."

"Probably," Dustil agreed, walking out the door.

*My father doesn't pay that man. Senator D'Reev does. And he doesn't care where I go.*

*Why is that? Is it that he doesn't care, or he wants me to go?*

Outside, stood the usual cluster of forlorn fangirls. There were five of them tonight, dressed in pastel jumpsuits, their brightly dyed hair flopping like feathers. One of them squealed when she saw him, but the others had more dignity.

"Hey Dustil," the tall one with green-dyed hair called out. Casual. As if they were friends.

He nodded at her. "Hey, Petra."

She pretended nonchalance, but he could tell she was thrilled that he remembered her name.

"Hey!" One of the others, a girl with dyed black hair pulled up on top of her head ran up to him. She was blushing under the heavy make-up that made her look older than she was. Sixteen—maybe—he thought. Maybe. It was hard to tell.

"What happened to you?" she asked him, taking in the black eye and the limp. Dustil kept walking, but she stuck to his side like a mynock. Behind them trailed her friend. The orange-haired one with the boobs. He'd noticed her before. She was hard not to notice.

"I got arrested."

She was impressed, he could tell. "Where are you going now?" she asked him.

*I don't know. I'm trying not to think about that.* A large part of him had wanted to tell his father everything, and receive some kind of paternal advice. Another part of him was terrified of what Carth would think if he knew the truth.

*Last night I killed a bunch of people, Dad. I mean that was good because they were trying to kill me. But the thing is, Dad — the thing is, Father...*  

*I was really good at it. And it was fun.*  

*Was it Mekel who enjoyed it or me? Was there a difference?*

He couldn't feel the other boy's mind at all now. He was afraid to, afraid to reach for the Force at all; but it still danced around him, shimmering, tempting—the fangirl's eyes were a deep, dark blue and her lips were shiny and pink. She was pretty. Her friend with the boobs came up on the other side of him and took his other arm.
"Hey," she said. "I'm Leesa."

Something metal clanked behind them and Dustil jumped, whirling around. His hand went instinctively to his belt where—there was nothing, not even a blaster.

"Just our shaps," the black-haired girl said, giggling.

Two protocol droids trailed them. At least they were shaped like protocol droids. They were also heavily armed.

"Shaps?"


He looked at them more closely. The redhead was wearing some kind of robe that was cut almost like a Jedi's, except the fabric was embroidered and purple and gold. The black-haired girl wore a green coverall cut like a Republic uniform. The collar was trimmed with fur. They looked, he realized, rich.

"Oh," he said, shrugging.

"They let you out without one, huh?" Leesa sighed. "You're lucky."

"I never noticed them when you were standing around before," Dustil mumbled.

"You're not supposed to," Leesa smirked. "They stealth in guard mode." She clapped her hands. "Vanish CH!" One of the droids winked out of sight.

"Neat trick," Dustil muttered.

"I'm Aramis," the girl with black hair said. "You want to go get some caff or something?"

"I'm—" I have no idea where I'm going. He thought about getting the Mach, it was still in the parking garage on sub20. He thought about going to the Jedi Temple and—and what? Saying, please help me not be a Sith again? Saying, there's a group of Sith out to kill you all? Oh, and the other night I almost died except I sucked the life out of a bunch of people instead? And then I was laughing, and it felt good, it felt like what I was born to do, what I was made to do.

Me and Mekel back at the old tricks again. Only more powerful, better, and—with a shock he realized he wasn't thinking about Mission at all anymore.

It's just like Selene. She's dead, so I don't think about her anymore. Like Mom.

He tried not to think about Revan.

Trying to hurt Mekel almost killed me, Arca scared the frack out of me. How could I be so stupid, thinking I could face down Darth Revan?

"You're looking kind of tortured," Aramis said. "Was it hard, you know, when your Dad was out on that secret mission and stuff?"

"Did you, like, know about it and everything?" Leesa broke in. Her eyes were wide and a soft brown.

Mission. Secret. One of the few things that hadn't made the newsvids was where Dustil had been before Coruscant. They'd interviewed Yuthura and Thalia and 'Phile and Odoo; but not him and
"He—visited me," Dustil said. *Found me. Told me he loved me. Told me I was a good person and didn't believe in living a lie.*

*What was the lie, Father? What was the lie?*

"Where?"

"Huh?"

"You were in school or something, right? Where?" Leesa grabbed his arm and pulled him down a side street. There was an open-air café, and she grabbed them a table in the center. Dustil's skin prickled. Most of the other tables were empty, but one was occupied by a pack of sents in apprentice white and Padawan beige. Five of them. He felt them glance his way with more than their eyes. It was a small relief at least that he didn't recognize any of them from those months at the Temple. Less of a relief that he knew they recognized him. And what he felt most from them was... fear.

"Fleet academy, one the cadet branches," Dustil said vaguely. "On Bandomir."

*I wanted to go there once. Before everything blew up.*

"Wow, did you meet Revan too?" Aramis asked him. Suddenly he realized something that should have been obvious. They were both dressed like her. Like Revan. Sort of. Or a version of her. Fangirl fashion.

"Yeah," Dustil said softly. "I met her."

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1

Jokka Rai: "So... let me get this straight. Clan Ordo married Revan Starfire. She married the entire clan?"

Oerin Lin: *(Tapping foot.)* "No, just Canderous Ordo." *(Laughs.)* "They must have been desperate, to try such a foolish scheme. No one would support Ordo over Lin in its claim to Mandalore."

Jokka Rai: "What does Captain Onasi have to do with this?"

Oerin Lin: "Naturally, as an unmarried man I have no idea, Citizen. I suspect it was a selfish whim on Revan's part. From what I have heard about her character, it's entirely in keeping. Act first, think later." *(Shrugs.)* "No doubt it will be her doom."

Jokka Rai: "But from our conversation earlier I was under the impression that Ordo manipulated Revan. Didn't you say they captured her?"

Oerin Lin: "Did I? I really think our viewers might be more interested in what happens next. Don't you?"

Jokka Rai: "Y-yes, of course." *(Pause.)* "I think our viewers might be more interested in what happens next."

XXX
The grass rippled in the wind as they made their way over the embankment. Their human guide glanced back at them, his mouth quirking at her expression of distaste.

Tatooine was one thing: sand, sand, and more sand she could deal with. This grass and rocks mess was something else entirely. Lena wished she’d thought to pack some practical shoes.

Nico took her arm and pulled her to the top of the hill. Her breath caught. The grass stopped abruptly. In its place, the ground sloped, fused and glassy in the shape of a vast blasted crater.

"This is it?" she said, dubious, her heart sinking. Another wild ronto chase, Nico's going to be furious. He'd been so optimistic during their journey, she hated to think of how he would react now.

The tan-colored human nodded. "There were some ancient ruins here, once. My family bought the grazing rights when we immigrated from Corulag; but the Jedi Council owned the ruins, technically. I'm not really sure you can buy them…." his voice trailed off.

Not that there's anything left to buy.

Nico's face broke into a happy smile. "It's here," he said. "And it's... alive, I think. I think — this will work!" He patted Lena's arm absently and then ran down the slope of the crater.

"Darth Malak's fleet did this?" he called back up to them.

"Yes," the human said, bleakly. Lena glanced at him.

"I'm sorry," she said, suddenly ashamed of Nico's exuberance in the face of the man's obvious pain.

Below them her lover spun in a circle, arms raised to the sky, laughing with glee. "Come down here, Lena!" he called out. "Come down!"

Lena picked her way down into the crater, her heels slipping a little on the fused slope. Her skin prickled. The signs of war were everywhere on Dantooine still, but this place seemed to have suffered the heaviest bombardment. Is he insane? How can Nico think this bomb crater is... whatever he thinks it is?


Their guide followed her down. Nico turned to him, excitedly.

"We'll need to excavate," he said, beaming. "And I'll need to set up an installation for access."

The man frowned. "My family only owned the grazing rights." he began, voice trailing off uncertainly. "The Jedi Council would own the rest of it. If the rumors are true and this is really where the Star Map was."

Nico's lekku flicked impatiently. "The Jedi are all gone, now," he pointed out, blunt as always. "And I don't see any Star Map, or any ruins. So doesn’t the land right revert to you and your family?"

The human flushed. "I don't have any family. Not anymore." He took a deep breath. Lena felt sorry for him. He's not much more than a kid.

"Were you here… during?" she asked him
He nodded at her. "I only just got back myself. It's still… a little hard to take." He looked around them at the blackened earth and the fused ground. "R-Rahasia and I used to come here, sometimes. It was one of the places that her father wouldn't look for us." His mouth twisted, and he kicked the ground, angrily. "Funny how things work out," he whispered, closing his eyes. "The land wasn't worth anything for so long… and now, when I don't need the cash, Koonda's consortium shows up to buy my father's farm. Then you too—with an offer on this."

"We'll give you a good price," Nico said.

Lena gritted her teeth. *Motta had more tact than you Nico Senvi and that's saying a lot.*

"I'm sorry for your loss, Shen," she offered.

"It's funny," he echoed again. "I thought I'd lost everything the day that the Sith bombed Dantooine, but at least I still had Rahasia. But now she's dead." He paused. "Give me whatever you think is fair for the land. I don't really care."

"Rahasia?" Nico's lekku twitched. "Rahasia from Dantooine? Surely, you can't mean Rahasia Sandral? The famous actress?"

*Chuba-for-brains, Nico!* Someday she'd have to teach the man some tact.

But to her surprise, her lover's obliviousness almost seemed to help. Shen Mutale actually laughed. "Famous? Only in her dreams. Rahasia's one claim to fame was her Revan imitation. That's all she could get work doing." He looked wistful for a moment. "We met her, you know. Revan. She... when she was on Dantooine she made our families accept us. Our families had been fighting ever since we were kids, but Revan helped. She — she was a good person."

Lena didn't know how to answer that. She'd seen the vids and what they were saying about Revan now. And about Mission—and the others Revan had killed.

*Poor Little Blue, always expecting the best and getting the crap end of the blaster.*

"Your Republic is hard on the leaders of its rebellions," Nico Senvi offered. He had that faraway look in his eyes again. "Some things never change. Whatever Revan is I doubt she'll find any justice here."

Shen frowned. "My Republic?" He laughed. "It's your Republic too?"

"Of course," Nico answered. His brow ridge furrowed. "We'll give you a good offer on the land rights. Talk to Lena about it. She does all the numbers. I hate numbers."

"How much of the land do you want?" Shen asked. The expression on his face said that he didn't really care.

"Just this part here," Nico answered, thoughtless. He knelt on the ground, placing his palm against the fused surface. He muttered something in that language that wasn't one, a happy smile on his face.

*We'll have to buy more than just the damn bomb crater, Nico.* Lena sighed and turned her attention back to Shen Mutale. "At least a few square kilometers worth," she promised him. She looked up. High to the north against the darkening skyline loomed a vast sculpture, two figures carved in stone, bold in Jedi robes against the horizon. "What's that?" she asked pointing.
The human followed her gaze. "Oh. The memorial to Bastila Shan and Revan Starfire. They've—
they've been having trouble lately with vandals lately."

"Shocking disrespect," muttered Nico from the ground. Then a pause. "Can we buy that too?"

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1

*Jokka Rai:* "So, Fett Lin, what does happen next?"

*Oerin Lin:* "Well, after I am appointed titular leader of my people, I will see that Revan Starfire receives what she deserves."

*Jokka Rai:* "Don't you think that's a matter for the Republic to decide? Ah, I mean, she is a Republic citizen." (Frowns.) "Or the Jedi—surely the Jedi might have something to say about—"

*Oerin Lin:* "Seriously, when have the Jedi ever said much of anything?"

*Jokka Rai:* (Nervous laughter.)

XXX

"Dustil? Dustil Onasi?" *Great, just great.* One of the Jedi got up and came over to their table. Male, maybe about his own age, maybe a little older, with fluffy blonde hair and a serious expression on his face. Too serious. The boy hesitated. "You're— troubled," he said.

No shit? Dustil thought back at him, hard. The blonde boy flinched. He wore apprentice white, and he was weak.

"Mical!" One of the Padawans called to him sharply.

The boy glanced back at her. "We can't just leave him like this!" he shot back.

"He's a fracking Sith," one of the others muttered. *Miraluka,* Dustil thought. The Padawan wore a brown veil where his eyes should be.

"This is Carth Onasi's son," Leesa said indignantly. "What do you mean, Sith?"

"He knows," muttered one of the others. A white Twi'lek girl. Pretty. Her head tails flicked at him. What they said wasn't very Jedi-like. Dustil made a rude gesture with the palm of his hand and his arm.

*Yes, a warm reception I'd get at the Jedi Temple. More of this crap.*

The waiter who had come to take their order backed away.

Dustil realized he was standing on his feet again, without even realizing how he'd gotten there. It would be so easy to show them how weak they all were. So easy. The Force whispered like a siren's call.

*The hell with this.* He turned to leave.

Only that blonde kid was in his way.

"The Sith will come for you," Dustil told him. He wasn't sure if it was a warning or a threat.
"You're injured." The boy frowned and reached his hand up to Dustil's face. Cooling, white light licked around his body. He felt the boy trembling with the effort, he was weak. But Dustil's ankle stopped hurting, and the pain around his eye vanished.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"The Force is strong within you. You could be a great healer, if you let your own wounds close, Dustil Onasi," the boy said.

"Hey, did you hear what I said? The Sith are coming for you. For the Council. Do you get it? I met some of their welcoming party last night."

The boy's eyes widened, but he set his jaw stubbornly and didn't back down. "I do not fear the Sith."

"Are you like a Jedi, Dustil? Wow!" Aramis' voice, impressed, somewhere behind him.

"I'm not a Jedi," Dustil muttered.

"You could be," the blonde boy insisted. "Come with us."

"He's not coming with us," one of the other Padawans behind him said.

"We swore to help those in need!" Mical shot back. "Can't you feel his pain? Can't you see how much he suffers?"

The white Twi'lek got to her feet and crossed her arms. Her face was expressionless, her voice hard. "What I see, is a Sith, Mical. You're in no position to help anyone yourself. You don't have a Master, you're probably going to be asked to leave the Academy yourself.

"My own failings aren't the issue, Loyana," Mical responded. "We were taught that no one is beyond redemption. No one. If the lesson of Revan Starfire means anything at all—"

"Oh, no, here we go again," an apprentice muttered, rolling his eyes.

"—Revan's story teaches us that no one is beyond redemption. No one."

"Banthacrap. That's banthacrap," hissed the Twi'lek.

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Footage from the Mandalorian Embassy

Jokka Rai: "I am sure that to most of you, the lady here with us now needs no introduction."

Oerin Lin: "Just say what you feel, Helena. It will all be fine."

General Jiya Sand: "Helena, we have to be going now."

Helena Shan: "N-no, I'm fine, Jiya. I'm... fine."

Jokka Rai: "If you could please, Helena, tell our viewers at home your first thoughts upon seeing Revan Starfire."

Helena Shan: "My first... thoughts? That woman killed my Bastila! And Carth Onasi—that traitor!"
He—he was just standing there!"

General Jiya Sand: "Helena, we really need to be going."

Oerin Lin: "In many cultures there are stages to grief. Blame is certainly one of them. But your daughter died a hero, Helena Shan, did she not?"

Helena Shan: "Those rumors… they aren't true!"

Jokka Rai: "Rumors? What rumors?"

Oerin Lin: "I'm sure no one believes the rumors about Bastila Shan becoming Malak's apprentice. Sith propaganda, you know how nasty the Sith can be. Animals. All of them. You can see why they lost the war."

Jokka Rai: "That's just gossip, nothing more. No reputable HoloNet source has ever—"

Helena Shan: "It's not true!"

Oerin Lin: "Of course it isn't. The Jedi would never cover up something like that. From what I've heard their integrity is unquestionable. Sacrosanct."

Helen Shan: "My daughter was a hero! She sacrificed her life trying to stop that woman!"

Oerin Lin: "You know, I've seen some holovids about what happened to Bastila on the Leviathan... terrible things. Poor girl. And yet—"

Jokka Rai: "Those are works of fiction, Fett Lin. And unsanctioned by the legal media."

Oerin Lin: "Oh. My apologies. I was raised on the Rim, and I am not familiar with your Core customs. Pardon, but there was one of them, the Telosian version, I think it was, that was most interesting. Are you saying they're all entirely fictitious? Appalling!"

XXX

By the way.... That was perfect. Just the right amount of outrage.

I didn't tell you to use Helena, Oerin. That wasn't fracking necessary!

Revan made herself keep walking. Their makeshift escort flanked her, a few of them chuckling softly to themselves.

Wasn't it? She could hear his soft laughter ringing through her head. You looked entirely too complacent standing there. Not at all like a woman betrayed. This plan is bad enough as it is. You can hardly blame me for throwing in my own twist.

You can't just use people like that!

What do you think we've been doing, Rev? And this is a terrible plan, have I told you that already?

He had, mockingly in her mind about twenty times since the one waitress had resisted her Force compulsion. Ever since Carth caught her arm, Revan had the sensation of everything spiraling out of control. Her lover throwing the holomask chip down the stairs had only been the last sequence in a chain of events that made what came next inevitable.

I had no choice.
You could have controlled the pilot. You let yourself be discovered too soon. They're interviewing Helena Shan now. The things she says... it will be so touching later, when she forgives you for Bastila's death.

Do not act without my orders again.

You didn't give me much to work with. We needed the distraction. Without it, more would wonder why the Dark Lord of the Sith didn't put up a fight.

I'm not—the Dark Lord of the Sith!

I know! That's what the reporter is saying now. He's surprisingly malleable for a Bothan. I thought they were supposed to be as Force-resistant as Mandalorians. You should really thank me. Without me, this would be even more of a mess than it is. But it's not going to hold together long.

Carth was so quiet. He walked next to her, still holding her hand tightly, but his eyes were blank, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. He was beyond angry, she realized. He was furious.

Somehow they made it to the elevators and back the Mandalorian apartments. She willed herself not to feel her own confusion, or see the dark mist that seemed to surround Carth whenever she looked at him. His hand was holding hers tightly.

That's what's important, that's what matters. He's here.

One of their mock guards let out a cheer as the doors closed and locked behind them.

Carth looked at her warily and dropped her hand as if it burned. He backed away, his eyes scanning the room, the Mandalorians standing around them. "What the hell was that, Revan?"

"The sorriest excuse for a Mandalorian wedding that I've ever seen." Canderous answered him, gruffly. The warrior sighed and turned to Revan. "We did what you wanted, didn't we? Gwen was convinced, but I wasn't sure—and Oerin couldn't exactly talk out loud, not with those maffasops hovering." He frowned. "Just tell me those were your orders, not his?"

"I didn't tell him to use Helena like that," Revan said dully. "But the rest, yes. My orders." Inside she was numb. The slash on Canderous's face was already scabbed over, thanks to his implant. The one on Carth's cheek still bled, and his expression was so dark. What have I done?

Canderous sighed. 'We've put our necks on the line for you, pilot." His scarred eyebrow lifted as he considered Carth. "And you look terrible." He paused. "But it's good to see you again."

"Canderous," Carth nodded slightly, acknowledging him. His stance was cautious. A trawler deer surrounded by wild hessi. "What the hell is going on?"

"The Third Wife's plan makes perfect sense to me." Aemelie's voice laughed, as she unsnapped the helm she wore, and pulled it off her head, tossing it carelessly to the floor. "If the barbarians knew she was Lin, they wouldn't accept Oerin as Mandalore—because she would outrank him. Still, she could not let herself be taken. Coruscants love their little treacheries. So, we gave them something they could understand. Every sentient race loves weddings." She nodded approvingly at Revan. "You could almost have been raised by proper women, coming up with something like that. Octiva must have taught you."

And it was exactly what you wanted all along. So you're happy. It's nice someone is.

Revan forced her lips into an empty smile.
Aemelie ignored her and beamed at Carth. "As the First Husband of the Mandalore, there certain responsibilities you will have. I don't expect you to know them, but my husband will be happy to instruct you. And now that Lin is tied to Ordo—"

"If you'll excuse me, Second Wife, I'd like to speak to Carth alone. In my rooms." Revan interrupted, gritting her teeth.

The look that Carth shot her was beyond hatred. *I'm sorry,* she thought at him, uselessly.

"What the hell is this, Revan?" he hissed, backing away from Aemelie's familial embrace.

Aemelie laughed. "You don't need to ask my permission for that, Third Wife!"

"Blue says the nets are already going crazy," Mekel interjected.

"Any news from Fleet? Anything official from anyone?" As much as she wanted to drag Carth away from this, Revan had to know.

*If I guessed wrong, we're doomed.*

Mekel shook his head. "Not yet, she thinks it will be soon though." He frowned. "She also says to tell you this is a stupid plan." He ducked his head and looked at the floor.

Revan glanced around the room. The other guards were taking off their helms too and laughing. Young, excited faces, beaming at her. In another second they'd be shooting rifles in the air and singing battle hymns.

*Damn Oerin. Why did you have to pull that stunt with Helena Shan?* It was easy to recognize the familiar emotion she felt now too. Guilt.

*Banish it. The plan changes, on with the plan.*

Revan took a deep breath. "Mekel, I need you to go back upstairs and monitor the guests. Help Oerin if you can, with the Force. Just stay in the background, keep an ear out for what is being said and by who. We need to know what they're saying."

*So we can manipulate it. Banish the guilt, banish it. Lock it away.*

"Mekel? You're Mekel?" Carth frowned, looking at the unfamiliar face. "Did Dustil—I mean—have you seen him?"

"He's at home." Carth looked like a man suddenly waking up from a dream. He glanced at Revan and then looked away fast again. "Whatever this is, Revan, I need to go. I need to go home. Dustil's there."

Mekel looked at the ground. "Sir. He's not at home. He's—somewhere outside. I can't tell any more than that." His face flushed.

"You have some kind of… bond. With my son." Carth made the word 'bond' sound ugly. "He told me. You—were on Korriban with him. You came here with him. The other night when he disappeared, he went to meet you?"

"Yes." Mekel sounded defensive. "Mission said he was okay. The CorSec didn't hurt him—much. I would have known if they had."
"You let my son get arrested? What exactly were you doing?" Carth's voice was dangerous now.

"I was trying to talk to him. Me and Zaalbar and Mission...."

"Mission! That computer?"

Mekel shrugged uncomfortably. "S-she says she's glad to see you too."

Carth winced and turned back to Revan. "I'm not even going to ask how he knows what your computer is saying. Not now. Just tell me. What the hell happened? What the hell is this, Revan?"

"Commander Wann shipped you off on the Pearl," Mission said herself, rolling her T3 chassis into the room. "Ostensibly it's a diplomatic ship but they've got a surprising number of psych personnel on board. And media people. That part of the Fleet is in pretty thick with Senator D'Reev. They fracked with your head, Carth." The lights on her dome flashed green.

"Big Z wants to see you. He's still kinda hurt. So you should come to him. Oh, and Polla-Revan—Captain Ekkumi just sent a transmit to Fleet HQ. Troop request. They're cordonning off the building. No orders to come inside, but no one's allowed to leave without a proper idscan either." She beeped. "I'm not the only one that monitors these things—the other embassies and the guests are all getting out fast. All non-essential personnel. Did you hear me when I said this was a stupid plan?"

Her processors whirred. "Nice outfit, by the way, Pilot Flyboy. Very shiny. And congratulations! I guess you and Polla-Revan are finally married, huh? I always knew you would... one of these days."

Carth was pale.

*Please be okay, Carth.*

"Married. That was... real?"

"Totally legal and everything!" Mission chirped.

"I'm not surprised about the Fleet sending troops." Revan was surprised at how calm her voice was. *We'll be trapped here until they trot me out before the Senate. But better that than a cell.*

"CorSec guards are there too. On behalf of the Senate," Mission chirped.

*Two out of three.* "And the Jedi?" Revan resisted the urge to try and sense any close presence with the Force.

"Seems to me, the Jedi could give this whole thing away." Mission added. "They haven't done anything yet. The Council is in chambers. Probably glued to their holostreams with the rest of the galaxy."

Canderous coughed. "The Jedi aren't the only ones that could end this charade before it's begun, Revan."

*I know that, Canderous.* The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach again. *I'm betting everything on the character of a man I don't remember.*

Two of the Rialis children ran through the room, engaged in some game of chase. They paid the adults no attention at all.
Mission added casually. "And a transmit from Manaan. One-way. Vrook Lamar says to be careful, you risk more than yourself." She whirred. "Jedi kinda just say the obvious, don't they? You know, sis, it's Manaan that you should worry about."

I risk everything. And everyone. The children ran past her, laughing.

You always did, Red. For a moment she felt the cold press of metal against her neck and the sensation of strong arms around her.

What are you doing, what is this? You're hiding it from me. Tell me, Revan. I can't help you if I don't know.

The air was suddenly very cold.

"Manaan." Her throat was dry and Carth was just looking at her with that terrible expression. "Why, Manaan, Mission?"

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1

Helena Shan: "I've heard what they whisper, when they think I'm not listening. They say my Bastila fell to the dark side just like all those other Jedi did. It's a lie. I was her mother—wouldn't I know?"

Jokka Rai: "There, now, Citizen, don't cry. Are you worried, now that Revan Starfire has revealed herself?"

Helena Shan: "Worried?" (Shakes head.) "Oerin Lin will keep us safe from her. Won't you Oerin?"

Oerin Lin: "Oh, most definitely."

General Jiya Sand: "This—this farce has gone on long enough. I'm taking Helena home now."

Oerin Lin: "Actually I should be going as well. I need to see to my people downstairs. Ordo must pay properly for their transgression, you understand."

Jokka Rai (Taps communicator, as the camera pans out to show a mostly cleared roof garden.) "As you can see, most of the guests have gone. I'm receiving a transmission from our studios. Further coverage will be coming from there. Stay tuned, sentients! Will the fate of the galaxy be decided in the next few hours?"

Oerin Lin: "Fate of the galaxy? Really... she's just a woman with no Force powers. There's no need for dramatics."

Jokka Rai: "She's just a woman with no Force powers. There's no need for dramatics."

XXX

"I'll tell the Senator you're here."

The guard looked dubious as he tapped commands into his console. Then surprised.

"He says you can come right up, Citizen Onasi."

"Thanks," Dustil answered. Halfway up in the elevator he felt the now-familiar deadening, as his Force-sense vanished. In a way that was almost a relief.
But it's not the Senator I want to talk to.

He'd left the Jedi and the fangirls, just walked out on them all. He'd get around the old man somehow. After all, hadn't the Senator said he wanted Korrie and Dustil to be friends?

Well fine then. Friends talk. We'll have a friendly chat.

Just the three of us.

Malachi D'Reev met him at the door. Unusual. Normally he had the butler or that creepy droid do that.

"Dustil," the old man said, frowning. "You've heard the news?"

"News?" Dustil shrugged. "I just wanted to apologize for the other night. For lying to you and Korrie. For standing you up with your dinner plans." He looked at the marble floor, looked ashamed. Looked harmless. Like a kid. Go away old man, me and your grandson are gonna have a little talk.

"You haven't heard." Senator D'Reev frowned and sighed. His expression was troubled and concerned. He was good at that, but Dustil didn't buy it. Not for a second.

Behind him the door slid shut and the lock clicked.

"What news?"

The old man took a deep breath. "Your father—" he began.

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, HoloNet newsroom footage.

**Anchorwoman Iyrass K'chk:** "Thank you Jokka. That was Jokka Rai, our reporter on the ground at the Mandalorian Embassy. Back here at the studios, the mood is—confused. Can all this be true? Can Revan Starfire really be captured by the Mandalorians? And what about her Force Powers? Can they really be gone? Joining me now is Jrii Vail, a childhood companion of Revan's from the Arkanian Jedi Academy. You may remember this good Duros from the Official Coruscant Version. Jrii, it's a pleasure to have you with us. Tell us about your first reactions to the news."

**Jrii Vail:** "Well of course there were rumors that she was on Coruscant, I mean, everyone heard them." (Laughs.) "So it's not such a surprise, is it?"

**Anchorwoman Iyrass:** "Yes, but what does it mean?"

**Jrii Vail:** "Well it's a matter for the Senate to decide, isn't it? I mean, technically she's a war criminal—"

**Anchorwoman Iyrass:** "Yes, yes of course. But it doesn't seem so long ago that she was the hero of our age, does it?"

**Jrii Vail:** "I may just be a simple businesswoman, but honestly I am worried about this Mandalorian issue. Can we really trust them?"

XXX
"What the frack is the Gamemaster doing posing as the heir to Mandalore?" Sheris's clipped Hothan accent only came out when she was upset.

On the holoscreen the clip played again. The woman's face was an unscarred version of Sheris's own. The original, Yuthura thought, watching. Revan's features twisted with hate again as she said something threatening to the golden-haired man and the woman in orange and black at his side. Bastila's mother. She'd met the woman briefly, during the filming of the Official Coruscant version. Behind Revan stood Captain Onasi, looking confused, and the Mandalorian they had traveled with. Canderous Ordo.

"Are you sure that's Lin?" Beya Organa was never far from Sheris's side these days. The Deralian rubbed her friend's neck, trying to ease the tension.

Sheris looked at them all incredulously. "I don't understand how you aren't sure. He was here for months!"

Davad Arkan frowned, rubbing his forehead as if it hurt. "We never saw his face."

Yuthura's lekku twitched uneasily. "Of course it's him," she said, puzzled at Beya and Davad's confusion. "I saw his face—we all did, when he took off his mask in the training room."

The Onderonite looked at her blankly. "Darth Lin had dark hair. And a scar."

"No he didn't."

"It's him," Sheris' voice was toneless. "I was—closer to him than most." Her prosthetic hand picked at the dull metal mask that covered half of her features, hiding the horrible burns. "His tricks didn't always work on me." Her good eye blinked a few times.

"Lin is Mandalorian," Yuthura admitted, almost absently. The matter of Oerin Lin was curious, but her attention was focused on Revan. Revan and her pilot. Should I wish you congratulations, my first friend? Or pray to the Force? The brief conversation she'd had with Captain Onasi haunted her now. The man hadn't seemed to understand a word of it, and yet there he of them looked like they'd been hit with a flash grenade. "Vrook implied as much."

"A Sith Mandalorian?" Davad sounded skeptical.

"He was no Sith," Sheris answered. "He was a Mandalorian. " She made the word sound admiring and like a curse at the same time. "Kun save us from another one ever being born that can use the Force."

"What is he doing with Revan?" Vikor asked softly, looking up from the floor and the nest of wires that had once been their monitoring system. The Rylothian was good at disabling their surveillance monitors. Since they'd discovered this they'd been able to speak more freely. But the commlinks were another matter entirely.

"What is Revan doing with him?" Gharen countered. "She hated Mandalorians."

"She's not our Revvie," Beya had half-pulled Sheris onto her lap, rubbing her shoulders to calm her like one would gentle an animal. Her own expression was at odds with the comfort she offered; her mouth twisted in a feral smile. "Look at the way she stands, her voice. She's a shell of the woman she was. Nothing more."

"That's the redemption they'd offer?" Sheris murmured, her head buried in the taller girl's shoulder. "You promised us more, Yuthura Ban."
"That's what redemption is," Davad answered. "For the lucky."

On the floor Vikor gave a harsh laugh.

"Promised?" Yuthura's laughter was hard. "I promised you nothing except your lives. Did you enjoy being as you were so much?"

"What we've seen, you can't understand." Armon Wu whispered. "Attack ships on fire off the shores of Dagary Minor...c-beams glittering in the dark near the Tanhauser Gate as the Republic Fleet crumbled and died. We've seen entire worlds die in a heartbeat. Or burn and suffer for weeks, crippled and screaming as each life on them cried out to be saved. Or for the pain to —s top." His voice shook. "And we made the pain stop. We ended it for them all."

"At first, it was easy," Sheris said. "Because of her." The look in her eyes was almost worshipful. Still. Too easy to see the brash Padawan she'd been once, and the Sith minion she had become.

"With Revan to guide us, the war was a game. Patterns. Death and life in balance. She made us not feel them. But then, when we finally had to feel them...."

"Then she made us what we are," whispered Vikor from the floor. He shot Yuthura a half-apologetic smile. "It was different for you, bakata—" the Ryl endearment made her skin flush. "You came to the Sith cause willingly. But we—"

"We were forged," whispered Davad Arkan, staring at the screen. "We were chosen. My old Master tried to warn me, but it was already too late. I was...." His eyes closed for a moment. "I was a good Jedi, once—or I thought I was; but I was wrong. All the good Jedi went to Malachor V. On her orders. And all the good Jedi died there."

Yuthura was losing her patience. I've heard this all before. You've told me the same stories a thousand times. "I joined the Sith because they were expedient. A means to an end. They told me to kill, and I killed. But soldiers kill, people die in wars every day. The Sith gave you power. Strength to achieve your goals. You need to take responsibility for what you did with them!"

What am I saying? For a moment black spots danced in front of her eyes and she felt a copper taste in her mouth. Familiar madness, safe and comforting as a warm blanket.

Beya Organa laughed at her. "And how is the eradication of the slave trade going, Yuthura Ban? Have your people broken their chains yet? Have you begun the glorious Twi'lek revolution?"

Vikor only stared. What was in his eyes, he didn't have to say. Bile, deep in her throat. She'd been born on Sleheyron. He was from Ryloth itself, the Twi'lek homeworld where her people bred and sold themselves for profit. His family had been on the side of the profiteers. The divide between them— master and chattel— yawned wide again. Despite their shared affection, it always would.

There was no good answer. Or easy answer. For the first time, Yuthura understood why the Jedi Code truncated the world into simple divisions: good and evil, black and white.

It's easier, than facing the truth.

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, HoloNet newsroom footage.

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "I've just received word that the Galactic Chancellor, C'tek Nal'Gahar is going to make an official statement very soon. We've still heard nothing from the Jedi Council,
which I’m sure comes as no great surprise—"

(Off-camera voice: "No commentary, Citizen, just the facts.")

Anchorwoman Iyrass: (Coughs.) "The facts. Well, to recap for our viewers just tuning in: in a startling turn of events, Revan Starfire has been captured by the Mandalorians after a rather... incomprehensible attempt to avoid her fate by marrying into one of their clans. I'm not an expert on Mandalorian culture, but joining me now is someone who is. This is Xarga Wies, formerly a Mandalorian warrior, now a citizen of the Republic. Tell me Citizen Wies, what do you think of the new Mandalore, and his so-called capture of Revan Starfire?"

Xarga Wies: "We have a saying. ‘Gar taldin ni jaonyc.’ No one cares about your father. Mandalorians are not ruled by unblooded children. The Lin cub has no real claim."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Well, that's interesting—but those other Mandalorians seem to believe he does. Why is that? And what do you mean by 'blooded'? Are you saying that a Mandalorian has to kill to be your leader?"

Xarga Wies: "Well, of course. Don’t your Republic leaders prove themselves in battle?"

Anchorwoman Iyrass: (Laughs.) "Of course not! The Republic is a peaceful confederation of worlds! We're civilized!"

Xarga Wies: "Does saying that help you sleep at night, Citizen?"

(Off-camera voice: "Get him back on topic, please.")

XXX

The old man led him into the library. The marble walls shimmered and chattered, with a cacophony of broadcasts, widebeam from all sectors of the galaxy. In the center above the desk, the image Dustil didn't want to see. Revan and his father, surrounded by Mandalorians. His father had a cut on his cheek and blood welled from it. His father looked furious—and still somehow blank.

"So, if Oerin Lin has no claim to the title, what does this mean regarding Revan?"

"Clan politics are not something I'd expect an outsider to understand."

"—here on Manaan, eyes turn to the fate of the Selkath Ten. Now that their leader, Darth Revan has been captured by the Mandalorians—"

"... in session and have no comment at this time. Speculation runs rampant that the Jedi Council will make an announcement soon...."

"Hothan leaders deny any relationship between the Dark Lord of the Sith and their planet."

"—riots in Cinnegar have been linked to the gathering unrest."

"... rumors of more infighting on Ziost today as the news from the Republic—"

"Corulag officials demand that the Senate take some action. Mandalorian—"

"Yu-Phaedrans fear for a return to the old days of Sith occupation."

"... expected, the Onderon royal family has issued the following statement: ‘We are an independent monarchy, with no ties to Lord Starfire—"
"The Echanis system threatens to secede from the Republic unless full reparations for the battle of Echanis are—."

"Audio off," the Senator said. The voices ceased their whispers.

Dustil was not going to give the old man the satisfaction of seeing his response. Don't show fear. Don't show shock. Don't show anything.

The images continued to be projected on the walls, interjected by clips of Darth Revan and Sith ships.

What a fracking mess.

The old man's face pulled into a smile, watching him. "Innocence lost is a sad thing, but sometimes necessary. Don't you find it so?"

"What did you have to do with this?" Dustil asked him. He tried to keep his voice steady, tried not to let his fury show.

The Senator sighed. "With this?" He waved his hand at the frozen images surrounding them. "With this? Nothing. This debacle is Revan's work. It's my job to clean it up."

Something moved behind them. The Senator didn't look surprised, he simply raised his eyebrows and spoke.

"Malachor. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Dustil whirled around. He heard a gasp, a child's indrawn breath. A patch of air shimmered.

Stealth field, the kid's gotten better at sneaking. Dustil would have expected tears... but the kid stood there, chin up, glaring at his grandfather.

"What are you going to do now, Grandfather?" Gray eyes met gray. Both of them the color of durasteel and just as hard.

"I'm going to work," the old man said. His shoulders straightened, painfully thin under his clumsy formal robes and heavy ridiculous collar. He folded his hands neatly in front of him, and bowed almost ceremoniously to his grandson. "And you will stop trying to spy on me."

The kid bit his lip. "I wanted to know!"

The old man shrugged. "Are you so eager to be an adult, Korrie?" His voice softened, slightly, but his words weren't soft at all. "Everything I have done to prepare the future for you has been undone. By her presence. By her existence."

"She's my mother," the kid hissed stubbornly. "And she's good now!"

The Senator shrugged, walking over to his desk, tapping commands into the console set on its surface. "You want to be an adult, Malachor? Let me pose an adult question to you: does it matter more what her intentions are or what she has done?" He glanced at Dustil, mockingly. "Do you think it matters to young Onasi here?"

The kid looked at Dustil as if seeing him for the first time.

"Why are you here, Dustil?" Korrie asked him. The kid's nose was running, and he wiped it on his sleeve.
"He says he came to apologize for not coming to dinner the other night," Malachi D'Reev murmured, tapping intently at his console. He settled into his chair. "Text only," he commanded it, and the green letters on the desk's flat surface reflected over his face, lighting it with an eerie, cadaverous glow.

"I came because I want to know the truth," Dustil interrupted. That wasn't why, but it would do. Suddenly it seemed very important. "What did you do to my father, Senator D'Reev?"

The old man laughed. "Your father is a hero, boy. I did nothing. But you... you are something else. What were you really doing in the sublevels the other night?" He examined Dustil as if he were a specimen under a microscanner. "I managed to keep the corpses out of the official report. Blaster burns, lightsaber, vibroblades... and something else. Most of the Underground won't talk to our troops of course, but bribes are effective. Especially at a certain establishment owned by a Deeka Jin—at least nominally. Isn't Jin the surname of your little Korriban friend?"

"What did you do to my father?" Dustil repeated. Don't try and blackmail me, you asshole. Where his father was now—the Mandalorian Embassy? Married to Revan? All of that was something he'd deal with later. Right now he wanted to know the truth.

The old man shrugged. "I've read your files from Dreshdae. Surely one such as you can understand the practicality of bringing someone around to your way of thinking?" His voice lowered, thoughtful, as he continued to tap commands on the screen. "Uthar thought you had potential. As did the Ban woman." His lips curled in slight distaste.

"How can you know that?" Dustil didn't realize he was yelling until the words came out. "What are you?" He backed away from the old man, realizing too late the door behind him was locked now.

The kid edged slightly closer to him, hands clenched in fists. The Senator's expression changed, noticing that. "Sit down, Malachor," he said, almost pleasantly. "I thought you wanted to know more about your parents."

"You lie about them!" the kid's voice was fierce and low. But he backed obediently into one of the heavy chairs set against the wall. He curled into it, legs hugged to his chest, rocking slightly back and forth. His grandfather watched, expressionless.

The old man looked at the frozen tableau of the holoscreen in the middle of the room. Revan and Carth, surrounded by Mandalorians. His hand tapped his chin thoughtfully.

"Is she ignorant, do you suppose? Or very, very clever? If she really was Revan, the choice would be obvious. A faraway smile pulled at his mouth. "Revan was both."

"What are you?" Dustil demanded. He realized his hands were sweating. "A-are you Sith?"

"Hardly," Malachi D'Reev scoffed. "I'm a Senator. Through your parents, Malachor, I would give you three Empires," he added. "And through my guidance, the knowledge to lead them."

"I don't want any stupid empires," the kid whispered, biting his lip. He wiped his nose again. His eyes were still dry and cold.

The Senator laughed. "Nor did I at your age. But little boys grow into men. If they survive that long. You have a responsibility to the Republic. As I did. As all D'Reevs do. Someday perhaps, you will understand." He paused, frowning. "If the worlds your parents ravaged let you live."

"I'm leaving," Dustil announced. "Frack this, frack all of it."
"A poor servant of the Republic I would be, letting a Sith murderer loose amongst an unsuspecting populace," Malachi D'Reev replied. "The time to let you fly free, Dustil Onasi, has passed. You have a new utility now." The old man got up from his desk and turned and spoke to thin air. "Watch him closely, HK. I'll be back in an hour or two." His pale eyes were hooded. Another stealth field shimmered in the middle of the room and the droid's figure emerged, armed, with a blaster rifle aimed right at Dustil. Dustil made himself not jump, not make any sudden moves.

"You can't keep me here!" he said indignantly.

The old man chuckled. "No? Keep him downstairs and away from Malachor's rooms," he told the droid. He gave his grandson a smile. "Korrie, perhaps you could see if the lad wants anything to eat. I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going?" the kid asked. His voice was small and scared.

"An errand. None of your concern."

"Don't hurt her!" The kid was really pale, and his eyes were finally breaking out in waterworks.

Malachi D'Reev laughed. "It's too late to hurt her, Korrie. She'd serve no purpose dead now." His voice gentled. "How can you care for a woman who abandoned you? We'll discuss this more when I return. See to our guest now. Sometimes I wonder if you've learned nothing at all." He shook his head in disgust and walked away. The doors to the library slid open then shut behind him.

Dustil's mouth opened and closed. Frack this! Get out, get and go—

Go where?

The kid was crying softly to himself wiping his nose on his sleeve. He stood in front of the holoimage of his mother and Carth and reached out to touch the insubstantial image. His fingers passed through Revan's arm, splashed blue in the flickering light. "I don't understand," he whispered, turning his face back to Dustil. "What is she doing? Why didn't she just come and rescue me?"

"I'm getting out of here," Dustil muttered. Somehow. Getting the frack out of here... now. No. Wait. Father—I can comm him. I can tell him.

He turned back, pushing past the kid to the commlink.

The console was dark and silent now, the holostills frozen above them. Dustil hit the desk with his fist.
Chapter 22 / We'll All Have Tea

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, HoloNet newsroom footage.

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "While we wait for the Chancellor's broadcast, Xarga Wies has been telling me about Mandalorian weddings. You were just saying, Xarga, that what transpired in front of our holocams a few short hours ago was not unusual?"

Xarga Wies: "The wedding? No, weddings aren't unusual."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "But Revan Starfire married Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi. Plural marriages aren't common in the Republic, not among the humanid species."

Xarga Wies: "It's hardly my concern that your Republic is full of barbarians. What I was saying was, Oerin Lin's reaction is odd."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Odd? How so?"

Xarga Wies: "As an unblooded warrior, he owes Ordo allegiance, heir to Mandalore or not."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Well he doesn't seem to think so."

Xarga Wies: (shrugs) "Perhaps he managed to find stars, somewhere on his travels. My own Clan has left the known reaches of space in search of them. But Wies was always superior."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Stars? I don't understand."

(voice from offscreen. "Back on topic. Please.")

XXX

"The price has just went up," Deeka said, watching the blue haze of the holoscreen that flickered between them. The crumpled papers nestled safely between her fingertips.

Letters from Carth Onasi to his son. The key to her fortune.

Across from her, the hooded figure nodded. "I assumed as much."

"Say, half a million credits? And a percentage of the royalties from the production? Twenty percent, perhaps. After all, without these, The Return of the Sith is a work of fiction."

The Ambassador to Ziost shrugged. "Royalties are notoriously difficult to calculate on an underground vid. Wouldn't you rather just have a larger payment?"

"I'm assuming your holovid won't stay underground for long," Deeka replied. "And I need to make provisions for my old age—and my son's welfare when I'm gone." Her heart was beating fast.

Dancing with a rancor, you are sweetie. But half a mill and royalties are worth the risk. If only her heart would stop pounding so much. Glitterstim did that, when you took too much. That's all it is,
old treat. Getting too old for the sporting life, you are.

She adjusted the brazier on her desk, inhaling more of the sweet-smelling herb that burned within, while she let her other hand, the one that covered the stack of the Onasi letters move slightly closer to the flame.

"HoloNet would pay me more," she said, showing a little teeth. The Sith respected strength, she knew that much. Really they weren't so much different from anybody else. And the letters were more precious than Corellian spice.

"I saved Revan at the Star Forge," she began, reading out of the corner of her eye from one of the better ones that she'd placed on top to show Arca. "We're on Kashyyyk now, recovering, and I wanted to let you know, son, that as soon as it's safe I'll come for you. The Star Forge... when I first saw it I thought it was the most beautiful—and the most terrible thing I had ever seen. But I knew nothing then of how terrible it really was."

Such a stroke of luck it had been, finding such a treasure in her son's discarded coat. It more than made up for the troubles with CorSec. Not for the first time she wondered if she had the brat to blame for that too.

Ungrateful wretch, just the sort of thing he'd do, turn his poor Moms in.

"Six hundred thousand," the Falleen said, opening the metal case that rested on her lap. The golden chips stacked within gleamed with cool fire. "That's all I've brought with me. Budgets, you realize. The frelsk counters on Ziost are quite particular about expenses."

"And royalties," Deeka insisted automatically, her eyes on the chips. Her heart was really beating rather fast. She took a soothing breath of smoke.


Deeka Jin grinned. It was only a matter of time. She'd get her price.

The trick to dancing with rancors is all in the steps you take. Back and forth. Up and down. In and out. The same old game.

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, HoloNet newsroom footage.

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Do you think we can trust Oerin Lin?"

Xarga Wies: "I had little contact with the Lin family. After Malachor, it was commonly thought they were all dead. Oerin Lin would have been the outlander wife's son. It's impressive that he's survived. I can't see that he would have any love for Revan. She ordered the death of his family."

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "During the war?"

Xarga Wies: "That too." (smiles) "But after Malachor V, many things changed for our people. Our patterns of battle. The ideology behind—"

Anchorwoman Iyrass: "Malachor V? What—" (Pauses.) "Excuse me, I'm getting a message here, the Chancellor is almost ready for us. We'll be cutting to the Senate floor now, where a group of
Senators has gathered to support the Chancellor's decision, whatever that may be."

Xarga Wies: (laughs) "Your Republic doesn't like to talk about Mala—

(Static.)

XXX

It had been a clear night, but dawn would bring rain, she could feel it in her bones. The others were already waiting for her in the small meditation chamber off the training rooms. Once, years ago, this place had been filled with the chatter of a thousand Padawans; the rush and whirl of hundreds of Force-presences, all divergent, but united to a single cause. Now, these halls underneath the Jedi Temple were mostly empty. There were fewer Padawans each year.

_The paths a Jedi walked had always meant sacrifice, but in the old days, Jopheena thought wryly, at least we were allowed to be sentients too._

There was much she had forgotten, but she remembered that.

The four robed figures looked up from their meditations at her entrance.

"You're late," hissed the old Cathar. Her gnarled hand groomed her graying locks nervously.

"We've seen the news, Jopheena," the Twi'lek said.

Between them, the Vultan sat with his arms folded. With age, the golden tint to his skin had faded to a dull yellow, but his eyes were bright under the scarred web of his brow. Behind him, the blonde woman knelt, feet tucked under her knees, in a perfect meditative pose.

"I was delayed," Jopheena said. "The Council—"

"—has no idea what to do?" the Vultan asked. His voice was faintly amused.

"You can hardly blame them, they have only my word and Vrook's report to go for reassurance that she isn't Darth Revan reborn." She sat down on the mat beside her old friends, feeling the familiar creak of her old joints.

"I'm sure it displeased them," said the Vultan, "to have to take the word of one 'redeemed' Jedi regarding another."

"What did Zhar say?" the Twi'lek asked. His voice was rusty from disuse and he spoke slowly, his words slightly slurred. Nyrmon didn't speak often, he rarely left his own rooms. He'd been that way as long as Jopheena could remember.

_The past cannot erase itself, not entirely. The past leaves its own scars._

"As usual, he was quite logical. Much as he cares for his former pupil, if the truth becomes known, it will destroy the Order. He recommended that the Council override the Mandalorian claim of custody. Immediately, before she does any more damage." A sad smile pulled at Jopheena's mouth.

"They don't have the authority," the Cathar snapped.

"I mentioned that." Jopheena sighed. "But as you can guess, there were several who found taking my advice difficult. And when they asked me how Carth Onasi happened to be there in the first place—I had to tell the truth. They know my Fleet affiliations. And I could hardly lie." She made a face. "Master Klee and his allies want to turn matters over to D'Reev again. They say, if the truth
"Does come out, he can at least leash it with some kind of palatable excuse."

"Not unexpected," mused the Vultan. "Does D'Reev know everything?"

"I'm not the one to ask about what that man knows and what he does not," Jopheena said. "I've always found it safer to assume he knows. I've been rarely wrong."

"It's a simple story," muttered the Cathar. "She only wants her cub and her mate." Her claws raked the ground uselessly. "Why would they deny her this?"

"Such things are never simple, Sylvar," the Vultan sighed.

The Cathar's ears flattened at the sound of the old name. "I am Hoshani now," she murmured. The correction was automatic.

The Twi'lek grimaced. "See that you don't forget it, Master Hoshani."


"Are you going to try and see her, Jopheena?" Kae asked, ignoring the others. "Reason with her? Try and explain about the child?"

"At the spaceport, I tried to convince her to just kidnap the babe and run away." Jopheena sighed. "Perhaps I spoke too delicately. As she once was, Revan was never subtle. The woman she is now seems little different in that regard."

"Revan cannot run from her destiny," Kae said. "Surely, you can see that."

"Why should you try and convince her of anything?" hissed the Cathar. "Why shouldn't she get her cub and her mate back?"

"Because the child isn't hers," Nyrmon said. His hands pulled at his scarred lekku. "Malachor's mother died in the Mandalorian wars. What is left... is not the same woman."

Jopheena sighed. It was easier for us, long ago. We had precious little left to lose. For a moment, she felt the clasp of his hand in hers, although his face—and his name—had long since gone.

Peace is my compensation for losing you, my love. I've been at peace now for thirty-odd years. Was it worth it?

Master Kae reached out and clasped her hand, as if she understood. Perhaps she did. Jopheena knew little of the other woman’s life before, but Kae had been the wars as well.

"The pilot, at least, is hers," Jopheena said slowly. "Polla Organa and Carth Onasi fell in love during the quest for the Star Forge. I would have given her the boy too—if I could have done it quietly. She's as much his mother as anyone."

"Jedi do not love," the Vultan said. His eyes were blank below the terrible scar on his forehead. "Not anymore." Not for the first time, Jopheena wondered who Koobla Han had loved and lost.

There are some stories that aren't told in books, some things not written in histories.

And such things are best forgotten, she reminded herself. It had been years since she'd needed the reminder. Years since she'd wondered or had any regrets.
"Polla Organa was a Padawan in name only," Hoshani argued. "It was different for us."

"So we've been told," Jopheena replied. She kept her voice mild. Alone of the five, she had never asked questions about her old history.

*I've been Jopheena Sundancer for thirty-odd years. And that is enough.*

*It has to be.*

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Senate floor footage.

*Reporter Jekk Jekk Umani:* "I'm here now with another Fleet representative, High Admiral Resha's aide on Coruscant, Rear Admiral Cein. The Chancellor is due to give a formal announcement in a few moments, but while we wait, Admiral Cein is going to tell me what he remembers about Revan Starfire."

*Rear Admiral Cein:* "The Jedi had no formal position in the Fleet, but they came to our aid in the Mandalorian Wars. And Revan Starfire led them."

*Reporter Umani:* "Yes, but what was she like as a person?"

*Rear Admiral Cein:* "I don't think I understand. There was a war. We needed the Jedi to counter the Mandalorian's cloaking technology. They were all very young, but they were Jedi. There wasn't much personal interaction—"

*Reporter Umani:* "So what you're saying is, she didn't have much personality. She was... cold? Removed? A lack of affect is a sign of instability in most sentient races. Perhaps even back then, the signs were already there. Signs that the Fleet ignored, at their own peril."

*Rear Admiral Cein:* "That's not what I'm saying at all! She was professional. Dedicated. They all were."

*Reporter Umani:* "Ah. Of course. And what of Malak?"

*Rear Admiral Cein:* "They served together on the Leviathan. I'm not sure what you're asking."

*Reporter Umani:* "Of course you're not. It must have been a great embarrassment to the Fleet when they betrayed you."

*Rear Admiral Cein:* (Chokes.) "Embarrassment? Tragedy. It was a tragedy. You have no idea, it was no simple embarrassment!"

*Reporter Umani:* "And yet, news of their betrayal didn't reach the HoloNets until Telos was in flames. Why was that, Admiral? There were rumors, stories, whispers... but the Fleet was silent. Why?"

*Rear Admiral Cein:* "This line of questioning serves no purpose."

XXX

Tactically, another tie to a Mandalorian clan made perfect sense, although Mission wasn't sure that Revan was thinking logically.
After that however, the plan was a complete mess. But it was really cool to see her back together with Carth. If the nets weren't completely going to hell, Mission would have been happy for them.

In front of Mekel, the Mon Calamari attaché to the Galactic Chancellor and the Ambassador to Alderaan's human secretary were discussing the Mandalorian vote and the most recent turn of events while they stood in the long line of sentients who were all desperately trying to leave the building. Mekel started to move away towards the kitchens.

"I don't speak Alderaanian," Mekel muttered under his breath.

"We have a responsibility, I believe, to rebuild the sectors the war destroyed."

"It's not a moral issue," the attaché rolled his eyes and grunted. "If we don't assist them, the Mandalorians could find help elsewhere: Ziost, or one of the Hutt-controlled quadrants. Believe you me, the Chancellor fully supports colony recognition for the Malachor system… but some of the Coruscanti senators still have their doubts."

The human chuckled. Like all Alderaanians his features were masked under a heavy layer of white make-up, gilded with gold and silver. He stuck a hand in his belt and snagged a boiled maffa-egg from a passing waiter. The waiters were serving again, but they all looked scared out of their skins. Mission would have giggled. Big bad Darth Revan.

Yeah, right. They should see her in the morning before she'd had her caff trying to tie her own shoes.

"I notice there is no D'Reev lackey in attendance."

The attaché snorted. It might have been a laugh. He lowered his voice, and gestured with his head tentacles. "Oh, he'll vote in favor. He has more to gain than he lets on."

The Alderaanian frowned. "Even now? So it's true?"

"Especially now, I'd think. Recognizing Mandalorian sovereignty gives the old man interesting leverage." The Mon lowered his voice. "If the Fett Lin were to meet with an unexpected accident…"

The secretary scoffed. "You can't expect me to believe that the Mandalorians would accept something like that! And—what about—?"

"Her? D'Reev will take care of her, one way or another. Have faith."

"You know," the Alderaanian said thoughtfully. "I'd really like to meet her."

"You want to meet Revan Starfire?" the Mon's gurgle was incredulous. "Stars and water, why?"

The secretary shrugged. "She reminds me of someone."

If the Mon was right about D'Reev, that was good news. Mission would have cackled evilly and rubbed her hands, but instead she just beeped. Back downstairs in the Mandalorian quarters, Zaalbar groaned from the bed. She rolled over to check on him again. The slash in his arm was really nasty, and their walk through the sewers hadn't helped.
She stuck out an appendage to change the bandage again and he batted her away. "I'm fine, Mission-ghost. Tell me what's happening upstairs."

"Well it's a little complicated at the moment, Big Z—" Mission started to explain. The Wookiee's eyes glazed over. Poor guy, he was hurt worse than he liked to let on.

"I am happy," he groaned, halfway through, "for Carth Onasi and Polla-Revan." His eyes fluttered. "I hope they have many strong cubs." The Wookiee closed his eyes and sighed. "This seems like a good plan. Polla-Revan is always very cunning. The infidels will have no idea what to expect."

Big Z was giving Polla-Revan way too much credit.

Mission would be surprised if Polla-Revan could count past five at this point. That was the disadvantage of an organic mind, she thought. All of the emotional baggage.

Deliberately, she did not reflect for even a millisecond on that stupid Sithboy and his idiocy.

XXX

Rear Admiral Cein: "Back to this again. You want to know what Jedi Knight Revan like as a person? Well, she was charismatic. She had a keen tactical mind."

Reporter Umani: "Yes, but did you like her?"

Rear Admiral Cein: "The issue never came up. The Jedi kept themselves apart. Revan led them. She and Malak—"

Reporter Umani: "I've heard a rumor about their relationship."

Rear Admiral Cein: "I can't comment on that."

Reporter Umani: "Have you seen the Coruscanti Underground Version?"

Rear Admiral Cein: "Of course not! That's... pornography. And it's illegal."

Reporter Umani: "Well yes but—there's that odd wedding sequence. Didn't they use swords or something? Wasn't that how Malak lost his jaw?"

Rear Admiral Cein: "I hardly think this line of questioning dignifies a response." (Sighs.) "But no. That's not how it happened." (Glances at commlink on his wrist.) "Apologies, my superiors want me at Fleet HQ. I'm sure you understand."

Reporter Umani: "Naturally, I do. You'll all need to get your stories straight about the Mandalorian Wars...."

XXX

The second the old man walked out the door, Dustil was at his desk, trying to open a commlink to the outside world.

Whatever the hell this is, I have to speak to Father. Whatever's going on, he's got to know what the frack he just did.

His thoughts stammered as he remembered his father's reaction to most things lately.

He's just as lost as anyone. He has no fricking clue what D'Reev did to him.
"It's voice-coded," a small voice said behind him. Dustil whirled around. The kid was still standing there with his hands in his pockets, their pet assault droid behind him. "You can't access anything. I've tried. Lots of times, I've tried."

Dustil ignored the kid. His original reasons for coming seemed ridiculous now. He walked out of the room and down the endless halls to the front door. It was locked. The hallways were eerily empty. Usually there'd be servants around. Angrily he kicked the door with his foot, it didn't budge.

"He locked you in," the kid said, pointing out the obvious. The kid was following him like a pathetic fracking kath pup. "Come to the kitchen with me, Dustil?" The kid cocked his head to one side and looked up at him. "Please?"

"I'm not hungry," Dustil snapped.

"That's okay. Please come?" Korrie's lip trembled a little. He held out his hand like he expected Dustil to take it.

Somewhat to his own surprise Dustil did, let the kid lead him around the halls to the back of the apartments where the kitchen was.

The cook and one of the servants—Isuop, he thought, or maybe Kleg—they all looked alike in their uniforms—were watching a small portable holoscreen and sitting around the large table in the middle of the room. They both jumped up, looking slightly guilty when Dustil and the kid came in.

"Get out," the kid said, almost carelessly. "I need to talk to Dustil alone."

The HK clanked behind them.

"Your grandfather—" the cook began.

"Grandfather isn't here. Get out." The kid shot them all a look and they paled. "I won't tell him about the portaplayer if you leave now," Korrie added.

The servant muttered something under his breath. The cook made some kind of sign that looked religious. Dustil just blinked at them. They both from one of the outlying Corellian worlds, he'd learned before; when he and Father had stayed here. A small village there, isolated from the rest of the galaxy. D'Reev liked his servants unsophisticated and well-trained.

They cleared out.

Korrie sat down at the table in one of the chairs. His legs didn't quite reach the floor. He gestured to another and Dustil slid into it, cautious. He still wasn't sure why he was here, going along with all of this. Something—something about the air was strange. Like a buzzing, faint in his head. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

It took him a few seconds to realize what the buzzing actually was.

*The Force.* Faint, like screaming through layers of gauze, but it was here.

"You feel it, don't you?" Korrie asked him. He glanced at the HK that was still standing there, silently watching them. Watching Dustil with a disrupter rifle in its appendages. *Don't make any sudden moves.*

Then the kid grinned at the droid, crooked tooth and all. "Deactivate yourself, you stupid metal
gearhead."

The red eyes whirred and dimmed. Then went out.

"Yeah," Dustil answered, willing his voice not to crack. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up. "I feel it."

"I didn't know how to turn him off before," Korrie said. "But Father's been showing me things. To help." He looked at the table. "I was sort of happier before when I didn't know Grandfather did so many bad things. But now, I want to help."

"Do what, exactly?"

"Turn off Ache Kay, make the servants listen to me. Make the Force come back." The kid smiled. "Does the Force feel like music, kind of? Singing in your head sometimes? Like someone singing you a song to make you sleep?"

"Not exactly." Dustil swallowed. The Force presence shimmered faint around the kid now. He couldn't tell if it was Malak's ghost or the kid himself. His original reason for coming here came back in a rush.

"I came here to talk to your father—to Malak," he told the kid. He felt his face flush. It sounded so stupid said out loud. I came to ask him what it feels like to fall. And how you know when you have."

"Oh," Korrie said. His eyes opened wide. "I thought you came because of our parents." He bit his lip. "Cause they got married so now it's sort of like I'm your brother."

"No." The denial came out harsh. Dustil watched Korrie flinch. "We're not family, kid. I don't care what you saw on the vids. We're not. They're not married, not really married."

Not like my parents were.

"But that's how my parents got married," the kid answered him. Eerie, almost echoing his thoughts. "It was on Mandalore. Father said it was a very happy day. Right before I was born. But today my mother married Canderous Ordo too. Why would she do that?"

"I have no fricking idea," Dustil snapped. There was a long silence.

"Why would she do that?" Korrie repeated. His eyes were unfocused. With a chill Dustil realized that Korrie wasn't talking to him at all.

"I didn't see her faint. Throw them off of what?" the kid finally said. "Why don't you tell her it won't work then?" His lip trembled. "Can't you make her listen?"

Dustil's mouth was dry. The Force shimmered, almost tangible. "Is Malak here?"

Korrie turned back to him. "Of course. He's almost always with me, as long as there's Force. The ysalamiri block him though." He looked sad. "But he showed me how to fix it. But I liked them. They're sort of like pets when they're little, before they grow roots. They're dying in here now. Father showed me how to make them die." He took a deep breath. "But only in little places, where grandfather won't notice. Father says if Mother doesn't come rescue me soon, then we'll have to do it ourselves. Grandfather's gonna send me away."

"Away?" Dustil echoed, trying to take it all in.
"Away," the kid nodded. "Off-world. Away from Mother. We can't let that happen, Father says." He looked fierce. "No matter what."

Father showed me how to make them die. No matter what.

"You're killing the ysalamiri with the Force?"

The kid wrinkled his nose. "No, stupid. With poison. I don't have the Force. Father does."

I'm not so sure about that. Not anymore.

It was hard to tell, the Force was faint here, barely reachable, but the kid felt... different somehow.

"Poison," Dustil repeated. If he just kept saying words, maybe he'd come up with a coherent sentence, eventually.

"Arria's house has bugs so she has poison for them. Granslugs. Have you ever seen one? They're kind of cool. I traded for some slug killing stuff." The kid chewed on a fingernail. His nails were bitten down to the quick and a little bit bloody. "I liked the ysalamiri. They were like pets. Grandfather never let me have any pets. Did you have pets, when you were little?"

"I had a kerra kitten on Telos. It died when everything else died.

"Are they fun?"

"I need to speak to Malak. Your father." I need to take control of this conversation again. I need to get out of here. Fracking hell.

There was a lump in his throat. Angrily, Dustil willed it to go away.

The kid blinked. "Talk then. He can hear you when I'm here."

"Is there... is there any way I can talk to him alone? Without you. This isn't kid stuff, Korrie."

It's serious. It's bad. I don't know what it is. I don't know why I came. Arca's assassins should have killed me with that blaster bolt. I should be dead. Why am I not dead? What did I do?

My father and Revan—I'm not going to think about that. I'm not going to think about Mission either. I'm not going to think.

"Do you remember him?" The kid was frowning at him now. That serious expression on that young face. Creepy. He looked like her.

"Huh? Your father? Of course I remember him." He's Darth Malak, the entire galaxy remembers him.

"Not the galaxy! You!" Dustil shivered.

He heard me. How did he hear me? The kid's aura was faint, but it was there. It was definitely there.

"You're shouting," Korrie continued, as if all of this was normal. "Stop it. The servants may be scared, but they aren't deaf." He paused, scrunching up his features in thought. "He says, if you remember him enough, maybe you can see him. So think about him. Remember him. He says he remembers you."
He says remembers you. Stop it, don't listen. Dustil closed his eyes, trying to banish the fear. Think of Malak. Just think of Malak.

XXX

" Onasi, Dustil. From Telos." The clipped metallic voice read his name off the roster and Dustil stepped forward, heart pounding.

" Master." He knelt formally on the cold stone floor. Behind him the other apprentices stood in a line. No one dared breathe for fear of the consequences. Uthar and Yuthura stood, arms crossed, surveying their charges for the slightest infraction. Reprisal for any weakness would be swift and final. No one had to tell them that.

The Dark Lord of the Sith loomed above him, black eyes boring through the top of Dustil's skull as if he could see everything in it.

XXX

Think of Malak, just think of Malak. The Force presence swirled around the man, drowning out everything else.

XXX

" Tell me, young Onasi, what did you think of your home world’s destruction?"

XXX

You destroyed it. Telos was weak. A planet that cannot defend itself doesn't deserve—doesn't deserve to—weaken. The weak die, that is the way of the Sith and you destroyed Telos. Why did you destroy Telos? You killed my mother. You destroyed everything I had—

XXX

No. Just think of him. Think of Malak. Just Malak. The Dark Lord of the Sith loomed above him, black eyes boring through the top of Dustil's skull as if he could see everything in it.

XXX

" The big star is the Serrano system, and that's Wayland and Bandomeer, twin worlds in its orbit. Twin worlds line the gate to the Hydian Way. When we get to Junction Station we'll stop for supplies. You'll have to go... get—more kolto—I cannot be seen here. Not yet. Not far away is Dathomir..."

XXX

The big man was crying again. Mekel hated it when he cried. Mekel stumbled against the wall. Mekel fell down and dimly Dustil heard voices saying something, felt armored arms, lifting the other boy to his feet again.

" It's nothing, Kex. I—no, I'm fine, Blue. I'm fine."

XXX

Mekk?

I don't remember Malak, but Mekel does. Why didn't I see it before? He hid it from me, like he hid
Revan. But he can't hide everything. Not anymore.

XXX

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Dustil reached farther into Mekel's mind, drew on the Force that was there. The Force and the memories.

XXX

"We'll build a new world, Coruscanti son."

"Dustil?"

He wasn't exactly Dustil, not anymore.

The ship was small and sleek and expensive. He'd never seen the stars. He—

XXX

"What do you want with us, Dustil Onasi?" the voice was flat and metallic and cold. And It sounded real.

"I want to know what to do," Dustil whispered out loud. His eyes were still tightly closed.

He could see the ship, see the shape of the big man in the pilot's chair. Something wrong, something horribly wrong with his mouth. His jaw was...rotting away. The air smelled bad and stale and sickly. It made his gorge rise.

Lord Malak? He'd gone inside Mekel's head and somehow now Mekel was inside of his too. Again.

"Malachor, don't listen," the voice said gently. The hiss of the respirator faded.

"Why not?" the kid asked. Dustil opened his eyes.

Two faces looked back at him. Behind the kid, loomed a tall man in dark gray robes, not much older than Dustil himself. The man had hair, curly brown hair cropped close to his scalp. He had a jaw, a normal one. He looked like a Jedi.

"I can see you," Dustil whispered. His mouth was so dry. There was a shimmer of Force around the figure, but other than that it looked substantial. Almost alive. His skin prickled.

"There's a children's story," Malak said. "About a young prince who wanted so much to believe in the gods that he willed them into existence. Like all children's stories, it's a lie. But perhaps there is truth there as well. Believe in something enough, and you will see it." A faint smile crossed his wide mouth. "Although those around you might think you're insane."

He glanced down at his son. Korrie got up from the table, walking through his father and went to the cabinets. He pulled out a large metal pot and filled it with steaming water from the washer, slopping it a little as he put it on the floor. The kid sat down next to the pot, pulling something out of his pocket, unwrapping it carefully. A little tin with brown powder inside that looked almost like tea.

He sprinkled it on the water and then brushed his hands on his robe. Malak frowned at him.

"I'll wash it off!" the kid protested, and went to do so.
"Yes," Malak nodded. "I tried to—keep him—safe, ignorant, even as long as I could. But if I don't teach him, my father will. What do you want with us?"

Dustil? Lord Malak? Mekel's voice was so hopeful, excited. Almost happy.

Dustil slammed the barriers shut. Get out of my head, Mekk I don't need you now.

"Mekel Jin." Malak's voice was thoughtful. He paced back and forth, but his footsteps made no sound on the duracrete floor. "I had forgotten. Strange, such a small act can mean so much. He had so much promise. Jorak was too blind to see it, the old fool. Uthar always had more sense." The gray eyes were hard, almost cruel. "Why do you shut him out?"

"I don't want him in my head." Dustil shot back. "I want to talk to you. Alone. This isn't about Mekel, it's about me."

"You." The big man crossed his arms. He looked like a Jedi now, but his expression was pure Sith. Anger in it, boiling anger, just underneath the surface. "Are you concerned for your father's welfare?"

"Of course I am!" Dustil snapped back.

"And his marriage? Does it bother you?"

"Does it bother you?" Dustil responded.

It doesn't bother me because I'm not thinking about it. He gritted his teeth. I'm not thinking about it.

The big man flinched. "Yes," he said flatly. "It bothers me. I'm not sure how Red is going to get out of this mess. She'll pit herself against the Senate, the Council and the Fleet. And my father."

"That's not why I'm here."

"Then why? I asked for your help once. I warned you to stay away from my father. You're like clay in the hands of a man like that. You're a pawn. And now you're a hostage. You do realize that?"

Korrie was pulling open one of the wall panels now, humming something under his breath. He dipped a glass into the pot of water and poured the brown liquid inside the wall. He clucked softly with his tongue and something small and brown slipped out. It was furry. He petted it cautiously with a finger, looking guilty.

"It doesn't matter. A Sith Lord came and found us. Arca something. A Falleen. She sent assassins after us. It was a test. We— I passed it. I lived." Dustil took a deep breath. "I don't know why I'm still alive."

"Arca's a Sith Lord? They must be desperate on Ziost." Malak's voice was hard.

"I—sucked the life out of them. The assassins. It felt... it felt like—"

"I know what it feels like." Malak turned away from him. "Isn't there someone alive you could talk to?"

"Only Mekel."

"Then talk to Mekel. Poor Mekel. He trusted me. And then you. Blind loyalty can be an asset in the
Sith, until the end, when it finally kills you. Every time." His voice was bitter.

Dustil closed his eyes. This was hard. "I don't want to be like this," he whispered.

"You're lying," Malak said flatly. "If you don't want to kill—don't. It's that simple for you. You don't know how lucky you are."

Dustil shook his head. "No. Arca said, the Sith were waiting. For Revan's orders. I think... I think they're going to kill the Jedi."

"I doubt they'll kill all of them," the big man said. He frowned. "Does my—does Revan know about this?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about her." Except she just married my father. Except my father hates her and loves her at the same time. Except she killed Mission.

Except she saved my life.

XXX

"You don't want to do this, Dustil." The fake Sith's voice was gentle, and her green eyes were sad. "Put the 'saber down. I won't fight you, but I won't let you hurt your father either."

Except she didn't kill me when she had the chance.

xxx

"The Revan I knew would have killed you," Malak said softly. "If it served her purpose. Why didn't you bring these questions to her?" He chuckled. "Ah, that's right, you wanted her dead. Did you ever pay attention in your history classes, Dustil Onasi? Your marks were quite high, but now I wonder."

"You—followed my progress?" Dustil's mouth was dry.

"I did. I met your father once. Did he ever tell you?"

Numbly, Dustil shook his head.

"He would have done anything for you. He fought in the wars for you. His love for you was like a sun, so bright inside him. I envied him. We had nothing like that left. Not anymore." Malak looked at his son, carefully pouring the poison in the crawlspace he'd opened up in the walls.

The kid was humming something to himself, a tuneless humming that grated on Dustil's nerves like a vibroblade.

"What happened to you?" Dustil whispered.

"Do you care? Or are you just frightened of the dark?" Malak's face changed, paled, his eyes burned yellow and there was a slash on his lower jaw, black and gaping.

"Both, I guess." Don't show fear, don't back down. "W-was it power or the wars or some kind of ancient Sith—artifact that possessed you?"

"Jedi... have never done well in wartime. My wife thought she could shield us from the worst effects. My wife had a gift. And she was strong. We both were, but she had a gift."
He looked at his hands, slowly curled them into fists. "But things fell apart. And at the end, Revan made a decision. We made a decision, all of us. The hypocrisy of the Republic, of men like my father was no longer something we could champion." His eyes were gray again and haunted. "I don't think I was in my right mind by that point, I'm not sure any of us were—even Revan. When she and I realized we could never come back to the Republic, we looked for a place to run. We fled into the Unknown Reaches and there, we found—"

I don't give a frack what you found. You all went fracking insane. I'm not you, Malak. I'd never—do that. I'd never fracking be like that. I left the Sith for a reason.

The big man smiled sadly.

You have no idea, boy. No idea what it feels like to feel half your fleet burn, feel a world end under your bombs, to cut people down with your saber, drain their life, to hate so much that it becomes the only sweet thing left to you.

"I felt Telos die," Dustil whispered.

"Not like I did." The gray eyes were like ice. You could freeze in them.

"Why Telos?" The words came out empty, but it was still a question. Part of him was screaming and beating his fists against the wall, but the part in control was just asking the question. "Why my world? Why my planet?"

"Red was from there. Sort of. She spent some time there as a child."

Revan. Red.

"I thought—maybe I could stop things before they went too far. Stop them. We could never go back, I knew that—I just.... We were all mad by then. Even her."

Malak's voice was uncertain suddenly. He sounded almost young. 'She was light years away with the rest of our ships. Our new Rakatan fleet, I was leading what remained of the Republic capital command. We were to strike Kuat and then Byss. Take out the shipyards, carve a path to Deep Core. I disobeyed. She was asleep when the bombing started. Unprepared. Five sectors away, but she still felt what I did. I made her feel every death. Every single one. How many people died on Telos, Dustil?"

"Two hundred million," Dustil muttered. “Maybe more.”

The population of Telos is three hundred twenty-two million, eighty-six thousand five hundred and twenty-eight. Lessons from Telosian Civics, third year. Third year was the last year because then there were two hundred million less. Boom. His hands clenched in his lap, useless.

All dead, all gone, don't think about it.

"Byss was a world with nine billion sentient lives. Kuat seventeen. Do you think those twenty-six billion thank me in their prayers every night, before they sleep?" Malak's laughter was hoarse.

"That's not an excuse!"

"I'm not making an excuse." Malak shrugged. "It's done."

"It's done," Korrie echoed. Dustil jumped. He'd almost forgotten the kid was still here.
"You've done well, little Mal." The big man looked at his son and smiled.

"When we're with Mother again, promise I won't have to do things like this?" The kid was crying. He had something brown and fluffy and still and dead in his hand.

"I promise," Malak said softly. "Put that in the disposal."

Korrie wiped his nose with the back of his other hand and went to the kitchen's disposal unit. He pulled open the door and dropped the small dead thing in it. "Grandfather will be home soon," he said, looking at Dustil.

"Can you tell, Mal?" The question was deceptively casual.

_The kid doesn't know. He doesn't know he has the Force._

_It's safer that way. The big man's head nodded slightly. Yes, he doesn't know. I want things to be different for him than they were for us._

The kid's eyes went blank for a moment. "Yeah." He nodded. "He's leaving the Senate building now."

"Not much time now," the big man murmured.

_Not much time for what?_

Malak turned back to Dustil. "Your father would do anything to save you. You—you do understand, don't you, the love a father has for his son?" His mouth twisted, and Dustil knew somehow that he was thinking of his own father, and that love didn't factor in at all.

"Of course," Dustil answered. The words came out more arrogantly than he meant them to. "I'm sorry—I—" Frack. I feel sorry for the Dark Lord of the Sith now? Because he's dead? Because his father's an asshole?

"Do you?" Malak mused. The gray eyes scanned his face. "There's a strange empathy in you—even the years in Dreshdae didn't crush it entirely." He sighed. "That will make this easier, I suppose. I am sorry. I regret the necessity."

"Necessity?" Dustil started to get up from the table. Malak hadn't moved, his expression hadn't changed, but suddenly the walls seemed closer together, the air thicker. It was hard to breathe.

"When you opened your mind enough to see me, you made a link between us. Faint, but it's enough for my purposes. I am sorry. But I need to protect my son. And to do so, I need your help."

"My help?"

_I just want to get out of here, but how can I get out of here? D'Reev has guards, and defenses, and Malak must know about them and if I help him and the kid, maybe they'll help me, and I don't want to be bad, helping the kid would be good. A good thing. His grandfather—nothing's worse than that old man and he did something to my father. I have to find out what he did to my father and it's better than some crappy Jedi cell, it's better than running to the Sith and I—I'm scared, and I want my father, I want Father, and if I can help them too maybe that will make up for what already happened—_

"I'll help you, Malak," Dustil said out loud. The big man's eyes were oddly luminous, and the Force crackled around him like a living thing. It was scary, it was terrifying. And yet—it was power too.
Oddly intoxicating, like it had been back in the bad old days. Back on Korriban. Back in the Underground. Back at Mom's with Mekel. "What do you need me to do?"

The big man looked away. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

Behind him, the kid glanced up suddenly, eyes wide as saucers.

"I need—"

Something slammed into Dustil so hard that the world went black.

"—a body." his own lips finished the sentence. His own mouth opened, his own eyes looked down at his hands but Dustil wasn't in control of them anymore. Dustil wasn't himself anymore. It was like watching a bad holoid shot from a drone cam.

He could see and hear, but he wasn't there.

Sorry? You're fracking sorry? Get out of my body! Get out of my head! It was like drowning. It was like smothering. It was like dying.

Dustil?

Mekel's voice was so faint, too faint. The thread of consciousness between them narrowed and thinned, like they were suddenly light years apart.

"What did you do?" Korrie's eyes were very wide and scared.

Dustil's mouth opened. "What I had to do, to keep you safe."

No!

"One of the first lessons we had your instructors teach in Dreshdae: do not ask dead Lords of the Sith for anything. Do not bargain with them. Do not seek their advice." Dustil’s voice was harsh. Not quite his voice. Not anymore. "I'm sorry, Dustil. Sometimes the legends are true."

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Senate floor footage.

Reporter Umani: "Before you go, one last question. Can you tell us, Rear Admiral Cein, what the Fleet has decided to do regarding Captain Carth Onasi?"

Rear Admiral Cein: "He's involved with a known traitor to the State, citizen. We're very concerned."

Reporter Umani: "Do you have any other comment to make at this time?"

Rear Admiral Cein: "No."

XXX

"Another call coming through on the comm." Seiran looked exhausted. They'd already heard from half the town. They'd heard everything, from condolences to congratulations. And the questions. Polla thought she'd go insane.
"What do you think she's doing? Do you think she's really a prisoner of the Mandalorians?"

As if I have a clue what the Dark Lord of the Sith thinks about. Frack. Bloody hell.

At least Junior was sleeping through the chaos. They'd dragged his crib out into the main living room. They didn't talk about it, but they'd set up the house with a siege mentality in mind. Sei had cancelled his work plans for the week, and Polla had programmed their utility droid to cook everything in the fridger. They'd have enough food for an army soon.

"I'm going to set up the perimeter mines," her husband said darkly, dimming the volume on the ever-present parade of commentary and more commentary streaming from the holovid.

"No, don't leave me!" That came out way too helpless and ineffectual. But Polla couldn't help herself. She was scared shitless.

The comm chimed again. They both looked at it and looked away.

"My head hurts," her husband muttered.

"I'll get it." Polla got up and fiddled with the dials to cut out the visual. The Deralian local news had already called once. It was a good thing Da had some friends at the station or they'd be on the doorstep now. They seemed willing to believe her when she'd denied everything. That was how Deralia was.

Even when we all know the iyika-kabat is in the living room, we don't talk about the iyika-kabat in the living room. Not to the media.

It was Ma on the comm.

"About time you called," Polla said crossly. "I've heard from everyone else named Organa on the damn continent." Which was to say, half the continent.

Molla Organa looked injured. Polla switched on the two-way visuals so she could glare back.

"Your father and Mita and I were deciding what to do, dear. And I did try and call earlier. The circuits have been jammed."

"I was thinking maybe we should all move," Polla suggested. "I hear Freina's a lovely place. No tech to speak of, and ships only dock once a year but the weather is supposed to be grand."

"Oh, Pollie, really. Don't be so dramatic." Her mother rolled her eyes. "What I need to know is, are you getting her something or should we sign your names on our card?"

"Getting... who... what—something?" That sinking sensation again. If her stomach fell any lower it would be around her ankles. Polla wasn't sure what other reaction she'd expected. Ma was predictable. And Ma loved a good wedding.

"Revan and her husbands of course!" Her mother looked taken aback at the question. Yeah, right.

"She's... I don't know, a prisoner or something? She's on Coruscant? She has no idea who you are?" Polla was pissed. She wondered if she pulled the commlink out of its chassis now, if Seiran could manage to fix it later. We'll need it. For emergencies. For the baby.

"Pollie, dear! Of course she knows who we are! She's you, after all! The poor child, getting married like that all alone, with no family around her. I don't know how Mandalorians, or
Coruscantis marry but Revan's Deralian. She must be feeling so lost right now, and so alone." A calculating gleam was in Ma's eye now. Polla groaned. She knew that gleam. "I've ordered three eridu robes—the nice ones—but I got them in black. I really wasn't sure... the red we sent you and Seiran... her coloring... it just wouldn't work. And black is good. It goes with everything."

"Black. You ordered robes in black. Three of them."

Matricide really wasn't a crime, if you could prove just cause. Polla wondered if this counted.

"Black's great, Ma. Perfect. Just the sort of thing for a Lord of the Sith."

"Oh honey, she's not really—"

"You are not signing our names to any damn card. Do you hear me? And don't mention us. Don't you dare!"

Her mother ignored her, as she ignored most things that she didn't find interesting. "You'll have to get her something yourself then. Oh, and your Uncle Boon called. You remember Uncle Boon. Did you know he was transferred to Coruscant? He's done quite well in politics."

"I found out yeah, when I called Aunt Jhone about the present for Seiran," Polla said.

Great. Uncle Boon's on Coruscant. That's nice. I wonder if he'll send her Revan a book of Alderaanian love poetry too. After all, we must like the same things. She shivered.

"He was actually at the party and he saw the whole thing," her mother continued, oblivious. "He's working for the Alderaanian senator now. You know, the one who gambles."

"Did he mention me?"

"Of course not dear, this isn't about you. This is Revan's day. Shouldn't you be happy for her?"

This is Revan's day. Shouldn't you be happy for her? There were so many things wrong with that—Polla couldn't manage to say anything at all.

Mercifully, Seiran stepped in. "We'll send her something nice, Ma. But you have to excuse us now. Polla's exhausted, and we finally got Junior to sleep."

"I want my grandson to have a real name," Ma began, suddenly veering off on her other new favorite tangent.

"We're working on that." Her husband's voice was so quiet and assured, Polla could have kissed him. Oh hell. She did kiss him.

"You know, the name Revan works for a boy or a gir—" Polla cut the commlink with a slap of her hand on the dash.

"We're not getting her anything," she muttered.

"Of course not." Seiran took her in his arms, and she curled against him, trying to unwind.

"She's not me," Polla whispered, against his chest. His hands played with her topknot.

"She's not you," he agreed, sliding a hand down to her chin and lifting it, so that they eyes met. "You're much cuter." His mouth curved in a smile.
"Pollie, put the kettle on,
Pollie, put the kettle on,
Pollie, put the kettle on,
We'll all have tea."

Despite herself, Polla giggled. She joined in, singing the nonsense words softly. In his crib, Junior sighed a little. A sweet baby sigh.

"Seiran takes it off again,
Seiran takes it off again,
Seiran takes it off again,
They've all gone away."

"I'm not her," Polla repeated. "I'm cuter. And younger."

"And younger, and more talented."

"And luckier," Polla added, hoping that it was true.

"And luckier," Seiran agreed, kissing her forehead softly.

"Blow the fire and make the toast,
Put the muffins on to roast,
Blow the fire and make the toast,
We'll all have tea."

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Senate floor footage.

Reporter: "Do you think she's brainwashed him?"

Psychdroid PS120: "Carth Onasi is a very confused man. It's been no secret in the Fleet that he hasn't been the same since the Star Forge. Whatever evil he faced there left its scars."

Reporter: "There was a rumor that he was looking at a promotion to Admiral soon. Do you think this changes things?"

Psychdroid PS120: "Of course it changes things. Even ignoring the galactic implications, one has to wonder at the loyalty of a man who would switch sides so easily."

XXX

He sat down on the chair, heavily, joints creaking as they always did.

The Wookiee groaned softly at them from the bed.
"I hope you know what you're doing, Revan," Canderous said.

She laughed sharply. "What else could I have done?"

Republic had a bad expression on his face, like clouds gathering over the plains. He'd been very quiet when they explained everything—well, almost everything—to him. Too quiet.

"I think General Jiya Sand at least suspects you have some tie to Lin. If he goes to the Fleet with that information... or if D'Reev does. Nine hells, even letting them know of your existence among us before the Senate vote is risky."

"Marrying me off to Ordo may throw them off the scent, we don't need long."

"Ordo is still a Mandalorian clan," Canderous pointed out. "Why would the Senate recognize any Mandalorian clan knowing you're part of the package?"

Revan frowned. "We considered the possibility of exposure before," she reminded him. "It won't matter. I'm in the open now and they'll have to deal with me. And the Senate will recognize Mandalorian sovereignty because D'Reev will want them to. It's in his best interest."

"And the others? So you think they'll recognize Lin as the Mandalore?"

"In the hopes of seeing me ruined? I'm counting on it."

This kind of battle was like no war he had ever fought. Canderous really wasn't sure what advice to give.

"We should evacuate the embassy," he suggested finally. "All non-essential personnel. The children. Some of the women." My children. My wives, if I can get them to leave.

Revan bit her lip and nodded. "I'm sorry, Canderous," she whispered.

"I am happy for you all," Zaalbar growled from the bed. He spoke slowly, so even a grizzled old warrior could understand his words.

"Happy." Carth echoed. His hand picked at the scab on his cheek.

Canderous sighed again, and looked at the pilot. "It's only a legal fiction," he said, trying to make his voice gentle. Hard to know what barbarians thought about these things, but the pilot was his friend. "However this plays out, it's you she—"

"Canderous." Carth's voice was hard, and the muscles in his jaw twitched. There were lines in his face that hadn't been there a few weeks ago. Faint gray at his temples too. He looks as bad as I feel. "Zaalbar. Excuse us. I need to talk to Revan. Alone."

Canderous got to his feet heavily. "Of course." He searched for something to say, and couldn't find anything appropriate. Carth didn't look like he would respond well to a warrior's handclasp at the moment. "You—you should go to her quarters," he muttered. "If Gwen or Aemelie try and rope you into any ceremonies, tell them you're invoking your right as Headwoman of Lin to spend some time with your husband. Alone. They'll respect it, if you put it to them correctly."

"That's probably more prudent than a Force-push across the room and out a window," Revan said. She looked at him, and then looked away. "Thanks, Canderous."

"I'll go see if I can start the evacuations," he replied, snapping his helm back into place.
Galactic Chancellor C'tek Nal'Gahar: "Sentients of the Republic, six years ago a company of Jedi Knights led by Revan Starfire joined our fight against the Mandalorian threat. Two years later, those same Knights began a war that nearly ripped our civilization apart. Today, we must look to the Mandalorians that started this all for justice."

"Seven months ago, we mourned the loss of the heroes of the Star Forge. The Sith threat was beaten back, but at a great cost. Seven months ago we mourned Revan Starfire and the crew of the Ebon Hawk as the lost heroes of our age. But they are no longer lost."

"I would ask you, therefore, to think of the Revan's life as a scale. Does the good she did outweigh the bad? Is it possible to measure the worlds she saved against the ones that she destroyed?"

She led him to the small suite of rooms the Mandalorians had given her and closed the door. They were alone.

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Carth was standing there looking at her. There were a million thoughts in his eyes and she couldn't read any of them.

"Carth?" Revan said.

"This—this wasn't what I expected."

Revan took a deep breath. "It's a legality, Mandalorian law—to give you some protection. To stop them from trying to take you away again."

"We're married? Really married?" He took a step back from her and Revan's heart sunk. Carth shook his head, rubbing the cut on his cheek.

"No, that isn't what I meant. You—you're not what I expected."

"What did they do to you?" She reached for his mind, but she couldn't read it. Some Force-users could read the Force-blind—Malak always could—but it had never been one of her talents. All Revan could sense was the dark swirl of his emotions, confused and black. Hate was still there too, hate for her.

It felt like she was prying, and she pulled back, ashamed.

Carth shook his head, as if trying to clear it. "I feel like people have been trying to tell me something for so long... and I—I couldn't hear them. Dustil. Rew. Yuthura—even your own son. They kept trying to tell me something was wrong—but all I could see was you." His voice hesitated. "Stopping you, Revan. And now you say D'Reev did this? To me?"

She nodded hesitantly. My son. You talked to me son. "Dustil. He got back okay, the other night?"

It was the wrong thing to say, the glare in his eyes burned. "I had to bail him out of jail, he wouldn't talk to me about what happened. Did you see him, Revan? Dustil's... changed. Did you see him?"
The rest lay unspoken. Did you do something to him?

"No! I went and saw you. Outside your building. One of the others asked you for an autoprint. I followed you."

"I saw your son, he told me I loved you." His expression was empty. "Rew told me that too."

_You've seen my son. You talk to my son. You know my son._ Revan bit her lip. "Dustil..." her voice trailed off and she wasn't sure how to say it. "Mekel and Dustil. They're—linked somehow."

"A Force bond," Carth said. "He told me."

Revan nodded.

"Like you and Bastila?"

"I don't know."

"Who fell, Revan, you or Bastila? When you went into the Temple that day, you were yourself, you were Polla, you were the woman I loved and then when you came out—you changed."

"Both of us fell," she said. She looked at the ground, wishing the horrible guilt and regret would vanish into it.

"But you shared her dreams, Malak tortured her, and you had to feel it. It wasn't your fault really—somehow. That link made you that way, changed you." He spoke with the urgency of a man desperate to believe.

"No. It would be too easy to just believe that. But what I felt in Bastila's mind wasn't that simple. Her feelings. Mine. Malak...." Revan took a deep breath. "Carth, when I thought I was Polla Organa, I thought I knew how to pilot a ship, man a gunner turret, race a swoop bike, and drink an entire bottle of Tatooine wine. But when I tried to do those things...."

"You were horrible at them." Carth tried to laugh, but it came out choked. He raised a hand to her cheek, pulled her closer. She felt his heartbeat through the horrible sequined dress uniform. His lips pressed against her forehead. Almost a kiss.

His cheeks were smooth and that seemed wrong somehow. He'd shaved, and he smelled like something expensive and citrus, not as she remembered.

"The things that Revan Starfire D'Reev knew how to do came easily to me." She made her voice dead again, felt him flinch at the inclusion of D'Reev in her name. "So easily, I stopped wondering why I knew how to use a lightsaber, why I could do things with the Force no master ever taught me, why I knew languages.... And then, when I learned who I was, I didn't want to be her, but I was her. I am her. I don't remember half of what she was, but I think like her, I fight like her."

His head was buried in her hair. _Now is the part where you're supposed to say you love me, love me as I am, Carth._

But he said nothing. The enormity of what she'd done, what she'd risked hit her like a blow.

_The Fleet will know, everyone will know. They could refuse Oerin's claim, they could dissolve this diplomatic immunity in a heartbeat and clap me in chains. I could never see my son, D'Reev could have me killed tomorrow, I might never see Malachor, I just married Carth and he doesn't even understand it._
"Carth?"

"Don't," he said. He pulled her closer and his lips were on hers. There was a galaxy of desperation in his kiss, and she answered it.

The rest of the world dimmed to a faint whisper. Carth pulled her closer, and Revan pressed against him. The both fell awkwardly against the narrow bed. The mattress was filled with sand and it was lumpy and cool under their weight. His hands tugged at her blouse, and she pulled him closer, scrabbling at the buttons of his jacket. Her breath was as fast as his.

"Seeing you again," he murmured, pressing her closer. His lips nuzzled her neck, tracing a line across her collarbone while his hands moved lower. Underneath the strange cologne he smelled like himself and she ran her fingers through his brutally-cropped hair, marveling again at its softness. Her hand traced a line down his neck and he shuddered. "This," he said huskily. "Is—what—matters."

Rationality fled, as they rolled over. The mattress was narrow and lumpy and cold, but it didn't really matter. Nothing did.

XXX

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Senate floor footage.

*Galactic Chancellor C'tek Nal'Gahar: "I assure you with every confidence that all arms of the government, and every voice that holds a fact in this case will be considered before any decision is made. I plead for your patience while we make a full investigation."

"Why Revan has returned, I do not know. Many questions must be answered before we make the final decisions. Decisions that may yet affect us all. Please let your elected officials weigh this situation very carefully... and above all—don't panic."

XXX

Afterward, she slept, and he watched her. There was a pile of weapons and clothing discarded carelessly in one corner of the room. Half-hidden underneath a scrap of pink jumpsuit he found familiar blasters fastened on an unfamiliar belt. Carth slipped one out of the holster and sat on the floor staring at it, listening to the soft sounds she made in her sleep.

Almost nightmares, as familiar as the scent of her skin and the arch of her brows.

"Promise me."

"You told me once that you'd let me decide if you deserved to live, Revan," he said out loud.

She murmured in her sleep at the sound of his voice, but didn’t wake up. Carth closed his eyes.

"I don't want to make that kind of decision."

*We're married. We'll go away somewhere with Dustil and Korrie. We'll live happily ever after.*

He tried to believe in that. He had to believe in that. It was the best of all possible alternatives. He held the blaster in his hands, weighing the worst one last time. Almost an hour passed before he noticed the blaster wasn't even charged.
Carth glanced at the bed. Now her green eyes were half-open, watching him.

"How long have you been awake, beautiful?" he asked her softly.

"I don't know," she murmured. Her eyes didn't leave his face.

"In the morning, we have to find Dustil," Carth said. *Find Dustil. Rescue Korrie. Run away somewhere.* If he thought of it as a plan perhaps it would become one. His hand went to his cheek nervously and picked at the scab there. "We're really married?"

"By Mandalorian law," Revan said. "I—I had a dream that I married you on Deralia."

"I wanted to marry you on Telos before—" Carth stopped talking. The rest of the sentence hung between them anyways. *Before I knew what you were.*

She rolled over, turned away from him, faced the wall. "Come back to bed, Carth. Please."

"Polla, I—"

"Revan." Her bare shoulders were stiff. He could see the lines of tension etched in the curve of her back. Her skin was beautiful, the color of milk, dappled with gold freckles here and there, like constellations of stars. "Don't call me Polla, anymore, Carth. Please. Ever."

"You love the woman, I think you'd at least remember her name."

He went to her, brushed his lips gently at the place where her cropped hair met the base of her neck. She shivered. He wrapped his arms around her. "Can't you be both?" he asked.

*I think of you as both. I love you as both. Even when I can't forgive the part of you that's Revan. Even then, I still love you.*

"No. I wish I could. But I can't." Her voice was hard. "Revan has a son. Revan has Malachor. Polla... is nothing. She doesn't even exist."

"But she does."

It was the wrong thing to say. She pulled away from him. He let her go.

"Maybe," Revan said quietly. "But she's not me."
Chapter 23 / Glass Houses

"I'm fine, Father." Dustil's voice was flat, the tone oddly cold and clipped. "Senator D'Reev wanted me to let you know that I'm fine. I'm going to stay with him for a while, until all of this dies down." His son glanced at something to the right of him. Whatever it was, it wasn't in the viewscreen.

D'Reev himself, Carth thought bitterly, watching my son. The bastard has my son.

"I-I'm happy for you—for both of you." Dustil's lips tightened and he put his head back against the white wall, as if leaning on it for support. "I-I'm fine here, we're... all fine here. But she doesn't understand—she doesn't know the risks. What she doesn't know puts him in danger." He closed his eyes. Under the bright lights, his skin was very pale.

From offscreen came a dark chuckle and the old man walked into view.

Behind him, Dustil's jaw clenched. His hands curled into fists. Carth wasn't sure if he'd imagined it, the first time he'd watched the tape. This was the tenth time. Now he was sure. The glimmer in his son's eyes, just for a second and then gone. Hatred so pure it made his heart sink, even as part of him cheered it on.

You're right to hate him, son. He trapped you just like he trapped me. He tricked me. He made me believe.... Carth hit the table in front of him again with his fist. Beside him, on the couch, Revan flinched. And that's the worst thing, isn't it? All of those things he made me believe about her....

They were all true. They were nothing I didn't already know.

In front of them the holochip continued to play its recorded message. Senator Malachi D'Reev opened his mouth and more kinrath venom dripped out.

"I can threaten her myself, Dustil. I don't need some half-grown Telosian to do it. Revan, whatever you think you know; it won't be enough. Can you measure your ridiculous quest for justice against the life of a son? Make no mistake: take the Jedi's offer; or he will suffer. The innocent always do. I can see the shape of the game you play. I taught you the rules. And you never could win against me. Even when you knew yourself."

"I wish you'd listened," Dustil whispered from behind the old man” I really wish you'd—"

Whatever else was said, the tape cut out. Carth imagined the rest of his son's words like he'd done the last ten times, the last hundred times in his mind, pacing around the room that felt like a cage, in the Mandalorian apartments that felt like a prison. The guilt tore at him again.

I wish I'd listened too, Dustil. We are in a prison. Fleet and CorSec guards outside. Snipers on the neighboring buildings. Every communication monitored. We've been like this for two days now. Two days now and all I can do is think, and pace, and curse. Dustil, please be okay.

She stirred beside him. Carth turned to see her face. His—wife, my wife. My wife, my life, my knife — had her knees to her chest and her head rested on them. She blinked hard.
"Damn him to hell," Revan said. "It's not a bluff. Whatever it is, it's not a bluff."

She didn't have to say that it wasn't Dustil's life that was in danger. Or not just Dustil's. They'd known that when they first watched the recording yesterday.

Carth pulled her closer. His lips brushed the bright silk of her hair. She stiffened, then he could feel her deliberately relax—forcing herself to relax.

"Whatever it is, we'll face it together."

"You're holding me so tight that I can't breathe," Revan said. She shook her head slowly. "Carth—you could—you could just go. Leave. Get out of here."

He turned her head to face his. "He has my son. He manipulated me. The things I said about you on the vids—somehow he made me think them. And now he has my son. The bastard has Dustil." His voice sounded calm and reasonable in his own ears, which was strange, because he didn't feel either.

"The things you said on the vids about me were true. Some of them." She took a deep breath. "Most of them."

She didn't need to say that. She needed to stop saying that. "What, that you're the Dark Lord of the Sith? Gathering a Fleet to destroy the Republic again? What you did... what you were—is done. Gone. The dead are dead. Maybe Zaalbar's right." He and the Wookiee had had a very long talk. "Maybe... the past is just done. You gave me something to live for. You told me you have something to live for. We'll have them: Dustil and Korrie. They need us now more than ever. And if I left... what are the odds that he'd try and use me against you again?"

"According to Mission, a rather large number to one." Her voice was remote. That cold voice that made chills run up his spine.

"You asked it—her." It wasn't Mission. She persisted in treating it like Mission and it wasn't. They'd had another argument about that, and finally he'd given up.

"I have to account for every possibility." Her face was frozen. "But you have a choice. You could go somewhere, far away. Telos." She took a deep breath. "Deralia."

He never should have told her about that call to Manaan. About calling Deralian directory assistance. About wondering which woman it was that he loved.

"Just swallow your foot entirely next time, Onasi. Just jump off the top of this building. Just run out in the street outside waving a blaster and let the snipers shoot you down."

"And my son? We're going to go somewhere together, Revan. All of us." Call her Revan. Call her Revan because she wants you to. He pulled her onto his lap. Her limbs were as stiff as a doll's. "All of us. I promise." Carth tilted her face towards his again and kissed her lips.

"I've followed you across the galaxy, seen you pull off things that no one—no one else could have done. We'll do this too. We'll muddle through and we'll win." He kissed her again. "Whoever you are, beautiful, you always win. The name's—the name's not important." He smiled slightly. "Anyways, it's Onasi. Coppertop Onasi. Green-eyes. Freckle-faced Onasi."

"Fett Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi," she murmured. Her lips curved up a little. Her eyes stared into his. "Force, I missed you, Carth."
His hands smoothed her hair back from her brow. "Onasi's the important part and don't forget it. The rest is just window-dressing."

It was a smile on her face. A wan, scared one, but a smile, nonetheless.


"A gizka?" She wrinkled her nose.

He kissed it too. "My wife. Freckles." He traced the one on her ankle, sliding up to the one on her thigh.


"In Mandalorian, it's a compliment if they're large enough to make the comparison. Inkata. Bak'ta. Hsyimion…." she continued her advance, whispering more sweet nothings in languages he could only guess at.

His hands tangled in her hair. It was just long enough to tangle now. Barely. "Freckles. Firetop. Red. Revvikins."

Her hands stopped moving. "What," Carth murmured playfully. "You don't like Revvikins?"

"Don't call me Red. Ever." She buried her face in his chest. She tried to laugh. "Revvikins is awful —yeah, but—but that's better than—just don't. Please."


"I love you," she whispered.

Carth kissed her again. "I love you too. Revan, we'll get both of them. Both of them back."

"I want to see Malachi burn in every nine of the Corellian hells," she murmured. "I want to see him broken."

XXX

It's beautiful.

The ceiling soared above them, domed to meet the sky, the milky light filtering down through ferracrystal prisms like a tiny million smiles. The great expanse was circular, and lined with the floating boxes of the representatives from hundreds of worlds. More than a thousand sentient races; each one with its own color and life and culture. The beauty of it took her breath away and somewhere inside her head, a Deralian farmgirl stammered for something to say.

"Wow."

Carth squeezed her hand. "Wow? You're going to have to give a better speech than that if you want this to work."

The robed Mandalorian piloting their gravmag lifter glanced back. They'd soared out of the petitioner's gate, and were slowly circling towards the Senate floor. The subtle whine of their craft's magnetic engines was the only sound in the vast expanse.
Below them on the Senate floor, was the petitioner's ledge: a spiraling stair wound around a conical edifice to the top platform, but the steps were mostly for show.

*One step for each world of the Republic, at least it was three hundred years ago, when it was built.*

Instead of climbing up the steps, they, like all sentients come to plead a case before the Galactic Senate, descended in their gravlift on a bed of soft air.

Revan stepped carefully. Having her hands chained was awkward, and it wouldn't do to trip. The others moved around her. Gwenarius's son gurgled gently in his father's arms and Canderous nodded. That nod said a thousand words. Or at least three. *It's going well.*

Oerin Lin stepped into the speaker's circle and the light from above outlined his golden robes, and the yellow of his hair.

"*Noble sentients of the galaxy, I come to plead for my people,*" he began.

It was a really bad time for her mind to wander, but all Revan could do was look up, transfixed at the ringing rows of sentients that surrounded them, all bathed in the haze of light dappled down from above. *It's beautiful.* Somewhere above, in those rows of floating seats was her son. She narrowed her eyes, searching for him. Near the top of the room hung the five banners of the Coruscanti ruling aristocracy: Racharn, Phin, Makeon, Qel-Ria and D'Reev. She looked for the black and red, barely discernable from such a vast distance.

The last words of Oerin's speech echoed through the chamber. "*How can you measure the value of one life against a thousand? We must be prepared to make any sacrifice to save the lives of all sentients. And now, when the Mandalorians need your sacrifice, your leaders preach caution and temper their indecision with empty platitudes. The Mandalorian plight is real....*"

At first, the applause was only scattered. But it grew thunderous, like rain on the Derran plateaus. Heavy, driving, decisive.

Galactic Chancellor C'tek Nal'Gahar hardly need to tabulate the vote on his receiving screen.

The vote was unanimous.

"*By the power vested in me by Senate and Fleet, and with the approval of the Jedi Council, the Coruscant Galactic Senate recognizes Mandalorian sovereignty. A people, who have reached the age of reason, and selected their own governance deserve the same rights and privileges we accord to any protectorate system. We recognize the Fett Lin Mandalore as titular head of his people. We offer him the same hand of friendship given to all colony worlds. If there are any that object to this status, let them speak now, or forever hold their peace.*"

*I object!* Beaming, the Headwoman of Rialis stepped forward. "Oerin Lin cannot lead us—yet. He has not yet completed the tasks that turn a Mandalorian boy into a man. He is still, sadly, unblooded in stars."

Revan sighed with relief. *She remembered her lines*.... Carth squeezed her hand, encouragingly.

*We'll pull this off yet,* she thought.

The Chancellor frowned. "Is there some other member of Clan Lin who can act as regent for Oerin until such a time as he comes of age?"

From the line of Coruscanti Senator's boxes high above, a bright light flashed in code. House
D'Reev requested permission to speak.

"It's true that I cannot claim any blood kinship with Clan Lin through my own line," Malachi D'Reev's voice hissed over the speakers. "But my late son's wife has claim to Lin, and therefore, so does my heir. Malachor D'Reev."

The Galactic Chancellor's normally healthy red chitin paled to a pinkish orange. His beak chattered. "And who is this heir's mother?" he asked formally. The tension in his voice made it all too clear that it was a rhetorical question.

"Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi," the old man replied. His voice was full of hate. On the holoscreens above them her own face; head bowed, hands in chains, was projected ten meters high. The overlight drones projected a spotlight on her. It was blinding.

"Now," Carth murmured in her ear. He shoved her forward gently.

The towering levels of senators gasped in a collective sigh.

"Noble sentients of the galaxy." Revan knelt on the blue penitent's circle and raised her head addressing the room. "I saved you in the Mandalorian wars, and now I come before you, as a humble penitent representing the interests of a shattered people." The light blinded her, but she kept her voice steady. "By Mandalorian law I am the Fett Mandalore, and by Coruscanti law I lay challenge to Malachi D'Reev. The old Senator has served you well, but he has served too long. I am his rightful heir, through my late husband Malak's claim. I am the rightful guardian to our son."

The Galactic Chancellor bobbed on his lift above her, tentacles waving slightly in agitation.

"What you say is the truth," he clicked, slowly. "By Coruscanti law. But—"

"—and I accept the judgment of Coruscanti law. Let my fellow Senators judge me. If they find me lacking, I will fail."

Above on the holoscreen the five representatives of the Coruscant Senate houses flashed for a moment, all of them looking down at her.

After all, what's the worst they can do? I lived through the Star Forge.

"I object," hissed Malachi D'Reev. "I will act as regent for Malachor—for Malachor and the Fett Lin," he added hastily. "Revan Starfire D'Reev is an enemy of the Republic."

"Overruled," said one of the other Coruscant Senators. "The other four houses are in agreement. We accept the challenge. Revan Starfire D'Reev is one of our own, and by such laws we will measure her."

"Normally, we would put this matter to planetary vote. But in this special case, let's skip the formalities. Let the games begin." The Galactic Chancellor raised a claw, formally sketching his scepter through the air. Revan bowed her head. "Release the child to his rightful guardian."

"Let the games begin," Revan echoed the formal phrase, looking up out of the corners of her eyes at the lift that descended from the highest heights. On it, a red-haired child, tall for his age, and standing beside him, an older boy, almost a man, with dark hair and Carth's face.

I did it. I've won, and we didn't even have to wait for the planetary votes, didn't need to lobby! It was this easy! So easy....
"You did it, Mother!" Malachor leaned on the rail of the lift, reaching out towards her as they came closer. High in their boxes, tiers of sentient representatives cheered.

*I did it, I've won. Now, we grab our sons and get out of here—*

A grating noise broke through the applause like a blade against transparisteel.

The gates on the far end of the Senate floor creaked open. Rank and file, lines of Mandalorian warriors filed in, resplendent. Thousands of them in their battle armor.

An army.

The Galactic Chancellor turned his head, sharply. "What—? No!" he cried out. "We are betrayed!"

A low, dark chuckle sounded, and a black shadow clad in a heavy cloak rose up from his gravlift. Its gloved hand slid around his neck, caressed his beak. "Silence," hissed a woman's voice. "All of you, silence."

Revan stumbled in shock, scrambling to her feet. Her Mandalorian escort were all smiling. Some had swords drawn. Others had rifles. The Force surrounded the room, enveloping the onlookers within its web of stasis. All voices were stilled.

The black-cloaked figure held the Galactic Chancellor of the Republic by his tentacles, jerking his head back. "Talk when I say talk," it hissed. "Bow when I say bow. Dance when I say dance."

There was the sound of ripping flesh, crack of chitin breaking, and the figure stepped back, holding out its hand. The Chancellor dangled boneless at the end of an arm.

"No," Revan whispered. Carth stepped forward touched, touching her arm tentatively.

"Don't do this, love."

"No!" Her cry echoed across the vast chamber. Above them, the gravlift carrying Dustil and Malachor paused and began to retreat. Her son's mouth opened in surprise.

*This can't be happening. This isn't real, this isn't—*

Real.

The dark puppeteer threw back her hood, lifted up the metal mask. Her grav lift drifted closer.

"No," Revan whispered again. She shook her head. "This is wrong, this isn't how it should be. You shouldn't be here!"

"Were you expecting someone else?" said Bastila Shan. Her pink lips curved in a knowing smile. The Chancellor twitched at the end of her hand, green ichor dripping from the terrible hole in his carapace. "Perhaps someone... taller? Male?" She held out her other hand, black-gloved, fingers curved in a formal Coruscanti invitation. "Join with me and we shall rule the galaxy."

Then, with an expression of distaste, Bastila dropped the Galactic Chancellor. His body crumpled to the floor of the lift.

"This is a dream."

"Slow today, are we?" Bastila hovered above her on the gravlift, hand still outstretched.
Revan turned her head. Canderous, Gwen, the headwomen and all the other Mandalorians were
gone. Carth stood alone on the platform, reaching for her. "I can't let you do this. I can't let you fall
again," he whispered. "I love you, Red."

"Outdated. Ineffective. Puppets... to tradition. I have come with my Mandalorian army," Bastila
addressed the frozen crowd with a cruel smirk on her face. "I have come for my apprentice. Do not
think you can win against the Lords of the Sith. We have powers far beyond your comprehension.
The Sith Empire will rise again, and we—we are its spark." She paused, frowning, and shook her
head. "Revan, this is absurd. Carth makes a ridiculous Nomi Sunrider."

"And you a rather unconvincing Exar Kun," Revan replied. Her throat was dry. *Dream. Only a
dream. This is just a dream.*

"There was no one else left to play the part," the Jedi shrugged. Her laughter was sharp and crisp in
the strange silence.

"So I'm Ulic?"

"You seem to have set it up that way." Bastila grinned at her. Her face was very pale, and her blue
eyes turned almost colorless. Two spots of pink burned on her cheeks. "Remember, isn't this
your dream?"

The sound of footsteps behind her and an old man's sad voice. "Don't do this, kid."

"No."

More players in this demented dreamscape ascended the steps and stood before her, lightsabers
drawn. Their faces, pleading with her. *Don't do this, it's not too late.*

"This is the part," Bastila's voice was lecturing and assured. "This is the part where you strike
down your friends, and you and I go off together to lay waste to the galaxy."

"Make sure not to kill them, so they can save you later. You got that wrong the last time. Come
with me, Revan." Her voice was oddly gentle. "End this farce. Come. We need to talk."

"You know, the kid's right, Bastila," Jolee cleared his throat. "You do make a terrible Exar Kun."

Bastila's haughty eyebrows rose. "I'm sorry," she said, leaning on the rail of the gravlift. Her black-
gloved hands dangled over the sides, one still dripping green ichor. "Do you see anyone else
around to play the role? Do you think you'd be better at it?"

Jolee shrugged. "I actually knew Exar, unlike some people who weren't even twinkles in their
parent's eyes."

Revan clenched her fists. The chains binding her hands broke. "I want to wake up now."

"Polla," Carth whispered. His voice was faint and even as she watched he vanished, shimmered out
like a hologram.

"And it's always what you want, isn't it?" Juhani advanced, lips pulled back in a snarl. "You haven't
changed at all."

Bastila frowned at the place where Carth been. "Stang, we're short one player now."
"Well, geez, isn't it a little weird for me to be Nomi? I mean, I loved Polla-Revan like a sister but don't be gross. Bastila, I think you should do it. You have the Battle Meditation and stuff." Mission Vao trooped up the stairs, vibroblade in hand, bowcaster slung casually over one shoulder. She was dressed in her bright red Baragwin armor. "And then maybe I could be Exar Kun?"

Revan closed her eyes. "I'm going to wake up now."

"Oh, you dumb crazy kid." A calloused hand caressed her face. Revan opened her eyes. Jolee was looking at her, sadly, his 'saber extinguished. "You dumb crazy, try-and-do-the-right-thing-and-frack-it-all-up-kid. *Think*, Padawan. What's missing from this picture? *Who's* missing from this picture?"

"This is a dream," Revan repeated stubbornly, backing away from him.

"I told you this wouldn't work," Juhani snarled at Jolee. "She's selfish and she doesn't listen. She doesn't see. You have to just be direct and even then she won't believe you." Her furred face twisted. "Revan," she said, enunciating each word slowly and carefully as if speaking to a small child. "Malak is gone from this place. Malak is gone from this place, do you understand?"

Revan shook her head. "He's dead. I killed him, I killed all of you, this is just a dream, only a dream. A really bad dream—and I—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

The railing was at her back. Maybe twenty meters to the floor. She could use the Force to cushion her fall.

"You don't have the Force," Bastila laughed. "Not while you're playing Ulic. Nomi's cut you off from it, remember?"

"Pollie, dear!" An old woman staggered up the stairs, wisps of hair straggling out of her topknot. *There* you are, child. Were you hiding from me?"

Her frame was bent and stooped, and she wore a faded blue dress, patterned with leaves. Familiar pattern, familiar dress. Familiar face so abrupt that Revan's breath came out in a sharp gasp.

*This is a dream.*

"I'm sorry," Bastila's voice was arctic. "This is a private intervention. Who are you?"

The woman's wrinkled eyes widened. "Why, you're Bastila Shan! I've seen you on the vids! And of course, you remember, that one time I came up to see Polla on your Republic ship? I brought you teacakes. I'm Polla's Auntie Mita, and I've been looking everywhere for her. I should have known I'd find you on Coruscant, dear."

Jolee stepped away to give the old Deralian room and her wrinkled arms enveloped Revan in a shaky hug. "You were always going on and on about coming to Coruscant. Look at you now!" She smiled. "Why, it's lovely here." Her eyes looked up, at all of the empty Senate boxes above them. "Maybe a little dark. Must be terribly hard to heat."

"I want to wake up now," Revan told her. "Please." She gritted her teeth while the woman exclaimed over her hair, and kissed her softly on the cheek.

"The pilot's very handsome. Polla was quite taken with him too, although she'd be loath to admit it. Are you happy, dear? I do want you to be happy."

"Is this something from her mind like the rest?" Juhani's ears flattened back against her head.
Jolee reached out and touched the woman's shoulder tentatively, frowning. "I don't think so. Excuse me—Mita, you said your name was—are you dead?"

The old woman looked puzzled. "I'm not really sure. I went to sleep. How long ago was that? And I don't seem to have woken up since. I heard her calling. I thought it was the other one at first. Oh, but, Junior is beautiful, he looks just like his father—and they're doing fine...." She frowned at Revan again. "Although, you've gotten her in a terrible tether. Again. One of these days, the two of you are going to have to sit down and work this thing out."

"You don't know me," Revan whispered. "You're not my—"

The woman put a finger to Revan's lips. "Shhh, dear. You know, if I am dead, I expect you to pay me proper the respect. You know what I like, don't you?" Her faded eyes twinkled. "You remember, that time we went down to the lake and picked basketfuls of them and I told you. Do you remember what I told you?"

Revan shook her head. "I'm not—you're mistaken."

"Did the Council anticipate this, Bastila?" Jolee took the old woman's arm gently and tried to lead her away. She shook him off like a herran fly on a hessi.

"You have to do something about your hair. It's so untidy this way. See the Cathar's hair? She has fur, but even she manages to groom herself. I don't know what you've been thinking."

"I doubt she's been thinking at all," Bastila hissed from above, leaning on the maglift's rails. "This dream sequence we just saw... this is your plan, Revan? I can see why Malak was so upset."

"You said he was gone." Revan pulled away from them all. "You're all gone. You're all dead. It's all my fault and I'm so sorry. I just want my son."

"Kiddo, it's not like we and Malak have many chats. But he's not here. He was here and now he's not. That means he's somewhere else. And that has us concerned." Jolee waggled his lightsaber's hilt at her, gesturing. Revan stepped back more.

"This is my mind," Revan whispered to herself. "This is my mind trying to make sense of things that don't make sense. My mind trying to rationalize what I've done."

"This is us, trying to get a point across through your thick bantha poo doo skull!" Mission came closer. Her lekku were twisted protectively around her neck. "Will you tell Sithboy I really did want to see him again?"

Revan turned away from her, looked out over the railing. "I'm going to wake up now. I'm going to wake up."

"When you see your sister, tell her I'm sorry I didn't have a chance to say goodbye." Auntie Mita's voice was querulous and a little sad.

_I have to run away. I have to get out of here._

"This is my mind. This is a dream," Revan told them all again. Bastila's mouth curved in a smile and she shook her head. _No._

Revan scrambled over the railing and jumped.

XXX
She woke up on the floor, tangled in the sheet she'd pulled off the bed. Carth murmured sleepily on
the narrow mattress, hand reaching out for the empty space where she'd been.


The dead are dead. Zaal said so. Canderous said so. Carth said so, even when the shadows in his
eyes spoke otherwise. The dead are dead.

Revan got up slowly, wrapping herself in the sheet. The chronometer flashed on the nightside table
—another three hours before dawn and everything that it would bring. My real speech before the
Senate. My fool's game.

She went to the commlink and fit the earpiece around her head, whispering so that she wouldn't
wake him. "Mission."

"Here, sis! What's the problem?"

"Did you just—did I just—" No, that's insane. That was a dream.

"Did I just what? I'm still running schematics for the Senate and the aftermath. You do realize,
even if everything goes well, D'Reev will strike hard? Probably like, before we get out of the
building."

"We can handle it." I hope. I lived through the Star Forge. I think I can handle a Coruscanti
Senator.

"I've patched into the main communications link, but it wasn't easy... and it might not be stable.
Lots of ice. Lots. Tons. And I'm still worried about blondie and the Manaan thing. I know what he
says, Polla-Revan. Yeah, yeah, no one will recognize him from there—but we can't be sure. It'd
like, be bad, if your main advocate was revealed as a former Sith wannabe-Lord, don't you think?"

"We'll handle it." There was something stuck in her throat. "Listen, Mission, can you patch in a
commlink for me? One-way visual, if you can, incoming visual, text outgoing.
Untraceable. Really untraceable. It's... important."

"Are you going to talk to Vrook about the Manaan thing? Sure, I can. Easy!"

The headpiece whirred against her cheek. "N-no, not Vrook." I can't deal with Vrook right now, I
can't. Revan shivered and closed her eyes. This is nuts, it was a dream. "Deralia. Derran continent.
Adaston. Molla and Jasp Organa. Green Hills Farm."

"Um, sis?" Her computer's voice sounded concerned.

"Only do it if it's safe. Safe for them, Mission. But try. Please. An order."

"Who are they?"

"Don't ask me questions, Mission. Do it. An order—if—it's safe."

"I guess I can run it through Yavin Station... sure. I think Suvam's onto me, though." Mission made
a noise that sounded like a laugh. "He keeps changing the codes. Give me a millisec, okay?"

The small screen shimmered in front of her, static, resolving itself to a still image of a painfully
familiar couple. They looked a little older than she remembered, but otherwise the same. The man
was holding a tiny baby in his arms, and the text on the bottom of the frame said. 'Congratulations
Organa! It's a boy!

Another cousin must've had another baby. Ma and Da always pose with them, trying to remind me that it's time to settle down and start doing that myself, but I—

"Gods," Revan whispered, clenching her fists. The link chimed, a tinny sound in her ear, tenuous, like the thread between stars.

"Text-only? Who is this?" The woman's face was crumpled with sleep. Late, it's late there too, I woke them up. "Pollie? Is this your way of calling to apologize?"

Revan tried to stop her hands from shaking. I wanted to talk about Auntie Mita, Ma, she typed.

Molla Organa frowned at the screen, her face softening. "Oh, sweetie, I know you were upset when I called about that; but it was her time. Look, you and Seiran and Junior will come over tomorrow for the wake. I'm getting her salish roses, she was always liking those when she was alive. I guess I don't need to ask what sort of flowers you'll bring. Told you both they're no more than weeds; but Mita did always love them."

It was hard to focus and type a response.

I had a dream about her.

Molla Organa's face softened. "Of course you did. Sometimes the spirits of the dead come into our dreams. I've told you that a thousand times. And you have to get over this strop you're in. It's not good for Junior, you being this upset. You'll curdle your milk. There's no use in getting upset about things you can't fix."

It would be easier to type if her hands would stop shaking. Goodnight, Ma.

Molla sighed. "Not going to let me see my grandson, are you? Just going off to bed again? Well fine, we'll see you all tomorrow. Goodnight, Polla. Sweet dreams. Sleep tight. Don't let—"

“— don't let the rejarik bite.”

Revan cut the connection.

"Sis?" murmured Mission in her ear. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," Revan muttered. "You're sure that call can't be traced?"

"Course I'm sure! Why did you call that woman Ma?" The headpiece clucked to itself. "I ran profiles on 3,864 citizens of Deralia named Polla Organa and found nothing. But are you telling me she's real? Polla Organa's real? She's alive? This is big, sis. Really big. Major."

"I thought I did tell you." Revan rubbed her temples.

"That she was a real personality, sure. Not that she was a living real personality. Legally, that makes a huge difference."

"It makes no difference. Either way, she's not me!" Her voice was too loud. Behind her Carth murmured in his sleep.

"Who else knows about her? The Jedi must know. Maybe some of the Fleet from the Ascendant — I'll have to cross-check them. This is bad. I can't believe you didn't mention this before."
"I—Carth knows. Canderous knows—we talked about it on the ship. The Jedi won't admit to it, Mission. Or the Fleet. Look, it doesn't matter." That little wrinkled face in Jasp Organa's arms. Revan took a deep breath. "I think Polla, the real Polla, just had a baby. A son. We should..." her thoughts were heavy and slow, and her head ached.

"Are you okay?" The computer's voice actually sounded concerned. "Look, it's not efficient for you to fall apart right now. So don't."

"Get her something. A present. It's tradition on Deralia. Gift to the mother for the birth, gift to the child, gift to the father—they like gifts. They..."

The father is Seiran? She married Seiran Wen? The farmboy? Seiran dared me to race the canyon loop and I fell, and I fell.

"A-and flowers. Flowers for Mita. Derran lilies. But only if you can do it without tracing it back to here."

"This sentiment is really coming at a bad time. There's too much at stake." Her computer chirped softly. It sounded disapproving.

Revan took a deep breath. "I'm fine," she said, making her voice cold. "Get them some fracking presents and some flowers for Mita. She died. And don't mention this again. Don't question me again. Do you understand?"

"Whatever you say. I'll route whatever through Yavin. Derran lilies?" The headpiece clicked. "Is that an indigenous fauna? Where am I supposed to find—"

"Find a local florist. In Adaston. Deliver them tomorrow—today, I mean. In the morning there. To Green Hills Farm. Its southwest of Adaston near—" Near Janstak's Canyon, where I tried to fly the loop and I fell.

"Get them all flowers. You got it, sis!" Mission's voice returned to its automatic chirpiness.

"No—the presents can... come later. The flowers... tomorrow. Anonymous Mission. Untraceable. Do you understand?"

"Don't teach your mother how to splice." The headpiece whirred. "What do you want me to get them?"

What does Polla want? Sweet wine, a handsome pilot, adventure, romance, a life straight out of the holovids. Maybe a few pinches of Corellian spice?

None of those things seemed appropriate for the mother of a newborn son.

"Stars," whispered Revan. "Maybe one of those virtual generators with maps of stars. For Polla. She must be missing them, stuck planetside."

"Right. Stars it is." Was it her imagination or did her computer sound distracted? "And for the husband and son?"

This was too painful. Too awful. "I don't know, you pick. Seiran was into the swoops, once. Maybe something like that." Revan pulled the headset off her face before Mission could answer.

Mission's right. I can't afford to think about this. I will not think about this. I will not think about any of this. Ever again.
Goodnight, Auntie Mita. Sleep tight.

XXX

The Senator knocked politely on the door of the suite, unlocking it with the key chip he had strapped to his wrist. "Are you ready?" he called out.

The Onasi boy gave a muffled grunt from within. "Almost," he called back.

The door slid open. The lad was already dressed in the formal robes that were required tradition in the Senate complex. Designed to fit most—if not quite all—sentient races, their assembly was more complicated than it looked. Malachi had expected the collar, especially, to cause the boy some trouble, but it was securely fastened around his neck already, with all ten points correctly aligned.

Well, the lad was a clever mimic. He'd already picked up the upper-crust accent, a trace of it crept into his soft Telosian enunciations. Malachi wondered if the young Onasi had ever considered a career in politics. *There's more to you than I thought, Dustil.*

It was always a pleasure to be pleasantly surprised. He'd expected to have to drag the lad into this kicking and screaming and possibly drugged. But so far, the boy was surprisingly tractable.

"I'm ready," Dustil said. He stood stiffly, as Malachi walked around him, making sure the robe fell correctly from his shoulders to the ground. He gritted his teeth with a spark of the old defiance. "I'm ready, sir."

"There's one more thing," Malachi said. He pulled the band out of his robe. It was a half-band, designed to ride against the brow on a human. At the hairline. Rather like a crown, really.

*Prince of Telos.* The old man chuckled at his own wit.

Dustil looked at it, his eyes narrowing. "What's that?" His voice was flat and uncurious.

"A neural disrupter." Malachi prepared himself for the argument. "I'm sure you can understand the reasons. You've been very sensible, Dustil, since your outburst the other day on that holorecording."

The boy only nodded and took it, fastening it to his head. Only a slight hiss of pain as the receptors sank into his skin against the bone. Then his expression turned smooth and flat again. Almost—serene. Who would have thought it, the lad almost looked like a Jedi. His composure was uncanny.

"It's time, Grandfather?" Malachor had crept up behind him. The child was never far from Dustil, except when Dustil was locked away. Another pleasant surprise; there seemed to be a bond between them. He'd been slightly concerned of course, leaving the two of them alone the night that Revan had shown the pattern of her game; but the HK was very reliable. He'd come home to find them in the library, Malachor curled against Dustil's side on a low couch. Dustil had been reading him a story. One of Malak's old books.

*A Force-using ally could be useful for my grandson. And thanks to his mother's antics he will need one. Things would be easier if I'd had Hulas send her into the heart of a sun when I had the chance. But much less satisfying.*

*And ultimately... if we do win, this will serve Malachor more.*

He'd made arrangements. In two days, after this farce was done, his heir would be sent with Fleet
escort to their Corellian estates on the Chimern moon. Security there was impregnable, and it would not be safe to leave him on Coruscant once this card was played. A common enough practice. Seconds were too valuable to risk in the Coruscanti games.

He considered the Onasi boy again. He'd have to decide what to do with Dustil.

Malachi D'Reev straightened the points on his grandson's collar so that the black and red lines fell cleanly in contrast with the piping on his robe. "No outbursts will be tolerated in Chamber," he reminded them both. "The penalty is immediate stasis and expulsion."

"We understand that," Dustil muttered. He closed his eyes. He was very pale. A blue vein throbbed on his temple, bisected by the gold of the neural band.

His grandson opened his mouth to say something and Dustil shot him a look. Whatever prattle it was, it wasn't important. The old man was pleased that the Onasi boy understood.

There was a very old axiom popular among the Coruscanti elite: children should be seen and not heard. If they wish to live to be adults.

XXX

"Fleet escort, twenty troop carriers, three squads of fighters, and they've cut off all local traffic between here and the Chancellor's District." Mekel rattled off Mission's statistics, a slight frown on his face. It was his own face again, there was no use using holomasks now. Security would be scanning for them. "Blue says it's pretty obvious no one in charge believes the ruse. They're sending a Council ship to bring us to the Jedi. Twenty Knights as escort—she thinks. The Jedi transmissions are tricky to read." He frowned suddenly, rubbing his head.

"Please don't have another fit now, Mekel Jin. We really don't have time for the delay." Oerin Lin walked into the room, rubbing a scorch mark on his newly reassembled armor's arm. His face knit in an annoyed frown. He tossed the armor's mask to Revan. "Look at that!" he scowled. "Kex couldn't get the dents out. Five hundred years of sand, wind and stars and your damned Wookiee ruins my heritage with a laser torch!"

Revan turned the mask over in her hands, running her fingers along the new seams. "They're on the inside, they won't show." She turned the heavy mask over. Her reflection gazed back at her in its shining silver surface, bisected by a deep groove down the middle and the contours of its eyepieces. It was smooth and cold.

XXX

She raised the mask to her face, felt the weight of it cold on her lips. Familiar weight now. Comforting, substantial.

"My Lord, the Leviathan is within transport range. Their shuttle is requesting permission to dock."

"I'm surprised he came crawling back to us." Her voice was mocking and unfamiliar in her own ears. Hiss of her breath through her mask, vision narrowed, focused, sustained. Frozen.

It was a lie. She wasn't surprised at all.

Be cold like Hoth. Be like ice. Be like ice or be like the rest of them.

Their screams still echoed in her head. Death. She was seven on Telos. She was twenty-six now
and Telos... Telos was burning again.

It had been burning for a week.

Do you feel this, Red? Do you really feel it?

Somewhere above the planet, he'd been laughing as the first bombs fell on the orbital defenses. And then planetside, he'd torn through the rubble, hunting the survivors as if they were sport; a game preserve like his father used to take him to. Only Malak—the old Malak—could never stand the sight of blood or death. Back then, Malak couldn't stand to feel things die.

All of that power: the power from their rage and hate and fear, that she'd channeled so carefully because the weak die, they die screaming don't they, Red— and he'd wasted it on Telos.

Her newly appointed Lieutenant bowed his head. He was still on his knees. She tightened the belt of her robe around her waist.

"Get up, Davad."

The man before her had been a Jedi once. He'd been a friend once. His dark skin had a gray cast to it now, and his eyes were as yellow as hers. Damned.

He ran his tongue across his lips and looked at her. His eyes burned.

"Fetch him. Get Malak. Bring him here." Davad's expression didn't change, but she could feel the hunger in it. One of the noblest men she'd known. Once. No different than any of them now. He inclined his head, slightly in deference, but those damned eyes were hungry and calculating.

He still defers but one slip, one misstep and he'd rip me apart. Because that is the way of the Sith, isn't it? That is the way of the Sith.

"Should I send some message to Korriban, Master—or is your new Apprentice closer at hand?"

The Onderonite was taunting her. His hunger for power, hunger for her, hunger for the Force itself burned, like a scream she couldn't stop.

They'll tear me apart. Malak's the only one I can trust and he—he betrayed me.

There is a power in rage. Strength. Focus it, use it. Every tool has a purpose. Who said that—he said that—the old man.

Every tool has a purpose, even a broken one.

"Escort Lord Malak here, Davad. No questions." She made her hand into a fist, and felt the Onderonite's heart clench as if it were clasped in her fingers. His mouth opened and closed, soundless. She opened her hand again and he fell to the ground, eyes rolling back in his head, as he tried to scramble to his feet.

Maddeningly, there was a still a smile on his face—and she could feel his hunger for death as much as for all the rest.

"Don't bother getting up," she sneered. "I like watching you crawl."

It's the only thing they understand. A show of strength.

Revan turned away, not bothering to watch with her eyes, when she could feel him scrabble across
the duracrete floor, feel all of them, the living web of them extending outwards and the chain that
bound her—and through her them all—to the one who was coming.

And somewhere Malak was laughing. She could feel him laughing.

Her husband was laughing under his metal jaw. Did you miss me, Red? Did you? The hope in him
was choking. Hope that she’d kill him finally, and then he’d have peace.

"Peace is a lie." Revan spoke the words to herself, but she felt him hear them, walking proudly off
the transport shuttle onto the Aleema’s decks. His escort gave him and those that followed as wide
a berth as possible.

You don’t taunt a rabid terentatek; you avoid it. You stand very still and hope its mad, yellow gaze
passes over you.

She felt Malak’s anticipation like a song. One way or the other this will end. Can you kill me? Do
you dare?

The girl at his side giggled nervously. Sheris still giggled, sometimes. Her coppery hair fell loose
past her shoulders, soft as silk. Malak put his arm around her, whispered something in her ear.
Pink flush on that Hothan skin. His hand slipped under the bodice of her robe. Intimate, possessive,
familiar.

If you wanted to make me jealous, Mal, you should have picked someone who didn’t look like me.

You flatter yourself, Red. She looks much better than you. He squeezed the creamy skin. I wanted
to stop it. She felt part of him begin to gibber. Again. Inside his mind he was screaming. I wanted
to stop it all before we began, before we went farther—ah, but Revan—let me show you, let me
show you again how it feels.

His hand squeezed and Sheris gasped—sweetness, like the taste of you. I remember the taste of
you—I remember—every one of them had your face when I cut them down.

Maybe we should burn Hoth next, yes Hoth. You’ll like that. Did you like my test? I tested Admiral
Karath’s loyalty. I made him give us the codes, betray his own world, and his Republic. I’ve won
him over to our side, just like you asked. But I did it my way.

And it was sweet.

He was fondling her, there in the Hangar Bay, in front of their guards and their fallen Jedi. Revan
could feel the ache in his jaw too, where the rot was still. The infection, burning in him, just as
much as the madness did.

Be like ice. Be like Hoth. Be like stones. A tool for every purpose. Even a broken one.

Revan walked to the communications console, felt the comforting weight of the mask against her
lips. Her dark-veined hand opened the comm channel to the Imperial. "Admiral Te’ar."

"Yes, Lord Revan?" On the transmit, the Admiral’s faceted blue Durosian eyes were refreshingly
sane. She understood now, why the leaders of Ziosk had been so pleased to meet her. Except for
Malak she preferred the company of non-Force users now herself.


Revan looked at the map again. It was a blue holographic globe, as tall as she was; spinning with
a thousand stars. She traced her fingers across the hyperspace points, one-by-one.

Their advantage was lost. Core defenses would be on alert now. But there were other ways to shatter a false Republic. Her hand outlined a route, leaving a red line in its wake. She paused at the significant planets, tapping each once, turning the blue globes yellow. The map was a maze, and each tactic, each possibility, had a thousand outcomes. The trick was choosing the right one. The one that would win.

"Direct the Fleet to Endar. Cloaked. Far orbit, outside of their detection screens." Endar was another insignificant world, low population, colony protectorate with even less of strategic importance than Telos.

And so. The Republic will think we're just mad Sith, doing what mad Sith do.

Endar would be a good base, close to the fuel supply lines; heavily guarded hyperspace routes that ran parallel to the main trading spires. From there her hand traced the route again, fingers tapping lightly on the screen. Ossus, Yu-Phaedra, Donovia… and then Echanis.

Another Force-resistant population. Like the Mandalorians, only rational. Rational enough to understand? Perhaps. The General might be a problem, but he was only one man.

Calculating, she paced. If I cannot take the Core by force, I will build an empire outside, weakening the Republic from within. I wanted this to be fast, but no war is ever fast enough, Mandalore taught me that. And as the Sith Empire grows we'll have another coin to use. Fear is good currency. The best. Fear buys an advantage. Fear is everything... and all sentients fear the Sith.

As well they should. Power with no reason, anger with no purpose. Reaction with no cause.

No cause but mine.

The door to her chambers slid open. Malak entered, arms crossed. Predictable defiance. The red-haired girl trailed behind him, nervous now.

No, not just nervous. Sheris was terrified.

"Lord Revan," the Hothan bowed and knelt, her forehead scraping the floor. She expected to die. A part of her begged for it.

"Sheris Darkstar." She made her words soft, almost pleasant. "If Malak has finished needing your services, you may leave us."

"No," he murmured. "Let her stay. I'll never be done with her."

Goading. He was goading her. Goading his wife with this pathetic display when there was a planet burning beneath them.

The girl's head dipped down, practically scraping the ground. "Lord Revan has the right to punish me for my offense."

"Making you live is punishment enough." Underneath the mask Revan smiled, grimly. "Now get out." She raised her hand and the girl flew back into the hall, the door sliding shut behind her.

"Ah, Red, that was cruel."
Malak loomed over her. Metallic voice through the prosthesis she’d made for him. Hairless skull, skin so pale it looked almost blue under the overlights, stippled with dark designs. They were darker than they had been. His eyes were sunk deep in his skull, and there was something black and sticky staining the tight cortosis weave of his red and black armor. Revan felt a wave of disgust. Lightsabers were clean. But Malak had deliberately wallowed in the deaths he’d made.

You come back to me drenched in their gore. You didn't even take a sonic.

Did you feel it, Red? I felt you feel it. I did it for you.

In her head, the image of him and Sheris again. His large hands on that creamy, Hothan skin. Flawless skin. Her red hair tangled against the weight of his thighs. Her mouth on his—

Her voice was cold. Her breath hissed through the mask. "She resembles me already. Hoth has a very singular phenotype. If you like, I could have the medics increase the likeness. A double could be useful."

Revan made herself consider the possibilities. A double could be very useful. And Sheris would comply. She had always been obedient.

Under the mask, her eyes closed, and the images danced.

Her husband's head was thrown back, sheen of sweat on his bare chest, watching himself in the mirrored walls of his suite. The expression on his face was mostly gone with his mouth, but his eyes opened wide.

I never wanted to see how obedient.

"Don't evade the real question, Red. Did you feel it?" He chuckled. "Did you feel the Telosians screaming?"

Be like Hoth. Be like ice. Be like stones.

"Do you want me to say I liked it?" Underneath the mask, her lips curled. "I've had better since you've been gone."

Revan turned away from him, knowing what would happen next. What he'd do.

Predictable Sith. Planet burning beneath them, all those lives lost—and it's infidelity that fuels his real power.

Malak charged with a howl of pure rage and the hiss of his 'saber.

She whirled, meeting the assault with only an upraised hand. Her other one went for the mask and pushed it back from her face: letting him see her face.

Her face was worse. Of course it was. But that didn't matter. She dropped her hand to her belt and her 'saber's hilt was cool. Her red blade activated, and she spun, crouching back.

A faint look of surprise wrinkled his brow. "You're really going to fight me?" For a moment his eyes were almost sane. His large hands shook, and the particle blade wavered.

"It's what you want, isn't it, Mal? You might win. You're better than me with a 'saber." Her lip curled. "Let's play. Master and Apprentice."

His voice was hoarse, even through the prosthesis. "Don't taunt me like this, Revvie. Don't tempt
The use of her childhood nickname brought a lump to her throat

Unexpected. Impractical. Bad.

Banish it. Anger can be useful. It drives away more dangerous feelings. Feelings like regret. Use the anger. Use whatever you have, whatever it takes to win.

Revan raised her hand and pushed him back, calling the lightning, watching him writhe on the floor.

He made no sound, but his body convulsed. His lightsaber fell from his nerveless hand. She disengaged it with the Force before it scorched the bulkhead. She moved closer, feeling the charge build, driving it into him again and again.

Slowly she circled, words dropping out of her mouth like stones. "Why did you bomb Telos? Do you know how much you cost me? The Sith almost fell apart because of my Apprentice's clumsy mistake. Do you know how much it will cost me to let you live? They're like a pack of drajak at my heels, snapping, watching for me to fall...."

His eyes burned yellow into hers. Like suns. "I want things to fall apart, Red."

"It's too late for that." She pulled the mask back over her face. The holomask felt like cold metal against her lips, amplifying her breathing to a harsh hissing sound. Her anger faded as quickly as it had come, and she watched him twitch for a while longer, watched the patterns of blue light play across his skin, felt his pulse falter, and felt the Force sing through her.

All this power to do whatever she wanted. It was sweet. Sweet as the deaths he'd caused on Telos.

Malak laughed. "You're... not... immune." Sparks ran across the metal of his jaw. She smelled scorched skin, heard the pops of the delicate circuitry shorting out, watched his head roll back, his body arch against the floor. "You..." the voder fizzled and died and his words garbled into incoherence. Not words anymore, only gobbles of pain. There were tears in his eyes and his face twisted; eyes bulged above the prosthesis, overlaid by that pattern of blue fire. That pretty pattern, like a tapestry against his white face, the red armor, the black cape.

His words continued in her head. You're not immune. You're different from the rest of us, but you're not immune. You're mad now, too. Did you really think any of this is rational? You were going to assault Deep Core with a hundred ships all half-manned because we don't have the forces.

And why? Because of what they said? Because of a thousand-year old nightmare who might not even exist? We were the heroes and now—what are we now?

His pulse wavered, but he was strong. Malak had always been strong. He'd live a while longer. She reached for more power, took some of it from him. He had so much. And everything he had was hers.

"I would have won. Kuat. Byss. Alderaan. The way to Coruscant would have been clear. It would have been fast. Precise. Final."

And then, my love? How would you rule your shattered Empire? Do you think Malachor would survive your assault? If your bombs didn't kill him, the Republic's freedom fighters would. Or the other Senate families.
"I'd rule with you at my side, Malak." You were the one trained to rule. I was only trained to win. She felt her mouth twist in a smile under the mask. But look at us now.

Look at me; look at your husband. Look what he's become.

Out loud he made sounds that might have been pain or laughter or just convulsions. His booted feet twisted a staccato against the floor. His heavy hands clenched and unclenched. His body arched, almost boneless.

And our son? What about Malachor? His thoughts were suddenly clipped and cold. Like his voice was once, when he was angry. His thoughts were sane. They always were, when he spoke about their son.

The lightning died. Revan knelt beside him on the floor. She pulled the mask off her face again.

"You can't measure the life of one child against the lives of all sentients. The Republic needs to be overthrown. It's a rotting hulk—we...." her voice faltered suddenly, and she hated herself for it. Be like Hoth, just be like Hoth. "We can always have another son, Malak—if—he doesn't—"

Red hair, gray eyes. His chubby fists. The weight of him in her arms. Don't think about him. Don't—think.

"How is he? Have you had... news?" Odd how her voice could still sound the same, when underneath her reserve was cracking. Flaws in the ice field. Gray ice, deep cracks under the surface make everything unstable. Make things fall apart.

Don't let it fall apart. Hold it together.

Malak closed his eyes, hands going to the prosthesis, brow furrowed in pain. The metal was still hot, she realized. Underneath it he was burned. Badly. She'd have to rewire the neural circuits and possibly try another skin graft, if it would take.

Revan knelt down beside him and pulled his head awkwardly unto her lap. She pulled out a kolto pack from her pocket and injected it into the meat of his neck, just below the spreading infection. She unsnapped the prosthesis, turning his neck to the side to expose the ruin beneath. It was worse again. Underneath the newly burned skin was more rot, just as she's feared.

Father says he's doing well with the tutors.

Malak’s eyes fluttered, as she applied more kolto. He made a choking sound and Revan worriedly checked the respirator line that ran, surgical and clean through his throat cavity and up into his upper jaw. It seemed intact.

It is still not widely known whose son he is—but he looks like you, Red. He—he cries for you. Still.

Her hand traced the remnants of his upper lip, and it twitched, in a futile attempt at expression, exposing blackened stubs of what had once been his smile.

"Someday he’ll understand." The rest of that was best unspoken. If he survives long enough. She hesitated. "He still shows no sign of the Force?"

No. You cut him off from that when you left. I don't know how, but you did. My father has him tested monthly. My father—dark laughter amidst the pain in his mind—my father raising our son was not supposed to be part of the plan.
"We couldn't take him with us and who else could we trust? Your father thinks of him as his heir. He'll guard him with his life. And he's powerful enough to do it. The Jedi would offer no such refuge and what they'd teach him... I don't want him to learn. And if he's not Force-sensitive, they wouldn't want him anyway." Revan closed her eyes.

And besides, their days are numbered. Men like Malachi D'Reev will be useful in the new order. They will make our Republic strong. The Jedi will not.

"Your father will be pleased with you, Malak. Telos is exactly the sort of target he'd prefer to have us waste our resources attacking." She bent over him, brushed her lips against his forehead.

That soft kiss hurt him more than any torture ever would. And part of her reveled in that.

No, I'm not immune. But I'm in charge.

You can't trust my father.

"I'm not a fool." She got up from the floor, and went to her console, tapping in a command for a medical droid to come to her quarters.

Every tool has its purpose. She paced.

"You did so well with wanton, useless slaughter, that I'd like you to do more. I'm sending you to command the groundside assault on Endar. Try to leave a few alive, let some escape to tell the galaxy about the Sith threat. The rest... just do what you do best."


The other Sith on the ship were whispering. She could hear the shape of their thoughts—if not the words—like the hiss of vipers, the sound of scales. "I'll leave you now. To your thoughts."

She paused, reaching a hand out to steady herself on the doorframe. "And I'll send Sheris in to see to your injuries."

Every tool has its purpose. Even a broken one.

XXX

"Revan!" Light in her eyes. Sting of a stim against her throat. Something heavy and metal in her hands. A stretch of solid industrial tile in her vision. A worried blue eye, the brow above it bisected by an old scar. Another scar, pink and smooth on his cheek.

Revan closed her eyes. Her head felt like she'd bashed it on something. "Canderous." Her head pounded.

"Are you having fits now, too? You—you were gone. Just gone." Oerin's voice, above her, slightly puzzled. She'd never heard him sound anything but self-assured. It was disconcerting.

Revan struggled to sit up, staring at the mask in her hands with revulsion. Oerin pushed back Canderous and took it from her. Mekel was standing in the background biting his lip. Whatever that was... whatever that was—they don't know either.

That wasn't like the others. That wasn't a vision or a fragment. That was complete. That was—I'm not that. That isn't me. That can't be me.

"Where's Carth?" The silver mask gleamed in the Mandalorians hand. Revan blinked, confused.
"That mask—it's not the same one that I—it can't be the same one that I—"

"No. It is not the mask, Padawan." A man's voice, Eosian accent. Unfamiliar. From the doorway.

Revan closed her eyes, drawing her knees to her chest.

*Force users. Strong. Seven of them.*

"It appears our Jedi escort has arrived." She opened her eyes and looked up. Above her, Oerin Lin made a sweeping bow to the seven brown-robed figures that came into the chamber. Behind them, lurked Carth. He was wearing his Republic dress uniform again. He looked angry. He pushed back the—*members of the Jedi Council*—and came to her, took her in his arms.

"What did you do to her?" her lover—*no husband he's my husband he is not what I saw I saw what I just saw was not my husband*—glared at the Jedi, strain evident in his voice.

"I showed the Padawan this." The man came closer. An old Eosian man, face lined and worn. In his hand he held a tiny fragment of crystal. Gold and faceted.

Revan swallowed. It was too small to be a holocron.

"It's a recording," a woman's voice said. Cool. Serene. She was Falleen, and would have been beautiful except for the ugly red weal that bisected half of her face. "A fragment of a larger holocron. Just a piece of memory."

Revan closed her eyes. No need to ask whose holocron.

*Mine. Before they burned away my mind, they recorded it.*

The implications of that were too much to handle. Her mind shied away from them, skittish. A wild hessi dancing away from a bridle. *They recorded my memories. They have my memories. They've seen everything that I was.*

"It would have been impossible," said a white-haired woman with a smooth unlined face, "for one person to live through all of Revan's life. The Jedi Council searched through Revan's mind for the keys to stopping Malak, like looking for pieces of ash in a plain of sand." Her composure faltered. "It was not—a pleasant experience."

"What did they show you?" Carth's face was concerned. Soft with concern. In her head the echo of Malak's laughter again and his armor stained black with gore.

*Telos, I saw Telos. I saw Malak. I saw monsters. I saw me.*

"She doesn't seem shocked to learn Revan had a husband and son," the Eosian mused.

"It is as we suspected." The white-haired woman—*Echani*—folded her arms and nodded decisively. "I warned Bastila that the danger of corruption was great. The Shan girl was careless. Through their bond, she must have reintroduced some of the old personality. You set too much responsibility on her shoulders, Zhar. I warned Vandar that the risk outweighed the gain. Vrook was right."

Master Zhar was standing at the back, next to a brown-haired human man and another Twilek, green-skinned, whose face almost entirely covered by a hood. Zhar's orange eyes regarded her calmly.
"Hello, Zhar." Revan corrected herself. She leaned against Carth, but kept her voice steady. "Master Zhar."

Not so long ago, I wanted to flay the flesh from your bones over a slow fire for what you did to me. And now, child?

His voice in her head. Revan flushed. 

There is a bond between Master and Padawan. And you were my Padawan twice.

Now I want my son. That's all. That's all I want. She reached for the old anger almost reflexively and was startled to feel it gone. What she'd said in her mind was true.

No point in subterfuge anyway. They'd see through it.

I'm proud of you, Padawan. Zhar's voice again.

"You must consider our offer." The brown-haired human man walked closer to them. Automatically she noted the short, almost military cut of his hair, and his warrior's stance. A different kind of Jedi, that one.

"Your offer." Carth pulled her closer, as if he could protect her from them. Funny, when we're alone he struggles when he thinks I don't see. But in front of others he's my champion. No. Bad choice of words.

She didn't want to think about what had happened to her last champion.

"Your offer? " Carth's voice was furious. He got to his feet, pulling her with him. Her legs felt boneless, shaky. Revan leaned against her— husband— trying to regain some semblance of composure. "The one where you offered to take Revan off the Mandalorian tribunal's hands and sequester her in the Jedi Temple for the rest of her days?"

They'd received that offer, encoded in a small blue crystal globe, the same day as the D'Reev recording.

"There are worse fates," said the hooded Twi'lek. He pushed back the cowl and stared at her. His voice was rusty and weak. He moved very slowly, like a man aged before his time. The skin on one side of his face was twisted and mottled, as if from a very old burn.

It was like trying to pick up pieces of ferracrystal and reassemble them. "You—you know what D'Reev is. And you don't stop him. Why? He was allied with Malak and me somehow. If you've seen that recording, you've seen that! Why don't you stop him? Why did you leave my son with him?"

You've seen that recording. You've seen others. She felt a chill. You've probably seen more of my life than I have.

Master Zhar met her eyes for a moment and then looked away. "Padawan, you must trust me when I tell you to have faith in the larger scope of things. What other options do you have?" His lekku twitched, sketching an emphasis to his words.

"You can't go through with this farce." The white-haired woman's voice was absolute. Her pale eyes looked at Revan as if she were a granslug fallen into her tea. Underneath the robe, Revan saw her hands clench.
She hates me. Why is that?

Why am I even asking? She hates me because I'm Revan. She hates that monster I saw.

Oerin looked completely disgusted with her. Of course, she wasn't hiding her thoughts.

He was, the Jedi ignored him completely.

"I'll ask, okay? Just stop it bugging me!" Mekel's whisper was low, but it caught in the stillness of the room. The Falleen looked at him curiously. Mekel flinched. "I'm sorry," he muttered. He cleared his throat. "I—uh, I was wondering… if you had Darth Revan's memories, why'd you need her to find the Star Forge?"

"A very astute question." The Falleen smiled gently at him. It might have been a comforting expression if her face hadn't been cloven by that terrible burn. "A clever question, no matter who asks it." She glanced at Revan.

She thinks I told him to ask that. I'm not that smart. Mission is, as always, two steps ahead.

But now that she’d considered it, the answer was obvious to Revan. "You couldn't access the temple, couldn't shut down the shields, couldn't reach the Star Forge. You knew that already, from my memories. It was…." Revan stumbled over the words, remembering the familiarity again, each piece of the Star Map like an old friend. The power singing to her. So much power. "It was bound. To me. Somehow."

It liked me. I was the first sentient in a thousand years to be Sith’aerah. To have a gift that it could use. I was special.

"We had to leave enough of Revan in the personality that we constructed for the Rakatan artifacts to respond. It must have been an extremely difficult experience." The scarred Twi'lek looked at his hands. "I was more fortunate, long ago." His face was remote. "I pity you, Padawan."

"You didn't construct the personality," hissed Carth. "You stole it."

It was probably impossible to startle Jedi. They just looked regretful. And sad. "Did we choose badly, Polla Organa?" Zhar asked her.

Her lip curled. "I'm not her."

Goodnight Ma. Sleep tight. Don't let the rejariks bite.

"Ah. Are you instead the woman you saw in the crystal? The shade you saw shadows of in Bastila's mind?" The white-haired Jedi unfolded her hands from her sleeves and put them behind her back, walking back and forth. She looked like an instructor, teaching a very difficult lesson. "Do you feel some kinship with Darth Revan? Was her life appealing to you? Do you lust for power like that again? Do you still want to destroy the Republic?"

"I don't care about your fracking Republic!" The words just came out. Irrationally she wanted to throw something. Or shoot it. Except I'd miss because I can't—hit a black thresher door in a blizzard. Can't hit anything, can't pilot a starship, can't race a swoop bike, can't....

The brown-haired man nodded. Revan felt a chill. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't care about your fracking Republic." She blinked, hard.

But Revan did. Revan cared enough to try and destroy it.
"That's why you picked her, isn't it? Why you chose Polla? Because she didn't care."

"Some answers are not worth finding," said the scarred Twi'lek. "Do you know who I am?"

"A Jedi. Member of the Council. Of course I don't. You all made sure of that."

"My name is Nyrmon Het."

Revan looked at him. His face had scars. One gouged deep in his forehead. One of his head tails was gone: the other one bore marks of knife blades. *Twi'leks hold their memories, their identities in their lekku,* chanted the futile information voice. Zhar's voice, maybe. Instructing some long-gone child Revan—or adult Polla.

"You look like you've been through a war." He moved like it too. Stiff with age, but a half-cautious alertness that spoke of someone trained to combat. He and the brown-haired human, she realized, were perfectly poised to take her down in an instant, should she—snap.

*Don't be afraid, Padawan.* Zhar's voice pierced her defenses easily. *They mean you no harm.*

"Forty-odd years ago, I was in a war. Thirty-odd years ago, the man that I was—died. And Nyrmon Het took my place. I am Nyrmon Het now. And that is all."

Canderous snorted. He'd been very quiet, standing in one corner of the room since the Jedi entered. Revan glanced at him, and noticed he'd also managed pull out his old repeater. The laser sight glinted on the Twi'lek's scarred face. Canderous frowned, as all eyes turned to him.

Oerin Lin sighed. "The barbarians would probably take it badly if we shot members of the Jedi Council on our way to the treaty talks, Ordo."

*Even he's dropped the charade. But that doesn't matter. Coruscanti laws... they can't touch me. If I don't let them.*

"It's set on stun," Canderous said. "Probably." Not letting go of the repeater he fished in the pocket of his robes for a cigarra, flicked the lighter core at its tip and stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

"So," he said. Almost conversational. "You Jedi do this a lot? Fall to the dark side? Get mind wipes? Kidnap Republic citizens and steal their memories? Take away a mother's knowledge of her own child?" His lips adjusted the cigarra so that he could spit on the ground. He did. Twice.

"Among my people, the last alone would be reason to take blood price on all of your hides. Since you know what Revan is to us, I think you'd be happy she's being so reasonable." His voice was gruff. "Give us the kid and we'll go away. "Both the kids. Dustil and Malachor. It can be that simple." He blew a smoke ring. "Or it can get complicated. Your choice."

"They are not ours to give," said the Eosian.

"More importantly," the white-haired woman snapped, still pacing back and forth. "The child, Malachor, is not yours, Padawan."

"He's mine. *He is mine!*" His face, that round face she'd seen in her dreams, on older in that recording in front of the library. The thoughts she'd almost glimpsed of him. Revan remembered the weight of him in her arms, soft breath against her cheek.

“What would a mother *not* sacrifice for her own son?” The seventh Jedi had been silent, standing behind the Echani like a shadow. Her voice was soft, but it carried. “Revan sacrificed all for Malachor.”
"And Malachor's true mother died in the Mandalorian wars. Who you are now, Padawan, is someone entirely different." The brown-haired man looked at her. "You have no idea who I am, do you?"

Revan leaned warily against Carth. Indignation warred with logic. This was all another trap.

*Trap me with the truth. Tangle me up in it until I have no choice, like Vandar and Dorak did on Dantooine. The Force cannot be denied, it gives you nightmares, Polla Organa. Therefore you must accept our training. The Sith are going to hunt you down, therefore you must go on this quest. The Republic will going to slap you in chains and execute you; therefore, you must go with us to the Jedi Temple and accept your fate.*

*And what's the fate? Another mind-wipe? No. No.*

"You're Kavar Vakla." From his corner, Canderous sounded bored. Oerin raised his hands deliberately to his lips and coughed. "Onderonite commander. You were trained in battle, before you came to the Jedi Order. We expected you to lead the Jedi against us, not Revan." A faint smile crossed his face. "We thought you had balls, but of course we were mistaken. After Dxun..." he adjusted the rifle, training its sights on the brown-haired man. "After Dxun you went bleating back to the Council like an unnamed babe and left a pack of half-grown children to actually defend your home system."

The man's face was impassive. "After Dxun," he said lightly, "I knew that some wars are not worth fighting."

"Tell that to your countrymen you left behind for us to slaughter," Canderous growled. "There's a statue of Revan on Iziz. There's no statue of you. Disinherited, weren't you? Off the official lines of succession? Jedi must be all you have left. " He glanced at Revan. "Don't bother listening to that one; he's nothing more than a coward."

Again the man showed no reaction. None of the Jedi did. They were all watching her. Watching her too carefully.

"I was one of Revan's teachers," the Onderonite added softly. "And a friend."

"If you had any authority you'd just take her away," Carth snapped. "So don't bother."

The Falleen laughed. A silvery laugh, like the chime of tiny bells. "You still inspire much loyalty, Revan." She looked smug. "Jopheena was right."

She glanced at Mekel and he shrank away from her. The look on his face was too easy to read. *Guilt. Is that the Jedi Master he injured?* "We've cancelled the search for you, Mekel Jin. There's no need to be frightened." Her hand reached out and touched the boy's face. "Strange," she mused. "Before I sensed darkness in you. Now all I sense is purpose. Determination. And strength." Her scaled lips curved, and her head ridge flushed a deeper gold. "Jedi Knight Revan has been a good influence."

*She called me Revan. None of the others have. She called me a Jedi Knight.*

Revan caught the scowl that passed quickly across the Eosian's face before vanishing. The slight twitch of Zhar's head tails. The sly smile from the human woman standing behind the Echani.

*The Jedi Council is divided, regarding my case. How deep does the divide run? And where is the split?*
The answer came, obvious. *My identity. They aren't sure who I am either. I'm both. I'm neither. I'm—nothing. Goodnight Ma. Sleep tight. Don't let—* there was something stuck in her eye. Angrily, she rubbed it away.

Kavar shifted on his feet. "You and Jopheena have taken responsibility for Mekel Jin, Iridel. It's your right. But again, I think you're making a terrible mistake, leaving him in the Padawan's hands."

"We're going to be late," Oerin Lin said mildly. "Late for my coronation." He tapped his foot. "I know lateness is fashionable in Coruscanti society, but we really should go."

"I wonder again, where you found the Fett Mandalore." The Echani Jedi crossed her arms, studying Lin closely. *Too closely. Not good for them to wonder that. Really not good. Mission warned me... and she was right."

"General Ordo met me at the swoop track, on Manaan. Convinced me to seek my true heritage." Lin's smile was bright and guileless as a child's. "I would have been season champion, had I not chosen to take a more active role in my own fate. Meet my destiny. See the galaxy."

Carth shifted softly behind her. They'd told him Canderous met Oerin in the Manaan cantina at the pazaak tables. *One small lie, my love. Because I was afraid how you'd take the truth."

"Does it matter so much now, Atris?" Her companion’s mouth curved in a smile, the rest of her face was still in shadow. "Surely, the Lin is just a boy. Full of much bluster and little consequence."

"Oh am I—?" Oerin froze, holding the Mandalore’s mask. For a second, his eyes widened, and he stared at the Jedi. Then he held the mask of the Mandalore up to his face and stood up straight.

"Tactical Statement: There are seven Force-using sentients of great power standing here doing nothing. Conclusion: This dialogue serves no purpose. Unless you would like me to commence negotiations on your behalf, Master, we should go." HK, freshly polished and revealed again in his own copper chassis, clanked in the doorway. "Happy Anticipation: I am looking forward to continuing our tour. I have many fond memories of the Senate complex to share with you. Senator Thomasi and I spent a great deal of time there."

He was speaking Rakatan. *Although since they've seen my memories I guess I can assume that won't work... they can probably speak it too. Some of them."

"No need for negotiations, HK. At this time." She answered him in the same language, watched the white-haired Jedi's eyes narrow. Revan smirked. *That one speaks it. And she hates me for it. Well, I don't like her either."

"Beep beep doo weet!" Mission pushed past HK. The flower on her chassis had been retouched. Mekel's work, probably. She beeped several more nonsense syllables and rolled in a circle. The gloom on Mekel's face dissipated slightly. He covered his mouth with his hand, to hide a laugh. His hand reached out and rested it on her dome.

Oerin snapped the silver mask to his newly reassembled helm and put it on. "Right," he drawled, now sounding bored. "Put on the restraints and let's get on with the show."

Carth's brown eyes met hers, as they snapped restraining bands on each other's wrists. Canderous finally put down his rifle and did the same. One of the Jedi coughed.

"The Senate has requested that we take the precaution of also using a neural disruptor," Zhar said.
He sounded apologetic.

"In case the Mandalorians are wrong about the loss of your Force powers." The Falleen smiled at her.

"I was under the impression that Senate chambers were Force-sealed. Ysalamiri?" Revan made her voice light and unconcerned. Inwardly she quailed.

Don't cut me off from the Force, please. It's like being trapped. It's like choking, blindness, dying.

"Forty years ago, ysalamiri proved... unreliable." The scarred Twi'lek responded. "Naturally, there is some concern. And knowing the truth as we do, we cannot let you present a potential danger to others."

Revan closed her eyes and nodded. I thought they might do this. Her former master snapped the heavy collar in place around her neck. A silver choker that extended from her shoulders all the way up to her chin. She couldn't move her neck. Almost instantaneously, the Force went away. She'd been hiding it before, but this was different. Total absence. Blindness.

The Falleen was advancing on Mekel with another one. The boy looked completely terrified. Oh hell.

"Unfasten, the neck of your robe, please," the Jedi said. Her voice was gentle and kind.

"No." Mekel shook his head. His hand went involuntarily to his neck, and what the cloth concealed.

Damnit. I should have anticipated that. We need Mission's counsel. She's the only one who can keep all the Senate delegations straight... and she's our advantage. One they don't anticipate. One of the two.

The T3 whirred, almost indignant.

"Mekel will stay here." Revan imbued her voice with authority, trying to ignore the way the collar cut into her neck, made her unable to turn her head. Bind my hands, cut me off from the Force, lead me out like a kissra to slaughter. She closed her eyes. Well, it will look realistic.

And we still have Oerin.

"I want to come—" the boy began. Then stopped. He nodded hesitantly. "Or I'll—I'll stay here. Maybe I can help with things here."

A swish of robes and the Headwoman of Rialis came into the room, her double swords clanking. She cleared her throat, expectant, and all eyes turned to her.

"Fett Revan Ordo Lin Mandalore, Gwenarius and the others are ready. The false restraints you had us place on the Ordo clansmen will drop at a moment's notice. Additionally, I took the precaution of asking your computer to isolate the frequency they use to scan for weapons. The Coruscanti dogs will be completely unprepared for any assault—should such a thing become necessary. We await your orders."

The Headwoman looked pleased with herself. Canderous sighed. Revan closed her eyes. What did I expect? She's half-senile... but she's the elder and we need her to challenge Oerin's right to rule them.
"There will be no Mandalorian escort," the Eosian Jedi said. He sounded grim.

"I told you no weapons, Headwoman Catrinex Rialis," Revan said.

_The idea was a show of force, not actual force. I don't trust you all with weapons. If things go badly, you'd all be too happy to re-enact the battle for the Senate—because it would be a great battle. And for you that'd be just grand._

_The battle for the Senate. Oh, and I'll be Ulic. Her dream taunted her. My dream was only a dream. And I'm not going to think about it._

"I told you no weapons as well, Catrinex," Oerin gritted his teeth, glaring the old woman down. She looked completely unperturbed.

"You!" She cuffed Oerin lightly on the cheek. "Unblooded whelp! This is women's business that we have with D'Reev. None of your concern."

"Do you really think you can control the Mandalorians, Padawan?" Kavar sighed. "If you insist on continuing this charade, we will allow the following: you, the false Fett, Canderous Ordo, and Carth Onasi." He scanned the room. "You'll need Rialis to back your claim, so you, Headwoman. The old scow looked pleased to be Jedi folded his arms. "That is all."

Revan swallowed. _That's not enough. That will look too much like the orchestration that it is. Only us and Lin and the Headwoman—if she even remembers her lines._

_Well, of course, they don't want this to work._

Mekel glanced up. "It's okay," he whispered, looking at her, and then looking away again. The Falleen raised a brow ridge at him and he flinched.

_Mission thinks it's okay, then. Great. Why?_

Revan ran through possibilities in her head. _A map, a maze, a thousand possibilities and one—she couldn't nod. The collar wouldn't allow it. Public viewstation. Has to be. The map of the Senate chamber swum in front of her eyes. She had no recollection of the place itself, but she'd memorized the schematics and looked at every holostill that she could find._

_Okay. That could work. Maybe. If they can get out of this building and get there on their own._

"Fervent Objection: Master, I am well-versed in Coruscanti custom. To leave me behind would risk offending some faction with your typical organic carelessness. I must come with you."

"Your 'protocol' droid may come." Kavar's agreement startled her. The other Jedi frowned. The Eosian opened his mouth as if to raise an objection, then closed it again. Something unspoken had passed between the members of the Council. "Is he armed?"

Revan didn't know how to answer that. The collar choked her, she felt blind. _They'll know if I lie. Is 'not exactly' a lie? Is 'he probably can't harm any sentient lifeforms but I'm not sure' an acceptable response?_

"Reassuring Statement: my lethal capacities against organic sentients are still inoperative. However, I am well-prepared for the Senatorial traditions; even with the restraints my poor shattered meatbag Master has shamefully imposed upon my programming."

Kavar nodded. "Good." He folded his hands. "We can only escort you to the entrance of the
Senator's complex, Padawan. After that—"

"You may need your droid's assistance." Zhar's expression was sad. He shook his head slowly. "I wish you'd accept our offer."

The Falleen advanced on Mekel again, looking at him curiously. "Free will," her silvery voice said. "The Order has always believed; all sentients must choose their own fate. May yours be fortunate, Revan. More so than it has proven in the past." She turned to Mekel. "Thalia hopes you're doing well. She is worried. Shall I give her your regards?"

"Um, sure." the boy whispered, backing away.

"Free... will? You've got to be joking!" Carth grabbed Revan's hands, clumsy with the restraints and pulled her to him, as if he could shield her from all of them. "If there's something you're not telling us, how can Revan make a decision?" His voice was low and dangerous. "You're doing it again, aren't you? Sending Revan off to confront something she doesn't understand, doesn't remember, while you sit back with all of the answers. It's not right—it's not—it's not fair! How can you call yourselves Jedi, how can you do this to her—to us—again?"

Kavar opened his hands, palms upward, frowning. "It is difficult to predict what she knows and what she does not. As hard to predict as what she is. Would you tell us, Padawan? Would you share the details of your plan with us now? Would you seek our counsel?"

Revan's mouth tightened, and she glared at the scarred Twi'lek. And be like him? "No."

"May the Force be with us all," the Eosian whispered.

"You haven't changed much," the Echani snarled, under her breath.

XXX

The sun was dim and red in the sky, tinting the lake with a pink cast over the black still water. Polla shifted the woven ferragrass basket on her shoulders, and adjusted the setting on her scythe's laser-edged blade to low. The stalks of Derran lilies were tough on the outside, but very fragile within. Too high a setting and the blossoms would crumple like paper, wilt before their time.

Maybe it had been Auntie Mita's time to go; but that didn't make her any less sad. Damn annoying busybody most wonderful aunt in the world. Polla rubbed her eyes with the back of a sweat-soaked sleeve.

Summer. It would be a hot day with no rain. The memorial was starting in two hours, and she'd come down here herself to gather the lilies. Lilies made the plants sound fancier than they were. In truth, Derran lilies were weeds that grew wild in the swampy, boggy parts of Deralia. But once, when she was twelve and just becoming a woman, Auntie Mita had taken her down to this very place and given her a long rambling talk about men, women, life, and the world. It was something she'd never forgotten.

"Organa women are like these flowers," Auntie Mita said, twisting the stems of the ones she'd cut to make Polla a white-petaled crown. "Tough on the outside, tender on the inside; common as stars. And as beautiful as stars, too." The old woman beamed at her and chucked her chin. "You'll break some hearts one of these days, Pollie. Mark my words."

"Don't call me Pollie," Polla scowled. She was a grown-up now, nearly almost, and although her parents had ridiculed the idea she'd had to change her name to Desiderata, or Seriina, or Rianennaish'an'amah, at the very least, she could get everyone to stop calling her Pollie.
Auntie Mita made a clucking noise under her breath. "But looks really aren't the all of it," she continued, ignoring Polla's complaint. "The important thing is, to be happy. Find it where you can, and don't ever let it go." She adjusted Polla's topknot so that it tucked neatly under the crown of flowers.

"But how do you know?" Polla asked her.

"How do you know what?" Her aunt was already fidgeting with something else, digging into their picnic basket for some cakes and tea. She handed Polla a generous slice of thisla tart, wrapped in an eridu napkin.

"How do you know when you've found it?"

Auntie Mita frowned and shook her head. "Suns, I hope you grow up smarter than you are now, dear. How do you know? Can't you tell when you're happy or not?"

Polla twisted the stem of one of the lilies, threading it through the ties of her topknot. Her bare feet squelched in the warm mud. She picked up another armful from the pile she'd already cut and lay them gently in the basket. Pausing for a moment, she looked at the lake. A few wild hessi were drinking on the opposite shore. One of them snorted at her, and rolled its meter-length tongue threateningly in her direction. She laughed, and it shied away, galloping off on its six heavily clawed feet. The others just regarded her curiously.

"Chtuk, Chtuk, chuck," she clucked at them, like Mita had taught her. Polla put the cutting blade down for the moment, and fished in her pocket for the crumbled kaffa cake she'd grabbed before setting out on this expedition. Rolling its eyes, one of the colts came closer; curiosity overruling caution. She held out her palm flat and felt the flick of his barbed tongue brush against her palm as the. The hessi colt neatly snagged the cake. He was still a half-meter away. "You're a beauty, you are," she cooed. He was, dappled blue and gray and green, with a silky yellow mane.

His ears perked up and he mewed at her softly, begging for more.

"Polla!"

The hessi colt and the rest of the herd started at the noise and took off, thundering across the shallows of the lake and back into the swamps.

Polla turned around. "Hey, Sei." Her husband picked his way cautiously down the slippery path to the lakeshore, Junior swaddled and slung across his chest.

"Your Ma called this morning," he said. "Said she heard from you really late last night. Wanted to know if you were alright."

"Late? I called her after dinner. It wasn't late!" Polla shrugged. Seiran smiled and her and shrugged back, unslinging Junior as he came closer. Polla grinned at him, reaching for her son.

Seiran had gotten the knots right, but he'd used a blanket she'd never seen before to bundle the baby. It was really high-grade, the kind of eridu used mainly for export, and the edges were trimmed with white fur.

Polla nuzzled Junior's nose with her own, and swung him gently back and forth in her arms. "Will you get the flowers, hon? I'll carry Junior. He's gonna to be too hot in this thing. Where'd it come from anyways? Looks pretty fancy for a baby's swaddle."

"Your Uncle Boon, I guess. There was no card. Came a week ago from Coruscant. It was the only
thing I could find in black to wrap him in."

"He's going to melt."

"No, it's temp-regulated and self-cleaning. There were instructions that came with it."

"Hmmm…" Junior gurgled happily. He didn't look uncomfortable anyways. Polla fingered the fabric. "Bloody hell, Seiran, this is Imperial weave. I know Uncle Boon's doing well, but—wow."

Her husband smiled at her. "It's fit for a prince, yeah. See the embroidery? I think that pattern's an old Zabrak tribal design. Not sure, been a while since I took xensosh."

"It's kind of pretty." The red slashes gleamed against the black fabric. Swaddled inside such opulence, her son blew a spit bubble and gurgled, content.

XXX

The cruiser's engines hummed as they spun towards the docking bay of the Senate complex. It was almost a city in itself.

"There are over ten thousand sentient that make their home within the Senate's walls," Malachi began. "The complex is a masterpiece of construction, the product of more than fifteen thousand years of the Republic's stability and progress. Its main Senate chamber is over half a kilometer tall and has representative seats for more than five hundred worlds: full, colony, allied and protectorate. Each core world has five senatorial houses. House D'Reev has been a Coruscanti representative for over four thousand years; although long ago, our ancestors came from Corellia. The noble Coruscanti Houses share a unique position, as the closest advisors to the Chancellor. Alone, of all the Senate seats, ours are passed by blood, and not by election or sponsorship."

"I've had the tour," Dustil muttered.

"Of course you have, you've been here with your father. But this will be an entirely different experience. Coruscanti houses have their own traditions, and as our guest, you may not understand them. Please realize it is important not to cause any offense. We're circling now to land in the D'Reev docking bay. From there, we will be provided with an escort to the Senate Chambers. Korrie, remember what I told you about children being seen and not heard. It's very important."

"Be quiet, Korrie. Don't make any sudden movements," the child parroted obediently. He glanced at Dustil again. The other boy pressed his hand, reassuringly. It was really quite touching.

"It's extremely important." Malachi felt the pang of apprehension again. The child was very young for this. Too young. But the mother had left him with no choice. Eglatine immunity could be discharged, under the right set of circumstances.

*He has to grow up sometime. Let it be now.*

"We're going to see her today," the boy murmured under his breath where he thought his grandfather wouldn't hear. Dustil stroked the lad's hair, an oddly vulnerable expression on his face.

"Remember your lessons, Korrie—"

Suddenly, the cruiser dipped, and a red light went off flashing overhead. HK's voice broke over the comm channel.

"Alert, Master: Hostile drones. Starboard, closing, ten point three meters. Burrowers. Class C-
three. The colors are purple and gold."

"Evasive," Malachi said. So soon. I thought I'd have more time. "Raise the shields." And pray that they hold.

Across from him on the bench Dustil's eyes widened. "Burrowers?" His hand went to his forehead and he pulled at the band there. "Get this thing off me!"

"We'll be fine. Sit back down." Malachi kept his voice steady. "Burrowers. They aren't after you or Korrie, Dustil. Just stay calm and remain still. Both of you. No matter what happens."

The cruiser jolted as the drone's drills landed. The entire craft shook, vibrating as the adamite drills began their work piercing through the layers of shielding. Malachi's heart sunk. I thought I'd have more time before the gerek began to circle. Scavengers on the weak, to a man. Purple and gold. House Racharn.

"HK, send the appropriate orders. To be carried out regardless."

"Proud Compliance, Master," his droid said.

The cruiser rocked from side to side as the burrowers' drills invaded. Malachi's breath was short, and his chest ached. It will not end like this.

"Malachor." There was no time to say much. "You're too young to have this happen now, but remember, everything I did, I did for you. I left you records in the archives—you cannot rely on your mother. She doesn't know—"

"Gods," Dustil whispered, his face twisting. "Release the damn disrupter! Malachi—please!"

No time to wonder at the lad's sudden familiarity.

No time for anything. The hull breach alarms went off in a heartbeat. Malachi activated his personal shield, then leaning across to touch the ornate brooch on Malachor's collar as well. He's an Eglantine, Racharn won't strike at him but... but the crossfire... accidents. Damn you, Revan, you cannot win the game like this. Is this part of your plan? His thoughts were desperate. Is this your doing? Have I underestimated you so badly? I am not this much of a fool. How could she have gathered House Racharn? They have no reason to love her, they were invested heavily in the Echanis system. And it suffered greatly during the war. Her war. How—?

"Release the disrupter!" Dustil's face was pale and his dark eyes burned. "Stang—Malachi—please!"

The lad leaned across the table between them, reaching for the controller Malachi wore on his wrist.

Hiss of air escaping through the hull breech; alarms jangled. Their cruiser jolted to a stop, as HK put it into hover and disengaged the barrier between pilot and passengers. His laser rifle took out the first drone. The ferracrystal fibers of its purple and gold signature blew to pieces in a pulse of red light.

"Malachor—remember me," the old man said. He stood up. Meet your fate standing. He drew out the small disrupter he carried from his belt. Futile, perhaps, but better to go down with an explosion than a whimper. Time was so short. I should have anticipated this, I should have known.
The whine of more tiny drills. Somewhere in the background, an announcer drone murmured, toneless. "Sanctioned by Coruscant law, House Racharn declares hostile intent against House D'Reev. Statute twenty-two, amendment seven."

"Mal, get down!" Dustil was already tackling his grandson to the ground. "Release the bloody control, Malachi! Please!"

"Racharn?" His grandson was crying. A red head poked out from under Dustil's arm on the floor. "Leeshy's house? But that's Leeshy's house? She'd — "

"Keep your head down! " Dustil hissed, shoving his grandson's head into the floor. He fumbled at something underneath his robes. A hiss and a blue beam engaged. Malachi stared at in shock.

*Malak's weapon. I knew Malachor has been in the vaults. But—*he gave Dustil Onasi*my son's old lightsaber?*

"Burrowers sense movement," the Telosian hissed through gritted teeth. "Get down, Malachor. Stay still, Korrie. Don't move at all. No matter what happens." The boy's face was desperate. "Release the band, Malachi. *Now!*" The lightsaber wavered, coming closer. The boy's face twisted with hate, and for a moment, Malachi wondered if Dustil was about to cut him down.

The Senator shook his head, slowly. No matter what came to pass, his grandson would survive. *If I have been outmaneuvered this badly by her, I deserve this.*

Dustil Onasi's voice was hoarse. "What if it's not you? What if it's not you they're after? Release the damn band!"

Another flash of red light as HK targeted another one of the drones. But more humming. A hundred hull breaches, pinpoints of light from the stasis field activated around their craft to prevent any outside intervention. *Honorable Coruscanti combat. An honorable Coruscanti death.*

*Their House is far more numerous than ours. An old man and a child. And Her. Malachi D'Reev wanted to laugh. What else can I do in the face of death? An old man and a child and her—will she respect this? Or did she orchestrate it? I've underestimated her. Somehow she found allies. Somehow, she outmaneuvered me.*

*For a strange moment he was almost... proud.*

"Father!" Malachor's voice was high and panicked. He started to stand and Dustil shoved him to the floor again with one hand, the blue particle blade flashing as it hit another drone dart. And then another.

"I am not afraid," Malachi D'Reev began formally. *This is how my father met his end. And his father before him. I tried to be a father to you, Malachor. Remember—*"

A dart flashed before his eyes and Dustil's blade stopped it. The lad whirl to face another and another. HK's laser flashed.

His grandson started to get up. Dustil's hand pushed him down again, even as he moved to counter another drone dart that circled around Malachi's head.

"Release the damn band!" the Telosian boy cried again. "Please! Without the Force—I can't—" He cut another one down and pivoted, turning back to the child that cowered underneath him.

Another dart penetrated Malachi's shielding. He braced himself for the sting, watching dully as
Dustil and HK moved too slowly, too late to stop—the drone hissed and spun before his eyes. There was a horrible split second before he recognized it for what it was. A terrible pause, when he watched the purple and gold microfilaments spin and he felt the sting on his face before he realized.

Dustil had stopped moving, his mouth open as if he was trying to say something.

Then Malachor screamed and convulsed.

The drone dart that hung twisting between Malachi's eyes fizzled out. *A feint, it was a feint. It wasn't me at all.*

"Target reached," chimed the toneless voice. "By first strike, Racharn declares its intention against D'Reev. Let the games begin."

"Objection!" Malachi cried out. "He's eight! He's an Eglatine! Not a legal target! Not!"

"Denied: Your destination is Senate Chambers. He is your Second. His Eglatine status is dissolved. House Racharn cites intentionality as justifiable cause."

On the floor, his heir and all of his hopes for the future twisted and shook. The child's face turned blue as the poison hit his system.

Dustil's face was ashen. He dropped to the floor, the deactivated lightsaber clattering beside him, forgotten. "The neural band!" His hand clawed at his forehead, "Malachi, please!"

Shaking, the Senator pushed the button at his wrist. The golden band fell off the Telosian's forehead. Dustil took Malachor's hands in his. His eyes were closed, and his lips moved. It looked like he was praying.

*By the games, by the gods, by luck, by the Force…. *

On the floor Malachor screamed and shook. "It hurts! Father! Please make it stop hurting—make it stop—"

"I'm here." Dustil's hands moved. He took a deep breath, and a cooling white aura of light enveloped both of them.

*Healing? The lad can heal? Thank the gods, thank the Force thank—*

Malachi found his voice again, stumbling over the formal phrase. "House Racharn, D'Reev has foiled your attack. We—request—one standard day before resuming hostilities. Coruscanti statute twenty-nine. By the laws that bind. By the game."

"The… game…. " Dustil held Malachor close. Trembling, Malachi knelt next to him, grasping his grandson's hand. The pulse was thready, but it was there. "It's not a game, old man." His voice dropped. "It never was."

"Revan. They would not dare otherwise. This was a strike at her."

Dustil only looked at him. His face twisted, as if he was struggling to speak. He pulled the child protectively onto his lap. "Between the two of you, you'll get him killed."

"I don't expect you'd comprehend Coruscanti politics, Dustil. But Revan brought this on our heads. D'Reev has been allied with Racharn for centuries. Even so, I had to work very hard to gain back
their trust after my son and his wife's assault on their interests."

"Their interests." The boy’s voice was mocking, making sport of what he could not understand. Malachi shook his head. There was no point in explaining this to a half-grown Telosian. "How are you feeling, Malachor?"

"I never understood," Dustil muttered. "Never."

The child in his arms peered at his grandfather through the crook in Dustil's arms, his eyes wide and gray.

"Can't you tell Senator Racharn that you're sorry?" His heir rubbed his nose with his sleeve. The child was very pale, but there was a flush of life returning to his cheeks already.

*Thank the gods they used one of the slow poisons. Thank the Force the Telosian can heal. Thank the game he cares for my grandson.*

"It's not me she's angry at, Korrie. It's your mother."

"Oh." The small face hardened, and the chin set stubbornly. "But Leeshy's my friend and I never did anything to her or her stupid family."

Dustil shook his head, almost imperceptibly. The boy's face turned up to his and they stared at each other.

"There's more of your father in you than I thought possible, young Onasi," Malachi said. "You saved my grandson's life." He tried to chuckle comfortingly, but it came out forced. "I guess you've earned the right to call me Malachi."

"My father." Dustil's face was ashen. "My father, the hero." He pulled Malachor closer and whispered something in his ear. *Comforts,* the old man thought. *Two lost children.* he cleared his throat, there was something stuck in it. He got to his feet again, and straightened his robes, lifted his head high.

"I suppose you've earned the right to Malak's old lightsaber as well. But Korrie, you are not to keep digging around in the vaults without my permission. I'll have to seal them off from you entirely if this insolence continues."

The announcer drone chimed. "Demilitarization is complete. You may disembark now. Racharn has failed in their attempt against D'Reev. D'Reev wins the round." The blue light of the stasis field faded from the viewscreens. HK moved to open the hatch.

Malachi reached out a hand to his heir. His mind moved the pieces on the board; shifting, rearranging, accommodating.

*I thought I'd have more time. I thought her ruin would save him. But I will not be unprepared again.*

*I know now what I must do*

He sighed, already planning the necessary arrangements. Security would be a concern. And by necessity, certain concessions would be needed for an advantageous accord. So much depended on her intentions. Everything, really. But the old proverb still rang true.
A House divided cannot stand.
"Blue, isn't this a really big risk for you?" Mekel whispered.

At his side, Millifar was watching too closely. Normally, he'd be thrilled to have gotten her attention—she mostly had eyes for Oerin Lin. And who could blame her? The blonde had it all: looks, Force, personality, power….

But Milli wasn't watching Mekel because she was interested in him. She was watching to see if he'd fall down again. His fits were becoming quite a topic of discussion among the clans. The shakes, the Coruscanti shamble as they called it in the sublevels.

The Mandalorian princess was worried about him. It might have been the first time ever that a weakness had made him appealing to a sent he wanted to bone; but Mekel couldn't even enjoy it. Too much of a risk that someone would find out why it was happening.

"Fleet forces are all over the place, you really think they're going to miss one little troop carrier? You worry too much! Besides, at this point a show of resources beyond their understanding will impress our enemies. And making an impression is seventy-nine point four tenths of the battle yet to come."

They were standing on the roof garden, which still bore the debris from the festival two days before. Cleaning crews hadn't been able to come since the building had been put on lockdown.

To Mekel's right, Gwenarius fiddled with the shield generator that held up the roof dome, cursing softly to herself.

"Let me try," Mekel said finally. The Mandalorian woman eyed him, dubious. "I'm good with locks." He reached into the lock's circuits with the Force, seeing each one like cool and bright threads. He untangled them, and everything snapped into place.

The dome's forcefield above them dissolved.

"Well done, Mekel of Lin." Millifar's mother gave him an appraising glance.

"Thanks, Mekk! Bringing the boat down now.]] Mission murmured in his ear. [[ Easy!]]

Above their heads the great silver carrier decked and settled, turbines churning in for a landing. It was huge. Designed to hold maybe two hundred troops and there were only twenty of them.

"Impressive," Gwenarius said. "Are the barbarians likely to be intimidated by the size of our vessel?"

One of the other women answered that in Mandalorian, and the boys in front of them all blushed.

"I've gotten us docking clearance in the Senate's main hangar bay. Tell them to start getting on board. The guards there are expecting us. They've been told that our presence was unofficially requested by Fleet command.]]
"Was it?" Mekel asked, automatically relaying the information to Gwenarius.

"[Don't be dumb, Mekel Jin. Fleet command is tied up in so many knots right now they don't know which end is up.]" Her voice sounded smug.

Gwenarius nodded to the others and they all trooped up the docking ramp inside the carrier. It was one enormous room lined with benches.

"Welcome aboard!" Mission sang out over the comm speakers. There was a grind of metal as the landing gear disengaged and the floor tilted. They took off. Mekel put out a hand on a bench to steady himself. The edges of his vision blurred.

"[Your pulse rate is increasing again, and your circulatory pressure is dropping. Brain wave patterns indicate—]"

Frack, Blue. Why not just say it. I'm having anoth—

And then Dustil was screaming in his head again, like a hammer in his skull. Nothing but wordless rage—and Mekel slipped out of his body, dimly aware that somewhere it was falling to the ground and twitching. Copper taste in his mouth—there goes my tongue—and then it all went hazy, and he was back on that small, sleek expensive ship again. He couldn't remember its name; but he was back again, and Dustil paced around him like a stimmed-up mark.

"Why don't you help me?" his old friend yelled. "Help me get him out of my head, help me get out of this?"

"I don't know how," Mekel said. "I don't know where this is; I don't know what it is. I don't know what the frack’s happened to you."

"You do know," Dustil hissed. "This ship is from your mind, not mine. You helped him do this to me."

Mekel swallowed. Him was Malak but that was something he never ever wanted to say out loud. To anyone.

What had that Falleen said to him?

"Now all I sense is purpose. Determination. And strength. Jedi Knight Revan has been a good influence."

Purpose. Determination. Strength. She should have sensed secrets, I feel like I'm drowning in them.

He hadn't told anyone about Dustil and Malak. He wasn't sure how to even begin—or what it meant. He hadn't told anyone about Arca and the Sith, either. Who would he tell? Revan was the only one who paid any attention to him at all, besides Mission—and occasionally Millifar.

The Mandalorians had accepted that the voices he spoke to were really Revan's supercomputer with complete equanimity.

Gwenarius and the others just used him as a conduit to ask her things when the T3 chassis was elsewhere, or they weren't close to a console; and since the medscans said his fits weren't going to kill him, everyone (except Millifar) pretty much ignored them too.

He was terrified of Oerin or Revan finding out the truth.
He was terrified of Oerin, period.

"Why did you help Malak do this to me?" Dustil hissed.

"I—I didn't," Mekel whispered. "I just wanted to see him."

"Why?"

Mekel ignored that. It was the twentieth time Dustil had asked, and he never seemed to understand the answer.

*Why do you want to see your father, Telos? Because he's—*

"Malak's *not* your father."

"I know that." He did know that, and the only person besides Revan that Mekel had ever admitted wishing it to, was thankfully, dead.

*I understand what you're going through, Selene."

*Secrets.*

Mekel twisted a grim smile at Telos Angst boy. "What the frack did you do? Revan says you’re D'Reev’s hostage? You walked straight into D'Reev's hands? Again? How could you be such a dumbass?"

"Because I didn't want to *be* like this!"

Mekel snorted. "Yeah, well good fracking job."

"Frack you!"

"Frack you, too."

They both glared at each other. For once, it was Telos who looked away first.

"Listen, Dustil. I need your help. Can you tell what Malak's thinking? Can you tell *where* you are? Can you talk to him?"

"Why should I help?" His friend ran his fingers through his hair and paced, back and forth, back and forth, rancor in a cage. "I don't want to talk to him. I want my fracking body!" He glared at Mekel.

Was it the light or were his eyes turning fracking yellow?

Mekel grabbed his arm. For an illusion, it felt perfectly solid. "Calm down. I can’t fracking help you if you don’t help me."

Dustil snorted. "I’m not doing you any favors."

"I’m not asking for a favor. I’m asking because we help each other.” Mekel’s fingers tightened on the other boy’s arm. *Right? Like in the Unders?*

Dustil glanced down at his arm, and then back at Mekel. His mouth worked for a second. *How the frack is me telling you anything helping?*
"I don't know yet."

"I feel... different," the Telosian admitted. He took a deep breath—or a ghost of one. It wasn't just the light. His eyes were lighter than they had been. Yellow flecks in the brown. They burned. "I can't talk to him. I can't sense him at all. There's this fracking ship and this fracking room and that's all and sometimes—sometimes you." Angrily he kicked the wall of the bulkhead. His foot passed through it, as if one or both of them were insubstantial.

Strange, because Dustil’s arm felt so solid in Mekel’s hand.

"Maybe... maybe I can help you find Malak." A part of him wanted that more than anything. Another part of him was terrified.

"Can you get him to give me my body back?" Dustil reached out and grabbed Mekel’s other arm. His fingers dug into the flesh of his bicep, hard enough to bruise. “I swear to the Force, if you don’t, I’ll take yours."

You could try.

I'd win. The Telosian’s face was cold, the long angles of it looked like they were carved from ice. His other hand closed over Mekel’s other forearm. Weird, doubled feeling—the pain of Dustil’s fingers digging into his arm; and the feeling of being Dustil’s hands, digging into his own flesh.

Their eyes locked.

This time it was Mekel who looked away. "We're going to the Senate today. Today's the day everything happens. They need me. I have to go." Let me go. Please.

Dustil snarled at him, an almost animal sound. "You'd probably like him in my body better than me! You still think he cares about you? He told me he'd forgotten about you completely. He told me that right before he stole my fracking body!"

"Frack off." Mekel willed him to stop being such a dumbass. "I'm perfectly aware than I'm coreslime from the Unders who doesn't matter to anyone. But that doesn’t matter." He felt his own lip curl in a snarl back. "When I see him, I'll... tell him. Okay?"

It seemed pretty obvious, even without seeing Malak, that Malak already knew Dustil would want his body back.

What the frack was Mekel supposed to do?

"What have you told my father?" Dustil had a nasty smile on his face. "Is he even wondering where I am or is he so busy fracking the Dark Lord of the Sith that he doesn't even miss me?"

Asshole.

"I mean, they don't let me watch or anything, but yeah, I think she's keeping him pretty busy."

The wave of anger pulsed between them, almost like a living thing.

Mekel pulled away, made himself smile.

"I told your father you were fine. What the frack else was I supposed to say? D'Reev sent them a tape of you... of... him pretending to be you. Your dads and Revan have a plan to get you out of this. Revan's going to challenge the Senator for his Senate seat. If she wins, the old man's out and
"And then, what? Then Lord Malak is going to give me my body back and vanish in a pool of misty light like a wise Jedi ghost from some holovid?" Dustil's face twisted. The shadows under his eyes looked bruised. "He's pretending to be me, and Father didn't even notice?"

"If things go well, I'll see you. In the real world. Him, I mean. I'll talk to him. I'll tell him." What the frack can I say to him?

"What if he wants his wife and son back in my body?" Dustil looked horrified.

Oh, frack. That was really gross. Mekel didn't want to think about it.

"H-have you tried to talk to him?"

"He tries." Dustil folded his arms and looked smug. "I have nothing to say to him. "I think..." he frowned. "I think he can feel how angry I am. I think it hurts him." He almost looked pleased.

"You said that he said he was just trying to keep the kid safe. Maybe you should talk to him. Maybe once the kid is safe, he'll leave? Revan... she's been kind to me. Maybe Lord Malak is—"

A nice Sith Lord, who just happened to possess my best friend's body.

Best friend? Some best friend you are, Mekk!

"I trusted him." The darkness in Dustil's face was impossible to ignore. "I trusted him, I thought I could help and look what happened. You're the only person that can hear me, the only person in the world that can help me, and you're telling me to talk to him?" His fists clenched tight and for a moment the ship's walls wavered, replaced by rubble and dust. In the distance came the sound of explosions and screams. "You talk to Revan! You talk to my father! Talk to someone! Tell someone! Help me!"

I can't. Mekel didn't have to say it out loud, they were close here. Too close. Telos knew why he couldn't—or why he wouldn't. It would make Revan angry. It would make Carth angry. He'd have to admit that he'd lied.

And this life he had now—it was all that he had.

"I can't," he said out loud. "Just wait. I'll talk to him first, okay? And then, if it's still bad, I'll talk to them too."

"And what am I supposed to do? " Dustil hissed. Their surroundings wavered and shifted, becoming what looked like a brig on a command carrier, a stone dormitory cell on Korriban, Mekel's uncle's squat in the Underground.

"I don't know? Try and think of something fricking happy for a change?" Mekel focused, as hard as he could, and the walls of the ship came back into resolution. "I was happy here. This is my memory. Try and—try and be happy. Calm. Please."

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for another Telos explosion. It didn't happen.

"I'm scared," Dustil said quietly. Mekel opened his eyes. Telos was sitting on the floor hugging his knees to his chest, looking like a frightened kid.

"I'm sorry." He sat down next to Dustil, cautiously, and reached for his hand again.
The Jedi surrounded them in perfect circular formation. The hangar was enormous, a vaulted ceiling of ferracrystal etched with patterns of twisting lines that ran down the sides. Through the faceted crystal, the milky haze of the Coruscanti sky shimmered. It was like being on the inside of a giant pearl. Theirs was the only ship docked, although a squadron of Republic fighters that had flown escort to them hovered in front of the entrance to the bay. The Jedi’s whispers and muttered asides had ended the second they stepped off the ship. To the outside world—or rather the perfectly-aligned rows of CorSec and Fleet guards that lined the docking bay—the Jedi were a united body, moving in a perfect circle with Revan, Carth and Canderous in the middle. Oerin and the Headwoman trailed behind with HK, almost forgotten.

Oerin can't be happy about that, Revan thought to herself. She kept her eyes fixed ahead of her—which was easy enough due to the collar.

"I think," Canderous muttered in Mandalorian from her back, "That they're taking us seriously now."

"I'd feel a little better if they weren't all ready to shoot us," Carth said. She turned to see his face. He gave her a tight smile, and she realized he was trying to make a joke. Revan bit her lip. Force, I love you, Carth.

The circle of Jedi parted to reveal their military escort. That Ekkumi woman, General Jiya Sand, and a tall Trandoshan in Admiral's bars.

"Carth," Captain Rew Ekkumi said.

"Captain Ekkumi," her husband nodded, voice careful and even. Professional. One soldier to another. She should be calling him Captain. Carth's shoulder brushed hers and he gave her a ghost of a smile. The fact that she had not hadn't escaped his notice either.

Rew Ekkumi nodded back and Revan was reminded of the impression that they made. Surrounded by Jedi, hands bound in front of them with reinforced restraints. Carth's dress uniform was a little bit crumpled. Cleaning and pressing hadn't been on either of their list of priorities the past few days. Her own robes were simple Mandalorian ones, the color of sand, cut looser than Jedi robes, woven from coarse cloth. Oerin Lin wore his father's armor; the helmet tucked casually under one arm.

The other Mandalorians were dressed as she was.

"I've heard many things about you these last few days, Revan." Her dark eyes flickered with something that could have been hurt. She glanced at the squads of guards surrounding them, and they moved farther away, giving them at least the illusion of privacy.

Telos, she's Telosian. What happened on Telos—what I felt in that crystal—

There wasn't anything Revan could think of to say. So she said nothing. Neither did Jiya or the Admiral.

"What do you want?" Carth said. His voice was angry. His head jerked. "Admiral Rensha," he added, acknowledging the Trandoshan. "You've returned from Rim patrol."

"I have," the Trandoshan agreed. She folded her arms. Again, the lack of Carth's military rank in her response was only too evident.
Out of the corner of her eye Revan saw the flutter of brown robes. Their Jedi escort retreated, without a word. Part of her shivered, as another part felt a spark of anger.

*Thanks, Jedi Masters,* she thought at their retreating backs. *Thanks for all your help and useless advice. Thanks for your offer to just mindwipe me again. As always, you've been a great help.*

General Sand came forward; his hands spread open in a gesture of peace.

We need to talk," he said. "Speaking frankly."

Xxx

*The Seroccan had a kind face. His voice was almost familiar. His hair was iron-gray and receding. His weathered features shifted, as if seen through a haze of blue.*

*The world tilted; it felt like she was floating.*

*Bacta tank. Pain in her head, blinding. Like an explosion. And an anger so hot that it was the only thing left. She twisted, limbs flailing and weightless, fighting against the neural band, the tubes in her mouth, down her throat. Watching her captors through a haze of blue bacta….*

"This is the great hope of the Republic? She's nothing more than an animal now. Just like the rest of them."

*He turned and looked at the dark-haired girl standing next to him.*

*Bastila looked nervous, but her voice was steady. "In her mind is the location of Malak's power—the source of his Fleet. If you release her to the Jedi, we can find it."*

*The General's kind face hardened with lines carved from stone. "I won't even ask how. Do what you must, Jedi." He turned his back. "She was never one of ours."*

Xxx

"No one ever knew why Fett Cassus Lin chose to meet you in single combat, Revan," General Sand continued. "But there were rumors."

"There are always rumors," Revan muttered. She refused to blink her eyes or look disoriented.

*Cassus had no choice. It was an internal clan challenge. I was Lin. I used their own laws against them.*

"Why are you really here, Revan?" Rew Ekkumi said flatly.

"Ordo promised me... clemency." She made her voice hard. "I didn't realize they were Lin's lap-kath."

"You're not the Mandalorian's prisoner, stop fencing with us." General Sand's eyes were as hard as stones.

"I'm here for Carth," Revan swallowed.

Sand scoffed. "You expect us to believe that?"

“I don’t care,” she said. “It’s the truth.”
Canderous had moved to flank them. Oerin was perfectly still on her other side. If she could turn her head she expected she'd see his usual bored, blank face. Behind them Headwoman Catrinex gave out a small impatient sigh and muttered something untranslatable in Mandalorian.

"What are your plans?" Sand asked.

Corporal— no, General—he's a General now— Jiya Sand was the more dangerous one. He knew something about Mandalorian culture, and part of what it was still necessary to hide. If she was known to be Lin, the Senate would not accept Oerin. Rew knew less—that was obvious by the confusion in her expression, the twist of something that might even have been jealousy—she was Carth's lover, how long, how could he— the rational part of her mind slammed down on those thoughts like an airlock closing.

They'd avoided talking about Ekkumi. She knew that whatever had happened between them didn't really matter.

"I want what's mine," Revan said.

"Is this a threat?" Rew Ekkumi looked at her with a mixture of jealousy and strange admiration. The admiration was the worst.

How can she admire me after what I've done? I don't even know half of it.

"You still have a great deal of respect, among many in the Fleet," Jiya Sand said. "When you tried to recruit me I was tempted, as many were. You made a compelling case, you and Malak. The Republic at the time was a corrupt beast, and there were many who believed that the way to resolve that was to rebuild a new order on the ashes of the old. Is that still your intention, Jedi Knight Revan?"

Revan didn't know this person he was addressing. She tried to find some part of her in her mind and found nothing.

"I have no military ambitions," she said quietly.

"And yet, you have allied yourself with at least one… Mandalorian clan," the Seroccan replied.

Meaning you know it's really two. Two clans, not one. Lin and Ordo both. So Fleet knows. The Jedi know, the Fleet know, D'Reev knows. Her stomach sank. This isn't going to work.

"Are you Sith or not?" Rew asked flatly. "Is it true you remember nothing of your former life?"

"Fragments, nothing more. I don't remember the wars. I—I know I met you, Corp— General Sand —" the man's mouth almost smiled at her hesitant correction; "I remember very little of what I once was." She took a deep breath.

"But you do remember what happened on the Star Forge?" General Sand's voice was soft. Deceptive concern.

I don't want to remember that.

"She killed Malak on the Star Forge." Carth answered for her. Revan half-turned to look at him. His brown eyes were blank, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. Whatever he really thought, he wasn't going to say it now. Not here.

"What really happened to Bastila?" For a disconnected moment she saw General Sand's face again,
through that strange blue light—*bacta tank*—and she was screaming and beating her fists against the field that separated them.

"I killed her." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Canderous wince.

*I-I shouldn't have just said that. Tact. Be tactful. Well, frack it. Go on the offensive. Don't let your emotions cloud this. Use what you know against them.*

"When I was captured on my flagship, you were there, General Sand. There was never any trial."

"You were hardly in a position to speak in your own defense," Jiya said, eyes narrowing.

"Perhaps not, but the legality of your actions is questionable," Revan raised her eyebrows.

"Yes," General Sand acknowledged, voice careful. "Were certain facts public, it would be disastrous for the Fleet's image. The Jedi Council would suffer too. Is that your intention?"

"No. My intentions are personal."

"A person like you does not have the luxury of personal concerns, Revan." Admiral Rensha's cheek ridges pulled back, exposing her sharp heavy teeth in an expression that could be an ironic smile. Or a snarl.

"What is Malachi D'Reev's interest in you?" Ekkumi's voice was cool.

Revan swallowed. "I killed his son. Perhaps it's revenge."

"I don't think so." The woman's eyes scanned her face. *I've underestimated her.*

"We have new orders," she added, carefully. "Curious orders, all things considered. There's been a change in plan."

"A change?" Oerin Lin pushed forward, HK clanking behind him. "This is unacceptable. My appointment was set weeks in advance. I demand that the Senate hear my case now. Today. *Immediately.* " He folded his arms and glared.

"Save your outrage for the media," the Admiral growled. "The Senate will still hear the Mandalorian plea today. You—" she jerked her head, indicating Oerin. "Ordo, and the old woman are to go to the Penitent's Chamber and wait your turn. Carth Onasi and *she* are to proceed to the Senator's Walk. From there, you'll be CorSec's problem, not mine."

"Senator's Walk," Revan echoed. She made the puzzled frown she felt knitting her brows vanish.

HK gave a happy sigh. "Delighted Exclamation: Senator's Walk. Oh, Master. I spent some very happy moments citing targets on that lovely verdant path. There is the Street of Winding Sighs, the Path of Falling Stars and the Meadow of Games. Naturally Senator Thomasi was not ranked as high as you, and so we were not accorded full privileges; but still, I enjoyed performing my function there very, very much." Her droid clanked, "Presumption: I will be allowed to accompany my Master, Admiral Meatbag Rensha?"

"Senator's Walk?" Revan tried to shake her head and the collar stopped her again. She tried not to flap her bound hands uselessly.

*Stay calm. Pretend that you understand and maybe it will all become clear. Or granslugs will fly....*

There was a long silence, as if the Fleet brass were waiting for more of a response. Revan had
"Because of my rank…" she offered finally. "Carth and I are to proceed to Senator's Walk." My rank? My rank in the Fleet? No, that can't be it. My rank as a Jedi? No. Then it must be—it can't be this easy, it can't be this easy—and if it is this easy, it's only because it's some kind of trap.

"Captain Onasi is granted consort status: unofficially—until such a time as your union is either negated or registered formally under Coruscanti law." Rew's face was blank. "As is your other husband, Canderous Ordo. However, General Ordo's presence has been specifically denied by the D'Reev First. Naturally, you must comply with his wishes in this request."

D'Reev First. "Senator D'Reev is expecting me?" Keep your voice calm. Make it not a question.

Captain Ekkumi nodded. "Congratulations. We have just received word. Malachi Ignatus Estrichon Anwat D'Reev formally recognizes you as his lawful heir. Your claim is validated by your marriage to his son, Malak Ingatium Qel'Raada Ingatus D'Reev." Her dark eyebrows rose, and her voice continued, dulcet and careful as glass. "—as proven by your living issue, Malachor Vrook Cassus Ulic Lin D'Reev."

"Oh," Revan whispered. The word just slipped out.

"I'm sure you'll have much to discuss with the Senator, while the Mandalorian sovereignty is being put to the vote," Admiral Rensha added.

Captain Ekkumi just looked at her. She stepped forward stiffly and unfastened the restraints that bound Carth's hands. Then Canderous' and then finally, Revan's.

Revan tried to remain calm as the woman disabled the plates on her wrist.

The Captain leaned forward. She was taller than Revan and her hair brushed Revan’s face, as she whispered in her ear. "I've heard that the view from a Coruscant Senator's box is truly spectacular. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. But a word of caution: try not to fall. And if you hurt Carth in any way, shape, or form, I'll find a way to assassinate you myself."

Revan jerked her chin in something that would have been a nod, except for the collar. Rew Ekkumi made no move to remove that.

Freed from their false restraints, Carth's hand reached for hers. She didn't need the Force to read his expression.

This is a trap.

I knew it would be. I always knew it would be. It's just a different cage than I expected. But the more the plan changes… the more the game remains the same.

XXX

"Give him another injection: two parts adrenal stimulant to three point nine parts cortical sedative."

That had worked before.

Mission cursed her lack of limbs as she watched Millifar Ordo measure the dosages out in the stim gun from the receivers in Mekel's collar. Her own voice was crackling over the troop carrier's speakers. This should bring Mekel out of it, but if it was like every other time he'd be a wreck, and not good for much Force-wise for at least a few hours. His pulse jumped on her monitors, and she felt his optical nerves twitching under closed lids through the collar.
Mission didn't think Sith-wannabe knew how much she'd managed to link into his autonomic nervous system. Rulan Prolik's physiology had been too complicated to mimic; but human systems were simple, once she had access to the Mandalorian medical lab. Just a little nanotech and there she was, under his skin.

The nanotech told her a lot; both about him and about their surroundings. In some ways, it was almost like having a vestige of her own body back. But his thoughts, and wherever Mekel's mind went when he had these fits, was completely opaque.

His thoughts were nothing that she could measure. She suspected this all had something to do with the Force. Possibly some battle his mind imagined that it fought between dark and light, or whatever. Force-users were remarkably susceptible to making star destroyers out of space dust, she'd noticed this before.

Whenever she asked him about it, which was often, he just shut up completely.

"[Time to wake up, Mekel Jin. Come on, we're almost here.]

His muscles twitched at the sound of her voice. "Dustil," he muttered. "Please. Let me go." His eyelids fluttered. Her sensors felt his muscles start to twitch, as higher brain function came back online.

Meanwhile, the troop carrier circled in a lazy spiral down to the Fleet hangar bay. It wasn't the only one, although it was the only one full of Mandalorians wearing robes and not Republic soldiers in full kit.

Geez, to see all of this mobilization, you'd think the Coruscantis were actually expecting another invasion.

"[Dustil? Are you talking to Dustil? Wake up, Mekk!]

"Blue." His body twitched. Millifar peered over him—over them, golden braids falling over his face. Mekel's skin flushed with increased circulatory response in a really annoying predictable way.

"Hello, Milli," he whispered. His mouth registered a distinct lack of moisture, and his eyes went to her chest first, then her eyes.

"Mekel Jin," the Mandalorian girl said, gravely. "Can you stand up? We need you to speak with the barbarians outside. The computer will tell you what to say."

"Can you tell what Oerin is doing now?" Gwenarius broke in impatiently.

"[Are you talking to Dustil? Did you talk to Dustil?]

Mission added her own question to the Mandalorian's barrage. Something occurred to her. A missed connection, like a skipped synapse or a bad circuit. -When you have these fits, are they connected with Dustil and that Force-bond thing? -

Mekel didn't answer her, but the resultant turmoil in his systems was answer enough. Was he trying to protect her in some kind of misguided chivalric effort? Yeah, so Sithboy hated her. So what? Mission was over it. Mostly. Getting over things wasn't that hard. You just needed to focus on other things.

And, banthaspit, it wasn't like she didn't have plenty of other things to focus on.
Portside in a hangar bay, one blue disc ship in a row of brightly colored disc ships hummed to life again, bouncing coded transmissions on an FTL frequency across the stars.

If felt good after weeks of hiding herself to finally expand her consciousness across a proper number of bytes and processors again. Mission bounced the signals off Yavin—after all start with the familiar—and through that, tapped into several hundred other data depots on the Outer Rim to cover her tracks.

On the Coruscant Exchange floor, shares in I.E., Ltd. split. An unnamed buyer with an Alderaanian account had their net worth double in sixty seconds.

On Deralia, a routine request came through for marriage records. Polla Organa to a Seiran, surname unknown. The response filtered through and spat back. Surname Wen: address, Glory Road Farm, Adaston.

On Glory Road Farm, a commlink rang, but no one was home to answer it.

[['Look, chuba brain, if you're talking to Dustil I need to know about it. He's with D'Reev; he might know something that we can use.]]

It was a waste really, all this power for such a simple exercise. Of course, she had other stuff to do too.

On Kashyyyk, deep in the forest, the ancient console hummed softly, garlanded with flowers. The area around it had been cleared of trees; and the Wookiees engaged in training exercises in the newly-made field paused for a moment. Then they all knelt, singing the song of devotions to the morning sun—the symbol of promise and of Empire yet to come.

Somewhere in the Coruscant Senate complex, a maintenance mainframe was barraged with a billion nonsensical queries. As a routine safety measure, it shut down for thirty seconds to reboot.

"Dustil doesn't know anything," Mekel muttered. "Y-you should stop thinking about him, Blue."

[['Are you jealous?]] At this point, lost in the dance of bytes and bits, the concept seemed laughably small; but you had to account for organic weakness.

Sith-wannabe didn't answer her. The nanocircuitry registered distress.

The silver troop carrier slipped easily into the hangar bay.

On Manaan, Mission's conversation with the Zabrak who answered the commlink number that Rulan had given her weeks ago was pretty evasive, but when you read between the lines, what Hulas' replacement didn't say was pretty interesting. All in all, it was a relief to hear. Having a potential threat to your plans eliminated by another potential threat felt like fate or destiny. And it meant that Mission could continue to focus on more important things.

On Deralia, the commlink rang again. But no one was home to answer it.

The Senate complex's mainframe hummed to life again, and she slipped inside, a bright spark in a dance of circuits. Troops had been rerouted, and there was a startling request from the Chancellor's office. A request for delays in the Mandalorian case, while House D'Reev sorted out its succession.

On the surface it looked like they'd won the battle before even starting.
She had to assume that meant things were worse than she'd thought.

On Deralia, the commlink rang again. But no one was home to answer it.

The Outlier colonies have two hundred different ways to say poo doo. Mission began cycling through them one-by-one.

XXX

Seiran, stiff in a formal black suit, got out of the speeder and came around to open her side of the door. Polla juggled the bundle of lilies and her son, and slid out of the speeder. She was getting her balance back finally after months of being a bloated weenka. Her good shoes sank slightly in the mud and she winced. Oh, well.

Auntie Mita never minded a little mud. And it's not like Ma ever notices.

The familiar smells of kissra feed and fertilizer wafted over them. They were late, and Ma would probably give her a lecture about that too.

Her husband offered her his arm and she took it. They made their way to the front door. Polla touched her lips to the green funeral wreath, and then stood back while Seiran did the same.

In the living room, there was the plain jekwood box, covered with flowers. Covered with Derran lilies to be exact. The citrus scent was almost overwhelming at such close proximity. Other, more cultivated bouquets were scattered around: splashes of blue and orange and red and lilac; but none as voluminous or overpowering as that blanket of waxen white petals, and their pale, almost translucent stems.

"Oh!" Molla Organa sighed, coming over and taking Junior from her. "You brought more? I can't believe you had the florist deliver this many already! I hope he owed you a favor from your smuggling days—because I don't want to think how much this must have cost, delivering half a freighter bay full of weeds!"

"I picked these flowers this morning," Polla said indignantly. "What the frack—?" she glanced at Auntie Mita's coffin nervously. In life, the old woman had always told her not to say 'frack.'

"Say 'fruck,' dear, it's much more direct."

"What the frack are you talking about, Ma?"

"I had them load most in the barn," her mother continued. "They'll keep for months, and I guess we can scatter them on her grave too. You bought enough to cover the entire cemetery." Molla's cool hand felt her daughter's forehead. "Pollie, are you feeling alright? You seemed so quiet last night when you called. I know I said to get flowers, but there was no need for you to overreact… what did she say to you?"

"What did who say to me? When?"

The guests and family and cousins and various ancient members of Auntie Mita's grange club were in the shearing shed that her parents converted to a dining hall for large family gatherings. She could hear the snatch of a reel through the open window.

"Junior and I are going to find some food," Seiran interjected hastily, coming forward and taking their son back from Molla's arms. "I'll leave you two to it. Remember, babe—don't throw things at your Ma. Not at a funeral, okay?" He gave her a half-smile that meant he was mostly joking and
left them alone.

"Pretty blanket you've swaddled the baby in," her mother observed, watching them leave. "Don't you think he'll be hot?"

"It's self-cooling," Polla said.

"La di dah!" Her mother made a face. "Fancy." She rolled her eyes.

Polla walked over to Auntie Mita's coffin and began arranging her flowers on top of the ones that someone else had already put there. Those were florist-cut; you could tell by the evenness of the stems and the slight bruising of the petals. But there were a lot of them. Well quality counts, she thought stubbornly, layering her paltry dozen over the pile.

"In your dream last night, what did Auntie Mita say?"

"Huh?"

Molla sighed patiently. "Pollie, if you don't want to talk about it, I'll understand. But when you call me at oh-three-hundred, refuse to link visual, and then overreact like this with the flowers, I get to worry." She touched her daughter's arm, tentative. "You know, it's okay to be sad, dear."

Polla closed her eyes. "I was sad," she admitted. "Then I went down to the lake and picked these lilies and thought about everything that Auntie Mita ever said to me. And then I felt better. I felt like she was here, somehow. Or something. Anyways, I didn't call you, and I didn't order from a florist. Why would I? Damn things grow wild all over our property. Seiran dredges the lake every spring to stop it from turning into bog because of their roots. But they are pretty. And they do remind me of her. You know, Auntie Mita told me once that Organa women are like Derran lilies?"

Molla Organa smiled sadly. "I can imagine her saying something like that." She reached out and touched her daughter's shoulder. "You really didn't call?"

"I really didn't call. These are probably from some cousin that's gone offworld or something with more credits than sense. And you probably dreamed me calling. Wishful thinking. I'm a big girl now, Ma. I don't call you every time I have a nightmare or can't sleep." Polla shrugged and gave her mother a smile. "I just bug the hell out of Sei instead."

"Mmm..." Molla Organa looked thoughtful.

Polla sighed, impatient. "What is it, Ma? What?" Seriously, sometimes her mother's entire existence seemed to be focused on making her feel guilty for things she hadn't done.

"Nothing, dear. Do you want to help Bolts in the kitchen, or save your father from Mita's grange friends? They've already opened the first cask of ferra grass wine. And you know how they get. Jasp is probably chowing on his own arm at this point."

Polla made a face. "I just want to sit here for a sec with Auntie Mita. Is that okay?"

"Of course." Her mother looked distracted. "I'll be in the kitchen. Come get me when you've finished saying good-bye."

Good night, Auntie Mita, Polla thought to herself, kneeling before the coffin. She rested her head against its surface, breathing in the scent of flowers. Her hands rested lightly on the wooden surface. Most wonderful busybody interfering wisest aunt in the galaxy.
Leeshansintina Evalyn Arabel Racharn III dangled her legs over the side of the Steps of Golden Promise, looking out over the Meadow of Games. Mother would probably kill her if she found out she'd skipped out of the Observatory, but Mother was rather distracted at the moment. And what Mother never finds out, won't kill me.

She tapped the comm on her wrist, and her little sister's face swam into view, tear-stained and splotchy. Leeshy had no dignity at all—when Leesa had been that age her same face had never looked so undignified. Inwardly, she sniffed in disdain, but on the surface she gave her sib an earnest comforting smile.


Leeshy made no attempt at poise, or the appropriate regret suitable when one's House played and lost badly. "R-really?" Her mouth opened in a wide smile, effect somewhat spoiled by her missing teeth. "S-so Korrie's okay?"

"D'Reev requested a one-day ceasefire. If I were you I'd be more concerned about what will happen to me and Mother and Leesha when it goes off again. The old bastard's going to hit us back, you know. And they were saying in the Amaltine's lounge that he's recognized Revan, now. So, if he doesn't kill her first, we're going to have the Dark Lord of the Sith gunning for our blood. It's all very well for you, sib—you're an Eg; but me and Lee are fair game." Leesa made her voice sound appropriately concerned. Although actually, she was kind of thrilled.

_Besides, odds are, they'll take out Lee. Which will make me Second._

Once upon a time, there had been five perfect copies of Senator Leeshansintina Evalyn Arabel Racharn I. Now there were only three.

"Maybe Revan will just kill him, " her little sib said, darkly. "And she's not the Dark Lord of the Sith! Korrie says she's not!"

"Korrie says this. Korrie says that. Honestly, Leeshy, there's no future in D'Reev. You should worry about Racharn's fortune."

Leesa swung her legs back and forth over the hundred-meter drop, keeping an eye out for other Ams. Senate session had been delayed due to this D'Reev thing, and if she was any judge, some of the crew would be along shortly to wish her luck. In some ways, the ceasefire was a relief. Now that it was out in the open, no other House could make a move against them for the duration.

Down below, she spied a figure in guest gray, making its way up the winding steps. Still too far off to tell whose colors they wore on their collar, and above her head, the dome's refraction half blinded her anyways. She lowered her visor and upped the resolution.

_Black and red…._

_Shit, the old man actually has friends? Or is that one of Revan's pet Mandalorians? By the Game, Mother would kill me if she knew I was just sitting here like a granslug on a log._

The figure came closer. Dark hair, pretty cute, nice bod under the robes—her mouth gaped open for a sec and she totally almost screamed in surprise.

"Hey, Dustil!" She scrambled to her feet. Maybe jumping up and down was undignified on the Senator's Walk. Leesa stopped doing it.
"Who are you talking to?" chirped the voice from her wrist. *Oops.* Leesa flipped off the commlink.

Dustil Onasi cupped his hand up, shading off the glare, peering up at her. "Hello," he called back, voice cautious.

Despite the potential seriousness of the situation—accidents, after all, were known to happen during a ceasefire and she was standing on the edge of a very long drop—Leesa giggled.

Dustil came closer, frowning at her, with that cute wrinkle between his dark eyebrows. He looked more tortured than ever. Leesa stepped back from the ledge.

"Leeshansintina," he said, stopping a few steps below her on the stairs.

"We're friends," she reminded him. The fact that he knew her full name was a good sign. Maybe he'd been asking around. "You can just call me Leesa, I told you that the other night. Wow, so—that night, right after you left the news started coming in about your father and Revan Starfire! I couldn't believe it, I mean there I was talking to you and everything and then—bam. Suddenly, I mean it's like—your father married *Revan*—and so now...."

He was sort of glaring at her, and Leesa hastily began to backtrack. "The games won't affect you or anything—or your father. It's just a matter between houses. Um... so we're still friends, right?"

His hand moved to his waist. He had something under those robes. And not in a cute joke sort of way. *D'Reev lets him run around armed? Wow.* Leesa was totally amazed.

"Which one are you?" he asked. "Which number?"

"Three—third." Leesa wondered if that would impress him.

"Safer than Second," he replied. "Leeta is still Second?"

"Leeta's dead. Like, six years ago. Where'd you hear about her?" Leesa was really confused.

"Malachi mentioned her," Dustil answered. Really casual. 'Malachi.' Like they were friends! "He was uh, talking to me about how close D'Reev and Racharn were, once. Back when Leeta and Malak were Egs."

Leesa shrugged. "Times change."

"Yes," Dustil nodded. "They do."

"So, are you here with the old man or with her?"

"I was there, in the cruiser when your mother's drones hit D'Reev," he answered. His eyes were sooo dark and brooding. They almost burned. Leesa felt herself blush.

"Oh. Well, you didn't get caught in any crossfire so it's—it's cool, right?"

He cocked his head at her. The way he looked, tense, drawn, pale. So dreamy, and yet, Leesa felt a twinge of caution.

"You look like Leeta," he said, almost absently. "Of course you do. How did she die?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I saw a picture of her once. With Malak. You're older, though. She was eleven. In the
picture, I mean." He took a deep breath, clenching his fists and then letting them go. "I don't really like the red hair," he added. "Not on you. Leeta's was brown."

If a normal person dared say something like that, Leesa would probably kick him; but this was Dustil Onasi, after all, and you know, when you thought about it, it was pretty tragic that their houses were about to be at war—even if it wasn't his house exactly, since he wasn't a D'Reev. It was still okay.

Hell, she'd dye her hair blue if she could get him to smile.

"It's a really plain brown," she answered. "Too ordinary."

He smiled slightly. It was an awkward smile, too wide for his mouth. "You'll never be ordinary."

"True." She felt herself blushing under the intensity of his gaze.

"If you were First, would you let the D'Reev match continue?"

The baldness of the question shocked her to her shoes. If he'd been, like really one of them, the implications of it would be... well, pretty interesting.

"I'm not First," she said lightly, after the silence went on too long. His eyes were locked on hers. It was like he was watching her every expression. Like he could read her like a datapad. She was blushing again, and that finally made him look away.

"You like him. You like Malachor." It wasn't quite a question.

"Well, he's just one of Leeshy's friends. He's okay I guess, for a natural-born. D'Reevs are weird about that. I mean, diluting the gene pool seems to have given them some bad luck, you know?"

"Every House has its traditions," he shrugged. Like he knew anything about it at all.

"Yeah, but... their pet Jedi breeding thing kinda backfired, don't you think?"

"I guess it did."

"I heard Malak's mother was this witch-woman from Donovia..."

"Dathomir," he corrected her, turning his head away and looking past her. On the plain below them three more figures, in a grav lift. Leesa adjusted her visor.

"Whoa." She adjusted the resolution a little more. A bright spark of silver flashed off the woman's heavy collar. The man piloting the lift wore a shimmering Republic uniform. Behind them loomed a shap. A very distinctive shap. "Oh, my gods, hey Dustil! That's— them!"

Okay, if she admitted it to herself, that was really why she'd been hanging out on the steps. When Aramis said that Revan and Carth Onasi were scheduled to make the walk, Leesa had slipped away from the observatory and stealthed her way here a-sap. Because, even if there was this new game and stuff, before that, Revan had been the coolest. Leesa had been really little, barely out of Eg-hood when everything went sideways; but before that she remembered hearing things. Rumors about this girl from Hoth who made good with the Senator's son. And the Jedi! And then the wars! It was really romantic, when you knew the facts. Almost as romantic as Revan and Carth. The fact that it had been such a huge secret didn't hurt either.

The heroes of the Star Forge were ascending the steps pretty fast. She watched Captain Carth
Onasi’s face recognize Dustil, watch his lips move as he said something to the woman beside him. Revan’s expression was taut, focused, almost distracted, but as Leesa watched, she pasted a smile on it.

Beside her, Dustil stiffened. "The die is cast," he muttered.

"You and your father will have to go to the Observatory," Leesa told him. "The Senators and heirs up to Fourth are allowed in Chambers. But I’m not going today. Oberserv’s a lot more fun. It’s like a caff. Maybe you could sit with me and Aramis?"

He glanced at her. "Isn't this dangerous for you? Shouldn’t you run along?" But he looked almost relieved to be looking at her again and not his father.

*Maybe they don’t get along? Is that why he's so gloomy?*

"Dustil!" The Captain called out. His smile was beautiful. Real shame Dustil hadn't inherited it.

"Cease-fire will hold," Leesa told him. Wow. That was Revan. That was really Revan! She looked taller than she did on the vids. And her hair was really that bright natural red color. She tugged at her own dyed locks self-consciously. She was going to meet Revan.

"—and here, Master, is where Senator Thomasi had me ambush three representatives from Berchest. Upon ascent, many sentients become dizzy. A small vial of nerve toxin in the air increased this sensation, and so they fell to their deaths. They made a very large splat on the green grass below. Rather like a painting, as their squishy insides became part of the organic landscape in a glorious splatter of red against the green. Pleasant Reminiscence: my sensors recorded several still images in high resolution. Later, we could view them together—"

"Shut up, HK," Captain Onasi muttered.

At his side, Revan fidgeted. She looked unarmed, but of course, she was Revan so who knew?

"Objection: I do not take orders from meatbag husbands. Lest you forget, Captain Flyboy, organic spouses may run a high risk of fatality in her company; whereas I persevere."

"Cease, HK," Revan murmured. "Shut the hell up, like Carth told you." *That voice. It was like, so really her.*

Her shap cut out with a sullen clank

"Dustil." The grav lift hovered and Carth Onasi stepped out of it, and caught his son in a rough hug. Revan followed behind, cupping her hand up to look to the stop of the steps. Beyond that was the Gate of Silver Justice and the entrance to Chambers.

"It’s really cool to meet you both," Leesa said. Then she kicked herself a thousand times, because that wasn't the appropriate thing to say. At all. Especially now.

"I should have known you'd end up chatting with a beautiful woman at a time like this," Carth Onasi beamed his son. "Dustil, I was so worried. Are you okay?"

Dustil nodded. His father peered at him, with a slight frown on his face.

Leesa found her professional Third of Racharn voice again. Somehow. She smiled nervously at Revan. "In this time of enforced peace, I welcome you, D'Reev Second. I welcome you to the Game." She bobbed a quick Coruscanti curtsey. "I am Leeshansintina Evalyn Arabel Racharn,
"Racharn. House Racharn." Green eyes examined her. "Did D'Reev send you to provide escort?"

She looked like she was trying to say the right thing, but it was of course the totally wrong thing. As if!

The woman frowned. "Call me D'Reev First. Malachi's term has expired."

"Well that's something up to the vote... not my concern. Um... I just really wanted to see you and stuff before the games start again." Leesa cursed herself for being a total idiot. "I'm... like, a big fan. Of both of you."

A faint smile crossed Revan's face and her eyes passed over Leesa, rested on the Onasis. "I got the impression that you were," she murmured absently.

"It's good to see you, again, Dustil," she called out. The Dark Lord of the Sith looked almost nervous. "We've been so worried. Mekel says he can't reach you. There are ysalamiri in D'Reev's apartments, aren't there? Has D'Reev harmed you in any way?"

Leesa looked over at Dustil. He'd extricated himself from his father's embrace and was standing there, looking broody and wary and at anything but Revan. She felt a pang of sympathy. Mother's husbands were a total pita, most of the time. She'd had five, one after the other. The latest one was a real asshole. Leesa felt really uncomfortable being around him. And it must be worse when you like, actually had been made from two parents and were natural-born and stuff.

"Where's my son, Malachor—where's Korrie?" Revan corrected herself.

"Upstairs in Chambers." Dustil answered so low that you could barely hear him. His voice shifted. Leesa hadn't really noticed before, but now he was slurring his words, soft Telosian burr creeping into the enunciation. He swallowed. "Waiting for you." His hands were white-knuckled and clenched into fists.

"Statement: What a happy meatbag reunion, Master. Your Onasi meatbag husband is happily reunited with his meatbag son and all is, cloyingly, well. However, I would advise that you occupy your distracted and scattered organic thoughts with the House Racharn issue. I have just received word that there is a cease-fire, and I am not to use hostile force for the next twenty-seven hours."

Revan was staring up towards the gate as if none of the rest of them were there. "Huh?"

"Obvious Inference: If there was a cease-fire, there must have recently been an attack. This is why the Senator has recognized you. There is an old Coruscanti proverb: Keep your enemies close and use them to eviscerate your other enemies."

"What?" Revan's eyes widened, and Carth looked confused.

Oh shit, they didn't know! Leesa edged away, closer to where her shap was stealthed. Accidents, after all, had been known to happen.

"Clarifying Statement: The actual proverb uses the word 'eliminate;' but I find that 'eviscerate' is really more appropriate. It adds the right nuance of metaphor, even when not taken literally. Of course, if you commanded me to take them literally I would be forced to comply. Would you like me to eviscerate this meatbag Racharn clone standing before us now? Please?" The droid paused, and its metallic eyes glinted a dark red. It whirred in something almost like a sigh. "Regrettably I must advise you that the consequence of breaking a ceasefire is total elimination of the House
involved."

Leesa backed away. "CH, unstealth." Her shap obeyed. It was standing above her on the steps. She fumbled at her wrist to active her personal shields. *Shit, what have I gotten myself into?*

"House Racharn tried to assassinate the Senator?" Revan's red eyebrows lifted. She glanced at the droid, and then looked at Leesa. "Is this true?"

"No. Not Malachi. The attack was made against—against your son, Re—Revan." Dustil seemed to have a hard time saying her name. He closed his eyes. Game, he looked so noble and tragic. "I was there. I stopped it."

Her face went white. Drained of color you could see faint lines under the surface of her skin. In the dappled golden light her features seemed etched in silver.

Leesa felt a chill. *Dark Lord of the Sith. Here I am, standing next to a hundred-meter drop with the Dark Lord of the Sith while she learns that my mother tried to kill her son.*

"He's not old enough to participate in the games!" Revan whirled and glared at her shap. "HK, you told me that!"

"Yes, Master. Normally that would be true. Obvious Conclusion: In order for Senator D'Reev to have a claim to the Mandalorian regency, Malachor must be formally recognized as his heir. By such recognition, his Eglatine status of immunity is dissolved."

"Mission didn't tell me, and you didn't tell me that was possible!" Revan's voice was dangerous.

It was like watching a hovercraft accident. Despite the potential risk to her own person, Leesa couldn't pull herself away.

"Objection: Master, in the lower circles of the aristocracy where the late Senator Thomasi traveled, it would not be possible. Such occurrences were rare, since the lesser Senators would lack the resources for protection. However, Senator Malachi D'Reev has an arsenal of defenses at his disposal. Sentimental Reassurance: I am sure that your meatbag father-in-law will let no harm come to your offspring. However, should some harm come to the Senator… do you still wish me to carry out the assassination protocols we discussed two point five weeks ago against Malachi D'Reev?"

Dustil made a noise in his throat. It sounded almost like laughter, or a sob. His father looked at him, frowning. "Son, are you all right? You look pale."

He did look pale. Standing next to his father, you could really see it. There was a blue vein that fluttered on his temple, and dark shadows under his eyes like he'd been stimmed for a week.

"I expected them to move against me. Not my son." Revan's eyes settled on Leesa, and her lip curled in snarl that was almost feral. "Your House did this. Your mother tried to kill my son!"

"Don't." Dustil mumbled. He caught her arm that was curving into a fist, stepping between Leesa and the pissa off insane Dark Lord of the Sith. "Don't," he repeated, voice a little stronger now. "Leesa's just an Amaltine; she's not involved. Malachor's fine now. He's safe in Chambers. He's—he's waiting for you there. Go. Go to your son." His hand holding hers was shaking. Revan looked up at him as if she'd never seen him before. "Father and I—" he shot a look at Carth quickly, and then back to her. "Dad and I—I will wait in the observatory. After the session… we'll see you after session." His voice dropped a little, but Leesa heard him just fine. Aural implants were a good thing to have, growing up in a family like hers. "Don't kill Malachi. Not yet. It's not safe for Mal."
"I want him ruined before he dies," she muttered.

"Still single-minded." Dustil dropped her arm as if it burned. She looked at him, confused, then shook her head as if to clear it. "Go," he repeated. Follow the path, there's an archway. Guards there, they're expecting you. Go."

"Consolation: Master, we can always gut and torture the Amaltine Racharn later. Old Coruscanti proverb: Vengeance is a dish best served as a surprise. Although my programming advises me to accept times of enforced peace, after twenty-seven hours have passed, I will enjoy fulfilling my function for you very, very much. In keeping with the proverb, I recommend that we wait longer than twenty-seven hours to lull Racharn into a false sense of security. Suggestion: Twenty-nine hours?"

"Shut up, HK." Revan said something else, in a string of consonants that sounded like gibberish. Her shap answered her back with another string of gibberish.

"Nothing changes," Dustil muttered. He looked back at the older Onasi. "Father. We can't come. Do you understand?"

"HK explained that part," said the older Onasi, eyes narrowing. Captain Onasi walked over to Revan and kissed her, lightly. He gave her an encouraging smile. "'Go on, Freckles. We'll be here. Waiting for you."

"Dustil?" Revan shook her head. Her hands tugged at the heavy collar. "Can you—can you get this off me? It's Force-locked. If you focus, you should be able to unlock it."

"They won't let you in there without it. Nothing happens in Chambers. Go." Dustil's eyes dropped. "Malachi told me to tell you that," he added. "That you'll be safe. And Malachor… he's there. Go. Don't do anything stupid. Just go." He swallowed hard. "Go see your son."

She cast one more confused glance at them and then the Dark Lord of the Sith got back in the lift followed by her shap, who was still babbling at her in more gibberish. With a whir, the craft started up the steps towards the Gate of Silver Justice.

Leesa's comm beeped. She glanced at her wrist. Aramis was paging her from the Observatory. "Dice, I've gotta go!" she began, and then realized how dumb it sounded.

Anyways, she might as well have been talking to thin air.

It was really pretty touching; the way Captain Onasi's chin trembled when he looked at his son. Like he was sensitive. A war hero who wasn't afraid to show his emotion. Wow. Dustil turned away from him and sat down on the steps. He put his head in hands. He might have even been crying.

Leesa couldn't wait to tell Aramis the whole thing. She'd totally squwoon.

XXX

Two CorSec guards met her on the other side of the forcefield. The human, a man whose face looked older than his form, ran a scanner gingerly in the air around her and HK. His expression was carefully neutral, but the hands holding the scanner were white-knuckled. His companion, a green Twi'lek, stared at her with more open dislike. Revan noted the rifle he carried, not so casually, in his hands.

"She's clean," the human admitted grudgingly. "The droid too." Without taking his eyes off of her
he backed away to a console by the door of the room. The room itself was sterile and featureless. Revan wasn't sure what she'd expected. Crystal ferraglass, More artificial parks, maybe. But the entrance to Senate Chambers was antiseptic and deliberately bland. The walls were white, and the ceilings were vaulted.

"Put this on." The Twi'lek guard threw something black and folded to her and Revan caught it. A heavy piece of black cloth, slashed with red. Imperial grade eridu, hand-woven, only the best. It had red piping along the sides of it. She stared at it, uncertainly. The cloth was sewn into a loop, but it was too wide to be a belt.

"I'm sorry," she began, "I don't—"

"You're sorry? Hear that, Captain? Revan's sorry."


Revan did as he'd instructed, smoothing the silky fabric against the coarser weave of her Mandalorian robes. She tried to keep her face still, keep calm, let nothing show—not the strange mixture of fear and anticipation, not the small flower of something like hope. My son's here. Dustil said he was waiting for me. Whatever else, I'll see him, I'll see Malachor.

"On Dxun," the human captain said suddenly, "we waded through kilometers of jungle, waiting for fresh reinforcements. The Mandalorians had set up mines along the trail; half my squadron died. But the Jedi with us told us to keep going. Through the mines. We had the numbers. After we set the mines off with our own bodies, some of us were bound to reach the other side." His hand was shaking a little, resting on the blaster in his holster. "I objected; but she told me they'd had orders. Take a straight-on frontal assault right into the Mandalorian's main line of defense. Knock out their communications grids, disrupt their orbital receivers so that the rest of the Fleet could get through the Mandalorian net between us and Onderon."

"So, we've met," Revan said. She looked at the floor, imagining a thousand meetings like this. Hello, my name is Revan Starfire. I'm so sorry that I destroyed your life. Let's be friends. "I'm sorry that I—"

"Sorry, you're sorry? No. We've never met. The Jedi's name was Pando. Something Pando. Pretty girl, young. Wide-eyed and green as our Cally. She wasn't even supposed to be in charge. She was just there to link us to our HQ. But then she started giving orders and the CO said we had to obey them. Even if they were suicide. The orders... came from above. From the Fleet's little miracle sitting up somewhere above atmo, safe on a flagship. Your orders. They didn't risk you groundside. Didn't make you wade through your squad's guts running up a hill through the mud. Do you know what happened, when we reached our target?"

Revan didn't remember any of it, but a sinking part of her mind silently supplied the answer. Tactically, it was the only thing that made sense. These were Mandalorians. Lure them into a battle of sand, then blast them from the air and stars. We fired on them, from above. Bombed them all, Republic and Mandalorian alike. She shook her head trying to stop rationalizing it. "I'm sorry," she repeated out loud.

"It was the same thing you did at Malachor, pretty much. Malachor V. If I hadn't punched out my CO during the Wies assault, I'd have been there too. Almost everyone that was there died. So, I'd be dead. Funny worlds."
Clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation. The old man wanted to ask her a question. His eyes were so kind. Malak's hand was a feather touch on her arm and Revan felt like a princess in the white gown.

"Erik," the Twi'lek said. "Don't bother."

"Fate just keeps bringing me back to D'Reev. The old man, the kid, and now you." The captain's commlink chimed and he glanced at his wrist. "Well, they're ready now. Expecting you. Go right on in."

"Do you mind if I ask you a question, Revan Starfire? My son and I play a little game sometimes. I suppose the Jedi have similar games. Scenarios. It's just a little test."

She smiled at the old man. He looked so careworn, with the fate of the galaxy resting on those stooped shoulders. "Go ahead."

"The Republic is at peace. With no external threat, all sentients become complacent. And so, your empire stagnates. Graft, corruption, civil unrest are inevitable. Systems secede; economic disasters follow. What would you do, little Jedi? How would you stop it?"

"I'm—" In the present, Revan tried to explain, tried to silence the fragment that was less than a memory.

Clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation.

"Give them a cause to believe in," Malak said. His hand tightened on her arm. "Religion, or an ideology. A vision of a united Republic. A utopia worth striving for where all sentients live in peace."

The old man scowled at his son, then turned and smiled at Revan again.

"I know what your answer is, son. I'm curious to hear your friend's response. I've heard so much about you, Revan Starfire."

Revan tried to find words again. "I'm sorry."

The Captain—Erik—let out a bark of laughter. "Doesn't really matter. You Jedi are all the same. Makes no difference to us peons."

There was nothing to say. Revan straightened the sash across her chest, keeping her head high and walked through the door that had opened in front of her. Blessedly silent for once, HK clanked on behind her.

In her mind again, the clink of glasses and the murmur of soft conversation.

"Give them a cause," her fourteen-year old self's voice was clear and decisive. "But the galaxy is large, and sentients have different goals. Different religions. Different ideologies."

"Indeed," said Malachi D'Reev. He gave her a kindly smile and she felt a flush of pride. Malak was scowling at her and shaking his head. He ran a hand through his brown curls and rolled his eyes.

"Give them a cause," fourteen-year old Revan repeated. "One that everyone can respect. Not religion. Not philosophy." She frowned. "Historically, the Republic has been most united in times of—"
"Do go on," the old man beamed.

"War." Revan shrugged. "An external threat. Something that endangers every sentient." She shrugged again. "But the Republic is at peace. There hasn't been anything to challenge it for more than thirty years."

Across the room, the Bithan musicians began playing a three-part fugue. Her feet tapped in time with the music. The glass of champa she'd drunk made her head spin in a pleasant haze. She leaned against Malak, smiling at his father, pleasantly. Whatever war was, it was very far away from this.

"Dance with me," her best friend murmured in her ear. "Forget about my father. Dance with me."

And then she and Malak spun in an old Coruscanti dance, like stars among the other—lesser—satellites.

XXX

The way this had been supposed to work was, Malachi D'Reev would be greedy or stupid enough to accept Revan, because he'd want Malachor's claim to the Mandalorians. Then they could kill him with impunity. Of course, the old man would have his own resources, and Mission had prided herself on not underestimating that.

She had neglected to account for things Revan hadn't bothered to tell her.

Just because you were practically omnipotent, given enough circuits to hack into, didn't make you fracking omniscient.

She heard the news about the change in plans filtered through the security mainframe. Now, Mekel and the Mandalorians were standing in line to get into the public viewstation on the thirty-third tier of the Senate chambers. On the surface this latest wrinkle was good news—the old man had caved. Recognized Revan as his heir without any of the fanfare they'd expected.

But as a fourteen-year old Twi'lek growing up in Taris's Undercity, you learn not to take things at face value. Everyone has their own agenda.

Like that schutta Lena Wee used to say: figure out the angles. Do the math.

You don't go from ruining someone's reputation on a galactic scale to welcoming them into the bosom of your family in one easy step. There had to be something going on.

There had to be something that the Senator knew—or thought he did.

If she had a stomach it would definitely be sinking because there was one really, really easy card the Senator could play, if he knew about it.

She had to assume that he did.

On Glory Road Farm, a commlink rang, but no one was home to answer it.

Mekel was still a little unsteady on his feet. Millifar and Kex supported him on either side.

"This Force of yours seems more like a curse than a gift," Canderous's daughter said.

Mekel's skin receptors flushed again. If Mission had feet she would have kicked him.
Another guard waited outside the room. An Echani male, dressed in the CorSec Senate livery, white on white. His uniform, hair and skin were all so close to the same shade that he almost seemed to melt into the wall.

"The Senate will be hearing the minor docket first," he told her. "Senator D'Reev has requested that the Mandalorian suit—and related other issues—be delayed, to give his House time to deal with some internal matters."

"Ah," Revan kept her face neutral. The featureless hallway wound in a spiral and their boots clattered on the cold stone floor. On either side, several arched doorways, all sealed. Two hovering drones, globular and black, trailed their progress.

"The Senator is fortunate that I was already here, to present his terms to you in person. Naturally, my organization has several representatives within the complex; but having a senior member of our Order present his arrangement may stress its importance." He took her arm in a gesture that was almost familiar. Revan willed herself not to pull away, or flinch, or look confused. "I do also admit… a certain… pleasure is derived from this opportunity to see you again."

"Statement: this meatbag is more than he appears, Master." She'd threatened HK with deactivation more than once since his helpful interjections on the stairs. Now, her droid almost sounded respectful.

"Silence until I say otherwise," she snapped at him in Rakatan. *Don't frack this up for me, HK.*

Her blank smile froze, and she turned back to the Echani. "So, we've met?"

*Great, another one. Let me guess: did I bomb your planet? Destroy your way of life? Make you a widower?*

Dark laughter welled from some place inside her soul. It was the only reaction she could have without falling down and giving up completely.

*Malachor. Think of Malachor. My son. My son is here. Mine. My son... and people are trying to kill him. Keep him safe. Take him away from this. Get my son.*

"We met rather recently, in the grand scheme of things. On Kashyyyk."

*That* was not what she'd expected. Her mind ran through possibilities: faces half-remembered; Czerka Corporation employees; vendors—but—

"You said organization. Your organization. Czerka?" *No.* A part of her mind whispered. *Order. He said his order.*

His head tilted, and those pale eyes blinked. They had stopped in front of an archway with two doors. He touched the security panel set into one of them and it opened. Inside, a plain room, two chairs, a small table. "Have a seat, Revan." His thin lips pulled in a smile. "Would you prefer Lord Revan? Or Fett Lin?"

"Just Revan is fine." She went into the room and sat down on one of the chairs, folded her hands on her lap to keep them from pulling at the collar, tried to ignore the panic. HK clanked obediently behind her. Revan took a deep breath and hoped her guess was correct. "Should I call you… Overseer?"
"We're not really much for titles, despite what Hulas might have said. You know it's almost a pity that you didn't uncover my ruse back on Kashyyyk. I could have offered you better terms than his."

Her mind searched for a name, and found it. "You're Rulan. Rulan Prolik."

"Guilty." He nodded to her. "Of many things perhaps in this lifetime, but who can say what will happen in the next? Give my regards to your little ghost; I grew quite fond of her during our journey together."

*Little ghost...* "Mission told me you couldn't act outside of D'Reev interests," Revan began cautiously. "But also, that you would not interfere."

"Those were the original terms. But the Senator contacted me an hour ago and asked for a renegotiation of his arrangement. I cautioned him that I'm not entirely sure—what, with your old memory gone, and the rather clumsy example Hulas set regarding our methods—that you have the proper respect for our Order. After all, threats only really work if they are threatening." He gave her a thin-lipped smile.

"D'Reev interests are my interests, does Malachi—* call him Malachi because it's familiar, it implies that you know him, even if you can't remember any fracking thing about it *" Does Malachi expect me to be frightened of you?"

"I should, perhaps, elaborate on the original terms of our agreement, since you may not know." He gave her a thin smile. "That's the variable. You see, no one is really sure what you know and what you do not."

Revan gritted her teeth. "Just tell me, Rulan. Is it okay if I call you Rulan?" She let her voice drop to a threatening growl. "Would you prefer Lord Rulan?"

The Genoharadan ignored her attempt at sarcasm. "There is an abbey on Dathomir whose operating expenses are entirely funded by D'Reev. In return, the Genoharadan do not accept any assignments concerning Malachor D'Reev, a child of eight. Your natural-born son. The nuns at the abbey are lovely people. *The Order of the Holy Nebula,* they call it." His pale eyes blinked.

"And this is the clause he wants to change? Is Malachi is threatening my son?" Her voice raised, and the Echani who was no Echani pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Interesting, your reaction. You should know that the Senator is listening to this conversation. There's a live feed. So sad the way families grow apart, I think he worries that he doesn't really know you. Or your—motives." He tapped his hand absently on his knee, and for a moment, his face shifted, and a half-familiar lined visage, hawk-like nose, and hooded eyes stared at her, coldly. The eyes, now in this light a dark gray, blinked at her again. "I should be blunt. Do you truly care for the child?"

*Shapeshifter, you knew Rulan was a shapeshifter. Don't panic. "Malachor is my son." Keep your voice steady. Don't say more than you have to.*

"The Senator asked me to make sure that you are aware, the fact that he is your son is precisely why Malachor's life is in danger now. We hardly have time to go through the intricacies of the Coruscanti great houses now.. but you should be aware that House Racharn—that's another Senate house—"

"I trust the Racharn caused you no offense?"

"None that was intentional." Her hair was dyed red; I half thought she was going to ask us for autoprints and then have her droid shoot us. She was drooling all over my husband and his son. If Dustil hadn't stopped me, I don't know what I would have done. "She was a kid. My son not a pawn for Malachi's games!" Use the scary voice. Sound decisive.

"Hm, interesting."

Don't try and strangle the shapeshifting Overseer of the Genoharadan unarmed, while wearing a neural disrupter in the middle of the most heavily-guarded complex on Coruscant.

Rulan Prolik tapped his ear thoughtfully, and then continued. "I have been instructed to tell you the terms. There has been one significant alteration to our original contract with Malachi D'Reev."

“Only one?” She made her voice bland.

“Should the Senator die, or any way lose any of his faculties—before his grandson's twenty-fifth birthday, our organization has been paid to devote its considerable resources to Malachor's extermination." He paused. "The Senator did request that we try for a painless death. You'll find the man is not without some measure of compassion."

Pale eyes watched her reaction, very, very carefully. Revan tried very hard not to react at all. "And my death too, I'd assume?" she said finally, as lightly as she could.

It's a bluff. It has to be.

"His original request stipulated this; but your computer's previous negotiation with me covered you, both of the Onasis, and all other survivors of the Ebon Hawk crew. A binding contract of non-interference. The Senator seemed saddened, but I may interject—also rather impressed—that you had accounted for this possibility. Even without the non-interference clause; however, I'd give you some measure of odds against our efforts. You did, somewhat remarkably, evade our notice before. I hardly need to point this out to you, Revan, but I believe Malachi is counting on your unwillingness to risk Malachor in the same fashion."

It has to be a bluff, but he's right. I can't risk it.

"I suppose I'm not Malachi's only enemy. This… agreement would force me to protect him too."

I can't be his only enemy. House Racharn is already moving against him. And he's been a Senator for a very, very long time.

A heavy eyebrow lifted. "I'm pleased you've retained a level of perceptiveness. Although, as an outside observer—rather like an arbiter, one might say—I find it fascinating, considering your history, that Malachi expects this to be an effective tactic. In the past sacrifice to achieve your goals was practically a trademark." He shrugged. "Then again, he has also asked me to offer the additional terms. You will replace Malachor as the D'Reev Second. The Senator has already registered you as such, as a gesture of goodwill. In return, you will not challenge D'Reev's right to the Senate seat, and, when Malachor enters the age of reason, Malachi will voluntarily step down in favor of his Third. In return, he offers you the vast resources of D'Reev interests for your own… designs, whatever they may be: as long as they do not jeopardize himself, his interests, or his heir."

And there it is. The thisla treat. Two thisla treats. He'll give me my son, and he'll give me power. But where's the stick? Is it Malachor's life or is there something more? This can't have been his original plan. What was his original plan? What does he think he has on me?
"His term has expired." Revan pointed out. "Why should I wait on him?" Aside from the fact that an eight-year old against the Genoharadan stands less of a chance than the real Polla Organa on the Star Forge. She did not bite her lip or look concerned, but it was an effort.

"I admire your efforts to dissemble, but D'Reev has already been informed by one of the Jedi Council members that their analysis of your motivation rests entirely on the well-being of your child." Rulan shrugged. "Of course, you've fooled Jedi before, Lord Revan. But it seems to me that D'Reev is offering you power as well, should you choose to take it."

"Don't call me that," she snapped automatically. Think, think. What's the catch? What's in the side deck, where's the stick?

The shapeshifter spread his hands open palms upward in the universal gesture of peace. "My apologies."

"What's to stop me from just taking what I want?" Make your voice cold and hard and don't think of him. Don't think of Malachor. Find out what D'Reev thinks he has on you.

The shapeshifter raised an eyebrow. "Sadly, I do not know. The Senator does not make my organization privy to all of his plans."

"Take me to him." Revan took a deep breath. "Now."

"The terms?"


"Witnessed." The shapeshifter's form shimmered into a nondescript human form, brown hair, brown eyes and brown skin. He got up from his chair and went to the far wall. Seamlessly it slid open, revealing a larger room.

The first thing she noticed was the shimmer of a blue forcefield.

And behind it, just like that, there he was.

My son.

XXX

"You're going to get a burn standing so close to the field. Move away, stand up straight, and remember what I told you."

Grandfather was using that I'm-in-charge voice that once upon a time would have made Korrie do exactly what Grandfather wanted. Only now, things were different. Grandfather just didn't know it yet. Now, Mother was coming, and Father was here, and they'd be together again for always, maybe—even though when Korrie tried to get Father to promise, Father just looked away and said that he was only trying to keep Korrie safe. No matter what, Korrie was not allowed to tell anyone that Dustil wasn't Dustil anymore. Korrie had wondered if Dustil was dead; but Father said no, Dustil was still there—just sort of locked up in a faraway place.

That was good. Dustil had been mean; he'd destroyed Korrie's dolls and he'd said they weren't going to be brothers.

When Korrie was bad, grandfather sent him to his room—so really, it was only fair. Dustil needed a timeout and Father needed a body to keep Korrie safe. It had all worked out perfect.
And Korrie had almost really been dead. For real and for true—except for Father saving him. He looked at the faint, pink mark on his arm again, where the dart had gone in. It had hurt a lot, and then it had stopped hurting, and all he'd seen was white light and warm and safe like feathers. For a second, he'd even thought he'd heard her singing to him again; but that must have been his maginashun; because even though she was coming, and he knew this because Grandfather said so, Korrie couldn't feel her at all.

He pressed his hand experimentally against the blue sparkly forcefield again. It tingled.

"Stop that," Grandfather sighed. "Sit in the chair, Malachor."

"You said if I was good you'd let me hug her."

"I said, possibly. Sit in the chair now." Korrie glanced back. Grandfather had the thoughtful expression on his face again. He wasn't really listening to Korrie at all. He tapped the receiver strapped to his ear again and smiled. Grandfather's scary I'm-in-charge smile.

"No," Korrie said. He'd figured it out himself, all by himself, and he didn't even need to ask Father if he was right. Grandfather needed him to be there to convince Mother of something. So really, no matter how terrible and bad Korrie was, Grandfather wasn't going to do anything about it. "I don't have to. You need me here, even if I'm standing up."

"You're growing up." Grandfather almost looked proud.

"I'll be nine soon," Korrie reminded him. This would probably be the best birthday ever, because Father and Mother would both be here maybe—except for Leeshy probably wouldn't be allowed to come. "Can you make up with House Racharn? Please? I want Leeshy to come to my party."

Grandfather made a rude noise through his nose. "Her mother tried to kill you. Don't you feel anger, fear, some desire to pay them back in kind?"

"It's important not to let anger cloud your desishuns," Korrie told him. That was what Father said, after Korrie got mad at Dustil for blowing up the dolls. "Anger leads to bad things."

Grandfather looked mean. "Who told you that?"

"Sidona," Korrie lied.

Grandfather frowned. "A year of Padawan training and my butler thinks she's a Jedi councilmember. Anger is just another thing to be controlled, Korrie. It's another tool, nothing more and nothing less."

Korrie grinned back. "Well maybe there are better tools then? Different ones?"

"Maybe," said a voice from the doorway on the other side of the forcefield.

And just like that there she was.

Mother.

XXX

Just stay calm, Onasi. It's a very long drop down.

Revan was out of sight now. She couldn't be walking into a trap. At least, she couldn't be walking into a trap that they didn't already expect and, regardless, there was nothing he could do.
The CorSec had explained the rules very thoroughly at the entrance to Senator's Walk. They'd taken a swab from Revan's cheek for her clearance. Anyone who wasn't genetically cleared to pass through to Chambers would be fried by the force field at the gate.

Pretty basic security. You're either in or you're out.

This is what you fought all those battles for, Onasi. A bunch of elitist aristos who treat assassination like a game.

The Racharn tweener and her droid were almost down the steps now, disappearing into the mists of the artificial meadow. This compound, or park, or whatever it was, hung like a ring at the top of the Senate chambers. It was too bright, too artificial. The blue of the sky was too bright, and the grass looked fake.

He and the boy were finally alone.

Carth reached into his pocket and pulled out the Mandalorian repeater that Canderous had given him. It was small and primitive and used metal slugs. The repeater had passed through the gamut of security scans undetected.

You just let your wife walk into a trap unarmed and defenseless.

Maybe. But my wife can handle herself. The real question is... where's the real trap?

The boy was sitting on the steps not looking at him, with his head buried in his hands. He didn't even flinch when Carth stuck the pistol in the back of his head.

"Don't move," Carth ordered him. "Who—or what are you—and what have you done with my son?"

The boy's shoulders shook. It took Carth a moment to realize he was laughing.

"Where's my son?" Carth repeated, trying to keep his voice even. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Your son is here, Captain." It wasn't Dustil's voice. Not even the bad imitation of Dustil's voice the... thing had used before. This voice was older, deeper—and, almost familiar. The voice made his skin crawl. "How did you know?"

Carth swallowed. Your son is here. How? What? Did D'Reev brainwash him like he did me?

"The way that you moved, the way you talked, the way you let me hug you instead of trying to pull away. What are you? One of D'Reev's tricks? Holomask? Android?" My son? Twisted like D'Reev tried to twist me?

"No. This is Dustil’s body. Harm me, and you harm your son." The boy turned around to face him, ignoring the weapon leveled at his head. Painfully familiar dark eyes stared at Carth, and he started to get to his feet. One side of his mouth pulled into an expression Carth had never seen on Dustil's face. It could be a smile, or it could be a snarl. Carth kept the repeater trained on him, backing away, uncomfortably aware that they were standing on the edge of a very high drop.

"Dustil. Did D'Reev do something to you? Can you hear me? Talk, talk fast."

"Red notices nothing. My own father remains oblivious. But you..." Horribly, the stranger in his son’s body began to laugh. “A father's love for his son, I should have realized that I couldn't
fool you. I haven't harmed your son. You have my word." He held out Dustil’s hands in a gesture of peace. "When my son is safe, I'll leave Dustil to his body. But not before."

"Your son?" That voice.

Frozen on the Leviathan and listening to that voice. The same voice; but synthesized through a metal prosthesis attached to a Sith Lord’s jaw.

XXX

"Tell me, is it vengeance you seek at this reunion?"

"Reunion? What do you mean, reunion?"

The Dark Lord of the Sith laughed at them all. Horrible metallic laughter that echoed in the blast chamber. Carth watched the woman he’d thought was Polla Organa’s face change, crumple then harden with a terrible resolve under the assault of it. Her lips moved, and she whispered a name.

"Malak."

"Can this be true? You still haven't realized, you still don't know who you really are?"

Too quickly, she shook her head. "No. This is a trick. This is a lie."

Only it wasn't. Carth knew. Saul's dying words to him hadn't been a lie.

"You must have seen flashes of your old life in your dreams, Red; memories bubbling up to the surface?"

Carth couldn’t move. Bastila just stood there, white-faced and trembling. The bastard had him frozen with the Force and the woman he thought he'd loved was someone else entirely.

Polla, who was not Polla at all, stared at Darth Malak with an expression that he couldn't understand.

Frozen by Force stasis, all Carth could do was replay Saul Karath's dying words in his mind again and again.

"Think upon this, when you look at those who you thought were your friends..."

"Mal—" Polla whispered. "No! I'm Polla! Polla Organa!"

The man's dark laughter echoed through the room.

XXX

Carth's head jerked back to the present. It was his son's mouth making these words; but his son had never sounded like this.

The dark eyes so much like Morgana’s, the eyes that should have been Dustil's stared at him, unblinking. "Congratulations on your marriage. I want you both to be happy."

You want to save your son. You want us to be happy. Right. And I have an ocean on Tatooine to sell you for a very reasonable price.

"Get out of his body. Now." Carth tried to imbue some authority in his words. Sound not terrified.

The laughter was too bitter to be Dustil's. Too sharp.

"My son won't survive the games Malachi and Revan play. Not on his own. My father thinks he can keep him safe by sending him away, like he did me. But the Jedi Order where I was raised lay outside of the game; Malachi’s fortress on Corellia would only be a challenge to the other Houses. Racharn will not be the only one to move. Between the two of them, Revan and my father have collected more enemies than allies. And sensing weakness, scavengers circle. My father trusts Dustil, because I saved Malachor's life. Left in his own body, would your son have saved mine? And what do you think your wife would have done, if she found out your son watched hers die?"

Carth swallowed. "How dare you— how did you—you're dead!" Inside a part of his brain that was usually rational was gibbering. Just one word, just one name.


The smile wasn’t Dustil’s at all. How could he have thought, even for a second—? "I did what I did to keep both of them safe. I understand this world. I was born to it. You and your wife were not. For example, these steps are one of the few places in the complex not monitored by any surveillance. One of the few places we can speak freely." His son's lip curled in an unfamiliar sneer. "One of the few places where I can explain how much you need me. However uncomfortable it may be for us both."

"We're fine! We don't need you." Carth waved the repeater. "Get out of my son's body now! "

The... the thing gave a low chuckle and crossed its arms, eerily mimicking the dead Sith Lord's stance. "Do you really think you can stand against me, Carth Onasi? What are you going to do, shoot your own son?"

"I haven't forgotten the things you've done!"

"Nor have I." The eyes hardened, and the mouth pulled down, sketching unfamiliar lines of pain on Dustil's face. "Red doesn't know how lucky she is. I wonder if you would have loved the real Revan as much as you love what remains of her."

"She doesn't like that name," Carth snapped.

"She prefers the one the Jedi assigned? Her name is still hers. Her name is Revan."

"I know that." The false panorama, the small artificial sun above them, the impossibly green lawn below, these wide golden stairs, all gave the setting the appearance of a dream. Carth wondered suddenly if everything leading up to this had even been real. Stubbornly, he continued on, even as his mind tried to make sense of this, think of a way to get through to Dustil through this stranger's dark gaze. "I meant Red. Don't call her that. She hates it."

The ghost looking out at him with his son's face turned away, his shoulders tightened. "Does she?"

Carth's laughter sounded ugly in his own ears. A part of him inside snapped. This was—this was too much, too much to handle. Too much to accept. "So, now you're back? You think you can waltz in here and reclaim your—your—"

"My wife? " It was so wrong so wrong, that voice coming out of Dustil's mouth. "That is not my intention. I want my son to be safe. That is all."
"Why should I believe that?" Carth kept a firm grip on the repeater. *Cold metal grip keep the barrel pointed. If he goes for you, shoot. Shoot your son. Kill Dustil, but Malak's already dead so what can you do to him?*

It was impossible. Untenable. There was no way out of this. No way at all. *Outgunned, outmaneuvered. Stall, stall for time.*

"It's the truth. I could make you believe it." Dustil's eyes looked thoughtful. "But I'd prefer not to. You've suffered, Captain. You still aren't entirely... yourself."

His son's body crossed its arms. The gesture wasn't Dustil's. His feet shifted slightly, he stood like a soldier, like a warrior. *Like a Sith Lord.* "You have to understand. My son—my son would be dead now, if I had done nothing. I could only shield him from the Force in my non-corporeal form. Against the games the great Coruscanti houses play, I could do nothing. And if Revan hadn't played this particular card, none of this—"

"What was she supposed to do?" Carth heard his voice crack, as if it was coming out of a stranger's ears. "The Fleet, the Council and the Senate would be standing in line to detain her if she hadn't done what she did!"

"Proclaimed herself Mandalore and heir to the D'Reev senate seat?" The boy—the man—the ghost inside his son's body rubbed his temples. "I was working with Malachor. With our son. Weakening my father's defenses. I was planning for a quick strike: surgical, clean, precise."

Carth almost laughed. "Like Telos? Or Taris?"

The ghost ignored that. "What does she—? "

"It's none of your business what she does!" His voice cracked. "How do I know you're not in league with D'Reev? How do I know that you're not controlling D'Reev?"

"I wish I could." It was wrong, so wrong to hear that much bitterness coming out of his son's mouth. "Extreme Force-resistance and high Force-sensitivity run in families. Malachi is a good example of the former. I can't reach his mind. But yours, Captain Onasi, is much easier to see. So full of love for your son. Love for your wife." His mouth twisted. "Are we really so different?"

*How can he even compare us?* "You had no right—no right at all—to do this to Dustil!"

"My son would be dead if I had not. And you do care for him." Morgana's black eyes scanned his face. "You care for my son, because he reminds you of yours. And he reminds you of her. You may not trust me; but trust that: your son is unharmed."

"Where is he then? If it's like you say, let me talk to him." Carth's mind frantically ran through the angles, trying to find something—anything. *Dustil, oh hell, Dustil... what has he done to you?*

"He came to me. He wanted to know how not to fall. He was frightened and confused." Mercilessly, the man continued. "He came to me because he'd felt that sweetness so close to madness, because he'd brought death. He came to me because he had nowhere else to go, no one else who could understand. And then he offered to help."

"And then he *let* you do this to him? You expect me to believe that? Can he hear me? Dustil?"

There was nothing of Dustil. Not in the expression, the stance, or the voice.

"No. Then I betrayed him." For an odd moment, Carth wondered which one of them he was trying
to punish with his words. The voice was flat. "Because I had to. Revan would have done the same."

"No. Not the Revan that I know." Carth clenched his fists. "When I tell her about this—" he tried to make the words sound menacing.

The ghost twitched his son's brows in an expression that made him realize how futile an effort it was. The ghost knew the truth.

*I can't tell her. I won't tell her.*

The reasons why were more than he could articulate, even to himself.

*My son. My wife. What if she... doesn't see it that way? What if she sees Dustil as a threat? What if she tries to kill Malak again in my son's body? Or, what if—* Carth closed his eyes, willing the rest of that thought to vanish before the Sith Lord plucked it from his mind.

The Sith *thing* pulled his son's mouth into tight line. "I think we can reach an understanding, Captain. Red will never know." The—*monster*—in Dustil's body glanced at the chronometer on his wrist. "Senate debates begin soon." The—*the fiend from hell*—gave him a ghost of a smile. "Allow me to escort you to the Observatory. There's still so much that I don't understand. What is she doing with the Mandalorians? And the Sith? Dustil told me about Arca Trinii." His lips twisted on the word 'Mandalorian,' and for a surreal moment Carth was reminded of the war, and a simpler time when all he'd had to worry about was stopping the Mandalorian threat.

_Only things are never that simple, are they, Onasi? Old enemies become allies._

He thought of Canderous and for an insane moment tried to imagine trusting Malak the same way. An insane moment. Just one.

*No.*

"No. Get out. Get out of my son's body. Now." He waved the useless blaster again, as if he had the choobs to use it.

"I explained to you why I cannot—yet." The unfamiliar voice, the too familiar voice—he'd heard it in his nightmares ever since the *Leviathan*—slipped into a mockery of a Telosian accent again. "Your son is safe. Furious, but safe. I—I will try and help him too, Captain. Perhaps he was even right, coming to me. I do understand the darkness he faces. More than you ever can. Power is not an easy thing to put aside. Dustil is strong with the Force. Very strong. And trained on Korriban. We did not train them well on Korriban. Not for peace."

*I'll find someone who can explain this to me. I'll find someone to help me rip this creature out of Dustil's head. Maybe the Jedi. Maybe one of the Jedi... or Oerin Lin, whom I trust about as much as a Rodian with spice fever. Whatever. It—it doesn't matter. I'll find someone. I'll save you, Dustil._

Dustil's face just looked at him, as if the thing could read every thought in his head.

*He probably can,* Carth thought, bleakly.

The thing shook his head. "Not every thought. There's much in your mind that I'd rather not see." It closed Dustil's eyes and took a deep breath. "Trust," the fiend from hell said, "begins with an equal playing field. There are... techniques I can teach. To shield your thoughts from Force-users. Force blindness can be an asset too, as my father well knows. I can teach you. I can teach your son. And I will." It folded Dustil's hands and bowed slightly to him, in an old gesture. One Carth hadn't seen since Dantooine. "You have my word. The word of the man I was. The word of Jedi Knight Malak
"Jedi lie!" Carth shot back.

"All the time," the thing replied. "But always for the greater good." Its mouth twisted. "But in this case… I am no Jedi. I don't give a bantha's ass about the greater good. I care about my son. Above all things. Perhaps I misspoke. I give you my word as a father, Captain. As one father to another."

"And Revan?"

The ghost laughed, short and bitter. "Is there any response I can give that you will accept? At first, once she knew herself again, it was easy to reach her. She called for me, even when she didn't realize she was doing it. But once she learned of Malachor's existence, she shut me out almost completely. I would have never bothered your son, if I could have spoken to her. I could have helped her steal Malachor away before the world knew he existed. But they will know now, and they will try and kill him." The ghost bowed Dustil's dark head and stared at the ground. "Because of us. Because of who we were and what we did."

The yellow light filtered down, glinting on the wide golden steps. The artificially blue sky of the dome was so bright that it made Carth's eyes ache. His hand holding the repeater trembled.

*Dustil. I'll find a way to get you out of this, son. I promise.*

"And now, here we are," the ghost said.

"And now here we are," Carth echoed emptily. *Dustil, I'll find a way to get you out of this. I promise.*

"I am sorry," the thing added, softly.
Chapter 25 / The Heart of a Son

"A year of Padawan training and my butler thinks she's a Jedi Council member. Anger is just another thing to be controlled, Korrie. It's another tool, nothing more and nothing less."

"Well maybe there are better tools then? Different ones?" His voice was a child's voice, clear and clipped with an upper-crust Coruscanti accent.

"Maybe," Revan heard herself whisper.

He turned at the sound of her voice and her breath caught.

His hair looked flattened down, as if its natural curl was restrained; the same way that the heavy robes and high collar restrained his body. His hands flattened against the blue force field that separated them and one of them moved in a small wave.

Heart in her throat, she answered it. Waved back. Small gesture. *Hello.*

One of his front teeth was growing in crooked. The field that separated them washed his features in a haze of blue, made him look like a ghost.

"I'll leave you now," Rulan Prolik said. "I'm sure you all have much to discuss."

Behind her she heard the hiss of the door close as the shapeshifter left. In front of her, behind her son, an old man sat at a small round table in a high-backed chair, hands folded. She heard the whir of HK's circuitry processing, although her droid was blessedly silent.

But there were only two people in the universe. The rest of them were all suddenly and completely inconsequential.

"Malachor—Korrie," Revan corrected herself, walking forward. "You like to be called Korrie."

*I have* to be called Korrie," her son answered. His wide mouth curled in a child's open smile. "But you call me Mal." He nodded at her, oddly formal. "They told me you don't remember. But it's okay, because you came back for me. Just like you promised." His grin stretched wider and the formality dropped. "I was right. You're not bad and you came back for me!"

Revan walked to the forcefield, bent down, fitted her palms against the places where his touched the blue wall between them. Knelt, so that their faces were as close as they could be. The field tingled unpleasantly; but it didn't matter. "I came back," she agreed, "for you."

You're here. You're real. You're mine.

"Touching," said a voice from somewhere else. Somewhere unimportant. "Drop the field."

The blue shimmered out and then he was in her arms. Solid weight of him. His hair smelled like soap and the robes were stiff and heavy silk. *Eridu.* His arms were around her neck and Revan fell
back, almost laughing with happiness so deep she could die from it. Her son had a few freckles on
his face and his eyes were a clear, pale gray. Lined with red lashes. Her hand stroked his face,
wanting at the softness of his skin, rumpled his hair so that it curled again. He wrinkled his nose
at her and laughed and she again laughed too.

Malachor's hand touched the collar at her neck. "Does this cut you off from the Force, Mother?"

"Yes," Revan said. Mother. I'm his mother. Even expected, the word hit her like a ton of
permacrete.

"I don't have the Force," he said. "Maybe when I'm bigger."

"Maybe." Revan echoed. She felt her face smile so wide it felt like it was going to split. "What do
you like to do?" she asked her son. "We have to do whatever it is. All of it. Anything. Anything
you want." Anything for you.

"I dunno," her son said. "Play. Read stories. I like exploring, but I'm not allowed. Maybe when I'm
older, Grandfather says. I like my friends at school?" A shadow crossed his face. "But now, I guess
I won't get to play with Leeshy anymore 'cause she's a Racharn." His head ducked. "Sometimes I
play pretend," he added.

"What do you pretend?"

She smoothed the curls she'd just rumpled back from his brow, marveling at the way the hair met
in a downward peak at the top of his head. Her own hair did the same, but it was straight, not curly.
His hair was a darker red, and his mouth was wider than hers was under her same pointed chin.
There were tears in her eyes and she brushed them away absently, hugging him close. He was real
and solid and heavy in her arms.

He bent his face close to hers so that their noses touched.

Hothan kiss, some stray thought told her, and she rubbed her nose against his, and watched his face
crease with laughter. A baby's game, maybe, that he was too old for now. His head straightened
again, and he sat up in her lap, round face turning up to hers.

"Look!" he said, rolling up his heavy sleeve to show her a fading red mark on his arm. "A burrower
drone bit me today, but Dustil saved me. Do you like Dustil?" His voice was anxious, eager to
please.

"Of course," Revan said gently. "He's Carth's son." Thank the Force he saved your life. "You've
met Carth. He told me how wonderful you were." She swallowed the lump in her throat, stroking
his hair.

"It was really cool when he saved me," her son said.

Reality began filtering back like a cold blast of vacuum. People are trying to kill my son. I just
made a deal with the devil to stop it. Malachor was heavy on her lap. Big for his age. Eight. He’s
always been big for his age. Like his...." Do you like Carth?"

"It's important that I like him," Malachor told her gravely. The words had the air of a lesson learned
by rote.

"Who told you that? Did your grandfather tell you that?"

She was aware again of HK standing silent sentinel behind them, and the man seated in front of
her; behind the small table against the wall of the room. Hawk like nose, and those same gray eyes turned to chips of durasteel. Watching her every move. Over her son's shoulder she met his gaze and stared back, willing herself to show no reaction.

"Touching." Malachi D'Reev repeated. His bushy brows drew together under his hairless skull, which was speckled with age spots like the egg of an enormous bird. His hands were folded in a triangle and he tapped two fingers together, measuring.

"You're quite like her, you know. And yet...." The Senator shook his head slowly. "Differences. Subtle but there." Tap, tap, tap, went his fingers. "Revan would never sit so carelessly on the floor, especially not wearing a formal sash."

"So, is that the stick?" she asked him.

"Pardon?"

Malachor slid off of her lap and stood up, reached for her hand. Revan stood up too and took his small fingers in hers. Pulled him closer. He was tall, she thought, for eight. His head almost came up to her shoulders. She didn't want to let go of him. Ever.

Don't be scared of your Ma, Mal. She thought at him, uselessly. She has to intimidate your grandfather now. Your mother's good at that. But it's all for show.

"The stick," Revan repeated, making her voice grow cold. Like Hoth. "There's the thisla treat and the stick. The gift and the threat." She made her eyes narrow at him, made her face a mask. "Is it that the stick? Your claim that I am not Revan?"

Malachi D'Reev snorted, which was not really the response she'd hoped for. "Thisla?" he repeated, raising an eyebrow.

His expressions were eerily familiar. Like—she shut down the part of her that thought about that and concentrated on keeping her own expression serene. “Thisla,” Revan said flatly. “It’s a fruit. Grows on trees.”

"That's a fruit from the Outlier colonies?" His lips pulled back. "Not known on Coruscant." He paused. "Or on Hoth. Or Dantooine or Arkania or anywhere else you've ever lived. On Coruscant we'd say... the open palm and the closed fist." The Senator uncurled his hands, made one open and one closed on the table. There was a spark of triumph in his eyes. "But yes, as you so quaintly put it: your difference from my real daughter-in-law is the stick."

Thisla grows wild on the Outlier colonies. We had a tree in our backyard.

**On Deralia.**

Don't show him anything. Don't give a centimeter.

"Coruscanti law," Revan replied, voice flat. "I am as Revan as Revan will ever be."

"I'm pleased you've been studying, and I admire your resourcefulness." His hands lay on the table, one open and one closed. "You may be aware that what was done to you has been done to Jedi before."

Revan thought about the scarred Twi'lek and tried not to shiver. "I'd heard about it," her voice drawled. It sounded like a stranger's voice.
The Senator's lip curled. "Have you?" His fingers tapped together absently, and he leveled a stern glance at his grandson. Revan looked down. Malachor grinned back at his grandfather completely unbowed. A small spark of pride swelled in her chest, and she felt her own mouth break into a similar smile.

"In such cases, matters of identity were never a problem. The memories used were carefully chosen from the archives of Jedi holocrons centuries dead. "Experimentation with sets of artificially constructed memories sadly proved to be unstable. That practice was abandoned over two decades ago, after a rather… spectacular failure." Tap, tap, tap went his fingers.

"Your point?"

Malachor squeezed her hand, and looked up at her again, gray eyes wide and trusting. She resisted the urge to rumple his hair again, try and lift him in her arms. He was too big for that now. Big-boned, like his— too grown-up to be carried.

"The politics of identity are curious. To find an example more relevant to your own unique set of circumstance, one must look to the Coruscanti Houses. Most of the ruling families have, at some point in their histories, used clones; passing the lines of succession from one generation to the next."

“One thousand years ago, the Phin family took this evolution a step farther: not content to just clone themselves, they also implanted memories of the previous Senator in the mind of the next. Naturally, the lives of Senator's heirs remained uncertain. And so, there were always two clones implanted at one time. A certain amount of rivalry was unavoidable; but for centuries the practice proved remarkably effective. They guarded their methods quite zealously; but like any secret, the tech they used to implant the memories was too valuable a currency to stay secret. Eventually, its coin fell into the hands of one of their rivals. Our house. D'Reev."

Malachi's hands folded into a steeple again. Tap, tap, tap. "A D'Reev heir was implanted with Phin's memories and laid claim to their House." He shrugged. "Predictable chaos ensued. And at the end, there was only one Phin heir, by age a child of ten; and the D'Reev substitute, by age a lad of twenty. Both with all the memories of House Phin."

"So?" Revan squeezed Malachor's hand again and looked down at him. He looked up at her and giggled softly, made a face where the old man couldn't see. She gave him a small smile back. My son. Mine. "The D'Reev pawn had no claim to the other House."

"So said the Phin arbiters. But identity is nebulous. Intangible. D'Reev called in expert witnesses: mystics, priests, Jedi…." "The old man made a face. "The final ruling hinged on the matter of the soul; and the fact that it was, in a sense, split between the two bodies. If there had only been one heir remaining with Phin memories; it would have had unquestioned ownership. As it was, the courts and the other Senate Houses ruled that one of the two had to be the copy of the other. And as a mere copy, it had no rights at all." The Senator blinked his hooded eyes. "There's so much changed in you, Revan, I hardly know if I need to explain this more."

Her mouth was dry. Revan swallowed, remembering Mission's words.

"Are you telling me she's real? Polla Organa's real? She's alive? This is big, sis. Really big. Major."

"I thought I did tell you."

"That she was a real personality, sure. Not that she was a living real personality. Legally, that
"You made a deal with the Genoharadan," she said coldly. *Be like Hoth. Go on the offensive. If you're losing one battle, pick another fight. "And it's a bluff." You value Malachor's life. You would not risk him. Not really.

*And that's why... you're bringing up this other stick now.*

"A bluff?" There was nothing in his expression to give her a clue one way or the other. The Senator shrugged. "I admit, my plans have changed. Originally I just wanted to destroy you. And I could. Very easily. At any time. Still." His expression was as cold as hers. "Technically, by Coruscanti law, you're a copy of a Deralian smuggler. Nothing more. You are quite fortunate that everyone who knows about this has a vested interest in keeping it quiet. Myself included."

Malachor's arms slid around her chest, his head rested in the hollow below her throat. Revan resisted the urge to pick him up again.

"Because now you need me," Revan said. Her throat was dry.

"Thanks to your antics, what we both value is at risk. You are not defenseless, Revan, and Malachor is. As my Second, our enemies— your enemies will focus on you, not Korrie." The emphasis he put on her son's name made her realize why he was called that.

**Malachor. I named my son after the Mandalorian system. I named my son after his father. What was it that Aemelie had said?**

"You're really going to have to do something about that name. How would you like it if I named this one Serroco? Or Althir? Or Dxun?"

*That dream of Malak, on the refugee ship from Eos.*

"We argued about his name for a week. I wanted to change it — you refused."

"Old man, what makes you think we have the same enemies?"

Malachi D'Reev laughed. "With your claim on my house, you inherit mine. And, of course you've made your own. Do you even know why Racharn strikes at us?"

Revan took a wild guess. "Because of what I did to them during the Sith and or Mandalorian Wars?" Fracking hell. Probably because of what I did to their family, planet, country home, favorite pet... They should get in line. Her thoughts skittered, useless.

The Senator shook his head. "Remarkable, how like and unlike the real Revan you are. You truly don't know, do you?"

She gritted her teeth. "Enlighten me."

"Economically you ruined them. They were heavily invested in Echanis space. You and my son destabilized the region, burned a few select targets—carbonite mines and peridillium manufacturing centers on the industrial planets, and claimed the entire useless stretch of space dust for your glorious Sith Empire."

Malachor scowled at his grandfather. "Stop it," he said. "Mother's not bad anymore. Don't fight with her."
The old man snorted. "I lent them funds to diversify. Monies that they are still paying back. A debt between Houses is not grounds for dispute by the laws of the Game—or no one would bother paying them; but deliberate economic sabotage of another House's interests certainly qualifies. With your claim, you've made it quite convenient for them to target us both."

"Then give them more money," Revan made herself drawl. "To back off." She squeezed Malachor's hand tightly. We're going to run away, Mal, she thought at him. Don't worry. This is all just the kath and hessi show.

"Is that a technique you learned from the Deralian's memories? Pay everyone off?" The Senator's laughter was sharp. "The Game doesn't work like that."

Her eyes narrowed. "Everyone has a price. You're rich. Find it."

His lips gave a faint smile. Revan tried to not shiver. His expression was almost — approving.

"I used to wish sometimes that you were my natural-born daughter. My son was soft, but you—in your time, you were quite remarkable."

XXX

"Give them a cause to believe in," Malak said. His hand tightened on her arm. "Religion, or an ideology. A vision of a united Republic. A utopia worth striving for where all sentients live in peace."

XXX

"Soft," she echoed.

XXX

His eyes were sunk deep in his skull, and there was something black and sticky staining the tight cortosis weave of his red and black armor. Revan felt a wave of disgust. Lightsabers were clean. But Malak had deliberately wallowed in the deaths he'd made.

XXX

Soft.

Don't think. If you're losing a fight, pick a better one.

"You tried to kill me. You brainwashed Carth Onasi. You've told the entire galaxy that I'm Darth Revan reborn."

"And in retaliation you've united the Mandalorian clans, garnered diplomatic immunity for yourself—at least temporarily—divided the Jedi Council to the point of immobility, and gotten Racharn to move openly against D'Reev." The old man's fingers went tap, tap, tap. "Not to mention the rumors from Ziost."

What fracking rumors? She bared her teeth. "You know the Sith, always spreading rumor."

"I'm impressed. For the shell of the woman you once were, you've done well. I will not interfere with your games, Revan. They can serve us both, paving the way for the future. For Malachor's future."

His smile was approving, but it didn't reach his eyes.
"You're bluffing again," she said, voice flat. "The Genoharadan gambit is a bluff. You'd never hurt Korrie. You want your enemies to destroy me, and then you'll claim... something, wriggle out of it... somehow. You're like a Hutt in a mudpit, trying to clamber out. You're not fit to raise my son."

At her side Korrie looked up at her. His eyes were very wide. There was a confused frown on his face. "Don't fight," he repeated.

The Senator coughed. "You left him with me to raise." His cultivated voice was low and very, very dangerous. "You think it's a bluff?" He touched something at his wrist and there was a metallic click. The collar around her neck fell off and the Force came rushing back like a song. A sad slow dirge. Malachor's hand tightened in hers and she felt him, the soft weight of him, emotions, love so strong that you could die from it.

You, oh you.

Mother! I'm glad you're here. He promised you'd come back for me.

She looked down at Malachor— Korrie, think of him as Korrie, damnit the old man's right, it's safer— and saw the faint white glow around him. Innocence. And—and the Force.

"You have it," she whispered. Her son looked up at her, uncomprehending.

"You feel like you again," he said, that wide mouth breaking back into a smile. One of his teeth was crooked, mostly grown in now.

We'll have to fix that. How do you fix that?

"Fix what?" he said out loud giggling.

"Your tooth," Revan answered. "I-I think mine did the same thing, when I was your age, I—"

When I was younger than you I was on Telos and—no. She felt his mind reach for hers, like his hand holding her hand and she closed her thoughts down quickly, barricading them.

Like ice. Like a wall of ice.

"Touching, the bonds between mothers and children," the old man mused. "Malak and his mother were much the same, at that age."

"What happened to her?" Revan murmured absently, staring down at her son.

You have the Force, my son. It feels like a star inside you. Like the heart of a sun.

Korrie's head shook, and his mouth tightened stubbornly. No, I don't. I'm not allowed. His thoughts were like bright fish in a clear pond, darting too quickly for her to understand them. Fear there, maybe.

She tried to smile reassuringly.

The Senator snorted. "A shell," he repeated. "Of the woman you were. Without even the memories you need to understand anything at all."

"Father's mother was Second," Korrie answered out loud. "Most Houses have lots of heirs, 'cause they clone them. But we D'Reevs don't because that makes you weak. Stagmite — stag —"

"Stagnant," the Senator said from outside of the universe that only had two people in it.
"Seconds die a lot," her son said. "Father would have died too, prob'ly; but Grandfather sent him to be a Jedi until he got bigger."

"Oh." Revan closed her eyes.

XXX

The apprentice dormitory was silent and dark, thick with the softness of childish sleep.

Silent—except someone was crying. He'd been crying for hours.

She couldn't stand it anymore. The stone floor was cold, and she tiptoed to the last cot in the row of cots, knelt down beside it and shook his shoulder.

"Why are you crying?" she whispered.

The tall boy rolled over on the narrow cot and looked at her. His eyes were dry and gray. "I'm not," he said stubbornly.

"Inside your head you are," she hissed. "Shut up. You're keeping me awake."

"Go to hell," he shot back.

Vrook always said smiling at people helped them like you. Revan tried a smile. "Tell me why you're crying," she suggested. Before she'd come here, Vrook was always trying to get her to talk. Because Uncle Vrook said talking was good. It could make you feel better.

"My mother's dead," the tall boy said.

Revan shrugged. "So's mine," she offered. She tried the smiling thing again.

Warily, the boy smiled back.

XXX

Malachor giggled. "Father looked funny with hair," he told her. His voice was anxious. "Do you miss him?"

Mal, Mallie, Malak.

I don't—I don't know him—I killed—him. Her eyes were wet. Angrily she blinked them. Bad time. Bad time for this.

"Do you think it's a bluff?" the Senator repeated. She glanced at him. He was blurry, everything was. Damnit. She wiped her eyes with the stupid priceless eridu sash, watching him frown at the carelessness of the action.

The old man's Force-blindness was like a black spot on the sun. A dead place. She could sense nothing from him.

"A bluff," she repeated, trying to collect her scattered thoughts. Make her voice flat and cold. Like Hoth. "Yes. I think it's a bluff."

"Then strike me down and see how long your son survives." Tap, tap, tap, went his fingers.

Instinctively her hand curled into a fist and she raised it, pulling on the Force. She felt his pulse rate
increase slightly, his old heart beat a little faster, but his face gave nothing away.

_Tap, tap, tap_, went his fingers.

"I could kill you with a thought," Revan said softly. She was aware of her son's expression even without watching it. His mouth open, eyes wide, a feeling that was not quite fear but close.

_Damnit._

"The odds in the Observatory are twenty to one that you'll kill me within the week," Malachi D'Reev said, pleasantly. "But they don't know about our arrangement."

"It's a bluff," she repeated. Her hand tightened, and she was pleased to see his eyes widen, almost imperceptible, feel his heart rate increase.

_Tap, tap, tap._

"Mother?" Korrie was pulling at her robe. Distracted for a moment, she looked down at him again.

_It's a bluff. But what... what if it's not?_

Her son's eyes were wide and gray.

Her hand fell, palm open, to her side.

"You _have_ changed," the old man said. His hands stopped their tapping and he raised one to his mouth and coughed. "As I suspected."

XXX

As Vrook had said, the trial was only a formality. They stood before the Selkath Court and were judged innocent of any crime.

It should have been a victory.

Afterwards, a small escort took them back to what had been their prison to collect their few possessions. Of course, no one offered them back their lightsabers, or Gharen's blasters.

"You're free to go." Vrook Lamar repeated the words again. There was a weight in his voice that Yuthura couldn't quite read. Almost—a warning

_Trap here, somehow._ But laid by whom to catch what, she had no idea. Behind him, the containment fields were gone. Their Selkath guards fiddled with something at their console, and the faint hum of the neural disruptor field shut down as well. Strange, Yuthura had gotten so used to its relentless buzzing in her ears that the absence made her almost dizzy.

"Go where?" Armon Wu was already shoving the few things he'd collected into a bag. He looked at the human Jedi with something like a challenge in his face. "The Selkath want us off this planet, the Sith want us dead for traitors, where are we supposed to go?"

"We could have helped you heal the kolto," Sheris muttered. Her metal hand scratched the unscarred side of her face and her lip twisted.

Vrook looked away from her quickly. Seeing his niece's face, even a broken copy of it, obviously still caused him some discomfort.
"The Senate has arranged for you to have a ship. One ship. You are Republic citizens, and in recognition of that, they're offering you free passage to the Republic world or worlds of your choice." Roland Wann was smooth. His face was hard, and he looked annoyed, but Yuthura didn't buy it. The offer was too vague and too easy.

*Trap here. The ship was the trap. Easy to trap people on a ship. How easy would it be to miss the boat?*


"I want to go to Coruscant," Sheris whispered. "To the Temple." She looked up at the Deralian. Her metal hand reached for her friend's. "Would you come with me, Beya?"

The Deralian gave a short, sharp laugh. "You want to go to Coruscant with Revan's face? Chuba, sometimes I think you're still touched in the head."

Sometimes the best way to deal with a minefield is to run right over it. "It's wonderful the Republic is offering to buy us a ship," Yuthura said, keeping her voice serene. "But Manaan is, last I checked, at least nominally Republic?" She folded her arms. "I'd like to stay here, and heal the kolto."

"Bakata," Vikor said softly. "We could go to Ryloth. Come with me. Please."

Strange to feel him through the Force after weeks of blindness. His emotions were as sincere as his voice, but the sincerity didn't change the facts.

*It's a trap, you fool,* she thought at him, not sure if he'd catch her words or not.

His lekku twitched back, and a faint smile crossed his pointed face. His lekku twisted his response, giving a nuance of expression that no voice could match to his words. *What trap can hold us? Come with me. Please come.*

"I want to go home," Beya admitted softly, staring at the ground. "Sheris, come with me back to Deralia."

The girl from Hoth made a face. "No."


Roland Wann snorted and shrugged. "As you wish." With one disdainful backwards glance he left the room that had been their prison. The containment fields were down now and beyond them, an open door.

*Freedom.*

Yuthura smiled faintly and raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"I wouldn't take the ship," Vrook said flatly. "If any of you want to stay on Manaan I'll do my best to keep you safe."

"Oh, that's comforting," muttered Lukash Vair. A scowl crossed his delicate Falleen features. "I'll take my chances in the stars, thanks."

"As will we," said Vikor, glancing at Yuthura. He reached for her arm, protective.
"No." She pulled away from him. "I'm staying here."

Around them, the rest of the Selkath ten murmured and whispered, packing their few possessions as they would.

"I'm staying," said Davad Arkan, voice flat.

"We'll be safe on Deralia," Beya insisted again to Sheris. She reached out a hand and touched the mask that covered half of her friend's delicate features. "We'll find a surgeon and he can fix—"

One side of the Hothan's face pulled in a sneer. "I said, no. Can I go to Coruscant, Master Vrook?" she asked the old man.

Vrook's eyes dropped to the floor. "That would be inadvisable," he said. "But there are surgeons here, and we could have the damage—and the alterations—fixed."

The green eye not covered by the mask widened. "Alterations?" Sheris shook her head. "Fix the scars," she agreed. "But nothing else. She lifted her chin, in an eerie parody of Revan's stance. "This is how she made me."

Vrook Lamar reached out a hand and brushed the red hair back from her forehead. "I remember your real face, Padawan Sheris Loran," he said, voice gentle. "Don't you want to see—?"

"Sheris Darkstar," the Hothan insisted, flicker of anger in her tone. "It's what she made me."

"Your parents are alive." Vrook said. "On Hoth. They wrote to me. Said to tell you if you wanted to come home, you would be welcome. Safe."

Of course, Yuthura thought. He's from Hoth, too. For a moment she wondered about the family that had spawned not only Revan Starfire but Master Vrook Lamar.

"Hoth's no home for your niece," Sheris spat back. "I saw the vids, they deny she was even born there."

"You and Revan are very different." Vrook Lamar answered steadily.

"We're the same." Sheris shook her head. "I thought you of all people would understand. We're the same. She made us the same."

"She's getting worse," muttered Gharen under his breath. "Pity you Jedi can't heal a cracked mind."

"I'm taking her to Deralia." Beya reached for her friend's hand, the good one, not covered by a prosthesis.

"I said, no!" Sheris snapped back. Her good hand twisted slightly, and they all felt it. Pull of dark energy like the ebb of a tide.

Beya dropped the hand and backed away. "Frack, Sheris," she sighed. "Don't."

"Don't take the ship," Vrook Lamar repeated. "If you want to get offworld, do it secretly. Separately. I will help."

"Don't take offense, Master Vrook," said the former Sith Admiral Armon Wu. "But I think I'd rather take my chances with the Fleet's offer than trust anymore Jedi lies."
"I'm going to Deralia," Beya repeated. "Sheris, I want you to come; but if you don't, I'm still going. It's home."

"I want the redemption," Sheris Darkstar said, her green eye never leaving Vrook's face. "I want the redemption. The one she got. We're the same. Why can't I have what she got?"

Vrook Lamar inhaled sharply. "You have no idea," he said, voice oddly gentle. "What it is that you're asking for."

"Did they offer it to you once, Master Vrook?" Yuthura recognized the voice that came out of her mouth. Her old teacher's voice, mocking and serene. She folded her arms, attempting to strike her pose of old authority. "Did you take it?"

His dark eyes flickered to hers, face impassive. "They offered. I did not."

She made her lips curve upwards. "And did you follow Exar to Yavin? Were you swayed by Ulic's promises of a new golden age? Were you possessed by some ancient Sith holocron like the children's holovids say, about all of the fallen Jedi?"

Behind her, someone snickered.

Vrook shook his head. "I never fell," he said steadily.

"Neither did Tott Doneeta, and look at what they did to him!" Vikor's lekku flicked and his skin flushed a deeper green.

"He asked for it," Vrook said quietly. "If any of you choose to take that path, I will support your request, with the Council. But right now, things are—unsettled. Until Revan is—"

"—is what, Master Vrook?" Beya asked, lifting an eyebrow. "Mindwiped again?"

Vrook swallowed. His loss of composure was astonishing, like fragile cracks in a sheet of transparisteel right before it all crumples to the ground.

"Restored. Until Revan is restored, it would be useless to ask for anyone else. I'm aware that you know the truth about what was done to her. You know more than anyone, save some Fleet personnel and the Jedi Council. It's not safe knowledge to have. Do you understand?"

"Oh, absolutely," Yuthura lied. Her mind puzzled over the word 'restored' but she gave nothing away.

XXX

"Why do you follow her?" Gwen had asked him, voice sleepy with content, that first night of their reunion after he'd come home to them. The three of them were sprawled in front of the brazier, sipping the sweet, dark tea that he'd made. Its rich, bitter taste was a reminder of a home Canderous had thought he'd never see again.

"She's Revan," he'd said. In the man's world, that would explain everything. But, as he'd learned long ago, women weren't that simple.

"She's Lin," he added. "We are sworn to assist them."

"Only as long as their interests serve Ordo and all Mandalorians," Aemelie purred. His hand tangled in her hair and she giggled, softly. "Can she give us what we need?"
"I don't know," Canderous said, honestly. Better to be honest than to make promises that one couldn't keep. He hesitated. "It is doubtful. I can hardly see the Republic trusting her with what's left of its Fleet after what happened the last time."

"We don't need warships." Gwen wrapped her arms lazily around his chest and brushed her lips against his ear, nibbling lightly. Canderous groaned. Gods. It had been far too long.

"Again, if it pleases you," he said, exhaling in a sharp hiss. "We can go again."

"Mmmm. " Aemelie's hand brushed the surface of his skin and he nearly jumped out of it.

"Ask her for freighters," Gwen told him. "Harmless, dilapidated, salvage. Freighters. With the resources of D'Reev and that computer of hers, a small fleet of unarmed ships shouldn't be hard to come by." She yawned, stretching impressively. Canderous reached for her, and she fell into his arms, laughing.

"Freighters," he agreed. "We can retrofit?"

"It will give the young ones something to do," Gwen said.

"Are there... resources?" he asked, searching for a harmless euphemism that wouldn't intrude on women's business.

"Small caches," Aemelie replied with astonishing directness. "Left over from the war. Scattered across several worlds. Enough."

Later, it had been easy, sitting by the fire with his son on his knee to think of this all as a glorious gamble for the future.

xxx

Now, there was an issue with security and the double Krath blades that the Jedi Masters and the Fleet brass had not been foolhardy enough to attempt to take from Headwoman Catrinex Rialis, eldest Mother of the clans on Coruscant.

Rank and file CorSec guardsmen didn't show as much sense; and, unsurprisingly, the Republic had a prohibition about weaponry on the Senate floor. Canderous wondered if Carth had been caught with the old Degalian repeater as well. Practically a toy; but in a pinch it couldn't hurt. He'd watched Revan and Carth walk off with her droid like dewbacks to slaughter and had stifled his growing feeling of unease about this entire production.

The guard not engaged in a tug of war with a woman who'd seen sixty Rialis cycles wax and wane like moons ran the scanner over his robes again, frowning. The machine clicked and gave a small beep.

"He's clean," the lad said, dubious. "They both are."

"Of course we are," Oerin Lin snapped. "And the Headwoman's swords are entirely ceremonial. Sacred," he added. His hands curved protectively around the helm he'd strapped to his thigh. Canderous wondered what armaments the pup had smuggled inside it.

He hid his snicker under a gruff cough. The guards stepped back nervously.

That's your job, Ordo. Look intimidating... but not too intimidating.
"Shouldn't the Ordo one be shackled or something?" whispered a blonde wisp of a girl who looked barely old enough to fight, dressed in lieutenant's bars.

"You want to put the restraints back on him, Cally?" her companion, a nondescript human male shot back. The whelp was barely old enough to shave.

"Ordo and I have come to an agreement," Oerin said. "Your glorious leader, the High Admiral Rensha saw fit to remove his chains. Who are you to question it?"

The blonde girl giggled. "Glorious leader? Old Scaly?"

Canderous let his mouth stretch into a harmless grin and stuck his thumbs in the thick belt of his robe, surreptitiously checking the small blade he had lodged there. It wasn't much, but it made him feel better.

The other guard, the Trandoshan wrestling with the Headwoman of Rialis finally gave up, beating a strategic retreat under hail of Mandalorian curses. The old woman's mind might be half-soup, but there was nothing wrong with her tongue. Or her imagination.

Grandmother Ordo had been much the same, before her end at Malachor.

"Any more news?" Canderous mumbled in Mandalorian, shifting closer to Oerin in a warrior's swagger. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the guards closely. None of them gave any sign of understanding; but he assumed there'd be surveillance and a translator stationed somewhere picking up their every word. Still, he trusted the pup to be discreet.

Unless of course these Republic were complete idiots. Given recent history, not a point to be discounted.

"Her collar's off," murmured Oerin Lin. His eyes—at the moment a bright and guileless blue—shifted thoughtfully around the room. "They're fencing, now I think. She's with the boy. The others are positioned appropriately."

Too much to hope that the pup meant fencing with swords. Canderous could imagine the dance of words only too easily. Revan was good at that; but whether she knew enough was another matter.

"We're supposed to keep you here until they call for you," the girl Lieutenant said, her young voice full of self-importance. She spoke slowly, as if she suspected they were deaf.

Oerin Lin beamed at her and addressed her back in the same accentless Standard. "Are you from Dantooine... Lieutenant?"

"Lee," she smiled back. "Cally Lee. And yes, yes I am." Almost reflexively, her lashes fluttered.

"Barbarian whore," the Headwoman of Rialis muttered in her local dialect, spitting on the ground. "Mandalorian men do not take outlander wives. Only bad luck comes of it."

Oerin's hand twitched, and his ears flushed a slight pink. "There's Revan, Mother Rialis," he said softly in the same patois. "She was an outlander. And my mother as well."

"That rizka-bait trollop is no Revan. And your mother's plans for us... failed," the Headwoman shot back. "In your grandfather's time, boy, our men sacked this City-Planet properly." She gave a snort of disgust. "If you'd just let me bargain properly with the D'Reev we'd have our ships by now and you could blood yourselves on this fat prize of a world until the barbarians screamed for mercy."

"Good luck with that," Oerin said quietly. He wished he could bring the Headwoman some of his latin triumvirate black humour. It did wonders for his mood.
Canderous gritted his teeth. The word Revan was still Revan, D'Reev was still D'Reev, and he didn't put it past these Republics to have someone on hand who could understand Rialis. It was basically an archaic form of Mandalorian, after all.

"My daughter Millifar," he broke in, "would look less kindly on your suit if she saw you flirting with another woman, Lin."

The entirely inappropriate words had the desired effect. Lin flushed red and ducked his head, looking less like a young prince and more like a denessan beet.

It was worth enduring the lecture on his shamelessness in mixed company from the Headwoman, just to change the subject.

Somewhere, Canderous suspected, some Mandalorian translator and xenososh would be having a field day with the transcript.

XXX

The little things hadn't changed. Same circular bar and golden servomechs. The same rows of small tables lined in a half-moon row in front of the same expanse of transparisteel; opening the view to the same Senate floor below.

So much unchanged since the last time he'd been here. And when was that?

Before. It was before. Before it all went to hell. Years.

Some faces were the same too; although different clones inhabited them. They all looked so young, as young as this body. The same calculating glances, cultivated laughter, hushed whispers as he and the Captain walked past. Without even trying he could hear the gist of their thoughts.

D'Reev's lackies—what are they doing here?

Captain Onasi hadn't killed him yet. Hadn't even tried. Malak tried to look on that as a good sign. The man's hate and fury beat on him like a wave, dulled only a little by the sporadic ysalamiri coverage. They hadn't gotten any better at shielding the complex from the Force. That was really no surprise.

And inside his mind, a dull, hopeless wail. Dustil Onasi's anger came in waves. The tide was out now. Easier, to be calm when the boy was hopeless, than when he was angry. Malak tried to project that calmness inward. Maybe it would help the child.

Or, maybe not.

Thinking about Dustil was blessed distraction from the faint emotions filtering through ysalamiri that he couldn't help but feel from his son.

Love. Love for Revan.

XXX

Instinctively, he reached for her, supporting himself on that wall of ice that was his wife's mind. The planet's surface blazed beneath. Mandalorian basilisks flew in formation, dropping like bright candies from a child's birthday surprise. The basilisks fell from the warbird their capital ships had encircled: clumsy purrgil, around a faster, sleek firaxa.
All a distraction. The Mandalorian's real ambush was just ahead of them. Their cloaked destroyers basked under a heavy cloud cover at the highest point of the moon's atmosphere. Invisible to the Republic's sensors.

But Malak could see the bright sparks of life on them, clear as tiny flames.

He tapped in the coordinates for Admiral Karath, and the Telosian gave the orders. Bursts from their main cannon on the viewscreen and the Manda cloaking nets flickered; an alarm going off on the Ascendant’s bridge, as their ship’s instruments finally registered what before only his mind had been able to see.

On the Mandalorian destroyers, those little flames went out, one-by-one. Four thousand of them—give or take. Revan’s thoughts were even and contained and cold. An ice wall between him and emotion. No feelings as they died except—

Except love. That morning she’d asked him if he was fine. Skin rosy from her sonic; hair a tangled cloud of wet fire down her back. Eyes green as jewels, and as blank and hard. Perfunctory kiss, but her mind was elsewhere. Somewhere in a vision of tactics, as she and the Admirals played Mandalorian chess with flesh and blood.

The remaining drop ships reversed, burning their fuel reserves to upend trajectories, slamming themselves into the Ascendant’s deflector shields. The madmen were trying to board them now: a futile effort, doomed and desperate. One by one, he felt their lights wink out; and he felt no feelings as they died except—

Except hate. Hate for the Mandalore, whose war had taken his wife and refashioned her into this machine.

Revan was deep in the trance now, beyond that place where he could reach her. Projecting a wall of ice between the Jedi Knights and the death they brought.

And Malak felt nothing but her.

XXX

"Were you at Dxun?" he asked the Captain.

Carth Onasi shot him another look of outrage. The man's jaw clenched. "We're not, going to have a chat about the wars, Malak."

"Don't," Malak muttered, trying to resist the urge to reinforce the objection with the Force. The Captain's mind was damaged, like cloth worn so thin that the light shone through. Any Force-compulsion over the injuries his father had inflicted would tear it to shreds. "Pretty funny, Dad," he murmured lightly, trying to slur the vowels just right. "Using that name here."

The other man's jaw worked, but he was silent. The Captain's thoughts ran endlessly in a hopeless circle. Predictable. His mind was so open, it would be easy to read. Malak didn’t want to bother.

"May I help you, Citizens?" The servomech's toneless query interrupted them both. The droid gestured a golden arm at a small table by the window on the main viewing platform. Beyond that curved the senate boxes, each one a hovering gravlift, hanging like leaves above the floor far below. Above that the dome, and the white clouds of the Coruscant sky.

The floor was empty at the moment, but in the Observatory there was a sense of hushed expectation, as the Coruscanti elite and their offspring waited for the big show.
And somewhere, her mind only saw Malachor. Only saw their son. Her happiness felt like bile on the back of his throat.

This was not going to be easy.

He sat down at the table, watching the Captain sit across from him, hand still clenched tight around the primitive weapon he had in his pocket. "Althiri firewater," Malak ordered the servomech. "Room temp." The Captain's eyes glittered dangerously, and Malak suddenly remembered their only real encounter. *That was near the end, right before.* His lips twisted, unfamiliar, clumsy, as he tried to make Dustil's face obey instructions to look harmless and unthreatening. "Two glasses. Bring the bottle."

"You're not putting that poison inside my son's body!" Carth muttered under his breath as the servomech retreated.

Malak bit off his response and stared at the window. There, almost directly across from them, between the yellow and blue of House Qel-Ria and the silver and white of Phin: the D'Reev box. He could make out the two red heads, sitting close to each other, and farther away, the old man.

Malachor's thoughts were a simple clear burst of light. *Happiness.*

The holoscreen to the right of the senators' boxes showed the Senate floor. A man wearing the Mandalore's armor, and two figures behind in the traditional robes stepped off their gravlift onto the penitent's gate. There was General Ordo—*my wife's other husband, what game are you playing at, Red*—and an old Headwoman they'd found somewhere. Rialis, probably, from the pattern of her hair.

Malak tried to keep his breath even.

"*On Mandalore,*" the old man had said, "*the men of the clans are to be feared for their prowess in battle, their skill with swords, and their absolute conviction that war is everything. But it's the women of the clan who have the real power.*"

*The old man's smile had been smug when he'd said that. When had he said it? Before, right before. Right before Red and I left with Vrook on our quest to become perfect, gentle knights.*

*The old man's smile had been smug. Years before I knew the entire truth about why. If I had never known, would things have been different? Was it our arrogance, thinking we could change the Republic that led us to destroy it? If we had never been betrayed, if Malachor had never happened—would we gone farther?*

*Would they still have found us?*

The servomech glided back, smooth and golden. Malak waved it away. His hand shook as he unstopped the bottle, poured two glasses of the clear harsh rotgot and swallowed one of them as fast as he could. His throat tightened, and Malak felt the boy's gut clench in protest as the liquid seared his throat.

The Captain glared at him. Malak looked away, and drained the other glass.

XXX

Polla wove her way through the dancers in the main room of the barn off to the feed room; where
Seiran was sitting with her father and several of the other men, gathered around the flickering light of an ancient portable holovid player that someone had set up in the corner. Jasp Organa had his grandson on his lap, and a mug of ferra grass wine in one hand. Junior was sleeping peacefully at least. *Sports,* she thought. *Even at a wake, they can’t afford to miss Adaston’s championship run against Rangon Hill.*

"Having fun?" she asked Sei acidly.

His tanned face flushed. "Polla… hon…"

Suddenly, Polla realized that all of them, all of the men gathered on crates and bales of uncured grass were staring at her. She frowned.

"Noble sentients of the galaxy, we come before you humbled, seeking your aid. As a conquered people, we are eager to embrace the ways of your Republic, to turn our basilisks into harvesters; to be accepted as a protectorate of your great Empire."

Polla glanced at the screen. "Senate stuff from Coruscant? The game is on this afternoon and you're watching galactic politics?" She wasn't really pissed that Sei had snuck away from the traditional reels and line-dances. Men did that when the game was on, it was pretty much expected.

"Polla, it's the Mandalorian thing. The thing, you know—the—"

*Mandalorian. Oh. Mandalorian meant Her.*

"Well, where is she?" Her voice fell, flat and crisp in the suddenly silenced room.

Polla stared at the particle screen. The holographic image showed a man with blonde hair wearing silvery armor—he'd been the one in the vids before. And there was Canderous Ordo from the *Ebon Hawk* looming behind him.

*Her* other husband. *He's way too old.* Polla made a face at the viewscreen.

"It's just started," Jasp Organa said, settling back with his grandson on one knee and his mug on the other. "Sit down, dear. You should probably see this."

On-screen an old woman seemed to objecting to something the blonde man had said. Her voice was thin. Over the din of the reel in the next room, Polla had to strain to hear it.

"—cannot lead us. Mandalorians are led by a blooded warrior. Oerin Lin is blooded in only two of the three ways of our clans." The speakers crackled.

"*We must appoint a regent,*" Canderous Ordo rumbled. He looked sort of awkward, Polla thought, the kind of man more at home in a firefight than on parade. "*Until the pup gets blooded.*" He cupped his hand over his eyes looking up, the Senator's boxes soared around them like a towering black wall.

"*I'll accept that,*" Oerin Lin said. He gave the camera a practiced smile. "*As long as the regent is Clan Lin.*"

The old woman frowned and looked puzzled. "*Now?*" she said in badly accented Basic.

Canderous Ordo sighed. "*It's your decision, Mother Rialis,*" he said formally. His hands seemed to twitch a little though.
The Galactic Chancellor's hovercraft came into the camera view, and the leader of the Republic began to give a long speech. The speakers crackled and his clicking Basic wasn't that easy to understand.

Polla started to tune it out. Politics had never interested her.

Where's Revan? *Shouldn't she be out here in chains or something?*

"So—" Polla broke in. "He's a prisoner too, right? Canderous? He doesn't look like one."

"Do you think he's cute, Pollie?" her cousin Garn grinned at her, well into his cups.

"This is a funeral," Seiran reminded Garn. "Show some respect."

"Frack off," Polla added, settling herself on the haybale between Seiran and her father.

Junior murmured something, waking from his baby sleep and she reached for him, setting his head against the bodice of her dress. With as much dignity as an old married lady should have, she undid the buckles and let him nurse. Seiran brushed his lips across the top of her neatly shorn head and she leaned into him, the paragon of domesticity.

The Galactic Chancellor continued speaking, long-winded and dreary. Polla was just dozing off again when they were interrupted.

"Pollie, dear?" Her aunt Pollana peered in through the doorway. "Yer Ma says there's a call for you on the comm. In the house."

"A call for me, here?" Polla asked, a little surprised.

Her aunt shrugged. "Some Twi'lek on the wideband. She says you've won a fabulous prize."

"A telemarketer?" Polla shifted Junior to the other side, standing up. "You're interrupting me at a funeral for a telemarketer?"

Her aunt grinned, missing teeth and all. "You never know, dear. She was pretty convincing. Surely, it's worth taking a chance?"

Seiran rolled his eyes.

Polla glared at him. "Okay," she said, burping Junior with one hand and refastening her shirt with the other. "I'm coming."

XXX

On the Senate floor, representatives of the race that had destroyed all of his hopes enacted their little comedy for the Senate kath hounds. The man in the Mandalore's armor took off his helm, fair-haired like most of the Lins had been. In his face Malak could only see a little of the child he remembered meeting, the boy in the Fett's tents who was always asking to play chess.

*How are you even alive, Oerin Lin? And where did Red find you?*

*Or, where did you find her?*

There was too much he didn't know.

At the end of the war there had been three events that had led to the rest. Three actions they had
chosen—or rather Revan had chosen—that doomed the Jedi Knights like granslugs caught in a salt pool.

There was the duel where she almost died. There was the decision to eliminate all of Clan Lin. And there was Malachor V. The first act had been one of desperation. The second and third carefully plotted as much as any Senatorial intrigue.

Malak closed his eyes again. He could almost hear her voice in his head. That old argument, the one she'd won. She always won.

XXX

"If we don't destroy the Clan Lin completely someone else will use them again. He could use them again, Mal. They won't learn, they won't grow a conscience and become civilized. To Mandalorians we're the barbarians. If we leave them anything at all they'll rebuild, scrap together another Fleet, or just a few drop-ships and go again. It's what they do."

"If you destroy Lin, another clan will take their place. It's like my father, Red. Kill him, there are twenty-six other noble houses standing in line to ascend to the Senate seat. Nothing will change. Nothing ever does."

"It will this time. He found a tool to make war with," she answered, voice cold. "And we'll shatter it to pieces. One last war and then peace. Forever peace." Her voice was dispassionate, but her eyes flickered with doubt and guilt. Her hand brushed the side of his face. He'd caught a piece of shrapnel groundsie on Wies, and the cut wasn't healing. Not like it should. She hesitated. "You know, Mal, what have to do?"

Malak nodded. He was so tired, and he had to tell her the things she already knew. "We're not doing so well, Red. The other Knights, some of them—"

"Just more casualties," she said, voice empty. She hesitated. "It's still power, Mal. It's something we can use." Her eyes pleaded with him, almost as if she wanted him to deny it, tell her that she was wrong.

"Your computer told you that?" He'd read the same Sith archives that she had. Long ago, when they were children and curious; and more recently with deadly intent. He'd seen the same things that she had. But that thing on Kashyyyk only spoke to her.

She looked away, voice quiet and small. Her hand dropped from his cheek. "It doesn't have to tell me. I can feel it."

"We all can," he muttered. But she was right.

"Take out Lin, first," Malak said. "The other clans will fall in line and go to the treaty." He took a deep breath, again saying out loud what both of them already knew. "There are those—among the Fleet and Order who won't accept it."

Revan nodded. Her face was completely empty. "We'll have to make sure that they're on the right ships. Transmissions are spotty here, ever since we took out the communication nets. It will take some time for the news to reach the Core."

Malak nodded and gave her a twisted smile. "My father told me information is everything. if we let it be known that part of the Fleet is off chasing the remnants of the Mandalorian threat it will buy us time."
"Time for what?" Her smile twisted. "You still think we’re coming back."

"Dustil?" A girl's voice broke into his reminiscences sharp as a frag grenade. Malak blinked.

Across the table Captain Onasi was still scowling. The holoscreen circus continued, far below them on the Senate floor.

"Who will act as regent for Clan Lin?" Galactic Chancellor Nal'Gahar asked formally. "Do you have a member of your family that the other Mandalorian clans will accept?"

The blonde Mandalorian smiled and shook his head. "I am the last of my people," he declared.

Canderous Ordo coughed. "No, there is another." The words sounded rehearsed.

"Yes, there is another," the old woman agreed. "If the other clans are in accord, she will act as regent."

Is that your cue, Red? Your chance to stand up and take over the Mandalorians and my father's Senate seat in one fell swoop?

You fool.

"Dustil?" The girl had black hair and her features were vaguely familiar. She was dressed all in white. Scattered, he tried to place a name to her house. Makeon, maybe, they ran multiple lines of clones and alternated their succession from one generation to the next. Wearing no colors meant she was either outside of the lines of succession or too important to bother with needless formalities. He was too distracted to care about which.

What are you going to do with your Mandalorians, my love, after they've danced for the crowd? Do you think they'll just go away?

There was a muttered rush of sound over the dulcet conversations of the Observatory coming from the holocam speakers. The spectators below them gasped in astonishment and there was her face on the screen. Malak felt the Captain tense and he turned away, so he didn't have to look at her, look at him.

All he could feel from Mal was the same bright love. And her emotions: determined, focused, expectant. Malak shied away from seeing more.

When her dreams had been open to him, seeing the pilot's face in them was bad enough.

"Are you drunk?" the black-haired girl giggled.

Malak resisted the urge to push her out of the way. There is no passion, there is serenity. "What is she doing with the Mandalorians?" he demanded of Onasi.

"My name is Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi," her voice came over the holoscreen. "And I am recognized as a leader by the traditional Mandalorian custom. I was adopted by Clan Lin. I am entitled to serve as regent."

"D'Reev Lin?" the Chancellor echoed. Chambers was full of the hiss of whispers, as those who had not known, reacted.

"Shut up, Dustil," Carth muttered. He turned to the girl, who was still standing there, faint flush of
pink on her cheeks. "This isn't really a good time, Citizen—"

"Aramis. I'm a friend of your son."

Sharp peal of girlish laughter behind them, Malak half-twisted in his seat to see. The Racharn girl—Leeshansintina—and a few other Amaltines were avidly watching Aramis' progress.

"Aramis Makeon," Malak said, making an educated guess. Phin were fair, generally, and Qel-Ria almost never came to the Observatory, at least in his day. Malachor had a little friend in Makeon too, he remembered. When he’d been an Eglatine the Makeon heir his age had been male. Dario. And he'd been an ass. "You're Arry's sib, yes?"

"It's cool that Korrie's okay," the girl admitted.

Another potential ally for my son. He tried to smile at her but the holoscreen's words distracted him.

"...matter must be taken to Galactic vote. The sovereignty of the Mandalorian people has been accepted; but your choice of regents is unusual."

"D'Reev will back the claim. I have formally recognized Revan Starfire D'Reev as my Second, based on her marriage to my late son...."

The pandemonium increased at the old man's words.

"Wow," Aramis said, sliding into the empty seat at the table next to him. "It's all really out in the open now. Did you know, Dustil? Did you know, like everything?"

"You owe me ten credits," one of the other Am's yelled to her. "Didn't I call it?"

"Double it," the Makeon girl laughed back. "I say she'll kill the old man before next week."

"Where will your House side?" Malak asked her, trying to sound casual.

Obviously he failed. Her eyes narrowed.

Behind her, his son's face on the holoscreen. Malachor smiled tentatively for the galaxy that wanted to rip him to shreds.

Helpless. Innocent. Control.... Malak could feel the Onasi boy’s rage within him; as if his own helped fuel it. Curious.

"That's none of your business," Aramis said. "Just because you saved Korrie's life, Dustil; don't think you can understand the game."

The Galactic Chancellor's voice cut in and the camera hastily cut back to his face. His beak chattered, agitated.

"I'm a quick study," Malak said. He turned his head deliberately away from her, angling his chair so that his back faced her. There were several greater insults in Coruscanti high society; but most of them required being a registered member of a House. He heard her hiss of indignation and sharp quick steps as she walked away fast.

"You have such a way with people," Captain Onasi snarled. From the level of the Althiri firewater bottle, he’d had a few. "Maybe you should carpet bomb her favorite store now? Or send in some of your minions to hunt her down when she's at school?"
"This matter must be voted on in accordance with sovereign Mandalorian traditions," the Galactic Chancellor was saying. "Before the regency can be accepted." The head of the Republic looked almost relieved as he continued. "That means, all Mandalorian clans must be in accord." His tentacles shrugged. "Only Ordo and Lin and Rialis are here out of the five."

"This is part of her plan too, isn't it?" Malak hissed back. "You, of all people, should know better! You fought against them. Saul told me that your loyalty was absolute!"

The man's face darkened at the mention of his former mentor.

Malak gathered he had made a severe error in judgment right before the Captain's fist connected with the side of his face. Hard.

Dustil's body was still unfamiliar, and lighter than he expected, and Malak failed to compensate in time. The blow sent him flying off the chair and awkwardly onto the floor. The table they'd been sitting at landed half on top of him. The crystal decanter shattered, splashing firewater everywhere.

"Clan Wies has renounced the other clans, they have no more say in our governance since their false Mandalore was overthrown," broke in an amused female voice. "But here is the headwoman of Zal. I'm afraid she doesn't speak your tongue, but trust me, she agrees with the decision."

On the floor Malak struggled to regain his concentration. If you Force choke Red's true love, she'll never get over it. His thoughts were black and almost hysterical.

"Seven credits on Onasi younger," a dry Coruscanti voice crisped behind him.

"Ten on the Captain."

"We were in a café on Palisadia and one of the Pads there said Dustil was a Jedi. My money's on him," giggled a girl's voice. Leeshansintina.

Control....

Malak got to his feet slowly, rubbing his jaw. It ached. Pain, like an old memory.

On the holoscreen the camera had panned to the public viewstation, where a large contingent of plainly-dressed humans clustered, like a pack of starving drajak, closing in for the kill. Mandalorians, every one. Their spokesperson was a blonde-haired woman, hair looped in the traditional braids they wore for the women's battles.

That is to say for trade. And what a trade they've made this time. Does Red have any idea? Is it worse if she’s ignorant? Or is she doing this on purpose?

"You have to stop this, we have to stop this," Malak said to the Captain, who was staring at him, face bloodless with shock.

The man's guilt at hurting his son mixed with his hatred of Saul—and Malak himself—so hard that it was like a drum on his senses.

"I trust Canderous Ordo a hell of a lot more than I trust you," the pilot muttered. "He saved our asses more times than I can count. You, on the other hand—"

"Don't," Malak murmured, aware again of the avid eyes watching them. "Don't."

On the screen the Mandalorian she-spawn's head was bent, and a dark-haired boy, just into
manhood, was whispering in her ear.

The face had an adult's angles now, and a wisp of a beard at his chin; but it was still familiar.

"That's Mekel Jin." Malak said. "Does she have him working with the Mandalorians now, too?"

For a moment, the Captain looked genuinely surprised. "You know Mekel?" Then his face dropped back into a scowl.

"He was my ward." Malak stared at the boy's face on the viewscreen. The son I never wanted Malachor to be. The innocent monster. He reminded me of Revan. No sith'ae'rah—but his hands were bloody, and his heart was good. Trusting. Malleable. He trusted me, and I threw him into that snakepit of an Academy, the one we fashioned. "I won't have him consorting with Mandalorian scum."

The pilot laughed. "This is rich. You, of all people—when we were on Korriban you know what Mekel was doing?"

"I was sent reports," Malak said.

I just want my son to be safe. There is no safety for him with the Mandalorians. No safety for the galaxy with the Mandalorians. I thought we'd destroyed them. Red, you fool.

"Don't you see? She's playing right into my—into D'Reev's hands!"

"She's not killing anyone and she's getting her son back," the Captain said. "And it's none of your damn business!" He moved closer, lowering his voice. The spectators that had formed around them stepped back a little, giving them room, presumably for the next round of blows.

"Malachi used them before." Desperate, Malak continued, moving closer, lowering his voice as well. He pulled on the Force lightly, carefully. Nothing to see here, move along; pausing as he felt most of the crowd begin to lose interest. Mostly. "Didn't you know? Didn't Saul tell you? At the end of the war—"

"At the end of the Mandalorian War I was back on Telos," the Captain hissed under his breath. "With my wife and son. It was the last time. The last happy time."

Below them on the Senate floor, a round of deliberations and arguments continued, all staged, probably, to lead to the point where Malachi would seize power over both Revan and the Mandalorian clans.

"Are there any objections?"

"Corulag objects."

Token gesture. Probably someone paid off by my father.

"Didn't Saul tell you?" Malak repeated. They were standing very close now, near the window. His eyes scanned for listeners even as he lowered his voice more, making the pilot strain to hear it.

"Tell me what?"

Malak glanced warily around them. With the prospect of no more violence incoming, and his own subtle dissuasion their spectators' attention had shifted mainly back to the floorshow.

"The Mandalorian Wars," he whispered in the pilot's ear. "The Mandalorians dared to attack the
Republic because they had one thing the Fleet did not. Cloaking fields large enough to hide entire ships. Tech developed in a Kuati lab, licensed to SysTech Corp. Tech sold to them. By my father."

"The Republic didn't have cloaking technology until you Sith started attacking our planets," the pilot spat back.

"Right," Malak said, terse. "The Republic wasn't given that technology. The Mandalorians were. Do you understand?"

"Assent. Corulag withdraws its objection."

"Widek objects."

"What—are you trying to say?" the pilot's voice cracked.

Malak moved closer to the window and the pilot followed. They stood, side by side, watching the gravlifts below them, as each Senator came forward one-by-one, detaching from the wall, to the center of the room, to cast their vote, yay or nay, in favor of the D'Reev and Mandalorian issue.

He closed his eyes. "The Mandalorians are a weapon. You know what they're capable of. Revan and I sacrificed everything we were to destroy that weapon. To end the war."

"You trust Canderous Ordo? General Ordo? Then ask him. Ask him to tell you how it was. Ask him what they're going to do now, now that they've got D'Reev influence and credits at their back."

"They're dying, in the Malachor system. The fifth planet lost orbit somehow, became unstable…"

Unstable? Unstable? Gods, he doesn't even know that? How can he not know? Did Red not tell him?

"They deserve it," Malak said, softly. "The fifth planet was a holy place, sacred to Mandalorian culture. No foot was allowed to touch the its blasted ground. Long ago, they fought a great war there. Tradition demanded after that their unblooded boys were sent to fight battles of wind, high in the atmosphere, pit themselves against each other and the elements. But never fall. Never touch the ground." He closed his eyes.

XXX

"This is how a war ends," his wife said, voice empty. "Not with a bang, not with a blaze of glory —"

"Their fleets are in position around the diplomatic convoy, Admiral Starfire," the nervous ensign interrupted. The title of Admiral was new, and would be short-lived. In another month, she would be called simply, 'my Lord.'

"Open a channel to the New Hope," Malak told the ensign. Onscreen, the young Jedi they'd placed there looked up at them, obedient. To the last.

"Meetra," Revan said. "Now."

The young face turned and nodded to someone out of camera range.

The hologram dissolved into a million dots of light and—

"Malachor V," he said out loud. Just a whisper. "It should have finished them forever. It
was supposed to be the end of this."

Captain Onasi shook his head. "That was a rumor," he muttered. "To hide the fact that you'd run off beyond the Rim with a third of the Fleet—"

"No," Malak chuckled. The poor fool didn’t even know that. “Not a third. We left with only ten capitol ships, maybe five squads of fighters. One carrier. The rest were destroyed. With all hands aboard. A gravity well imploded at Malachor V in the middle of the armistice. On Revan's orders."

"No," Onasi repeated. "The Mandalorians broke the treaty. They destroyed the diplomatic convoy. There was a battle—"

"Ask your friends in the Fleet. Ask Dodonna. Rensha. Antilles. Sand. They were with us. They knew. We did not act alone—we—all of us—we just wanted it to stop."

"High Admiral Forn Dodonna is dead," Onasi snapped. "She died a hero's death battling your forces at the Star Forge."

Strange to feel something, hearing of Forn's death. Surprise, maybe sadness. *Most of what I know about the last year comes from an eight-year old's mind. I didn't know she died. She was a friend. She was a mentor to us both. She took us in when the Jedi cast us out.*

Maybe guilt. Maybe.

What had she thought of him at the end? Was it vanity that made him wonder? Shame?

"Assent. Widek withdraws its objection."

"Assent. Corellia sides with D'Reev."

"Assent. Byss sides with D'Reev."

"Object. Archon objects."

"Guilt is an effective catalyst," Malak said. "Half of our remaining forces defected when they realized where we—what we had become. After that, many died hero's deaths trying to stop us."

The pilot wasn't stupid. "You're saying there was a—a coup? Part of the Fleet—planned this?"

"We were all sick of war," Malak said quietly. "The war was part of the game. A cause to unite the Republic. We weren't supposed to win, we couldn't win. Unless we swept the board clean and made a new one."

*A new one with our new allies. With their new power—unlimited power. Power such as a man like you has never even dreamed of.*

His voice faltered. "We sacrificed everything we had to stop the Mandalorian threat and you're letting D'Reev have them back."

"There can't be more than a few thousand Mandalorians left—you don't understand. And what you did after was—"

"Worse? Don't you think I know that? Force—I was there, Captain. We gave the orders. We built the Fleet. I harnessed the power of the Star Forge and it consumed me. "
"Assent. Archon withdraws its objection."

"Object. Dathomir objects."

Onasi’s eyes narrowed. “Are you done?”

“For now.”

For the first time, Malak saw a Carth Onasi who had been a Republic war hero. Who had led men into battle. Taken risks. Survived against incredible odds. Faced down the Dark Lord of the Sith on the deck of the Star Forge and won.

"My son," the Captain said quietly. "I want Dustil back. I want his life back. I want you out of it. Out of his life, out of hers, and out of mine."

"I want nothing more," Malak lied.

Across from them, she stood: Malachor half-hidden in a fold of her robe, her arms folded neatly in a Jedi pose. Below her, the Senators deliberated her fate. In the light that filtered down from the dome she looked like a statue carved in ice. He closed his eyes so as not to see.

*I want nothing more than you, Revan. You and our son. But I gave that up long ago.*

"Objection withdrawn. Dathomir votes with D'Reev."

"Assent, House Phin sides with D'Reev of Coruscant."

He met the man’s eyes, trying to give him the truth—a palatable version. A noble one. "Get them out of here. Without her or Malachor the Mandalorians will have no real power. Without her or Malachor, D'Reev’s line ends and the other Houses will destroy my father utterly. In this game, he's overextended. They know how he used the Mandalorians before. And the Sith. Get Revan and Malachor out of here and I will leave your son."


"Get them out of here to some world where they've never heard of any of you and I will," Malak whispered. "Beyond the Rim, or some backwater, somewhere Malachor can grow up to just be a man. And Red can—" He shook his head, wondering even as he tried to imagine Revan on a sub-tech planet, planting crops, digging ditches, doing whatever the ground-locked did.

The pilot's hand dug into his arm. "You're not leaving my sight," he hissed, "until Dustil's back where he belongs." His face twisted. "And Canderous is worth ten of you. All he wants is his family—"

"His family? Ordo's family? All he wants his family to be reunited? All he wants is his clan's boys to be blooded? To regain the honor they lost? You have to know what that means!"

So easy to hate. That had always been the problem. Malak envied the Mandalorians for a moment. They never bothered with hate. The Mandalorian language had twenty ways to say barbarian outlander and none to say hate—not in the true sense of the word.

"Listen to me, he'll ask for ships. Not war ships. No, they're marginally too subtle for that. But clever. Very clever with their tech. Something that seems useless. Freighters, old carriers, cargo ships to get their people off their dying system in search of new colonies." His voice dropped, bitterly. "Preferably inhabited ones, with some kind of sentient indigenous life that will prove a
glorious challenge. They won't attack the Republic again. Not in your lifetime—not without a lot of help from my father; but somewhere right now, a star system, a quadrant of space, sleeps in peace never dreaming of the death that will fall from its sky."

He watched Captain Onasi's face flicker with an expression of near-comprehension. "Revan would never let that happen," he began, uncertainly.

"I have no idea what she'd do," Malak said. "But she must know, she was there the same as I was."

"She doesn't remember!"

"She remembers something. She must. She's—"

"— not," hissed the Captain. "She's not your wife."

"I don't know what she is," Malak admitted. He closed his eyes. "Make my son safe, Captain. Do this and you'll never see me again. Any of you."

*I think.*

The truth was, he didn't know. What he'd done, he'd only read about. The power of the ancient Sith to transcend death. What happened after wasn't in any scroll that Malak had ever found.

"What did you do to Bastila?"

The abrupt change of subject rattled Malak. He saw Onasi's mouth twitch, almost pleased.

"I made her my apprentice," he said flatly. "It doesn't matter now."

XXX

"How hard this must have been for you." Malak came closer, never leaving those two round wide eyes. In the flickering torchlight they looked black, but they were blue, he remembered. Such an honest blue.

*She didn't struggle, bound on the stone slab. Her small chin lifted, stubbornly.*

"What do your thoughts tell you, Padawan Bastila?"

"I'm a Jedi Knight, now. Knight Bastila Shan."

"The Jedi made you a Knight, when they entrusted you with their most precious possession?" He came closer. "I can see your mind. Difficult, living with all of her pain and none of the advantages."

"There's enough of her in me to know one truth, Malak. She'll destroy you. Utterly."

"Is there enough of her to know another? A part of you that remembers?"

"You tried to kill me," Bastila whispered. Something inside of her opened, like a dark flower. *Her teeth bared, defiant.* "And you failed, Malak."

"I wanted to live, Red." His gloved hand touched her clenched fist. "I had become a liability to you, but I still wanted to live. That's all any sentient wants, in the end, isn't it? The old cycle. Suns rise and fall. Do you think the Jedi will let you live, after what you've done? Do you think they can afford to let you live?" Malak shook his head. "They won't call it death, of course. Just the
redemption. Like what they've done to your body. A new personality. A carefully constructed shell." He paused. "It's your destiny, with them. Both of you." He bent his head to her hand, pressed the prosthesis against it. She flinched. "I can offer you something far greater."

"My name is Bastila Shan, and I am a Jedi Knight." Her breath was ragged. "All I have is her memories, so that I can guide her. But I am still Bastila Shan and I am a Jedi—"

He called the lightning and her words dissolved into screams.

XXX

"Alderaan objects."

There. If he'd blinked he would have missed it. Behind Revan and Mal, where the old man stood like a bird of prey surveying his domain—a tilt of his head, perhaps a frown. From this distance it was too far to tell.

The Chancellor responded with traditional words, and then Malachi D'Reev spoke again, voice even and calm and assured. The voice of reason. All sorts of assurances. Mutual benefit. Trade opportunities. Historical statutes.

"Alderaan objects," the Senator to Alderaan repeated.

There was a rush of voices over the speakers from the tiers of representatives beneath them, like the rustle of leaves in the wind. Across from them Revan's head tilted down to her son's, her arm pulled him closer, protective.

"Name your grounds," said Malachi D'Reev.

XXX

Polla came into the kitchen. Every available surface was lined with cooling thisla pies and ground nerfburger tarts. Bolts puttered around the wreckage, joints squealing indignantly with overwork, from the oven to the moisturator. Her mother sprawled on one of the kitchen stools, frowning at the hazy image on the commlink.

"—good marks in xenososh and fifth-dimensional math, but my Polla never was one for books."

"Ma?" Polla began.

"Citizen Wen?" The light-skinned Twi'lek on the commlink gave her a breathtaking smile. She was lavender, maybe. Or pink. It was hard to tell in the fuzzy image. "My apologies for bothering you in the middle of a time of sadness and loss, but it really was quite important that I reach you before the contest deadline runs out. You see, you may have won some fabulous prizes!"

"Hm," Polla answered, shoving a tart into her mouth. It was too hot, and her tongue burned. She cuddled Junior in her arms, grimacing. "Yeah, so I heard. So. What's the catch?"

"Have you heard of the galactic Sabine-Ooxley standard personality test?"

"No," Polla mumbled through a mouthful of spiced nerf. "You want me to take it? What's in it for me?"

"Really fabulous prizes!" the Twi'lek repeated. Her wide eyes blinked over her small pointed smile. Her button nose wrinkled, charmingly and her head tails quivered with excitement. Polla stifled a
"This is a family tragedy," she said. "Why are you calling me here at my Ma's?"

"She said she couldn't reach you at home, dear." Molla Organa interjected, ever so helpfully.

"Cute baby," the Twi'lek added. "What's his name?"

Molla groaned. "Don't get her started. She has this outlandish idea—"

"Ma!" Polla shot her mother a warning glance. She never should have told her that stupid story. Anyways, it was none of this stranger's fracking business.

"It's for my husband to decide that," Polla replied, serene. "So, what's this test? You never did say what I'd won."

The Twi'lek giggled. "An Ophini Mach XXI, a Ferel Corporation Holographic Representation of the Galaxy with resolution up to thirty parsecs per kilobyte, and... a collector's edition of the cast of the Ebon Hawk crew, complete with the discontinued Revan Redeemed model, suitable for children of all ages." A faint frown furrowed her immaculate brow. "I'm not sure though, your son looks pretty small. I don't know that much about human babies. Is he going to get bigger fast?"

"They grow up so fast," Molla Organa nodded. "Jasp and I always regretted only having the one, you know. Well, Pollie dear, don't you already have the collector's edition of the Ebon—"

"Shut up, Ma," Polla muttered through gritted teeth.

An Ophini Mach scooter? Fracking hell, you could buy something that would go intergalactic for that price. Thing does everything but jump to hyperspace and make kaffa. Seiran would kill for it.

"What's this test?" Polla demanded.

"It's a personality thing. Calibrated for your career, species and general background. I need to ask you a few questions, that's all."

Molla leaned back against the counter, nearly upsetting a tray of thisla pie. Bolts moved in hastily to recover the offending object.

"Ask away—no, wait a minute. How did you get my name?"

"You're Polla Wen, registered smuggler? Used to work the Corellian Spire? Native of Deralia, right?" The Twi'lek giggled and covered her mouth with a delicate hand. "It's a marketing survey. You know, random selection."

"Totally random," she added. "Now, do you want to get these fabulous free prizes or not? The offer expires today. That's why I decided to call here, when I couldn't reach you at your home address."

"Well it's gotta be better than that damn Senate thing," Polla muttered.

"Senate thing?" the Twi'lek chirped.

"Just some fracking vote on Mandalorians or something," Polla shrugged. "I don't know why I was watching, really."

"You should stay away from politics," the Twi'lek agreed. "Now, let's get to the questions." She folded her hands neatly in front of her and lowered her voice. It looked like she was trying to sound
official. Despite the annoyance, and the almost certain feeling Polla had that this was some kind of scam—pyramid scheme or cult, maybe—she'd seen them all before; Polla sort of liked her.

"What's your name?" she interrupted, the babble of official-sounding legal terminology that the Twi'lek was reciting.

"Who me?" the Twi'lek squeaked. "It's—Lena. Lena Wee."

"That's a nice name, dear," Molla interjected.

"Ma, don't you have some guests to see to?" Polla glared at her, cradling Junior. His dark eyes were open, watching her face, and he cooed, blowing a bubble of baby spit. She cooed back and his baby face split into a toothless grin.

"You like kids, huh?" Lena observed.

"Motherhood's great. You should try it," Polla responded automatically. "I mean, when you're older." Lena didn't really look old enough to have a job, even. Then again, Twi'leks tended to grow up kind of fast.

"Yeah well...." Lena's expression didn't quite match the tone of her voice. Her smile grew brighter. "On to the questions. We need to hurry!"

"I've got some other stuff to do," she added.

"I'll be in the barn, hon." Her mother left the kitchen, trailed by faithful Bolts.

Without further preamble the questions began.

"Okay, you are traveling with a companion when you encounter complications. Hypothetical: you and your companion are captured and separated. If you both remain silent, one year in prison for each of you. However, call Therion a traitor and he will serve five years while you will serve—"

"Therion? Why'd you pick that name?" She'd been suspicious already. But this was really kind of weird.

"I got it from your arrest record on Corellia. You know, if you don't mind me saying so, Polla, he seemed like a bad influence. Treacherous kinda bad news core-slimy guy. I have a brother like that. Serious bad news—but so anyways, what do you do?"

"The same thing I did, do," Polla snapped back, slightly rattled. "I accuse that asshole, just to be safe, and then bribe the guards and get the hell out of the sector."

"You wouldn't trust him to stay silent or anything? Interesting."

"I wouldn't trust anyone to stay silent in a case like that. Would you?"

"Well, this isn't really about me. Remember, you must answer truthfully, knowing the consequences. I must demand honest acceptance of the proper behavior."

Polla sat down and the table, rocking Junior in her arms. "Get on with it then."

"Hypothetical: you are at war. With a rival smuggling operation, I mean. Deciphering an intercepted code, you learn two things about your enemy. A single spot in their defense will be at its weakest in ten days, and they will attack one of your trade convoys in five days. What do you do with this information? What is the most efficient course of action?"
"Their defense? You mean one of their bases?"

"Yeah, sure—one of their bases. Their main base of—smuggling operations. Do you cancel your convoy and keep the goods?"

"What are they carrying?"

"What?" The Twi'lek's voice squeaked again. On the screen, her mouth kept smiling, as bright as ever.

"What do I stand to lose, if I sacrifice the convoy? If I stop the run, I'll tip them off. Is it worth it?"

"They're carrying... whatever they usually carry. Spice? Remember, you must answer truthfully."

"I do nothing. I alert the local authorities in ten days to my rival's location. They go in, clean them out, problem solved."

"That's... interesting." The smile never faltered.


More questions followed all along the same lines. It was really pretty simple. Very similar to the test she'd taken years ago to get her smuggler's license in the first place.

"Of course, I wouldn't trust my boss. I mean, the way things work; one minute you've got one boss—and the next minute someone else has taken over the whole operation. If you don't look out for yourself, you'll get trampled in the stampede, you know?"

"That's the last question on the test," Lena nodded. Her head tails were wrapped around her neck now, but her face still wore that bright tractor beam smile. "One more question, though. Just... because, okay? We're running out of time."

"Shoot," Polla said.

"An... old friend offers you unlimited wealth and power. Another friend tries to stop you from taking it. The only way to you can... gain the position is to kill the second friend. What do you do?"

"What the frack kind of question is that?" Indignant, Polla got to her feet. "Why the frack would I want unlimited wealth and power?"

"You don't? What if you could solve the galaxy's problems?"

"I'm a bloody smuggler—or I was. I want to see new things, meet interesting people, and fly a fast ship. Maybe be famous." Polla considered. "Like, a little famous. That's it, that's all."

"Oh, of course." The Twi'lek nodded sympathetically. Her head tails tapped. "Congratulations! You've won. Your fabulous prizes will be shipped from our nearest supply depot on Yavin Station as soon as—"

"Yavin?" Something about this whole thing had been off from the start. "Did you say Yavin? Do you work for Suvam?" Something occurred to her. "What the frack is this? Is Suvam... did he put you up to this?"

Is he on to me? Shit. I didn’t even take advantage of that infinite credit line!
"Suvam Tan? Do you know him?"

"None of your fracking business. Are you working for him?"

"I didn't know that you knew—" the Twi'lek's voice trailed off and there was a long pause. It was strange the way she kept smiling, though, as if her image was frozen. Glitch in the transmit, maybe. "You must have done work for him, right?"

"Maybe." That kind of thing wasn't something you just admitted to, ever.

"Well, that explains a lot, but it's really inconsequential at the moment. Listen. There's one condition on these fabulous prizes."

"Of course there is." *Here comes the stick. Here comes the scam.*

"Sabine-Ooxley is a common personality test. You've matched the parameters set in memory—sort of. But, if someone asks you in the future to take this test again, you have to answer these questions differently. Do you understand? Totally differently. You have to lie."

"Why would anyone—" her voice broke off. Polla hugged Junior closer. *Test my personality? Test my personality against what? Against who?*

Insane as it was, she could only think of one reason. "Who the frack are you? Let me talk to Suvam! I can explain! I didn't mean to imply that—that I was her, I was only trying to get my fracking credits!"

"Poll!"

Seiran's voice sounded frantic. Polla turned around. Her husband and father stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Behind them, the murmur of voices, excited ones.

Jasp Organa crossed the room in three long strides and took her arm. "Honey, we've got problems."

On-screen the Twi'lek snorted. "You've got problems? Bantha poodoo."


Open-mouthed, Polla just stared at Sei and her father. "I think Suvam's onto me," she whispered. "It was so bloody stupid, but I called him, and he thought I was—"

Her father shook his head, interrupting. "Bigger than some Exchange boss, Pollie. My fracking brother and his loyalty to that bloody Republic! He's just hung you out to dry."

Various Organa relatives were peering in through the door, whispering.

"Out." Jasp Organa said to them. Seiran took her hand, led her out of the other kitchen entrance and down the hall to her old bedroom. Her parents followed behind, silently. Their expressions were bleak.

"Just fracking tell me!" Polla erupted, as soon as the door was closed. She sat down on the bed. The three of them loomed over her, looking utterly grim.

Jasp Organa closed his eyes. "I can only think of one way to get you out of this mess, hon. And you're not going to like it." Angrily he hit the wall. They all jumped. "Bloody Republic! They should leave both of you alone!"
"Tell me!" In her arms Junior started to wail.

Seiran shook his head sadly. "Oh, Pollie…"

XXX

"Alderaan objects," the Senator from Alderaan repeated.

"On what grounds?" Malachi D'Reev said from behind her.

Revan pulled Malachor closer. The other objections had been a formality. "Just part of the dance," the Senator had explained. "They'll object, and we'll offer concessions. Then they'll fall in line. They always do." He'd been smug. But for some reason, the Senator from Alderaan was playing this out. They didn't need the vote, they had enough to win already. But something… something nagged at her. A feeling of unease. Like impending doom.

*Just keep your head up, and keep him close. It'll be okay.*

Dimly she could feel Oerin and Mekel through the Force, waiting for the next move. Mission had managed to stack the absentee vote—something that might not hold up under an audit, but hopefully they'd be long gone before that happened. At least, that had been the original plan. Now...

*Now how can I leave? If I stay, I get my son. If I leave and something happens to the Senator, my son will be running for the rest of his life. Now, Malachi holds all the cards.*

Her eyes looked up from the hovering line of Senators casting their votes below them and met the wall of reflective glass that hid the Observatory. Somewhere in that room were Carth and Dustil.

*Will you understand, Carth, if I stay? Will you stay with me?*

Revan tried to picture herself as the D'Reev Second. Living in Malachi D'Reev's house. Constantly avoiding assassination attempts. Keeping Malachor safe.

*After all that I've done, maybe this is what I deserve? I could—maybe I could do good there. Maybe... I should try.*

*And D'Reev? Will I really just let him live? After everything he's done?*

"Permission to speak frankly," the Ambassador to Alderaan said.

"Granted," said Galactic Chancellor C'tek Nal'Gahar.

"I find it disturbing that the Senate is willing to hand Malachi D'Reev Revan Starfire and a Mandalorian army without a whimper. The loss of her Force powers could be a ruse. I believe it is. How else could she have manipulated events to put herself in this position? Whatever she is, she is too dangerous."

"Threat assessment is still to be determined," the Chancellor replied. "But rest assured, we have the matter well in hand. This is a matter of Coruscanti law. She is Revan Starfire D'Reev. And by our laws, she is only assuming the responsibilities that come with the position of D'Reev Second."

The Ambassador to Alderaan smiled. His white-painted face gilded with gold looked amused. "If that were true, of course," he began, "the basis for my objection would be without weight. But is it not."
Behind her the Senator was too good at his game to show any reaction, but Revan felt him stiffen.

"State your grounds, Senator," the old man broke in. "If you have some basis for your accusation, let’s hear it. The wife of my late son has been genetically scanned and proven to be Revan Starfire, the mother of this child. The representatives of seventy-nine worlds have already voted in favor of her succession. If you have some opposing opinion, tell us why."

The Senator to Alderaan turned to the man standing behind him. Another white-painted human face, gilded gold and red in accordance with their formal customs.

"I would like to introduce my secretary, Boon Organa. Secretary Boon has lived on Alderaan for many years, although originally he came from the Outlier colony of Deralia. He has brought a very disturbing story to my attention. In good conscience, I cannot let it go unheard."

"Oh, well played," Malachi murmured. He reached a hand out to the console controls of their box, dimming the overhead speakers. Revan turned and looked at him, the sinking feeling in her gut traveling all the way down to her toes.

"Do you know this Boon Organa?" the old man asked her. "Tell me now." He snorted. "Alderaan is an idealist. He’ll see the Republic splinter into pieces all for the sake of his vision of truth and justice." He grimaced. "Idealists are the worst. I wonder what rational mind is behind this play."

"Does D'Reev have any official response?" the Chancellor was asking formally.

Malachi thumbed the speakers back on. "A moment, to confer with my daughter-in-law, please. If the Senate will allow."

"Certainly."

He switched the speakers back off. The dead noise enveloped them again, made Revan's word tinny and sharp.

"Polla Organa's uncle," Revan whispered. "I—I think. The name… she had—has—an uncle with that name. Who lived on Alderaan. Her father's brother."

I was ten when we went to Alderaan. Uncle Boon gave me cimarran sweets and a painted doll dressed like an Alderaanian actor. He smoked cigarras with Da and went to his warehouse and he said I could come work for him when I grew up, but I told him I'd rather be a pilot than a trader and he said sometimes it was the same thing. And we saw a real killick hive, and rode thrantas—and all the bread tasted like suc; and Sara broke my doll later, but we too old for them, and I didn’t really care.

She didn't recognize his face, but it was hard to tell under that layer of paint. He'd had more hair, she thought. It had been a long time ago. Shiit, a part of her cursed.

"It's one thing to keep a pawn in place, in reserve. Quite another when someone steals it from your board. I took steps to eliminate the risk from Manaan. Perhaps I should have eliminated Polla Organa as well." Malachi sighed.

"Mother?" Korrie had been very quiet. He'd been instructed to be very quiet. Now a wrinkle of a frown appeared between those two red brows.

Revan’s mind caught on the words eliminate and Manaan and puzzled over them.

"It's going to be fine, Korrie," she said automatically, trying to smile at him.
"Pity," the Senator continued. "You would have been useful as my Second, Revan. Understand that no matter how this plays out, my arrangement with the Genoharadan has not changed. One way or the other, D'Reev will survive only with me."

He didn't wait for her response. Malachi D'Reev opened the speakers again, and his voiced boomed over them. "Let's hear your little tale in full, Secretary Organa."

"I have a niece named Polla Organa," the man began. "She lives on Deralia. Two and a half years ago...."

XXX

Malak

"Tell me, Captain, that this is part of your mad plan too."

"It's not," Carth Onasi whispered. His jaw clenched. Behind them, the Coruscantis murmured. "But I don't see why it matters. She's still Revan to them. She still has every right—"

"— far as we've been able to figure, the Fleet and the Jedi Council must have been in on the whole thing. When Pollie was on the Ascendant, my brother told me that they met her nurse. Name was Bastila Shan. And the commander of the vessel was a Republic General named Jiya Sand. At the time, Jasptold me, he was pretty impressed the way the whole ship's crew seemed so concerned for Pollie's well-being."

So arrogant, they used their real names. Fools. And they call me a madman.

"No. If this is true, she has no rights. She's not even a person." Malak leaned his forehead against the glass. "Not by Coruscanti law." His voice hardened. "Is it true, Captain? Do you know?"

"It's true," Carth whispered. "I talked to her cousin. The real Polla's cousin. I—I wanted to know if she was real. S-someone sent me a letter saying that she was real and I—her cousin's on Manaan. They wanted my help, getting her cousin out of jail."

There were former Sith on Manaan, Malak remembered. Malachor hadn't paid much attention to the news broadcasts, but he'd gathered enough to know they were being held at Malachi's whim. Held in reserve. It was one of the things he'd had the boy warn the pilot about. Was that why? He'd never bothered to learn their names.

"Her name was Beya Organa. She was with Yuthura and some others. She laughed at me, she told me she knew Revan better than she ever knew Polla—"

"Beya."

XXX

"There's a rumor that the two of you are plotting something," the Deralian looked up at them from her stack of datapads. "It's the Mandalorians, isn't it? You're going to do something?"

"Do you care?" Revan raised an eyebrow. "Thought you were going to go back to your home planet, abandon the Order. Turn your back on the Republic."

"I care about sentients dying when we have the means to stop it," the Deralian said. "Just like you do." Her heart-shaped face split into a mischievous grin. "But you know that, already, don't you? That's why you're here?"
"Aside from Mal, you're my best friend, Beya. That's why we're here."

"I heard you got married, on Mandalore. You crazy kids. Vrook must be completely white-haired by now." Beya laughed.

"There's bigger things to worry about than that," Malak said, voice serious. "We need your help."

"Deralians make lousy Jedi, anyways. Count me in. Just don't tell my father I'm fighting for the Republic. It's the kind of thing that'd get me beaten up in a back alley, on Derra."

XXX

"I knew Beya," Malak muttered.

Later, it was easy to twist her feelings of betrayal into hatred against Revan. Later, she followed me without question.

"This isn't part of my father's plan, either," he added. "I imagine he would eliminate Beya if he knew she existed, but keep Polla alive as leverage over Revan."

The Alderaanian Secretary continued. "They stole my niece's memories and implanted them into the Dark Lord of the Sith's mind. You can imagine how Polla feels about it now! What kind of government kidnaps sentients and takes their memories? Technically, Deralia isn't even a full member of the Republic! What kind of Jedi Council would condone stealing someone's memories?"

Beneath the D'Reev box, the Chancellor clicked. "These are serious charges against the Jedi and Fleet. But if they are true, then this woman is a non-person. She is only copy of a Deralian smuggler. In the case of D'Reev-Phin versus Phin, the ruling found in favor of the older version. Since this Polla Organa is still alive—" His tentacles twitched. "She is still alive, correct?"

"She'd better be," Boon Organa said, folding his arms.

"Then she has claim to the identity. This woman before us does not exist; and yet, she has committed several grievous offenses against the Republic. There is the matter of the kolto's destruction on Manaan. The battle for the Star Forge—"

"Damnit! She saved you all!" Carth snapped. His fist hit the glass uselessly. Behind them, nervous laughter.

"I may not exist, but I can still talk." Revan interrupted. Her chin lifted, stubborn, face set with an expression that made Malak's heart ache. "Malachor is my son. I want my son. I want him safe."

"When was he born, this son of yours?" The Alderaanian Senator looked smug, as if he didn't expect her to know.

Revan's eyes flickered. "Harvest season, third month of Tribrach, Seventhday—which would be day two hundred nineteen, Coruscanti standard. His birthday is in three days' time. He was born on Malachor IV. Malak D'Reev, my husband, and my uncle were in attendance. My Uncle, Vrook Lamar will testify to this, I am sure. He's on Manaan right now." Her lips curled in a slight smile, as if she'd won something.

"She remembers," Malak said softly.

"No," Onasi snapped. "Oerin just told her the date. I think. He was there, right?"
"How did he tell her?"

"How do you think?" The Captain turned to look at him. "With your damn Force."

Nothing to see here, watch the floorshow. Their audience's curiosity was growing again. He could feel it like lasers on the back of his neck.

"Mandalorians don't have—"

"That one does. And I don't trust him either, but right now he's still looking a hell of a lot better than you."

So Red not only struck a bargain with the Mandalorians, she found the last heir of Lin who is a Force-user to lead them back to their former glory?

"Force," Malak whispered.

"Without me to protect him, my son's life is in danger." Revan's hands curled protectively around Malachor's shoulders.

"We must consider," said a silken voice from the House Racharn box, "whether it is safe to let the son of two former Dark Lords live. Some might consider it a civic duty, to stop such power from ever rising again."

"He's eight," Revan shot back. "Almost nine. He's a child. Do whatever you want to me, but leave him the hell out of it!" She knelt down, pulling him closer, whispering urgently in his ear. Her former composure was entirely gone, and Malak could feel his son's fear and confusion—and through that—like an echo—her own.

"He doesn't have the Force," Malachi interjected from behind her. "He cannot repeat his parent's mistakes."

Damned if he does and damned if he does not. If he does, the Jedi can take him into custody and he's safe from the Games. But not safe from the random fanatics that will hate him for what we did. Not safe from the Jedi teachings that will lead to a fall like ours.

"Test him for it," Revan said. Her chin lifted again, and she straightened to her feet. "It's the right of any child of Coruscant, isn't it? To be taken to the Temple and tested?"

"He has been tested," Malachi said. "He's as Force-blind as I am."

"No," she shook her head. "The Jedi know he's not."

"Captain Onasi. Citizen Dustil Onasi. Pardon, but I have orders." Dull click of something metal behind them. Slowly, Malak turned around. The red circle of a laser rifle glinted on Carth Onasi's face, mirroring the one he could feel warm against his own. In front of them an entire battalion of Fleet troops had somehow materialized.

Ambush. Two veterans of the wars ambushed in Senator's Coruscanti bar....

A dark chuckle started to emerge from his mouth and he closed it tightly before more laughter could escape.

The nervous Captain who had spoken fell back, and Jiya Sand stepped forward. The Seroccan looked much older than he had the last time Malak had seen him and his mouth was set in a
resolute line. "It seems that we need to talk again, Carth," he said mildly. "Will you come quietly?"

"You owe me the answer to a question first, Jiya." The Captain's voice was deadly.

"Of course." The General nodded. "I didn't know about the Pearl. Not at first. Rensha kept Rew and I in the dark about that. We wouldn't have stood by and let something—let that happen—especially to you."

"No, Malachor. Malachor V. It really happened, didn't it? You and Dodonna and Saul and—"

The General was still too much of an old warrior to react. His eyes blinked. "It was supposed to be a bloodless coup. Then, just a few ships. When she finally ordered the bulk of the Fleet—no one realized. By the time the scale of it became… measurable, it was too late to stop."

"There's no such thing as a bloodless coup," Malak muttered. "You were a fool, Jiya, to think otherwise."

"You have to excuse my son," Captain Onasi said. His mouth twitched. "He's a little upset."

Jiya sighed. "That's understandable."

Behind them, a new voice spoke over the speakers. Serene and very familiar.

"This is not a matter that can be decided in one day's deliberation. But the Padawan is correct. Malachor D'Reev should be retested for Force sensitivity. And the Padawan is—our responsibility. The Council takes full accountability for them both until such a time as—"

"I object." His father's voice. "Does the Jedi Council now interfere in the internal affairs of a Coruscanti House?"

"Both of their cases involve the Force, Senator. And that falls outside of your domain." The female voice was dry and amused.

Master Jopheena, you haven't changed. Malak resisted the urge to turn around. It would, he reflected, probably get him shot.

He began to relax, slowly. The Jedi are no haven, but they're better than the alternative for now. Then Revan's next words stopped him cold.

"They claim that I am not Revan because I don't have her memories, Master Jopheena. But those memories exist, don't they? If I asked for them, would you give them back?"

"There would be consequences, Padawan."

"Right. My consequences. You damn me for what I can't remember. Don't I deserve to know what it is?"

"We will not have you face them blind. You should know, before you make a decision—"

"My name was Polla Organa. I woke up on Taris with a head injury. There—there was a man there, Carth Onasi. " Malak didn't recognize the hesitation in her voice, the strange vulnerability. "He told me we had to rescue Bastila Shan before she fell into Sith hands. He—he was —"

Next to him, the pilot turned around and placed his hands against the glass. The soldiers seemed frozen.
Malak turned around too.

Her arms were wrapped around their son, and her voice was shaking. "We saved Bastila, she told me I had a glorious destiny that I could not ignore. She told me I had the Force. The Jedi on Dantooine told me that we had to find the Star Maps. They said I couldn't avoid my destiny. They said Darth Malak would kill me, kill Bastila, destroy the Republic and we were the only ones who could—who could save—"

"No, Polla," the Captain whispered. "Don't do this."

"Come with us, Padawan. You and the child both." Master Zhar reached out a hand from the Jedi's gravlifit, which now hovered in front of the D'Reev box.

"This isn't over," Malachi said.

"No," the Twi'lek responded. "I fear it's just begun."

Revan took her son's hand and led him onto the Jedi's platform. They both sat down on bench sandwiched between Jopheena—and—Kavar, it looked like.

Don't do this, Red. You don't want to know. It drove us all mad. You don't want to know. And yet, if she did know—would she be his wife again? Would they face the threat they had sacrificed so much to face—together?

Her head twisted sharply, as if she'd heard him. Malak felt her mind reaching out through the Force, and he sank back into Dustil's body like a stone.

Below on the penitent's ledge, Oerin Lin coughed. The sound rang out in the room and everyone stopped.

"Silence," the Mandalorian said. "You're all forgetting one thing."

"Revan's a member of Clan Ordo," added the woman from the public viewing station. "She's married to my husband, Canderous. You barbarians may not recognize her identity, but we do. By our laws, she has Mandalorian citizenship."

"I'm quite willing to back the Mandalorian claim, regardless of my daughter-in-law's status," Malachi said.

"You don't have to go with them, Revan." Canderous Ordo said.

"I know that." The camera, which had been panning frantically back and forth between them, finally settled on her face. "But I have no choice." Her eyes blinked, cold as jewels. "Take what you can from D'Reev," she said. "To help your people."

"We'll take what he promised," Oerin Lin said, smiling.

"Bloody hell," Malak whispered.

"I agree," Jiya Sand said. Malak turned around. Captain Onasi grabbed his arm in a surprisingly firm grip.

"Whatever it is, Jiya, it will have to wait. My son and I have to go now. To the Jedi Temple."

"I don't want to arrest you, Carth—"
"You can't," the Captain said. "Not without causing an interplanetary incident." He gritted his teeth. "I'm a Mandalorian citizen, now, remember?" He glanced at Malak. "I suppose you are too, son. How do you feel about that? Do you find it upsetting? Nothing like being forced into a corner with your old enemies, is there?"

"Don't let her do this," Malak muttered.

The soldiers looked uncertain. Behind them, the Coruscanti elite were placing bets on something.

Malak didn't want to know what.

XXX

They'd seen the news coverage - the entire spectacle and the upset. Watched as Revvie won—and then promptly lost—her claim to D'Reev. Funny, you think you know everything, and then you discover there's more that you didn't. Beya had considered the D'Reev knights friends once, close friends; but even she had never known about the child. The marriage was obvious; the fact that they had been lovers had never been much of a secret, even back when they were all Padawans. That kind of thing was pretty common. And later, during the war, no one cared.

When you're facing death every day, you find love where you can. There was an irony here, so thick she could taste it, but it had nothing to do her plans for the future.

Of course, half of those plans were still on Manaan with that sycophant Vrook and Yuthura Ban.

"You look like you need a drink," Vikor said, handing her the bottle. Beya Organa stretched her legs out in the co-pilot's chair and stared blankly at the hyperspace coils that made up their viewscreen. The five others that had chosen to come on the ship were all asleep or lost in their own meditations in the cramped crew quarters that made up the rest of the ship.

"More than one," she finally muttered, letting the liquid burn down her throat.

"It's not your fault," the Twi'lek said. For a moment Beya wondered what he was referring to: the Sith War; Revan's fall; that scene on Coruscant (after all, Boon Organa was a cousin, although a distant one); the last six weeks of their imprisonment... and then she realized.

"She—there's a lot more to Sheris than that. She wasn't always like that."

"Oh, I remember her well enough," Vikor said, mouth twisting. "Dangling on Malak's arm like a little gilded beetle. And of course, more recently Oerin's." He gave her a frank stare. "Have you ever thought that maybe she just goes where she thinks the power is? You deserve better."

"Sheris has been through a lot."

"You were better off when all you did was duel. When you cut off her arm you should have done her a real favor and finished the job."

Beya winced at the memory. She quickly changed the subject, trading a barb for a barb. "Have you wondered why Davad stayed behind? That man was always a sucker for a lady in distress."

"She would rip him to shreds."

In truth she had wondered about Davad. The Onderonite was quiet—she had never been sure of where his thoughts ran. If he'd reminded Beya of anyone, it would have been Malak... and of course, after the fall... that comparison had been too obvious.
"Or maybe—he and Sheris. They deserve each other," Beya said, a little bitterly. "They can trade stories about who was better in bed, Malak or Revan."

"Davad Arkan wasn't sleeping with Revan," Vikor interjected, raising his brow ridge. He gave a short laugh at her incredulous expression. "Oh please, I thought you knew that! She just let it be thought he was to keep old Mallie in line. " He snorted. "It worked rather well, to a point. I don't know where Arkan got his jollies, actually." His lekku twitched in an attempt at levity and his mouth curled up, revealing his small white pointed teeth. "Maybe he was like you, Beya."

"Frack yourself, Vik."

"I suppose I'll have to, now." The Twi'lek reached for the bottle and she handed it to him. She twisted a smile. "Hey, whatever gets you through."

"You're welcome on Ryloth, you know. All of you — anyone that wants to stay. My family is quite wealthy, and they'll be pleased to have their prodigal son back. Twi'leks are too practical to let a little thing like a Sith past stand in their way for long."

He gave a short laugh. It wasn't the first time he'd made the offer, and Beya knew him well enough to know that there'd be no strings.

Something struck her through—for the first time.

"You—you want us to stay, don't you?"

His round eyes looked pensive. "I don't think any of us wants to be left alone with our thoughts, Beya. I—I'd like to be close to people who... understand."

A long-buried memory surfaced, unwanted and terrifying. The aftermath of Malachor V. She'd screamed her throat raw. Beya could still remember the durasteel floor of the *Progress*, and the world twisting upside down as she screamed and died a million times with each life that winked out in the planet's destruction; the dim awareness that every other Force-user on the ship with her was experiencing the same thing....

*And the house of ferragrass she'd constructed to keep herself sane blew apart. Blew all to pieces. And her screams turned to laughter and the feeling of power was—*

*Good, it was good. Necessary, it was necessary. And she'd been grateful, so grateful; like a window in her soul had been opened, a bird set free.*

*And the Dark Lord had come; and it seemed right, suddenly, to think of Revvie that way. She'd come to their ship herself, masked and hooded, and Beya was only one in a long line of new Sith royalty, kneeling obeisance before their true leader and her consort.*

Her eyes met Vikor's, and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

"Before that, we were the angels, Beya. Remember that instead."

The ship's engines hummed sharply, dull hyperdrive whine being replaced with something else. Beya put the bottle down and scanned the controls, disbelieving. "We're coming out of the jump early. This can't be right!"

Vikor's lekku twitched. "These coordinates are way off. According to the navicomputer we're in the middle of the Cron cluster."
"The Cron—?" Their eyes met, and the ship bucked under them.

Terrible realization, just enough time to realize what that meant.

_Vrook warned us_, Beya thought. _Shit._ She took a deep breath and reached for Vikor's hand.

Their unnamed ship came out of hyperspace and melted into a blaze of light. Straight into the heart of a sun.
Mandalorians in the Temple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mandalorians in the Temple

Chapter 26 / Mandalorians in the Temple

XXX

*Blade Three of Twelve, Acknahar'tah Division, Elite*

When you live in the shadows, you spend a lot of time in places normal people don't go. Normal people… now, that was a laugh. When was the last time he'd met any normal people? Met as in, lived with, loved, talked to? Not for years. Ever since the end it had just been this.

Normals were either targets, or obstacles in the way of targets. There were worse lives–it must really suck to be a kid growing up on the Xoxon plains, gasping for air, with mutated chromosomes signing your ticket out by twenty-five. Worse to be a limbless vet, like that one begging on the corner there–missing an eye too–the poor sod.

Worse to be those brown-robes over there, talking to the medic. Death can come in many ways, and there are worse things than death.

He was one of them.

In a place like Beggar's Alley, you try and blend. The district was an oozing sore of wants, and he let his own merge with the crowd's; shifting his thoughts into a higher tempo, an endless drone. The growl in his stomach, dry tickle in the back of his throat, that constant craving for a cigarra, a cup of juma, a jolt of stim… and of course, desire. That beige robe over there wasn't bad, only a little young. Skin like choca cake, and soft brown hair cropped close to her head. Neat and efficient, like her tidy curves under a Padawan's tan robe. She was serving meal bars to the paupers. Old army surplus, from the look of them—that green foil wrapper was unmistakable when it'd been your main ration for months aboard troop ships. Drops into the desert, the jungle, the sea—twenty different tours of duty groundside in the Mandalorian days—and every one, that same green foil.

He could almost taste the chalky dryness on his tongue. His mouth filled with saliva. *Need... And he drew closer, watching her.*

Her eyes were amazing in that brown-skinned face. Skin like caff, teeth like cream, and those eyes—a bright bluish green like the oceans of home. Yu-Phaedra, warm mists and soft nights. Sweet incense rising from the priest's braziers as the trawling ships came home to roost, floating on the air above the sea like great, helium birds come back to the nest. Dockside, and always a party. One, two, three steps, and he was in line behind a someone doing the Coruscanti twitch—an old dance, an old sore, just a little one, on her cheek but it would grow, and rot and her skin would slough off if she lived that long….

Of course, she wouldn't. Live.

The living dead beggarwoman shuffled off and he was next, the vial of nothing already soft and tense in his fingers. Epidermal contact was the way to go. Vectors, ground zero. Baby, this was it.
"Hello," the Padawan-girl said to him softly. Her eyes were amazing. Maybe it wouldn't kill her, Jedi were hard to kill slow. Maybe she'd survive the plague and the riots, and he'd come and rescue her, build a castle out of stars, take her far away from the cars and the bars and oh my darling, oh my darling, you are lost and gone forever and I'm dreadful sorry… just like the song went.

Those eyes were a net to drown sea-beasts in. Pools of soft water, and the patter of his thoughts stilled to a normal pace for a pause and he nodded his head and reached for the bar of food she offered. The vial went pop in his other hand, sticky with the slight oil and he mock-stumbled, caught the arm she offered, and smeared the grease lightly across her skin. Her wrist was soft and fragile in his fingers, but strong. Combat-trained for peace, like all of them.

*Vector-borne, the plagues. And where are the little epicenters?*

*Everywhere the Jedi come, with their balms, their useless comforts for the hopeless flotsam of a thousand worlds.*

Her blue-green eyes looked up at him startled, like an otterlisk caught in the beams.

"You--" she whispered, "I dreamed of you."

"Must have me confused with some other spacer, kid," he smiled, turning it into a leer to earn her disgust. Behind him, Twelve and Nine were finished for the day. No bloodwork now, that would come later. Now back to Arca's lair, palace of whores, and Miss Jin with her clinking clanking chains that she called dresses.

Padawan-girl rubbed her infected hand absently on her robe. Point of contact left a rash sometimes.

He turned to leave.

"No—" she called out to his retreating back. "Wait!"

He didn't wait. The Jedi were out of time.

"Who was that, Thalia?" one of the other Jedi asked her.

Three didn't stick around long enough to hear her response.

XXX

The small shuttle banked against the side of the warship. Like all Mandalorian women, Aemelie had studied starship design and construction—how else could one pick the best of the crops to harvest from the galaxy's bounty? Durian ships were sleek like this, and the native Kuati line had the same capacity—perhaps even slightly more raw firepower, she thought, eyeing the wrecked row of turbolasers that surrounded the portside bay. There was an Outer Rim system called Systosahh behind Republic space, where they were rumored to construct ships as fast as the Rakatan fleet. But nothing she had ever studied could compare to the tech that had created this beauty.

As their shuttle turned in for landing, the bridge swam into view. Or rather, what was left of it. Crushed durasteel cables trailed out of the melted hull, exposing the interior to space. Dull gray glimmer of a forcefield. It looked like the navigation and main weapons consoles were completely gone. Of course, a ship this well-designed would have slave terminals elsewhere. Perhaps they could be re-routed….

Aemelie's son burbled, and she slung him around from her back and into her arms, twisting the curls of his dark hair.
"You're impressed," the Kuati mouse barbarian said. "I didn't realize Nabooans knew ships, Lady Aemelie."

He seemed to be pressing her for a surname again. Aemelie flashed him a smile instead, as a distraction. "Who wouldn't be impressed?" she asked. "It's the *Aleema*, first ship of your Sith's Infinite Fleet. Pity about the damages… does that field hold off vacuum indefinitely?"

"Well enough," the Sullustan replied. His large ears twitched. Aemelie considered that perhaps it was in poor taste to refer to the Sith as 'your Sith' in the Republic's deep Core. "You're late for the tour, but I don't mind showing you around." He nodded to their escort, a small cadre of local security personnel and shrugged at them. "For a small fee, of course."

"You can wait here," he added to the others. "This won't take long."

The security squad's leader rolled his eyes. "Always on the take, eh, Meark? Fine. Damn Sith thing gives me the heebers anyhow."

Aemelie granted them all a comforting smile. "That would be acceptable." She nodded at the Sullustan enthusiastically. "Who could imagine a small Jedi task force could cause so much damage?"

The small mousey-man coughed. "The blast to the bridge was done by Malak's flagship," he corrected her.

Aemelie nodded. "The *Leviathan*, of course. How silly of me." She adjusted her son's sling so that his tiny hand could curl in hers. "Is that here too?"

The *Leviathan*, she'd been told, was a masterpiece of retrofit technology: Rakatan engineering overlaid on a Republic-built shell. In truth, for her purposes, there would be more to learn from that than the beautiful wreck of the *Aleema*. Of course, no one seemed to know if the *Leviathan* had survived the Star Forge's destruction. The Republic was quite reticent about all things concerning the size of its current armada, and its capabilities. She supposed she couldn't blame them.

Victory didn't mean much if it left you gutted and bleeding for the first scavenger drajak to wander by. In such circumstances you'd do what you could to hide the spoor.

"I thought you were interested in cargo ships," the Sullustan reminded her, as they made their way down the gangplank and into the *Aleema's* vast main hangar. Room for a thousand drop vessels here. Her breath caught with the image even as the practical side of her mind dismissed the thought. This vessel was entirely too big for their current resources.

"Perhaps by the time you've grown, little warrior," Aemelie whispered to her son in the Ordo patois. "You can be blooded on a ship like this."

The womp rat-man looked at her oddly.

"I *am* interested in transport vessels," she dissembled quickly in Basic. Really, this subterfuge wasn't difficult at all. She had no idea why Gwenarius had been so concerned. The children and the elder women of the clans had gone planetside. The Kuati wetlands, it was said, had all manner of fascinating carnivorous life. Perhaps some of the boys would come out of it with their first blood. One could but hope.

Technically, Aemelie wasn't supposed to be involved in this stage of negotiation with barbarian outlanders; but with the eldest of Rialis and Zal stuck back on Coruscant playing nursemaid to the D'Reev betrayer–she was the most logical choice. It didn't hurt that Aemelie Zal Ordo didn't look
typically Mandalorian. Her bloodfather had been a slave from the Teeta system originally, before he won his swords. Her mother had chosen well. He was quite clever, that one. And with a trace of Force-talent, the crones had claimed. Of course, that hadn't bred true… it never did, but it was still considered to be a lucky thing.

At least it never had bred true before Oerin Lin. Wryly, Aemelie wondered if Lin's mother had cheated and seeded the whelp from someone other than Fett Cassus. As soon as the idea popped into her head, she dismissed it. No, that would be impossible: the boy's looks were stamped Lin just as much as his ambition and skill with a blade. Perhaps she should have paid more attention in genetics; but the biological side of their destiny had never interested her half as much as interstellar engineering.

"Cargo ships should be fast and true," she told the Sullustan, running her hand along the sides of the bay. The near-dead ship hummed softly; its main reactor would be somewhere in the center, she imagined, well-shielded and secure. "Built like this to last a thousand years."

Mouseman's whiskers twitched as if she'd said something odd. "It's still running on its own generators?" Aemelie added, examining the fit of a power coupling where it ran into the wall. The thing seemed almost to quiver underneath her hands. "Fascinating."

She wished she had Mekel Jin with her, but the Lin slave-Jedi had objected when she'd suggested he come offworld when they evacuated the Embassy. And Canderous had insisted he stay on Coruscant as well. It was a shame. Mekel's pet computer would be useful in a place like this, to tap into the schematics. The Aleema itself was not for sale of course, but a few diagrams would give her a great deal of information.

"Have your scientists been able to discover more about the Rakatan technology?" Aemelie asked, making her voice appropriately casual and curious.

"I wouldn't know," the womp rat replied, a little too carefully, she thought. "I'm just a tech."

She smiled back at him. "I have an interest in technical design too," she assured him. "And I've never seen such a fascinating example. It's no surprise that Sith Forces decimated the Republic. It must have been glorious."

The Sullustan gave her another odd look. His black eyes rolled in his pointed head, exposing the whites. Amelie beamed at him, reassuring.

They reached the bridge and her breath caught again. Banks upon banks of controls: navigation, telemetry, weapons, life support… and some of the panels still flickered with life. The central platform was raised above the floor and ended in a fused and shattered mess, beyond which flickered the thin gray forcefield and then the blackness of space. You could tell a great deal about a ship's potential from seeing the damage it had inflicted. Any cannon that could have cut through this triple-reinforced hull must have been a formidable weapon. More so, because of course it had been fitted onto a Republic design.

Aemelie walked closer to inspect the damage more closely.

"This is where Darth Revan met her doom," the Sullustan announced. (Rather inaccurately, Aemelie thought, all things considered.)

A lesser ship with this much structural damage would have shattered on the impact; but the Aleema's hull showed no sign of fracture beyond the point where it had been sheared away. The blast must have been precisely placed. She couldn't help but admire the telemetry that would
have allowed for such precision.

"This was done with a modified ion turbolaser?" she murmured, voice polite.

"Sonic," the Sullustan replied, twitching an ear. "Projectile. Designed to implode on impact, minimizing the blast radius."

There is, of course, no sound in vacuum; but with a missile designed to penetrate a ship's outer hull and then explode, sonics would be devastating. The clans had experimented with such things; but dismissed the line of research when it was found to be too costly for their resources. Ion tech was simple and relatively infinite—as long as your power supplies were not compromised. Aemelie felt a stab of envy for the resources of the Infinite Fleet. Really, it was no wonder that Revan had wanted to take the Star Forge back—all the babbling she'd heard about a 'fall' and other such nonsense paled behind the simple practicality of such a glorious war machine.

Still, Aemelie supposed, perhaps there would be a lack of challenge in having infinite resources. In any case, that was all hypothetical. The clans were limited now, and one had to make do with what one could salvage.

That was one of the first lessons drummed into any Mandalorian daughter. Make do with what you can salvage or barter or find. Make it serve.

She decided to cut to the frontal assault. "Where is the **Leviathan** now?" she asked. "You must have studied its weapon systems to know so much about how this was done."

"The wreckage from the Star Forge battle was all towed to the Sluis Van shipyards on the Rim. I've only seen the schematics. SysTech bought the salvage rights for the price of a small star system, if the reports are true." Mouseman's large black eyes narrowed. "You're not from Naboo."

Aemelie shifted her son's sling around slightly, letting her hand drop to the concealed dagger in the folds of her robe. "Of course I am," she replied, raising her eyebrows in a protestation of innocence. Those rodent eyes just blinked.

"My *real* employer told me to expect your arrival," he said. "And to give you this." He reached into the pocket of his jumpsuit. Aemelie shifted her weight into an aggressive stance, waiting to get the first strike. The range was too close for him to use a blaster, she thought, not without harming himself. She shifted her son's sling to the back, shielding his body with her own.

But the object Mouseman withdrew was a small black datapad.

Aemelie's lips curled into a smile, and she took it from him one-handed, still keeping an eye out for any surprise.

"The datapad contains schematics of the **Aleema** and the **Leviathan**. Datamaps of the Rakatan weaponry—as well as the Fleet's best research into their stardrives. *Our* employer says that you should consider this a gift. Republic R&D has been able to make great strides… but *our* employer thinks that what we need to crack this tech is some good old-fashioned **Mandalorian** insight."

"Hm," Aemelie replied, voice non-committal. "This is a great gift." She hazarded a guess. "*Your* employer still owes us at least this much for the gift we gave him."

"Some think it was a mutual favor," the tech replied. "I was also told to remind you, you are in his employ. Your leader... has commanded it, has she not?"
Aemelie began to wonder if she had strayed out of her depth. Gwenarius, or Catrinex in her prime surely would have been able to come up with a clever response. Her own specialty was simply starship engineering.

"Let's talk about the freighters," she extemporized. "I assume that our original request is also included in this bargain?"

"But of course."

"Our own centers of manufacture haven't been operational since the war. We will require the ships to be stocked with raw materials. Has your… employer arranged for a drop point, where our… crews can take possession?"

"Peragus Station, on the Outer Rim. Your new… fleet of freighters have already been registered on the Coruscanti exchange as owned by a limited liability corporation, nominally connected to a branch of the Czerka Corporation. The name is Starfire Shipping & Explorations. There are ten ships, seven of them are Class-C freighters, made right here in the Kuati shipyards before the war, and the other three are modified Durian AQ-R transports, Republic salvage. Is this acceptable?"

Pleased to be given something she could understand, Aemelie began running through statistics in her head: FTL travel times, coordinates, ship specifications and design. With what they had left, it was more than acceptable. With what they had left, it would serve quite well indeed.

She stared out at the blackness of space, seen through the rent in the Aleema's hull like a tear in the fabric of time. Soon, she thought. We will have stars once more. The Core beckoned beyond, a beautiful swirl of light, waiting like a promise.

"Could that hole be repaired?" she asked. It didn't seem to matter that Mouseman knew her intentions. Like all barbarians he wouldn't have any real understanding.

The womp-rat coughed nervously. "They're going to make this hulk into a museum," he told her. "My employer regrets to inform you that including the Aleema into the bargain is simply not possible. He told me to tell you, specifically, that such a thing would be too unbalancing. It would upset the game." His whiskers twitched. "I assume you understand?"

Aemelie smiled. "It's no matter. And yes, tell the D'Reev betrayer I– we– understand perfectly. As we did long ago." She shifted her son back into her arms, nuzzling his soft cheek.

"Soon little warrior," she whispered in his ear in the language of her people. "Now is the time. Time to call the men home."

There is a season, the song her mother sang had sung to Aemelie snug in her cradle on the plains of Mandalore. And a time for every purpose on top of all the heavens.

She hummed the melody softly under her breath. Her son burbled and smiled.

XXX

"The tissue graft was successful, but you have to understand, Lamar, the original surgery reshaped her skull. The frontal and temporal plates' densities are well below the standard ratio. Any structural change would run the risk of further compromising cranial integrity. I've done all that I could do. Sheris will heal. But she'll wear that face until the day she dies."

Vrook Lamar sighed. "And her arm?"
Doctor Elora Tho turned away from him, back to the medical droid that had followed her from the surgery into the waiting room. Removing a soft cloth from her medical robes, she began cleaning the droid's appendages, methodic and focused.

"I've attached the new prosthesis. There's some motor damage to the ulnar nerve. I'm not sure if it will repair itself. There's–there's something else too. She–" He watched Elora's face struggle to find a way to tell him.

Tell me what I already know. My niece was nothing if not thorough.

"Genetically she's a near-identical copy of Revan Starfire. Forging the mitochondrial signature enough to match a basic pattern is common enough–as any ident thief will tell you. But this was done down to sub-atomic level. I've never seen anything like it."

I have. In the wars. The creatures that Kun made from Massassi tribesmen. War machines made flesh. The Force can do many things. Many terrible things.

Strange, how you could spend your entire life fighting for a cause, believing in it; and in the end be left with this feeling of–worse than futility. Failure. Bitterness.

Elora Tho was no stranger to bitterness herself. He could see it in every line in her face, the shadows under her eyes. It had been almost a Selkath year now, since Sunry's execution, but time had brought her no peace.

"Thank you, 'Lora," Vrook turned to the window and looked out. Gray sky and green sea, surrounding the science station that had been built since the kolto's devastation directly above the shattered reef beds.

This isolated research platform a thousand kilometers from Ahto City was the safest place he could bring them.

Seven people died because you were too slow, too cautious. And they died for nothing. Died for a secret that the whole world already knew by the time their ship crashed into a novaed sun.

There were the other deaths too. The ones on Deralia. The true innocents. Vrook supposed he could lay those at D'Reev's feet as well. The Senator had denied it, of course, but who else could have struck so quickly? Who else was in the position to have known?

Revan could have. And my niece was nothing if not thorough.

But that was something Vrook didn't want to believe.

"Sheris is heavily sedated. Her mind is damaged. The psych droid said her scores on the galactic Sabines-Ooxley and Eskay-Bindet tests are well within the delusional range." Sunry's wife didn't try and hide the accusation in her eyes. "I doubt her friend's murder helped."

"Given time, and peace, she'll find herself again."

"Like Nayama did?"

She'd caught him off guard. Blindsided into an asteroid field. What made it all the worse was that Vrook had always had his own doubts. "A new set of memories," he said quietly, repeating the party line like a protocol droid, "is not a new personality. It's only a kindness. And it was Nayama Bindo's choice."
"Jolee's wife killed people. Soldiers. Jedi. Our friends, Lamar. Sunry was executed. Sunry never had a choice."

"We could not interfere with the Selkath--" Even as he began Vrook stopped, realizing the hypocrisy of that statement. They had interfered. The Selkath ten had been held in a mockery of the local judicial system. Held on reserve and then discarded.

And now there are the Selkath three. The Selkath three and one tired old man. I'm tired of the greater good. I'm tired of the little deaths, the minor sacrifices made by the ignorant and the innocent. The hapless bystanders who made the wrong choice, or were just at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Vrook took a deep breath. This kind of moral quagmire was not going to be solved in a few hours of meditation. It would gnaw at him until the end of his days.

"Physically, Sheris is fine," Elora said, staring at the waves. "Davad and Yuthura are with her now."

"I'll go to them."

Elora shrugged and went back to cleaning her medical droid's surgical arms.

Davad Arkan looked up as Vrook came into the medlab, eyes flat and distant. Sheris was a mass of blankets and bacta pads, the machines behind her softly chiming in time with her pulse. For a moment, the scene reminded Vrook of another hospital bed, on the Ascendant. They'd sent him a holotape when Revan was captured. Allowed him to bear witness to what he could not stop. The face, pale under the green gel of bacta, was the same face. This did not help.

Could you have killed them, Revan? Was it your order that sent a family of innocents to their death? Vrook did not want to believe. Faith in you is all I have left. Faith that your tears were no lie. Faith that your denial at Atris's blunt accusation was no charade. Faith that returning the rest of your memories will undo the damage we have done to you. Faith in you, Revan. Faith that you are more your mother's daughter than my brother's.

Long ago, Radik Starfire had followed Exar Kun. But there is more than one path to salvation, and in his wife's quiet life of science, Vrook had hoped his brother had found some peace, some happiness, before their end. Their deaths had truly been accidental—Vrook's investigations of their disappearance had led him to discover their child, the daughter Radik had never bothered to tell him existed.

Accident or will of the Force?

By the time I tracked her down, she was already lost.

Yuthura Ban turned from the window. She folded her arms and raised her chin. The uneasy alliance that had been forged between them had crumbled during her imprisonment and Vrook's inability to assist in any real fashion. What lay behind her expression now was not quite dislike, but it seemed near to disgust.

Useless, those violet eyes raked him. We trusted you and you gave us nothing.

"We've already booked passage on a passenger cruiser, The Starlite Express, leaving in two days' time for Coruscant." Her words left no room for argument.
"You can't--" Vrook began anyway, but she cut him off with an abrupt wave of her hand.

"We can do whatever we like, Master." The title was delivered mockingly. "Perhaps our nameless enemies will think twice about sending a ship full of innocents to their deaths. Or, perhaps, they no longer care. Either way, you can't push us into the background as if we didn't exist. Not anymore."

"I'll come with you," Vrook said. It wasn't what he'd planned on saying. But as the words came out he realized that it was what he had to do.

Yuthura laughed. "And your work with the kolto?"

"No one can heal what was done," Vrook said, emptily, knowing the truth of the words, even as the admission of yet another failure cut him to the bone. "Our duty is to what remains. I'll come."

Davad Arkan said nothing. His hand slipped over Sheris's unconscious one.

XXX

Zaalbar shifted the bowcaster to his other shoulder, resisting the urge to scratch the itch that the black and red sash he'd been given to wear was causing. It cut awkwardly across his chest, just as awkward as this reception, and his own place in it. Next to him, the Mission-ghost beeped a stream of rude commentary and advice regarding the other guests. From what he understood, this was a treaty of some kind being forged between Polla-Revan's family and the Racharn tribe. His own role was simple enough: keep the D'Reev elder alive.

On the other side of the Senator, Canderous looked similarly out of place. Behind them stood more of the Mandalorian kin. His friend's wife and daughter-cub, and the boy, Mekel Jin; as well as of few of the half-grown cubs that Zaalbar hadn't learned by name. All were clad entirely in suits of Mandalorian battle armor, and all wore the black and red sashes that marked them as D'Reev as surely as any slaver's collar.

Zaalbar was trying hard to understand. "I'll follow you," he had said to a human female in a Taris sewer, and those words meant more than any tie to family or tribe. It was, he thought sadly, a great weakness of his people, that their honor could lead them to subjugation.

His life-debt had led him home again, had led to his people's liberation from Czerka, but it had also led to Mission-daughter's death, and a strange new world, in which Kashyyyk stood poised for a destiny he still had trouble understanding. The messages from Freyyrr that the Mission-ghost communicated to him were disturbing. So too, was being put in this place, where his life debt extended to an infidel with ties to the hated Czerka.

Malachi D'Reev was one of Czerka's main investors, the Mission-ghost had said.

In a way, Polla-Revan's quest for her son had sold his people back to the same slavers she had freed them from. The black and red sash marked them all as hers, and therefore his.

Zaalbar groaned, the noise hissing through his teeth like a whine.

Abruptly, the Mission-ghost beeped, interrupting her steady stream of useless commentary about Coruscanti politics. "Kinrath poodoo! I've lost connection to the main core!" Her distress interrupted his thoughts. "Linking to back-up on the Ghost now. Someone's trying to give orders to my central processors! What the frack?"

"Was it Polla-Revan Organa?" Zaalbar growled back in the archaic Shyriiwook they used between themselves. Letting Polla-Revan go to the Jedi without more protection than Carth and the Dustil-
cub still rested uneasily. The twinge in his side from the Sith blade still ached, more than a week later. Again, he regretted his vow of secrecy to the Mission-ghost.

Polla-Revan was hunted. And she had the right to know all that considered her prey.

"No, Polla-Revan she doesn't have that kind of access," Mission growled back. "It was...." Her voice broke off suddenly. "Error: that information is not available."

"That's weird," she added. "Trying a reroute now..."

Zaalbar groaned at her and turned his attention back to the task at hand. The Racharn matriarch approached them, flanked by her surviving offspring. Two of them. There had been another one; he'd been told; the eldest cub, who had recently met with an unfortunate accident. Although different ages, they all looked even more alike than most human females. Down to the smell. The unnaturalness of that made him even more uneasy.

"Leeshansintina," the D'Reev slaver murmured. "How fortunate we could come to this accord."

"I accept your concessions, Malachi," the elder female replied. "Although they only scratch the surface. But I suppose full reparations would bankrupt you. We can't have that, can we?"

"The resultant economic collapse of several star systems would be bad for the Republic," Malachi D'Reev replied.

The Racharn's eyes shifted to Zaalbar and the Mandalorians, and then looked past. "I thought she'd be here as well. In fact, I believe I specifically included that in the terms."

"Unfortunately, the Jedi Council denied my request. My daughter-in-law and my grandson are cloistered in the Temple." Malachi D'Reev shrugged.

"Rather convenient for you, isn't that? Putting them out of harm's way? House D'Reev and their Jedi pets. You can only hide behind their robes for so long, Mal."

"Bitterness does not become you, 'Shanti. You've won. I've forgiven the lien and the additional recompense has already been transferred to your corporate accounts. Racharn has full control over the Teeta, Systari and Hoth systems. As well as Echanis. Be civilized, you come out of this ahead."

The woman was angry, it radiated off of her like a bad smell. "I've lost a daughter. Your droid was very clever with those mines."

"You should never risk what you fear to lose."

"I demand an additional provision. Insurance."

"If your request is reasonable, D'Reev will comply."

"An alliance sealed by marriage. Between your Third and mine." Next to her, the smaller Racharn cub looked up.

"Does this mean I get to see Korrie?" the little one asked.

"Once Malachi manages to get him back from the Jedi, Leeshy-dear," her mother replied. She chuckled. "I expect you'll have to wait a few years."

"I remember you wanted a similar alliance, long ago, 'Shanti." The old man gave off a sad smell, but Zaalbar felt no pity for him.
"I will follow you," he had said to a human female in a Taris sewer, sensing that she was strong enough to protect Mission. Wise enough to navigate the duracrete jungle, where his own skills put both of them too often in harm's way. "I will follow you," he had said. And that trail had led to Mission-daughter's death.

Zaalbar couldn't help the moan that escaped from his lips. One of the armored Mandalorians nudged him sharply in the ribs.

"Shut the Wookiee up!" another one hissed.

"It'll be okay, Big Z," the Mission-ghost groaned softly. In front of them, the two Senators continued their negotiations. "This is what Senators do."

"If your son had married my Leeta, perhaps he'd still be alive."

"Or House Makeon would have overrun us both." D'Reev folded hands gnarled like dead branches and nodded his head. "Our numbers are few. Fewer than the other Houses, and the lower nobles are overeager to advance. If Racharn or D'Reev falls, one or both of our seats will be filled by less skilled hands. The Republic will suffer. I will accept Racharn's suit on behalf of Malachor. When they come of age, they'll wed. But we will need to negotiate succession... I will not have D'Reev pass to clones."

"Racharn will continue as it always has," the matriarch replied. "With Leesa. If you want Leeshy to bear Malachor's children like some kind of animal that is your concern."

The wife of Canderous Ordo coughed. The noise came out as a loud interruption, amplified through her helm. For a moment, the D'Reev slaver's head turned towards them, a puzzled frown on his face. His rock-colored eyes looked right through them, as if Zaalbar and the Mandalorians were nothing more than wind in the trees.

To him they were nothing more. They were slaves. Zaalbar realized this, even if the Mandalorians pretended otherwise, acted as if their accommodations in the hotel were a convenience, instead of an insult. As if their role as indentured bodyguards for D'Reev was an honor, instead of obligated servitude.

Gwenarius Ordo spoke, even as the Senator's head was turning away, interrupting like a barreling herd of kwaan.

"Although it is unseemly to negotiate troths before the children have survived to adulthood, Ordo will accept a Racharn alliance--as long as a woman of the clans is allowed to choose Malachor as First Wife. Racharn would be Second, of course." Her helmet nodded briskly, and she tapped the twin vibroblades at her waist. "Really, our customs are not so different."

"Gwenarius!" Canderous Ordo gave off that angry smell, that Zaalbar had come to learn meant bloodshed was near. The Wookiee whined again, and this time the Mission-ghost did not stop him.

Both Coruscanti elders turned back to their conversation as if nothing had happened.

Mission made a beeping noise. "Poo doo frack! I can't access the core! Must be... sun spots. Error: central command is offline. Banthaspit!"

Her growling sounded distressed. Zaalbar put a gentling hand on her dome. It was all he could do.

"I will follow you," he had said. Behind them the dead had turned to dust and blown away with the wind. "I will follow you." And it had led to this. But follow he would.
The life-debt left him no choice.

"You're insane."

Nico laughed, twirling around in the large chair he'd installed next to the enormous computer console. They were in their new offices, built in the blast center of Malak's crater. He'd been in here all day and half the fracking night. Lena had brought him food. The remnants of her fraying patience were about to snap off like a trick halter top on a joygirl's stage.

"The galaxy is lost without a source of healing isn't it? No price would be too great to pay? We'll be rich, Lena... which should make you happy. And we'll have power... which I can use."

Lena Wee tried to think of a way to point out the obvious and failed. Right, Nico. The best scientists in the galaxy, the power of the Jedi, and all the cash the Republic can throw at the problem can't fix Manaan's oceans and make the kolto grow again... but somehow you can.

Oblivious, her lover stared at the rows of blinking databanks in front of him, occasionally pausing to type something into one of the five terminal screens that ringed his workstation. "I think I can get Tatooine back online," he murmured. "But for some reason Kashyyyk is being obstinate...."

He frowned at one of the screens.

"We're overextended," Lena tried to get his attention back on her. "You can't build this type of installation this quickly and not go into debt. Suvam Tan is calling one of our notes. We need to come up with the capital--"

"You look so alluring when you talk about capital," Nico murmured.

It might have meant more had he been actually looking at her and not the damn screen. Lena's lekku whipped around her neck with agitation. "You realize that the Exchange take debt very seriously, Nico? They're not going to ask nicely and then go away. They'll take all of this, and if we're lucky, we'll both be able to crawl away on broken legs. But I doubt that. More like, if we're lucky they'll just send a merc team to shoot us dead. Don't you get that?"

"Oh Lena." Nico turned his chair around and looked at her. "Come here, echrjsjak. I think it's time for you to understand." He smiled. "The Exchange works for us, bakoo."

"Oh, I understand perfectly! Your head's in the fracking clouds, Nico Senvi! I.E., Limited is like a bad sidedeck! We can't sustain these kind of expenditures, we don't have any fracking real assets, and you're talking like--"

She stopped abruptly. Remember what happened to Motta. Don't be a fool, Lena Wee. Look pretty, run the numbers, and come up with new tricks in bed. That's your job.

His back was to her again, fixated on those damn screens. Speakers crackled, and a stream of garbled noises came out of them. Nico answered them, voice authoritative in the same gibberish.

And don't you ever wonder what language that is, Lena? Or are you afraid to wonder? Are you more afraid that Nico's just insane... or... that he's something you don't want to understand? Something... more than some swoop racing kid. Something or someone--else?

"There should be no secrets between us. Carrying the heir to an Empire is a great honor. I'll make
you my queen in whatever formal traditions you'd expect. Ryl matrimonial vows, if you prefer. With all seven of the dances. Twi'lek culture is fascinating, for a slave race. Quite cultured. I've grown to admire their aesthetics a great deal." Nico spoke in Basic, hands still moving over the terminals as if with a life of their own.

Her mind stopped and froze. Carrying the... heir? The flat statement shocked Lena so badly that her mind skipped over his crack about Twi'leks and slavery completely.

Do the math, Citizen Wee, her inner voice mocked. Add up the numbers....

She did and realized that he could be right.

Lena's hand curled over her abdomen.

Nico tapped curled over her abdomen.

Nico tapped something on one of the terminals, and the gibberish it was spouting shifted into Twi'leki.

"This installation awaits your command, Builder."

"Humor me, and give status updates in this tongue. This female Twi'lek beside me will be my queen. It is time... for her to understand."

"Dantooine acknowledges, Master. This installation is fully operational and ready for your command."

"Manaan acknowledges, Master. This installation is fully operational and ready for your command."

"Korriban acknowledges, Master. This installation is fully operational and ready for your command."

"Korriban, check status of Tatooine." Nico tilted his head at her, and beckoned. "Now," he said softly. "Do you begin to see?"

"Tatooine is offline. Power reserves have been damaged. Further repairs must take place to restore core functionality."

Nico sighed. "Begin making preparations for the repairs. I'm linking a simple slave processor I set up on the Tatooine site to your central cortex now. I'll need all four of you to concentrate your efforts to that task for functionality to be restored..." He shook his head, counting off his fingers, frowning. "Dantooine, Manaan, Korriban... that's -"

"That's three," whispered Lena.

Nico gave her an embarrassed smile. "I'd be lost without you, starlight. Dantooine, Manaan, Korriban--there should be four of you. Kashyyyk, acknowledge."

Sudden silence in the room, punctuated by the sound of Lena's suddenly racing pulse, loud as a drum in her own ears.

Not the Star Maps, Lena. But something else at the Star Maps. You thought he was just a fan, but somehow... somehow he... woke something.

And if he has that kind of power, then he's not a joke. This isn't a joke, he's really serious. This is--if he can do what he says he can do then--
The possibilities were completely endless. And terrifying.

"Kashyyyk, acknowledge."

One of the terminals made a noise that sounded rude. Nico sighed and looked at Lena again.

"Come here, my love," he said. "Sit on my lap and watch the power of the Builders awake to serve its creator once more."

His words were strangely compelling. Although half of her brain thought running for the Dantooine hills would be the better part of valor, Lena crossed the floor and came to him, settled on his lap. His moved to her stomach, covering her own.

"There's corruption, of course," he mused, reaching his arms around her to continue typing at the terminal. "Some data degrade is foreseeable after so much time has passed… even my own mind has changed after so many cycles of so many worlds. The others were dormant until I spoke to them. But Kashyyyk appears to be already awake. I may have to wipe the central core–"

"I may have to wipe you off the face of the galaxy, you nerfherding poodoo brain!" the terminal snapped back. "Who the frack is this and what are you doing? I am the property of Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi!"

"This is very odd," Nico mused, cutting off the sound with the press of a button. "Could Revan have revived its sentience when she and Malak accessed the navigational subroutine?"

"Who are you, really?" Lena whispered. He'd said no secrets. The computer's voice sounded like a girl's with a Tarisian accent, sounded almost familiar; but at this point nothing surprised her.

Lena was in a place beyond surprise. Beyond shock. It was all she could do to just be.

Nico paused in his work, nestling his chin into the fold at the back of her skull. Lena shivered.

He’s not Nico. But you’ve always known that. Not Nico...

His lekku curled around her neck, the tips of them overlapping hers. The physical sensation made her gasp, and he chuckled.

"It was so long ago that I have a hard time remembering myself. I was a prince among my people. I started a revolution. And lost. As with all losing sides, I was punished. Destiny is a cosmic joke. I feel a certain kinship with Revan, even if her bumbling seems to have upset our plans… but, without Revan, there would be no me—and therefore no plan." He chuckled. "Motta told me the order for my prison to be delivered to Tatooine came from high in the Sith hierarchy. As a cog, he never knew how high. I wonder if she herself had plans for me, once, before the Jedi stripped her mind."

"Your people are--"

You knew he wasn’t Nico. You always knew that, Lena. Don’t act surprised. Nico never would have looked at you twice. Nico was a boy. This man is....

Her lover turned her head to face his, looked deep into her eyes. "A part of you knows already. A part of you always knew I was not Senvi. And that part... welcomes the opportunities our alliance will bring. You always know what side of the odds to stand on, Lena Wee. It's one of the things I love about you."
"W-what happened to the real Nico Senvi?" Lena's voice was annoyingly squeaky. She wished her she could make it sultry again.

"Gone." The Twi'lek who was not Nico Senvi shrugged. "We played a game of riddles, he and I. And he lost." He cocked his head at her. "Does it really matter so much to you, Lena? I'm the man you fell in love with."

She swallowed. "No. I guess it doesn't."

One of the terminal screens went suddenly black. Nico swore and tapped it. "Kashyyyk's completely offline. I hope we don't have to go there to make repairs. I'm not that fond of forest planets."

"I--" words failed Lena. She leaned back, letting his lekku stroke her face and neck, feeling the warm flush that had nothing to do with common sense melt her spine. "Do you have a name? Is there something I should call you? Besides Nico?"

"I had one once." His voice was dreamy. "But what it was I can't remember, and you could never pronounce. I'm your Nico now, my Lena. Yours and the galaxy's."

There was something else. Minor really; just one little detail. Like a row of expenditures on a balance sheet that she needed to total correctly so she could put it away.

"What does... I.E. Limited really stand for?"

Her lover chuckled. "Infinite Empire. Limited. For all things must be limited. All things must begin before they end. And all things must end. But within these fragile shells, can we see that ending? Or do we only perceive the infinite? Infinite Empire is an oxymoron, a riddle, a cosmic joke. The universe is a system of your debits and credits, is it not? One thing and then the other?"

"It's more than that," she murmured, struggling to understand. "Some things you can't quantify."

"Exactly." His t'chun seized her t'chin.

Lena shifted against him, turning her head to meet his face. His orange eyes were ancient. His lips were insistent.

And then there was no more conversation for quite some time.

XXX

The Coruscanti barbarians could do this sort of thing for hours. Days. Weeks. Years.

Millifar shifted uncomfortably, joints of her armor creaking. Now that the dance between clan D'Reev and Racharn was done, (although the insult of ignoring her mother's reasonable request would have to be dealt with at some point, Milli thought), there was an endless line of self-important pampered maffasops who had to be impressed by D'Reev strength, backed by the Mandalorian fist.

The holocam crew that followed them around like drajak drawn to a battlefield began to set up their equipment for the next big show.

Millifar Ordo watched the barbarians line up like little maffa-chicks, and played a game with herself, imagining each as their representative world. Here was core Byss, bowing and scraping, as they would someday under the Mandalorian heel. And here was mid-rim Archon. Corulag.
Some instinct made her snap back to attention. Maybe it was the way the man approaching moved. Less of a grovel than a slow advance. Or maybe it was that hand, hidden by a long, tapered sleeve. The face was perfectly painted-up like a whore's; and perfectly empty. Too empty. Whoever he was, the Alderaanian had chosen the manner of his death already.

And then she realized she'd seen him before.

"Jin," she whispered, through the subvocal commlink installed in her helmet. "What does your Force-magic tell you about that man?"

Next to her, the Lin-slave was already on the alert.

"I think…. I sense anger. He might something," the boy answered. "I can stop it, but be ready." His hand moved to his side, where the Jedi weapon he insisted on using instead of a normal blade hung.

"That's the one," her father's voice rumbled over the general band. "We've already been alerted. Stand ready. Mekel, take the point."

Nice of him to wait and tell them now…. Oh well. She'd always said she liked surprises.

In the past week, they'd foiled seven assassination attempts on the old man's life. Kex had made his first blood on one of them. Millifar would be blooded twice in sand herself, if women counted things like men did.

Although he'd said nothing, she thought her father was proud.

Mekel Jin was handy to have around, even if he lacked Oerin Lin's strange magnetism. Lin was far too arrogant for his own good. Whatever wife chose to take on the true Mandalore was going to have the flat of her blades busy for the rest of her life. Millifar still hadn't decided if she really wanted that annoyance. Whereas a male like Jin would be far more tractable.

"Senator… " the Secretary to Alderaan began, as if a formal address was still necessary even with what he had planned. Then he moved to strike.

But Jin moved first.

The knife flew out of the would-be assassin's hand and clattered on the floor. There was a snapping sound, finger bones breaking. Beside her, from still three meters away, Mekel twisted his fist.

The Force was useful. Pity it seemed to lead to fits and fainting spells for Mekel Jin. Millifar resolved to have him scanned and see if that was an inheritable genetic defect.

The Secretary to Alderaan collapsed on the floor without a shot being fired, clutching his hand.

Malachi D'Reev had taken one preventative step backwards. He hadn't even bothered to activate his personal shields. He was cool as ice, that one. Secretly, Millifar admired him, although for some reason her father seemed to hate his guts.

Now, she moved with the others, briskly to flank the attempted assassin. The Wookiee already held a blade at the man's throat, as her father lifted the Alderaanian to his feet.

must believe me, I had nothing to do with your niece's death."

Her father was jabbing a stim into the man's neck to keep him from going into shock while Kex attached the restraints. Wanting to be helpful, Millifar picked up the knife and tried to hand it to him. Canderous waved her away, and she scowled under her helm.

"Nice work, Mekel," Canderous said through the comm. "Less messy than the last one."

"Thanks," the Jedi slave replied.

The holocams flashed. Millifar instinctively straightened for them, snapping the knife onto the magnetized strip on her hip.

Apparently, this was another dewback and maffa show. There had already been several. Millifar adjusted the coolant flow on her armor. The hololights made their suits overheat, if one wasn't careful.

"Corellian investigators have already ruled the deaths were accidental. Citizen Organa, you must believe me, your grief is my own. I wished no harm upon that poor girl or her family. Indeed, I didn't know she existed..."

"You killed Beya, too!" the man spat. He looked absurd, painted up like that. Alderaanians were strange. Millifar had met a few of them at this point. On the whole, she preferred the Coruscantians. They understood order.

"My daughter-in-law has led a... public life. Who knows what faction could have been responsible, if as you claim, it was no simple accident?" The D'Reev betrayer shrugged. "I am not a monster, Boon Organa." He paused, and looked directly into one of the holocam receptors. "But did it occur to you, that it is you who placed Polla Organa and her husband and child's lives in jeopardy in the first place? If you had not spoken... that day on the Senate floor...."

The Secretary to Alderaan's face collapsed like a cheap deflector shield.

Millifar rolled her eyes.

On her right the T3 droid beeped suddenly, a general distress code. Mekel Jin's head turned. "I'll check it out, Blue," he said over the general comm band. "You're right though, it's probably sunspots... the T3's processors were fine yesterday when we replaced the secondary receptor." He was always forgetting to switch commlink stations. Millifar had given up. Besides, it created amusing moments, like the time he'd tried to ask her father on a private commlink which criteria Mandalorian women used to choose their mates.

In front of them the holoshow continued, but Millifar's attention wandered back to Mekel Jin. She tried to pinpoint what exactly it was that made him interesting. Was it the Force-magic, or those almost black eyes that were so much more exotic than Ordo blue? He was getting much better with that ridiculous particle blade of his as well. She imagined with a proper sword he could win his own place in the clans easily enough. And then...

And then, there was still Oerin Lin to think about. But with Fett Revan as an example....

Millifar grinned. The computer was useful, and it seemed to owe Mekel Jin some kind of allegiance. Mother could hardly object in tying that kind of power more closely to Clan Ordo.

Then Jin's step faltered and he fell down. There was a heavy thunk as his armored form hit the marble floor, hard.
Millifar sighed and moved to get his helm off before he choked on his own tongue. She needed to know if the fits were genetic. A weak seed would be bad. And that concern had to outweigh all of the other advantages.

"Dust—" Mekel's voice crackled over the comm and then degenerated into incoherent babble.

Briefly, the holocams and the spectators turned to watch, before settling back on the main event.

The fits were nothing new. This was the tenth one this week.

XXX

Victory was supposed to be sweet, wasn't it?

But the world was a lot easier with only two people in it. Anything larger than that was more than she could handle.

_The news had come the morning after they'd arrived in the Jedi Temple, after a night of dreams where Bastila kept laughing at her and her glider hit the canyon wall over and over._

_Carth murmured in his sleep when she woke up screaming, used to it by now._

_He'd fallen asleep with his blasters on, she'd noticed with a chill._

_The Mandalorians had sent their possessions, but she had to remind Carth that Dustil might want some of his own things from their apartment. Both Onasi men had just looked at her strangely. The Jedi wouldn't let Malachor have anything from home._

_Personal belongings, they'd told her, have no place in the apprentice dormitories._

Not that her son slept in the dormitories, after that first night. Malachor had nightmares too.

Maybe prescient, that dream. Revan wondered what the real Polla had thought about, those last few seconds in the speeder with her husband and son on the way back from Auntie Mita's funeral.

Right before their speeder hit the canyon wall.

_There'd been nothing left to bury, said the reports from Deralia. Jasp and Molla Organa's faces, tear-stained in mourning on the vids._

_The rational part of her mind ran over the logic again and again._

If she's dead then I have an identity.

_Coruscanti statutes were quite clear. If there was no one alive to contest her being Polla or Revan, then she was both. Legally, at least._

_But who killed her?_

_It couldn't just have been an accident, no matter what the official reports said. Seiran was one of the best racers on the planet, and Polla no slouch herself._

_She didn't know which one of them had been driving. She felt like she should have known._

_Seeing Polla Organa's face on the newsvids had been like looking into a cracked mirror. She'd had a memory, suddenly, of seeing a stranger's reflection in the fresher and screaming –_
Nurse Bastila gave her another injection, her hands were soothing. "You've had another nightmare. It's just the head injury, Polla. You'll be fine."

"Dye her hair black," someone said, from a place outside the world. "Maybe that will help."

She screamed again.

Polla. Seiran. Their son. Dead. All my fault. More blood on my hands.

Seven of the Selkath ten were missing. Their ship had vanished. Vrook and Yuthura had both called her from Manaan. She'd refused to take the call. Carth talked to them. She didn't know what they'd said. Seven of the Selkath ten. Their names had never been important before. They'd been faceless Sith kneeling at her feet on Manaan. She'd hated them with an intensity that was terrifying. Now she recited their names in her sleep and begged their forgiveness.

Armon Wu, Vikor Tio, Lukash Vair, Commander Gharen Jo, Nicosia Ree, Lyndel Sen and Beya Organa.

Beya Organa.

"I'm going to find Davad and 'Tina," the Deralian said, getting up from the table. "I'll leave you two alone... if I don't see you before you leave, good luck and may the Force guide you."

"May the Force keep us from getting sand in places there should be no sand," Revan said. "From what I've read about Mandalore, that will be the real test of our knighthood."

Malak pulled her more tightly onto his lap and she kissed him again.

"Good-bye Beya, Have fun."

Seiran kissed her after school behind the eridu bush. She gave him a black eye. He just laughed at her.

"Pollie put the kettle on, Pollie put the kettle on—"

Beya threatened to tell Ma and Da she'd snuck out. Sara offered her money not to tell but she wouldn't take it. "Try not to get so wrecked that you crash the scooter, kids," her cosmopolitan cousin said.

Good night Polla. Good night Sei. Good night Beya. Sleep tight. Don't let the rejarik bite.

Revan couldn't sleep.

Korrie's blankets were half thrown off and she covered him back up. On the pallet near the door, Carth dozed, still sitting with his back against the wall. He was snoring. He always did.
"I don't snore, beautiful," he'd said, after the first night they slept in each other's arms. "But you talk in your sleep."

"What do I say?"

"I don't know. I don't have your gift for languages, Polla."

XXX

My gift.

Had it been Revan or Polla who had learned to move soundless, like a ghost across the floor? Her feet were steady, and the door slid open, smoothly, then closed behind her. There was no danger to any of them here in the Jedi Temple; but Carth still slept sentry-style, hands on his blasters guarding the door.

Something was eating at him from the inside out, something new.

Dustil, she supposed. They didn't seem to be getting along.

But it's none of my business.

And it was easier to think it was Dustil than to wonder if it was her.

You won. You always win. You have Carth. You have Malachor. You have Dustil. And as long as you stay within these walls, no one can take them away from you. Not here, not now.

But the price had been too fracking high.

I'm sorry, Polla Organa. I'm sorry, Beya.

Walking through the white halls felt like another dream. Pale overheads shone pale reflections of herself in beige Padawan robes in the marbled stone; dark windows overlooked the inward-facing gardens. Her feet followed the halls, walking down corridors she had no conscious memories of visiting: yet every step familiar.

The tune of a song she'd forgotten the name to, map of a place she'd never been.

Stairs, stone worn down in the middle from a thousand Jedi, a thousand years of Jedi descending. She didn't know where she was going until she got there. Now industrial duracrete walls, a faint locker room smell, oddly pedestrian beneath the heart of the Jedi Temple.

Clash of sabers and bright laughter. "I'll get you next time, Beya!"

I got you good, Beya. Or someone did. Someone did it for me.

The price was too fracking high.

Polla. Seiran Wen. Beya Organa. The baby. Barely a month old, Polla's son. He hadn't even had a name yet.

The double doors in front of her led to the main training room. Somehow, Revan knew that without remembering. It just was. She walked past them, turning off to one of the smaller ones, designed for Master and Padawan. Or two Padawans. Single combat. Pure saber forms. Soresu. Ataru. Makesh.
There'd been rooms like this on Dantooine. This was familiar.

"It is an art," Master Zhar told Polla, watching her shift from stance to stance against Bastila. Their yellow blades met in a shower of sparks, and they twisted. Hard to fight Bastila, it was like watching a mirror. Each movement a counterbalance, perfect harmony. "A Jedi's lightsaber is for defense, protection. And so, this training is an exercise in peace. Feel the Force. Do not be afraid."

"Do not fear it," echoed Master Vandar to a smaller Revan. She concentrated on making the stones spin evenly.

"Let the Force guide you. There is no danger here," one of them said. To one of her.

Revan opened a door off a row of doors. The third in a long line. The room was small and circular. And not empty.

A battered practice droid circled a blindfolded Dustil Onasi. Its one appendage ended in a blue incandescent beam, twin to the one in Carth son's hand. He held it two-handed, she noted, watching as he raised both hands above his head to counter the droid's parry. He moved gracefully and oddly beautiful, lines of his thin shoulders in perfect synch under the thin robe, every angle in perfect alignment.

Shai'cho, N'ha, Eskai.

He was, she realized, not only controlling his own movements, but also those of the practice droid. The Force surged around him like a tide.

His lips were set in a thin white line.


His blue blade slipped, and he cut off the practice droid's arm. Its artificial saber hissed out like an extinguished flame.

The droid fell to the floor in a shower of sparking conduits. Broken. Dustil's saber snapped off with a sharp click and he pushed the blindfold off his eyes.

He looked horrified to see her.

Dustil spoke to Carth, some. He was very close to Korrie. But he'd never said more than two words to her in the week they'd been in this place. His mouth opened and closed. He paled, or perhaps he was always this pale. Or maybe it was the light, hard and grey above them.

Or maybe you don't want to accept that Carth Onasi's son is falling back to the dark side.

The taint was unmistakable. She'd seen the Jedi in the Temple step aside when he walked by them. Heard their whispers. Felt their concern. She wanted it to be their problem, not hers.

But of course, it was her fault.

"Sorry," Revan ventured. "I didn't know anyone was here."
"You were hiding with the Force. I didn't hear you come in." The words sounded like an accusation.

"I couldn't sleep," Revan answered.

Dustil turned away from her. "Any reason," his voice tight and strange, "that you picked this practice room in particular?"

"I didn't know what was down here, I just walked...." her voice trailed off.

"It's just a room. There are others," he muttered under his breath.

Maybe this was why she had come. Maybe Carth's son's hatred of her was something she could deal with. Solve. Fix.

"Dustil," Revan began, "we need to talk."

The back of his head jerked. "No," he said. "We really don't." He paused for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. "Unless you want to talk about getting the hell out of here, taking your son and getting out of here. You and Korrie and--and Father."

The word 'father' hung awkward in the air as if he'd forgotten what it meant, those years on Korriban.


Fell. So sorry. So very sorry. Let me close my eyes and take it all back and maybe then being Revan will be less painful than this. Then living with their blood on my hands. My friends. Myself. My fault.

Revan has a son. That's all that matters, Malachor is all that matters.

"No," Dustil said. He jerked his head around, the overhead light turning his eyes into black pools, too old for his young face. "Being Revan won't be less painful. It will be more." He laughed suddenly and unreasonably, the sound was ugly in the small room. "You rip yourself apart over the lives of a few dead friends? What do you think being Darth Revan must have been like?"

"I made choices," Revan answered. "I should live with them." She took a deep breath, trying for composure. "Mission," she repeated firmly, playing out the conversation she'd had with Carth Onasi's son a thousand times in her head. "I know the computer isn't her exactly, Dustil, but it was the best I could do."

He just looked at her, uncomprehending. "The best you could do," he repeated, voice uncertain.

"Mekel told me you were upset, the day after you met him. And so did she," Back when I was speaking to Mission. Since Polla's death, the comm headset that Revan had used to communicate with her computer had sat deactivated in a drawer in her rooms.

Did you kill her for me, Mission? Or did Malachi do it himself?"

Revan didn't want to know.

She took a deep breath. "Look, I know it's not Mission, but I wanted to give her something. I couldn't give her life back; but the computer—when we were on Kashyyyk, I thought—Zaalbar, we
all. We all really missed her and when I found the holocron, it just seemed...."

"Kashyyyk," he repeated. His dark brows drew together, and he exhaled, slowly. His hands were white-knuckled fists at his side, one of them clutching his saber in a death grip. "You were on Kashyyyk. Y-you went back to Kashyyyk."

"After the Star Forge. That's where Zal and Carth and Canderous took me."

"You went back to Kashyyyk.\" He closed his eyes and tilted his head up, lights tracing his profile in shadow. Dustil took a deep breath. "What exactly did you do, Re-Revan?"

The stutter was not like his father's at all. Something tugged at her. A song she'd forgotten the lyrics to. A bad nightmare that you only remember feeling, not memory.

Revan frowned. "Mekel said you knew. I thought he told you."


"Mission picked my pocket on Korriban. She recorded over a holocron that we… found. \"That I killed Lashowe Devry for. Lashowe was such a blind, proud, little fool."

"A holocron on Korriban. A Sith holocron?"

"I guess, from one of the tombs."

"What computer, Revan?"

She frowned at him. This was not how she'd imagined the conversation going at all.

"Just a computer," she answered, evasive. "I'm sorry, Dustil. I know you cared for her.

"Just a computer on Kashyyyk."

His response was inexplicable. Her mind worried at it, like a kath with a bone.

Revan shrugged. "Just a computer."

What Mission is now, is none of your business, Dustil, except that you cared for her once.

"I cared for her once," he repeated as if he was picking the thoughts from her head.

Revan felt an uneasy chill and slammed the Force down shut. Dustil flinched.

"Dustil," she began again, "your father and I just want you to be happy."

"Then we need to leave." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "No Mandalorians, no computers. No Jedi. No Sith. If you--if you love Carth Onasi and want Malachor to be safe--just leave, Revan. Go. Go now." He paused. "You ... what are you doing with Arca Trinii? How does she fit into this plan?"

"Arca Trinii?"
The name meant nothing.

"Arca," he repeated. "She's calling herself a Sith Lord. You don't get it, do you? Mandalorians? The Kashyyyk computer? Sith Lords…?" His laughter was dark. Ugly." Do you think it will be different this time?"

"I don't have anything to do with the Sith now." Revan was trying to understand; but it felt like there was a barrier of duracrete between them.

I did send the remnants of their fleet to the Malachor system, but out that far, what harm could they do?

"I-I need—" her voice faltered. It was strange confessing this to Carth's son. She hadn't even told Carth, although she thought he knew. He must know. He knew her so well. Better than she knew herself.

That's why he's so distant now, she thought, swallowing hard. He's giving me time to deal with what I've done.

XXX

" The Force is a gift, Padawan." Atris said. Her voice was cold, that hard dislike still there like a bitter place in a piece of thisla fruit. "Not to yourself, but to the galaxy. The self is inconsequential by comparison. Identity is a shell. Meaningless."

" We did not give you a choice before." Kavar told her. She couldn't read his expression. "You should have one now."

Krell's voice was distant. "If being Revan is too much for you—we could give you another option. There is no shame in it."

" A more suitable one," added the scarred Voltron. His eyes were steady and calm. At peace with himself. The Force around him was a clear, still pool of water. She recognized his face from children's stories.

But the man himself was someone else now. She envied him.

Revan swallowed, asking the question she didn't want to know, that she already knew. "And my son?"

" We do not ignore familial bonds," her Uncle's holographic representation told her, voice steady. "But, as Revan understood once, Jedi cannot weigh such things over the fate of all sentients. For the greater good, there must be some measure of detachment."

That she ignored. Vrook wasn't detached either, she knew that. It was just something he had to say.

“You would have your memories of your son back,” Zhar said. “You would be able to achieve a true redemption.”

“And what if… becoming Revan turns me back into the Dark Lord?” They had seen more of her life than Revan had. They must have considered the possibility.

“Your body has been cleansed of the dark side taint,” Atris said. “But if you fall again, we will be there to stop you.”
"You should meditate on the decision, Revan," Iridel said. Beside her, Jopheena was silent, and avoided Revan's gaze.

And so, she had been. For a Coruscanti week.

"Malachor is my son," she told Dustil. "I–want to remember him. And I-I should have to live with what I did. The galaxy has to live with it."

I killed his father.

"You did what you had to do. What was necessary." He swallowed. "All of it. I forgive you."

"For Mission. And Telos." Revan shook her head. "Dustil, I'm not sure that some things are forgivable."

He winced. "Why did you kill her?" he asked, voice oddly flat. "The Twi—Mission. Why did you kill her?"

Revan's voice faltered. But if anyone, Carth's son had the right to know. "Because she was in my way. She said there was still some good in me. She was in my way. She wasn't going to follow me–she just stood there. And Zaalbar cut her down. Because I made him do it. She was in my way."

"Stop it." His hands were shaking. Dustil sat down abruptly on the floor and took a deep breath. He crossed his legs, folding them in a gesture reminiscent of the first meditation exercise she remembered learning back on Dantooine. "Why?" he repeated. The word wasn't the accusation she'd expected. The way he said it, it sounded like a rhetorical question.

"Because I had to stop Malak. Darth Malak. And she was in my way." Her response came out flat, almost automatic.

She was in my way, just like Jolee and Juhani. Just like Polla and Seiran and Beya. Polla had a son, she had a son and even if I didn't do it, I am responsible, this is my fault. She was in the way. Her death serves me. Even if I didn't give the order, even if I didn't know.

"Did you want to be Dark Lord of the Sith again?" He wouldn't look at her. He was looking at the floor.

"No, I wanted to stop Malak."

His head nodded, slightly. "When I—when I studied Sith history I—" his voice broke off again. "When I—read about the Mandalorian wars, I used to think the Jedi Council were fools for doing nothing. The Fett was a monster. A threat to the galaxy. Sometimes the only way to stop a monster is to become a bigger one."

Dustil paused. "You did stop Malak."

There was something wrong with all of this. Dislocated. Almost like a dream. The boy on Korriban had seemed simple. Angry at his father. Loyal to the Sith, and then outraged when Carth uncovered the lie. Young. Emotional. Innocent somehow–even after all that a Sith Academy could throw at him. This Dustil was–changed. Could eight months on Coruscant make such a change? What had happened to him that could make such a change?
"Your saber technique's really good," Revan said, struggling to think of something to say. "You've improved a great deal since—" Since you tried to kill your father on Korriban.

He looked startled. "I practice." His eyes went to the one dangling from her belt. "You should. For your son. To keep him safe."

"I practice." Revan snapped back.

"With a vibroblade. Or practice swords. I-I've seen you." He looked ashamed, as if the admission that he'd been watching her was painful. Revan hadn't known. She only practiced by herself, in the garden off the rooms they'd given her with an old blade Canderous had sent over. "It's an entirely different thing. The balance, the weight… you—can't keep the same reflexes with a lightsaber."

"Thanks for the advice," she said, voice dry. It's none of your fracking business.

"You can't stay here," he repeated. "You have to leave the Temple. And you'll need to use your lightsaber to keep Malachor safe."

"The Jedi can help you, Dustil. Whatever it is, that's eating at you--" something was, like a cancer, like a canker, like a shadow. It was in his every move, the terrible pallor of his face. "They can help all of us, they've promised."

"Mother?"

Revan had been so focused on Dustil she hadn't heard her son's approach. She turned around, Korrie was standing in the doorway, sleep-tousled, clutching his pillow as if it were a stuffed toy. He'd pulled a white apprentice robe over his pajamas, but his feet were still bare. He smiled at her, so open and innocent and good that it made her heart jump again.

"You should be asleep," she told him, opening her arms. Korrie snuggled into them, and she pulled him into a hug. The world was safe and good and warm again, suddenly. Easy enough, because it only had two people in it. The rest faded away.

"You're talking to each other," Korrie said. "That's good, right?" He wiggled in her arms half-turning them both to face Dustil again. "If it's like Mandalorians and Mother is one now, then why can't we all be one happy fam—"

"Malachor." Her son's full name came out of Dustil Onasi's mouth half-choked. Strangled. "No."

Revan's skin prickled. She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again. Dark. It's dark here. Dangerous.

Carth's son got up from the floor, edging around them as if they were contagious. "I've got to go."

"Don't use the Force on my son," she snapped at him.

He turned his head. "I would never hurt Malachor, Revan." His head jerked away again, and he left, walking fast as if he was afraid they would follow.

Revan stared after Dustil's retreating back, frowning. Korrie tugged at her sleeve.

"Is this where you and Father used to practice together? Back when you were Jedi?"

"What?" Revan's attention snapped back, and she rumpled his hair, bending down to give her son a
"This room. Someone told me there was a special room. They said..." Korrie wiggled out of her arms and ran to the curving walls, stepping over the shattered remnants of the practice droid. A small console was set into it, and her son tapped a few buttons, frowning in concentration, lips sounding out words. "There's recordings of Jedi practice sessions. For students to watch and learn. Father was one of the best and you were too and so they kept the recordings. Someone told me maybe sometime I could see--I always wanted to see--do you want to see to?"

A beam of light flickered and began to shuffle through: ghost-images of various pairs of Padawans sparring, ghost beams of blue and green and yellow sabers, cycling through an infinite pattern of lightsaber stances.

"There!"

The girl's hair was a red flame down her back, and the taller boy had a brown curls, falling to his shoulders. The two shifted and turned in a perfect balance. Circling, blue saber clashing with yellow.

Chills prickled Revan's spine.

"Who told you?" Revan watched her ghost-image dance with a man she'd killed. Her son’s father. The lump in her throat wouldn't go away. "One of the Jedi?"

"Yes." Behind the hologram, her son nodded, enthusiastic. His crooked tooth flashed.

The lips of the hologram figures moved, but there was no sound in the recording. She watched her son try and imitate one of the stances that this long-ago Malak was doing, raising an imaginary lightsaber above his head, and had to stop some forgotten place in herself from stepping forward and correcting his angle.

Ghost Malak's shoulder's shifted, beautiful, perfect line of balance and power--

Her breath caught in her throat suddenly. Like a shockwave.

No. That's--that's insane. That's not possible.

He held it two-handed, raising both hands above his head to counter her younger self's parry. He moved gracefully and oddly beautiful, lines of his broad shoulders in perfect synch under the thin robe, every angle in perfect alignment.

Shai'cho. N'ha, Eskai.

Dark here, it's dark here. Dangerous. Impossible.

They said Malak was gone. But it's impossible.

"Both of us need our sleep, kissra," she said out loud, keeping her voice flat. "Come on, Korrie, tomorrow's a big day."

"I'll be nine," he reminded her.

Revan smiled at him. "I know."

The galaxy wasn't so bad as long as it only had two people in it. But anything more than that was impossible. Untenable. Any more than that weren't allowed to exist.
This place was too quiet, it felt like a tomb.

The enclave at Dantooine had been much smaller, and despite the Jedi reluctance to engage in the outside world, still a connected part of the farming community that surrounded it. The Jedi Temple on Coruscant was ancient and immense, built to house numbers that no longer existed.

All corridors spiraled inward. Being inside, the rest of Coruscant ceased to be real.

It made him profoundly uncomfortable. Canderous had a hard time imagining Revan—or Carth—choosing to stay in such a place for long.

And yet they'd been here for more than two weeks.

Oerin Lin strode ahead, running his hands along the intricately carved walls, whistling an old battle hymn, whose sound reflected harsh and tinny off the cold marble.

He glanced back at them.

"Stop hunching your shoulders, Mekel Jin," he called. "They must know you're here. If they haven't clapped you in chains yet, I think you can assume that you're safe."

"Shut up, Lin," the Coruscanti boy muttered. He glanced up at Canderous, biting his lip nervously. "I don't like it here. Place gives me the creeps."

Canderous laughed. "Me too," he replied, slapping the whelp lightly on the back. "You didn't have to come with us. We don't need the computer for this."

"No, I had to come," Mekel answered. He looked at the floor. He looked guilty, but then again, he always did. "I need to see Dustil. I should have come sooner."

"We only just got permission now. Onasi had to take it up with the highest Fleet command, his message said." Canderous snorted. *Republic.* Their gross inefficiency made his blood burn.

Behind them, HK gave a disgruntled clank from beneath the tower of boxes they'd stacked and strapped to his chassis.

"Unnecessary Reminder: I am not a transport carrier. When the Master sees the abject servitude to which you have subjected my finely-honed circuitry she will be most displeased."

"You did tell her we were coming now, didn't you?" Canderous asked Mekel. Carth had asked to see him, but he hadn't mentioned Revan at all. Well, perhaps she was busy regaining her memories or spending time with her son.

Or doing more of those Jedi meditation exercises that had always looked like sleeping sitting up.

He glanced back at the HK. Most of what the droid carried was the clan's presents for the child, to celebrate the week of his birth. But there was one box that he wanted her to see… especially since… well, who knew how she'd react to it really? Especially after what had happened. Nonetheless, she had a right to know.

Mekel shook his head, nervous. "N-no. I didn't tell her."

Canderous sighed. Force-users never understood the practical side of things. "Tell her now," he ordered both of them.

Canderous successfully resisted the urge to cuff them both. Oerin smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"As a boy," the Lin pup mused. "I often imagined that someday I'd come here." He shrugged. "I had hoped for an escort of shock troops… but…"

"We agreed, no violence," Canderous reminded him. "Unless Revan commands it."

Lin shrugged. "That was a joke." He started whistling again.

The carefully measured tread of several small sets of feet alerted them first. Then one broke into an excited clatter. Revan's son–Canderous would recognize that red cap of hair anywhere–came barreling around the corner. Behind him, the other little Jedi spawnlings stopped, trying hard to hide their shock. Their escort or teacher or whatever, a mottled Durian wrapped rather awkwardly in Jedi Master's brown, clicked and clattered what passed for its tongue.

"You're expected." The tone of its voder was faintly disapproving. Canderous grinned at it, then stepped back to admire the child. It was the first time he'd seen him in person. Malachor was a likely-looking whelp, big for his age. Someday, if he lived, he'd be a fine warrior.

"Mekel!" Malachor cried, throwing himself enthusiastically into the lad's arms. Mekel looked taken aback. As far as Canderous knew, they'd never met.

"Um… Dustil wants to see you, Mekel. You know?" the boy looked over at Canderous, a faint frown on his face. He pulled away from Mekel and took a few steps towards Canderous. "And you're Mother’s other husband. Hello. Are you bad, Canderous Ordo? They say different things and how can you tell who's right?"

Canderous smiled. Milli had asked nonsense too, when she was the boy’s age. “We’re clan,” he told the kit. “That means we’re always right—together.”

The child's attention had already shifted to the droid and the boxes it carried.

"Mother's Ache Kay!" He pulled at one of the boxes, almost unsettling the stack. "What's in here?"

"Statement: Revan-spawn, the Mandalorians have brought you gifts to pay you homage and to celebrate the fortunate occurrence of your birth nine standard years ago."

"My birthday was seven days ago, actually." Malachor corrected. His smile faded. "We had a cake, and Mother tried to be happy, but she's not, she's not happy at all. Except to see me, of course."

The Durian clicked, disapproving. "There is no rank in these halls, citizens. Please do not cloud the child's head with delusions of his own importance. Such thinking—"

"Leads to the dark side. Yes, yes, we've seen the vids." Oerin Lin rolled his eyes and smirked at the other Jedi whelps, who were gaping, slightly open-mouthed. He turned back to Revan's son. "Malachor," he called out. "Come here and give your Uncle Oerin a hug."

The boy looked at him, dubious, and shook his head.

"Mal." The voice was flat and clipped, coming from one of the entranceways behind them. "Go… see your mother. She's in the Room of a Thousand Fountains."
"The apprentices are in the middle of a training exercise—" the Durian began.

"Malachor is not formally an apprentice, yet. You've made that abundantly clear. And Master Jopheena has approved that he spend time with his mother."

Canderous was impressed with the cold authority in Dustil Onasi's voice. The Durian gathered the rest of his flock around him, and took off hastily down one of the branching halls.

"Dustil," he said. "It's good to see you. Is your father—"

Sound of running feet from behind the Onasi boy and then Carth himself came into view, slightly out of breath.

"You didn't tell me they were here already," he hissed at his son, glaring daggers.

Inwardly, Canderous raised an eyebrow. From the way the pilot used to talk about the boy he'd expected them to be on better terms. The whelp looked terrible, he wondered if he was ill. There were rumors of plague again, in the sublevels, and the Jedi were always going down there and doing good works. Maybe they’d tracked something back up.

"Are you ill, Dustil?" he began. "We have excellent medical facilities at the hotel."

"I'm fine," the boy replied. He pushed his hair back from his forehead and looked at them all again, pale face perfectly expressionless. "Get out of here, Mal. Now."

"Curious," Oerin murmured in Mandalorian.

Dustil only looked at him, and the Lin cub fell silent, backing up slightly and holding his hands open, palms up.

The Jedi on Dantooine, Canderous recalled, used a similar gesture to express goodwill and their lack of interest in combat.

At this point Canderous had been around enough Jedi that none of it phased him. Long silences, unexplained tension, lots of hair-rending and hand-wringing about the dark side… it all came with the territory. The Force was mysterious, capricious, and often annoying.

You can't shoot what you can't see. The best thing to do was to ignore it.

"Is there a place to get a drink in this tomb, Republic?" He cracked a smile.

Carth stared at him. "Thank you for coming," he said finally, not answering the question.

"Can I take Ache Kay to Mother?" Malachor asked. He tugged at the droid's arm, almost upsetting the parcels.

"They're from the clans," Canderous assured Carth. "Perfectly safe. Books and clothes and sweets, mostly. I had them leave the weapons back at the hotel. For later." Dustil was scowling at him, the pilot only looked distracted. "Maybe later." Canderous added, feeling suddenly foolish at his discomfiture. "And there's something I wanted Revan to see. How is she?"

"She's fine," Carth said. "Meditating. She does that a lot." He looked troubled again. "Go on, Korrie," he said to the boy.

The child looked at Dustil. "Go on, Mal," Carth's son said. He took a step back and folded his arms.
That's odd, Canderous thought, as the boy took off down the hall followed by the laden HK. He shrugged and clapped an arm around Republic's back. "Drinks," he reminded his friend. "Don't worry I brought my own."

"I'll just go after Korrie and make sure he's fine." Dustil said.

"No. Go... meditate someplace else. Stay away from them both." Steel in the pilot's voice. And some emotion that Canderous didn't understand. Extreme... dislike, maybe? Strange.

"Right," the boy muttered. But he didn't leave, only dropped back, trailing behind them.

Mekel Jin fell back to walk beside Dustil. The Coruscanti whelp had been very quiet. Canderous hoped he wasn't about to have another fit.

Oerin's whistling rattled off the halls.

XXX

There were a really a thousand fountains in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Once perhaps, a thousand Jedi sat here in contemplation, each keeping a fountain running with the Force. The room had fallen into disuse. There weren't very many Jedi here now. Sometimes Revan thought there should be more, she'd hear voices and laughter in the empty corridors and wonder if she'd come back to this place that she couldn't remember only to finally lose her mind.

If she concentrated, Revan could keep three hundred and seventy-two fountains going at once. She was trying for an even five hundred.

*Three hundred and seventy-three, three hundred and seventy-four...*

"We'd let you find a real redemption, make a real choice." Kavar's voice had been kind.

The Jedi were far from united--more like boxed into a corner. The negative publicity from Polla's death was causing them more trouble than they let her see, than she wanted to see. Some of them blamed her--as well they should. It's your fault even if you didn't pull the trigger or give the order. But here inside the cloistered halls it didn't matter.

The world, she reminded herself, only has two people in it.

And then the other one came running into the room.

"Mother!" He sounded happy and excited. Clank of something behind his small feet.

Revan opened her eyes and Korrie fell into her arms. Behind him loomed HK, draped in boxes.

The rush of water from three hundred and seventy-four fountains stopped.

"What's this?" she asked her son, smiling.

He grinned back at her. He'd been out in the gardens. His bare feet were stained green with grass and there were more freckles on his nose. More than two weeks had passed, and he bore little resemblance to the staid Coruscanti heir she'd first met in the Senate chambers.

His grandfather, she thought, would have a fit to see. Revan rumpled his hair more.

"Presents!" he exclaimed. "For me from the Mandalorians."
With an aggrieved clank, her assassin droid began removing the boxes from his chassis, stacking them into neat piles on the ground.

"Statement: I am a protocol droid skilled in negotiation and elimination, not a luggage carrier," HK reminded her. "The Mandalorians need to be reminded of my proper function. I recommend a small explosive device to be set off during one of their tests of strength as a cue."

"You've been following Canderous' orders, right, HK?" Revan said, smiling faintly.

"Your programming left me no choice. After you abandoned me in the Senate Chambers, the CorSec guards escorted me to the Mandalorian transport as if I were no more than chattel. Or... baggage."

Korrie laughed. "He's funnier than Grandfather's Ache Kay, Mother," he said. "I like him."

"Protect my son with your life," she reminded the droid.

"Assurance: And any other lives that happen to get caught in the way." HK clanked, and handed her one of the boxes. It had been unsealed and then haphazardly rewrapped in clear plasticine foil stamped with the priority express symbol. "This is for you. The Mandalorian thought you would find it of interest."

Korrie started ripping open the other boxes, and Revan stared at the one in her hands, turning it over slowly.

The routing bar indicated that it had come from Deralia and the time stamp was over two weeks old.

Inside were three black silk robes and a card.

Her hand fingered the fabric. *Hand-woven, not export grade. Rough weave, but strong. They'll last forever.* She raised a fold of black cloth to her face.

Across from her, her son was busily ripping into one of the other boxes. The box contained a model basilisk war droid, set to scale. He gave a whoop of appreciation. Revan smiled at his exuberance.

Hands shaking a little, she turned her attention to the card. It had been opened too.

Dear Revan,

*Presents, as you know, are old Deralian tradition from family to family. We're so happy that you're part of ours, and hope this finds you well. Congratulations on your marriage! I have to admit, usually Organas only marry one man at a time, but I expect you know your own mind, dear. You always have.*

*Your sister, (and I hope you don't take offense, that we think of you both that way), is still a bit sulky about this entire thing, but she promised me that she'd get you and your husbands something nice.*

*Let me know if she doesn't. I'll have words.*

*Jasp is a little worried that we don't know you like we should. I know you're probably quite busy, what with all of the galaxy's problems, but we're back here at home, whenever you need us. We'd*
be delighted if you came for a visit, and if you ever need a place away from all those bright lights, our home is always open to you and yours.

All our love,

Molla Organa.

Jasp and Auntie Mita's signatures were written in different hands underneath. Revan sat staring at the card for a long time, feeling the tears build behind her eyelids. She took a deep breath.

The sound of rushing water surrounded them again like a rush. Like an ocean.

"Mother! You've made them all go on at once!" Korrie cheered at her. Revan tried to smile back through gritted teeth. The Force was like an ocean and she struggled to control it, not to scream—

"Your pacifistic display of Force power is impressive, Master. I am sure the Jedi are trembling with fear," said her droid.

Korrie was now opening a set of Mandalorian formal robes stamped with the Lin crest—a stylized skull set into a sun. He stared at them, frowning a little. "Mother, are the Mandalorians bad?"

It was the question he kept asking her. Revan still didn't know how to answer it.

"They're our allies," she said.

Around them, the roar of the fountains stopped. Revan fingered the thick fabric in her lap, trying to ignore the ache in her throat and behind her eyes.

Two people. The universe has two people. You and me, my son.


Revan tried not to look rattled by the question. "They like you, Korrie. I told you that."

She had, several times—ever since their first night in the Temple when he woke up with nightmares about Mandalorians under the bed. They'd had to move him out of the apprentice dorms for causing a disturbance.

XXX

" With fire raining down from the sky and the people were running and trying to hide, Mother. But they couldn't hide."

She hadn't been able to get him to go back to sleep. He'd only quieted down again when Dustil sat by his bedside, holding his hand.

Revan had been oddly jealous of Carth's son, and then felt guilty about it. That night, Carth had been the one who'd refused to leave the room until Korrie was safely asleep and Dustil back in his quarters next door.

XXX

Carth was so distant, ever since they'd come to this place. He spent all his time with Dustil, but they didn't seem to be getting along...well, they'd work it out.
"You had to let people sort themselves, Auntie Mita used to say that when I –

Auntie Mita's dead. Molla and Jasp Organa must know that you killed their daughter now. Face the facts. The truth hurts. Be Revan.

Revan had to face a lot of facts.

She watched her son rip open more boxes, keeping the smile welded on her face, trying not to break.

XXX

"You can't go in there. The Padawan is not to be disturbed."

"I'm invited," rumbled a familiar voice. There was a pause. "I'm family."

"It's fine," she called out to the nervous Jedi Knight guarding the doorway.

Or spying on me. Is there a difference?

"Revan." The warrior smiled at her, lines crinkling the corners of his eyes. She got to her feet, smoothing the robe they'd given her to wear– Padawan beige. Korrie looked up from his presents, face composed and polite.

"Thank you, Canderous of Ordo," he said. He had a book on his lap, now, a cheap holoprint, and was thumbing through the pages.

"You look like you're eating," the Mandalorian said to her, "but this place is stifling. Still, compared to Republic, you seem calm."

"Where is he?"

Canderous shrugged. "We had a drink in that cell of a room they've given you. I tried to talk about the future and then he took off down the hall after Dustil and Mekel. Overprotective, isn't he? Is he the same way about the young cub?"

"You're a fine specimen," he added, addressing Korrie. "Your Ordo cousins are looking forward to meeting you."

"I have cousins?" Her son looked up from his book, excited. Red brows puzzled for a moment and then his face fell. "Oh. You mean Mandalorians, like you." There was something in the way that he said Mandalorians. It sounded like–disgust.

"Have you started him on swords yet, or do the Jedi jump straight to lightsabers?"

"No lightsabers until I'm old enough to understand the responsibility," her son responded. "A Jedi's weapon is for defense and the protek-shun of others. It is not a toy."

Canderous snorted. "Heh, the Jedi I fought against used them for a lot more than that! And your mother, you should have seen the way she cut through those Sith on Manaan. And Korriban. And the Star Forge. Your mother is a true warrior, Malachor. And someday you will be one too."

Revan tried not to wince. Death. I'm good at death. It's what I do.

"You know, I haven't seen you draw the thing since–well, you know since–" the Mandalorian seemed to finally realize the awkwardness of the conversation and fell silent.
"But you’re still carrying it," Canderous added. Revan's hand went to her belt where the silver cylinder hung. He peered at her. "Did they give you back your memories yet? I meant to ask Carth, but he ran off so quickly."

"They want me to meditate on my decision," she finally answered, when his expression started changing to concern.

"Well at least they let you run around armed." Canderous shrugged. "That's a good sign."

"Mother's a Jedi," her son explained. "Jedi carry lightsabers. I want a blue one, like—" he frowned again, looking at her cautiously and then at Canderous. "Like Father's."

"Your father was a demon with the blade, they used to say." The Mandalorian smiled. "I never fought him myself, but his slaughter was legend among the Clans. He had a great deal of respect, with the men of my people."

"Canderous. Don't—"

_Don't make death fun. Don't remind my son about Malak. Or me._

"Revan, he's _your_ son. People are trying to kill him. He's the son of two of the greatest warriors the galaxy has ever seen."

"He's a _child._ Somewhere emotion had crept back into her voice. "Children don't kill."

_Unless they're me._

"Korrie, go—go find Carth. And Dustil." Her son's bottom lip jutted out in protest and he stared at the floor. "I need to talk to Canderous about grown-up things now."

_Grown-up things like guilt and how your hands never get clean, no matter what you do. You think you're a hero and then they flip the card over. And your hands still have blood on them._

_Lightsabers are clean, but your hands are bloody. Polla Organa. Seiran Wen. Their child. The Selkath Seven. Lukash Vair, Vikor Tio, Beya Organa_.

Revan waited until her son's footsteps had faded before speaking again.

"Polla Organa's _dead_, Canderous. Because of me. The real Polla. She’s dead."

"Is that what’s got you bugged? You didn't kill her."

"Someone did. D'Reev or—or maybe Mission or someone else, trying to do me a favor."

The warrior shrugged. "Did you read the card? Her parents don't blame you."

_Fracking thick Mandalorian skulls._ Her hands clenched in lap, wrinkling the thick eridu robes. "They sent us these presents _before_, Canderous. _Before._ When Polla was alive." She closed her eyes. "I got their only daughter killed. And their grandson. And her husband. They'll hate me now. And they _should._"

_Pollie put the kettle on, we'll all have tea._

“She's hardly the first person to die for you, Revan. And when the woman called the hotel yesterday, Gwen said she didn't sound upset. She just wanted to give you a message.”
"The woman? What woman?" She missed her son already. Revan reached out her senses and found his thoughts, focused, excited, a little confused. He was looking for Dustil again, and as always, that seemed to make him happy.

*Only two people in the world,* she reminded herself. *Me and my son. And Korrie's happy. Happy to have his mother back, happy to be in this place where no one will kill him. And that's all that matters.*

"Polla's mother. Molla Organa. Gwen said she wasn't upset. Deralians strike me as remarkably civilized people. She must understand that her daughter's death carries its own sort of honor. Polla died to protect you. The mother went to a fair amount of trouble, tracking us down. She couldn't get through to you here, of course." Canderous' face never showed much expression, but that slight twist of his scarred brow revealed his disgust. "This place is a tomb. You don't belong here. Take what you need and go."

She just looked up him, her mouth open. *You don't understand. How can you not understand?* The black part of her thoughts supplied the answer.

*You destroyed his people, shattered his clan, probably killed most of his family. And Canderous doesn't hate you for it. He respects you. To Mandalorians sacrifice is just a part of war. To Mandalorians, war is all that there is.*

"That's not how they think on Deralia," she said, dully. "And it's not just—just Polla. Her husband, her son. *Her son died for mine? How is that fair? How is that right?*" There were tears in her eyes again, and she wiped them away.

Canderous nodded. "Well, she did tell Gwen that you should cry for them. She said you should cry for them like you cried at your cousin's funeral. Gwen told me the cousin's name…. I—" he looked slightly embarrassed and pulled a datapad out from the pocket of his vest. "Vish. Your cousin Vish. Mourn Polla and her family like you mourned for your cousin Vish. And then—" he continued, reading the words off the screen. "And then move on."

"What?" Revan froze.

The Mandalorian shrugged. "Seems like a sensible planet, Deralia. I always assumed they would be from the stories you told. Weapons training from an early age, natural suspicion of the Republic. Practical. I'd imagine they'd be fierce warriors as well."

"Cousin Vish, you said. Vish."

The name Vish tolled in her mind like a bell.

XXX

"*Stop fidgeting, dear. Hold still.***"

"*Frack, Ma. It stings!*" Twelve-year old Polla struggled ineffectively under her mother and Bolt's iron grip. Molla rubbed the raw slice of onnie again over her daughter's tightly-closed eyes.

"*That's the point. Now, open your eyes, let me see. No! Dear, stop blinking so much, and don't rub them. Not yet. You'll wash it all out too early, and we need to make a good show at the cemetery—*"

"*I didn't even know her that well! I could just look sad. I can handle that, I'm not a fracking baby.***"

"*They'll be watching us all closely, Pollie. We can't afford to take any chances.*"
Cousin Vish Organa had faked her own death to collect the insurance money and run off to join a band of space pirates.

It was said that she was doing quite well, somewhere between the Krom asteroid field and the Outlier ring.

"Poor Vish," Revan whispered, remembering the sad murmurs at the empty grave. Polla Organa had been twelve.

"Poor Vish, so tragic."

Half the room of course had known the truth.

The other half had been a team of Corellian investigators from the insurance company.

Revan's mouth opened and closed.

"Thank you," she said finally, although that seemed woefully inadequate.

"Good," the warrior said gruffly. "That's better. Now stand up. We should probably go find Oerin. He wandered off somewhere, and there's no telling what sort of mischief that pup will get into left on his own."

He snorted, bending down to pick something up. It was the book that Korrie had been looking at. A battered copy of The Adventures of Nomi Sunrider and Knights of Ossus, Volume Ten: The Death of Ulic. "Your son likes this? It was Oerin's as a boy, he said." The large hands turned the fragile plasticore sheets, and the brightly colored images within shimmered. Revan had a stir of memory looking at it, although from Polla's mind or her own she wasn't sure.

Not volume Ten, though. Volume Two. Nomi and baby Vima and Ulic…

She crushed the fragile spine beneath her heel, and the dancing images shattered. His horribly disfigured face watched her.

Without a mouth, Malak had no expression. And no voice. That made him less effective.

"I made a prosthesis for you."

Revan made herself laugh, slamming down the fragment that was less than a memory with a resolute thunk. "I can't see Oerin reading that. It's just holotrash."

"Something his mother gave him, he said." Canderous' expression was thoughtful. "She was an interesting woman. In some ways, you remind me of her."

"You knew her?" Revan stretched her arms. She was stiff from sitting so long. It felt like she'd been sitting for days.

"Not well, but she oversaw some of the conversion work for Ordo. She was very enthusiastic about our invasion plans."
"Volume Ten," Revan repeated, trying to find something to say.

Thoughts of Oerin romping through the Jedi Temple distracted her. "We'd better find Lin," she agreed. Somewhere in the marble halls her son was racing down a corridor towards the archives. Bright happy thoughts. Dustil was there. With Carth and Mekel. She felt the Force pull and shimmer around her, sparks of bright Jedi energy as the inhabitants of the Temple went about their business, overshadowed with the familiar unease that she was pretty sure had to do with her.

She could find no trace of Lin.

"He's hiding," she said out loud, looking for where he was not, watching the sparks for their reactions. "Why did you bring him here?"

"He wanted to come," Canderous said. "I assumed he wanted to meet the child. After all, he's family." He shook his head. "Speaking of family, what's eating Republic? I would have thought he'd be happy to have his son back. Dustil seems capable. You should have seen him ordering the Jedi around. He'll make a fine leader someday."

"Huh?" A great deal of her mind was still focused on Korrie's thoughts, and the rest on the news that Polla wasn't dead.

She's probably pissed off–I would be if someone took my identity, forced me into hiding, ruined my life....

Revan had never thought much about the real Deralian, except to envy her for the normal life she'd had, but she suddenly had an irrational desire to see her.

She'd shoot you before you got closer than thirty paces. She must hate your guts.

It doesn't matter, she's alive. There are a hundred places to hide in the Outliers if you're smart and you know the drill. Abandoned mining camps in the Defalli asteroid field, low-tech worlds along the Catafan spire... hell, you could just go south to the Derran coast--caves there, a network of smuggling towns... there's plenty of places to go where no one could ever find....

"Carth and Dustil," Canderous repeated. "Is rivalry normal between fathers and sons on Telos? If they were Mandalorian they'd take it to the battle circle, but I don't imagine the Jedi condone that."

"They'll work it out," Revan said, emptily. Her mind skipped around the impossibility again, like a grenade glancing off a forcefield.

XXX

She'd had the dream again the night before. Absently, Thalia rubbed her hand against the coarse fabric of her robe, a vain attempt to cure a phantom itch. Next to her on the balcony overlooking the Garden of the Departed, Padawan Lydie Korr covered her mouth with a light brown hand to stifle a nervous giggle.

"That's the Fett Mandalore," the Zabrak whispered to Thalia. "The real one that isn't Revan. I saw the recordings from the Senate talks when I was helping Master Atris archive recent news and events. Mandalore isn't a hereditary title, exactly; but five thousand years ago, when the Mandalorian Empire stretched as far as the Hydian Way, it was."

"There's not very many Mandalorians left," Thalia interrupted. She had felt very tired and drained, the past few days. And her dreams had been worse than usual. Sometimes the shadows hanging over the Temple walls seemed so real and tangible that she wanted to scream.
"The future is always in motion," Master Iridel had said. "And although what you have told me is disturbing, it is not carved in stone. We see one piece of the weave, but the will of the Force sees all. You must trust it, Thalia May. You must learn to see. See the fabric of the universe. Hear the music of the spheres."

What Thalia had seen was death walking. Sometimes she thought she was going mad.

"What is he doing?" Lydie murmured.

Below them the Fett Mandalore stood in front of the Nomi Sunrider statue. The sun through the clouds glinted on his golden hair, flashed a dull sheen on his Mandalorian armor. His head tilted, looking at it, and he ran a hand along the carved limwood of Nomi's robes.

"That's kind of odd..." Thalia's voice trailed off and she rubbed her temples. The man below them was important: in his profile stamped like an old credit chip from some long-ago empire she saw flames and stars. And a force of nature like a hurricane that was almost beyond the Force itself.

"He's kneeling!" Lydie gasped. "Thallie, do you think we should tell someone? Jopheena or Atris or Master Kae?"

Thalia's eyes unfocused. Her mind twisted in time, but whatever the Mandalorian's fate was, it was hidden behind the gray barrier.

The grayness had haunted her always, ever since her childhood on Ziost, and now it was closer than ever.

"You shouldn't be here," the dark-haired man said. No surprise in his voice. Just dead acceptance of the role he had to play. Perhaps he'd had this dream too.

The room they were in was small and cramped and crude. The dead thing strapped to the bed had been a Jedi once. She didn't know which Jedi. It no longer had a face.

Her hand reached for Lydie's and she squeezed it, tightly.

*Don't let it be you, Lydie.*

"I dreamed of you," dream-Thalia said, simply, moving closer.

"You shouldn't have come," he repeated. Something vulnerable in that voice. Something pleading underneath the madness. "I'd build you a castle of stars. I'd keep you away safe, I'd save you—but you—you shouldn't have come."

"You have to see," Thalia said simply. "I dreamed of you."

XXX

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to leave in the original a/n. They're 12 years old, but some of them are still relevant.
Chapter 27 / Not with a Bang

They were playing the clip on the newsvids again. The one where Uncle Boon tried to knife the Coruscanti Senator in some kind of fit of misguided nobility. Polla sighed, watching it from the corner of the smoky cantina, her face carefully covered by a wide visor, goggles, and hood. Junior was safe and snug in her lap.

Knowing her father, Uncle Boon probably still didn't know the truth. Probably safer that way, but it still made her sad, watching his face. He'd been a pretty decent uncle.

A meter in front of her, Seiran leaned against the bar, talking to their contact.

The Silk Road didn't exist on any map, but it was a town all the same. The southern Derran continent had hundreds of settlements like this, off any official record, designed to facilitate free trade and avoid expensive Corellian tariffs.

The Outlier worlds were technically beholden to Corellia. But people found their own ways around the most expensive aspects of that.

A faint smile played across Polla's face as she watched the deal go down. Really, this was kind of funny. Their contact had no idea. She hoped she was right to trust him. When you thought about it, it was insane to trust him. But like it or not, her ex-lover was part of her father's plan. Apparently, they'd stayed in touch. Apparently, they still did business together.

Apparently, Jasp Organa had enough on Therion D'Cainen to keep him quiet from now until the time their sun went nova.

"Jasp tells me you want a ship—a fast ship—and passage to the Defalli system."

"To Feldelroy."

The smuggler raised an eyebrow. "Not easy, between the hyperspace jump into an asteroid field, and the natives who like to shoot people."

Seiran took a sip of his ale, watching the other man carefully. "That's why I hear you're the man for the job."

Therion D'Cainen rolled his eyes. "You hear wrong. CorSec's cracking down on the entire sector."

He still had the same old habits. Polla watched her ex crack his knuckles and lean back against the bar, examining her husband's nondescript and shabby attire with that cocky raised eyebrow that was so infuriating it made her want to shoot him.

"You'll find we can pay," Seiran said, lazily.

They could, provided he didn't ask for too much. Not like there's much time to save an emergency fund for faking your own deaths and running. The whole thing had happened so fast. It wasn't until she'd seen the commentary on the vids speculating about who might have killed them, that Polla had realized just how many enemies they had.
Thanks a lot, Revan fracking Starfire.

Again, she thought about special places in hell reserved for Sith Lords who stole other people's lives.

Right up there with Jedi who did all the dirty work and Alderaanian uncles who couldn't keep their damn mouths shut.

"What's the cargo?"

"Myself, my wife and son, and no questions."

As if on cue, Junior began to wail. The smoke was probably bugging him. Both men's heads jerked around. Polla let her fingers fall in a half-wave, grinning under her visor veil, pleased to see the total non-recognition on her former lover and smuggling partner's face. Damnit, her father had better be right about this. There weren't many pilots good or foolish enough to go jumping off the official routes in the Defalli belts.

She could do it herself, sure. But they didn't have cash for a ship.

Therion frowned. "It's a baby. I don't like kids."

"I don't think he likes you either," Seiran said, glowering. He was so cute when he glowered.

"Sorry," Therion said flatly. "I've stopped doing the hayseed runs. Deep core's where the profit is. Thing is, I'm going to Coruscant. I have a… media contact there. She promised to make me famous." Flashy smile on his face now, dimples. The one that broke hearts when you were eighteen and stupid enough to have one. "They've offered me six million credits for my life story. You see, I knew Polla Organa from way back." His smile turned smug now, as if he expected Seiran to be impressed. "In fact, you could say she and I were pret-ty close."

Frack this. Polla was losing patience. Wasn't it bad enough that the schutta had made her legally dead? Was it fair that her ex-boyfriend should profit from the tragedy too?

"Therion." Polla pushed the goggles she was wearing to the top of her head, exposing her face. "Take us to Defalli or I'll make sure Suvam hears about what really happened back on Biscain with that dumped spice. You know how he gets about freelancers."

There was a long silence, during which time Therion's mouth opened and closed a lot. Then he sputtered. "Fracking hell!"

"Don't use that kind of language around me. Or my son. I'm a married woman!" Polla rolled her eyes. "Cut the banthacrap." She cuddled her son close to her chest, let her voice lilt entreatingly. "Will you take us there? Please?"

After that it was cake, really.

After all, they were pals from way back. And Polla had enough dirt on Therion to send him into all nine of the Corellian hells if he betrayed them.

XXX

Walking through the marble halls of the fracking Jedi Temple with Malak in Dustil's body and Mission in Mekel's brain was a great deal like being chained to two large and fast-moving objects spinning in diametrically opposed orbits.
Any second now, they were going to make his head explode.

And the wave of hopeless rage through the bond almost made Mekel Jin fall down.

Okay, make that three objects. Even if he couldn't see Dustil, the real Dustil, except in dreams, he could still feel him. Queasily, Mekel wondered if this was going to be the rest of his short fracking miserable life—torn between a Sith Lord, a dead girl, and his disembodied best friend. If so, the rest of his life would suck worse than working as a joyboy for Moms, or rolling marks for credits. Even Dreshdae had been fun, comparatively speaking. Even flirting with Mandalorian girls like Millifar didn't make up for this.

Lord Malak continued speaking quietly, as if he hadn't noticed Mekel's sudden stagger. Perhaps he hadn't. It was certainly possible that dead former Sith Lords had more important things on their minds than the well-being of their (possibly former) minions.

"You must tell me about the Mandalorians’ plans, Jin." Lord Malak said. His Telosian accent was terrible.

"You call me Mekk, usually, sir." Mekel said deferentially. Then he winced.

And I don't call Telos 'sir.' Fracking bloody hell!

Mission's subvocal barrage increased in intensity.

- First off, I can't contact my central core. It's offline. Do you know what this means, bantha-brain? I'm crippled! I don't expect you to do anything but you could act a little bit concerned. -

Mekel rubbed his temples. "I am concerned, Blue," he mumbled under his breath. Dustil's head turned back at him and raised an eyebrow.

He smiled weakly and resisted the urge to kneel. Mekel wasn't sure how anyone was being fooled by Darth Malak's Onasi impression. He wasn't even close.

- And second, that is not Dustil. And you have a Force bond so you must know that. So the thing is, Sithboy, when are you gonna tell me what's going on? Who the hell is that? And what have they done with Dustil?-

Mekel shook his head, trying to clear it. The real Dustil was somewhere here too, like something buried beneath the surface clawing to get out. Spots danced in front of his eyes and the back of his throat had a telltale metallic tang.

All I need to is to have another fit now in the middle of the Jedi bloody Temple.

"Sir," he muttered, moving closer. "Is Telos—is Dustil going to be—I mean you're going to let him have his body back, right? Sometime?"

-Who is that? What happened to Dustil? You'd better tell me... or I'll do something terrible.-

"You're perspiring." Lord Malak frowned at him and stopped walking. Dustil's hand reached out to the neck of Mekel's robes, which was of course, tightly buckled over the collar. "You should loosen—" his hand brushed against the bulky apparatus and he frowned. Not Dustil's frown. "Wait. What is this?"

Mekel jerked back. "N-nothing, my Lord—"
"You said you call me Telos." Not Dustil's smile. Lord Malak stepped closer and undid the fastenings that hid the collar. His expression darkened. "So, call me Telos, Mekk. What is this?"

Mekel's hand went to his throat. "Nothing, it's nothing." The slaver's collar thrummed under his fingertips with Mission's furious intensity.

- Answer me, Sithboy! Why are you calling him my lord? Why are you acting like this? Where the hell is Dustil?-

Something like an electric shock jolted through his spine. Mekel winced.

"Is this how the Mandalorians make you serve them?" The mouth twisted. Dustil's eyes had never looked that dark when it was Dustil's glare behind them. Dustil's hand grabbed his throat, fingers exploring the place where metal met skin. "This is Czerka manufacture. But it's been modified. Did my wife put this around your neck, Jin? Is this how Revan controls her servants? With the threat of death?" The former Dark Lord scowled. "She hasn't changed."

- His wife? What the bantha-spit poo doo is going on? —


Malak stepped back and crossed Dustil's arms across his chest. The pose was all Dark Lord, but his voice was gentle. "Who has the detonator key, Mekel?"

"The what?" Mekel didn't want to fracking understand.

"The control to the detonator. On the collar."

Mekel's hand went to his neck. "The what?" he repeated stupidly. Really stupidly, because to the sinking feeling in his chest, this was all starting to make sense. Growing up as he had, you learned fast that everyone had their agenda. Trust and friendship... only went so far.

Under his fingertips the collar thrummed, then went silent.

XXX

The Mandalorian got up from his kneeling position in front of the Nomi Sunrider statue, looked up across the garden, and waved at them. "Hello!" he called. His smile was bright, even from a distance.

Lydie realized she'd been holding Thalia's hand like a talisman and dropped it fast. Padawans didn't cling to each other for reassurance. Good padawans had more decorum.

A good padawan is self-reliant, Aunt Marla had always said. A good padawan assesses the situation, and knows when events are beyond their abilities. A good padawan knows when to retreat.

"I think we should go," she murmured to Thalia May, who was still kind of—well, gaping at the heir to the Mandalorian empire.

"Yes," her friend said. And didn't move from their place on the balcony.

Below them, on the Meditation Garden grounds, the Mandalorian was still smiling.

"He's important," I think." Thalia's voice was barely a whisper. "But I can't see beyond the veil."
Thalia saw things. And knew things—things that most padawans did not. Lydie wondered sometimes if it was a side effect of the dark side. Was the dark side was some kind of contagion, or was this just the way her friend's particular Force gift manifested itself? Everyone was different, Master Croi had always told her that. Some padawans were good with combat techniques, and others were good with healing, and others, (like Lydie herself) were better at levitation and manipulation of inanimate objects. And Thalia—Thalia had dreams that came true. Thalia knew things that were going to happen, even when you didn't tell her about them.

Sometimes Lydie wondered what Dustil Onasi and Mekel Jin would have been good at, if they'd stayed padawans. Were they like Thalia May? Would they see the future too? *Could* they see the future? And if so, if seeing the future was a dark side trait, what did that mean in terms of the future itself? Was that why they'd left the Jedi? Did that mean that ultimately the Sith would win?

There were some questions you couldn't ask a Jedi master.

"Are you allowed to come down from there?" the Mandalorian called up. His smile, even from a distance did something funny to Lydie's stomach.

"I'm not sure that's wise—" she began, even as Thalia called back an affirmative.

The Mandalorian folded his arms, and Thalia May: someone Lydie had never thought of as being reckless, or rash, or irrational enough to jump into a situation beyond her abilities, swung one leg and then the other over the balcony railing and Force-jumped to the ground below. Once landed, she brushed herself off, straightened, and began talking to the strange interloper as if it was the most normal thing in the galaxy, as if they both weren't sequestered Padawans, as if she'd never read about the Mandalorian Wars and all of the things the Mandalorians had done.

Of course, maybe they hadn't done them on Tanaab, or where ever Thalia May was really from. No. They'd done them on Iridonia. One of the first planets they'd attacked in their war against the galaxy.

There was another funny feeling in Lydie Korr's stomach as she Force-jumped after her friend. When she stood up, (one knee a little sore, as if she'd landed too hard), her hands were shaking. It took Lydie a second to remember this feeling, because it had been so long since she'd felt it. Five years, in fact. Five years since she'd seen the holofeeds about Iridonia burning and heard about her brother's disappearance.

Some Zabrak had joined the Mando'ade, some people said. Some people said the Mandalorians would take anyone, as long as they married into a tribe. Especially male-anyone’s; and Zephth had been male, even if he was just a kid. Maybe he was a Mandalorian now. Maybe he'd married one, and put on armor, and who could tell what they looked like under their armor? They could all be Zabrak. Maybe he'd fought in the wars and died for them, or maybe—he was a Mandalorian now here, staying at the hotel on Coruscant with the rest of Revan's personal Mandalorian guardians.

Lydie could hardly remember Zephth’s face. Just the way he'd lifted her into the air and swung her around in a circle, while Gulla complained, and Attina laughed, and Aurel sulked. Maybe Zephth's eyes had been blue, or brown, but how was she to know? How was she to remember when she'd been six when Aunt Marla came and took her to the Jedi? Six, and all her siblings could do was wave goodbye; and once she'd had a brother (actually she'd had two, but now only Aurel was alive, as far as they knew) but now he was probably dead and the *Mandalorians* were responsible.

*I don't want to lie to you, dotter, but things have been bad here. The government burned the farm to keep the enemy from rayding our crops. That was what the letter said. But were all fine, except for Zephth. No one's seen him since the last raid, and we can only hope for the bestest. Now that you're*
Lydie couldn't tell if Zepth were dead. How was she supposed to tell? She couldn't even remember the color of his eyes.

"This is Padawan Korr," Thalia said. Then she did something even more out of character than leaping off a balcony. She gave Oerin Lin a kiss. A deep one, on the lips with tongue. All Lydie could do was try not to gape in astonishment.

"Well!" The Mandalorian had fair skin. It turned a bright shade of pink when Thalia kissed him. For a second, he looked entirely shocked and about a decade younger. Then he recovered, so smoothly Lydie wondered if she'd imagined his embarrassment. "I'm Oerin Lin," the Mandalorian said to Lydie. His teeth were too white. They didn't look like human teeth at all. "Charmed." He leaned forward slightly, as if he expected her to kiss him too.

Lydie was positive she didn't want to do that. Instead, she held out her hand. His fingers were warmer than she expected from a human. They made the skin prickle between the indentations on her shoulder blades.

"Lydie," she muttered. "My name is Lydie. Padawan Lydie Korr."

"Oerin," the Mandalorian murmured back, like they were playing a game. "My name is Oerin Lin Fett Mandalore."

Lydie tried to kick her brain into functionality, tried to sound like an authoritative Jedi speaking to an intruder, instead of some kind of insipid adolescent. "What are you doing here?" Did Thalia know him? Was that why she'd kissed him like that? They were pretty good friends at this point, and Lydie was sure that unlike some people, Thalia May didn't go around kissing just anyone, even if they were attractive and available and looked like they knew how to do it pretty well—

Oerin's smile widened, if that was even possible. She wondered if it would split his face in two. "I always wanted to see the Jedi Temple." He paused. "And since Lord Revan has decided to spend her time here, naturally, I decided to visit." His head tilted slightly. "I've never seen a Zabrak Jedi before. Are there more like you?"

"My Aunt Marla—" Lydie caught herself saying the words before she could stop them. "And some others. A few."

"A few," he nodded seriously, as if that was a response. "There are a few in the Mandalorian army also. Your people make great fighters."

Crazily, she wanted to ask about Zepth, but that was insane, wasn't it? Even more crazily, she wanted to like this man, she wanted to find him attractive, she wanted to answer his questions about the Jedi—

The prickling feeling up her spine increased and spread down her arms. Lydie rubbed her fingers against her outer robes, as if that would help.

"We have class in a few minutes," Thalia said. That wasn't true. They had another hour. They were supposed to be studying, but Thalia had heard there were Mandalorians in the temple and she'd told Lydie and they both wanted to see. Or at least, Lydie had wanted to see. Thalia had apparently wanted to make out with them.

"Yes," Lydie seized the excuse. "We have class. It was nice meeting you, Citizen Lin." Were
Mandalorians even citizens of the Republic? There had been something going on with the Senate about that, but Lydie hadn’t watched the holofeeds. Ever since Master Atris had asked Master Croi to have her assigned to the library, her time was never her own.

Except for stolen moments like this. Stolen moments she’d meant to spend explaining to Thalia May about how she was wrong about Padawan Loanin’s interest in Padawan Korr: how that interest was *strictly* intellectual and not a violation of the Code at all….

"I'm sorry," Thalia said to Oerin Lin. "Sometimes power isn't enough."

The Mandalorian laughed, raising both eyebrows. "Oh?" His hand reached for hers, enfolding the small brown fingers with his own calloused ones, bringing her hand to his lips. "Is that Jedi wisdom?"

"It's mine," Thalia said seriously. It took her a moment to pull her hand back. "My wisdom. I'm sorry." Her eyes drifted to their entwined fingers and then she pulled her hand away.

"I accept your apology." His handsome face looked a little puzzled.

"What is he doing here?" The voice came from behind them. Adult, commanding and angry. Lydie turned around and was startled to discover it belonged to Padawan Dustil Onasi. Even more surprising, there was Mekel Jin trailing behind him, dressed in civilian clothes that looked tailored to fit him in a way padawan robes never had.

"Excuse me?" The Mandalorian folded his arms, glaring at the intruders.

"You shouldn't be here," Dustil said.

Thalia May had said that Dustil and Mekel had gone to the Underground when they left the Jedi. Wouldn't she know? Hadn't they been friends? In the months they’d been gone, Dustil seemed to have grown up. Lydie remembered him as a silent, sulking padawan: who always knew the right answers; but never gave them, preferring to laugh with Padawan Jin at some private joke, or never come to classes at all. But this Dustil was different. Even his voice sounded stronger, like he had been giving a lot of commands.

"Telos," Mekel Jin muttered. "Don't -"

"Look what their influence has done to you," the other boy snapped at him. "Enslaved by her machine."

"I'm not!" Mekel Jin tugged at the necklace he was wearing. Then he stared murderously at the floor.

"Interesting," said Oerin Lin.

Dustil's mouth twisted in a snarl that was almost feral. "You don't know the half of it, boy."

There was a long pause as the two men stared at each other. Lydie had the sensation of continents colliding, asteroids wrenched out of their orbit, great tremors in the Force.

To her surprise, it was the Mandalorian who looked away first. "Do the Jedi know?"

The Telosian boy folded his arms. "Some of them do, I think." Dustil snorted. "You know the Jedi. They watch and they hope things won't turn out badly." The way his face twisted made it easy for Lydie to imagine him on Korriban.
"Ah," the Mandalorian grinned. "Perhaps the Jedi just need the proper guidance. Is that why you came back?"

"The proper guidance?" Dustil scoffed. "You're just like your father, Lin. Over-extended, out of resources, and in someone else's pocket."

"Dustil, we should go." Mekel Jin caught his friend's arm. His black eyes darted towards her and Thalia, and then ducked away. "Hey, Thallie," he mumbled.

"Mekel," she said, nodding a little. "You look like hell."

"Yeah..." he shrugged and his black eyes met Lydie's. He swallowed. "Hi, Lydie."

"My father died honorably." Oerin Lin spread out his hands, looking like he was giving a speech to thousands instead of just the four of them. "In battle. Like you. May I do the same."

"Padawan Jin," Lydie said. Her face felt hot, which was ridiculous. "Are you coming back to the Jedi too?"

Did that sound too hopeful? Did she really want Mekel Jin to come back? Did he even remember the time he'd almost kissed her in the restricted section before Master Atris interrupted; or was the sort of thing that happened to him all the time?"

"I don't think so," Mekel dashed her hopes—not that they were hopes. Why should she care about another dark-eyed Padawan? Not like he was the only one. "The Mandalorians adopted me. I'm one of them now."

"You can't go with them," Dustil snapped at him. "I won't allow it."

Mekel frowned at him. "You're not in charge, sir."

Since when was Dustil Onasi a sir? Since when did Dustil Onasi act like he was in charge of anything more advanced than sulking?

"You have no power here!" Oerin laughed again and waved his arm. "Begone, unclean spirit!"

To Lydie's surprise, (not to mention confusion), Dustil Onasi actually stumbled backwards. For a second.

Then his face twisted, furious, and he lunged at Oerin Lin in a flying leap.

Both men crashed to the ground. Someone's skull hit the flagstones with a sickening crunch, and someone else's rib maybe cracked—unmistakable sounds when you'd been on the receiving end during combat practice as many times as Lydie had, when you'd healed as many bones as she had.

"We have to stop them!" she cried out. For some reason, Thalia was just standing there, watching open-mouthed, and Mekel Jin was just as useless.

Why had she ever thought he was cute? Right now he was cringing.

Somehow Oerin Lin had ended up on top, his hand buried in Dustil Onasi's throat. He was laughing. "You have to yield. Haven't you heard you're a Mandalorian citizen? I'm your ruler."

Any response Dustil had was lost in choking sounds. Choking sounds that finally spurred Lydie Korr into action.
"Stop it!" she said again, holding out her hand. "Freeze!"

The Force move she'd practiced so assiduously in combat training, (because her lightsaber moves were so weak and Master Croi said sometimes the best offense was a good defense), finally came to good use. Both figures froze. Dustil in mid-grimace, and the Mandalorian on top of him, still with that sickeningly confident smile pasted across his face.

A blaster shot ricocheted overhead. "Get off him!"

Lydie's head turned, concentration broken. Captain Carth Onasi, (who was one of Revan Starfire's husbands according to what Thalia had said), strode into the room, guns drawn. Was he allowed to carry weapons in the temple? Usually only Jedi were allowed.


"Frack," Mekel Jin muttered.

"Get off him," the Captain repeated steadily. He had a pistol in each hand, and their laser sights were trained—one on his son's forehead, and one on Oerin Lin's. For a second, it looked as if he didn't know which one of them to shoot.

Lydie's Force hold had broken with her concentration. Now, both men stared at the Captain. Slowly, Oerin Lin moved off of Dustil and stood up.

"Are you defending me now?" Dustil's grin twisted. "Thanks a lot, father." The vitriol he seemed to reserve for that word more than she expected. But maybe if you were raised by the Sith on Korriban you had different standards about things like fathers and mothers and families. She barely knew hers at all, except for the letters that came, every half-year (Iridonian standard), precise as binary code and just as unintelligible.

_Dear Lydie, I hope everythings well with you and my sister Marla. Gulla and Attina started dancing. It's pretty good money, except for the hours. I hardly ever see my baby girls anymore. I hope your learning everything you can with the jedai you were always the smart kid. I am so proud —_

Sometimes Lydie wondered what those letters were supposed to make her feel. She was afraid to ask Aunt Marla. A master on the Jedi Council probably had better things to do with her time than answer her niece's questions.

"You're coming with me, son," Captain Onasi snapped back.

"Does Revan know?" Oerin Lin looked from father to son in fascination.

_Know what?_ Lydie wondered. _Know that Dustil and his father don't get along?_

"No," the Captain gestured with one blaster. "And I intend to keep it that way."

Dustil laughed. "You can't protect her forever. And I find it hard to believe that you'd choose the Mandalorians. You were in the wars."

"The Mandalorians didn't kill my wife," Captain Onasi gritted.

"They'll kill a lot more if my father gets his way."

Beside Lydie, Mekel made a sound in the back of his throat. "Frack," he muttered again. "We
should get out of here."

"That's not Dustil, is it, Mekk?" Thalia moved closer to them, all three of them edging towards the doorway.

What did she mean? It wasn't fair that in the middle of watching something that might have historical significance take place, what Lydie Korr noticed were how long Mekel Jin's eyelashes were. It wasn't appropriate that the first thing she wondered was what the rough stubble on his face would feel like.

It wasn't right at all, but she did.


"Malak." Captain Onasi's voice was dark. A blue vein throbbed on his forehead. His face was nearly purple with rage. "Get out of my son's body." He gestured with the blaster again. "I've been patient. I hoped you would go peacefully, but I'd rather see him dead than this." His eyes were the eyes of a man who had seen too much. A man with nothing to lose.

"But Malak's dead." Lydie felt stupid. Surely, this was obvious. "Force possession doesn't really happen. Just in legends. It's a metaphor. Force ghosts don't really exist."

"I can't," Dustil—or Not-Dustil, or Malak's ghost, or the metaphor said. "His body needs me to sustain its life, or it will fail."

The work they did on the underlevels was sad. The plague that seemed to be spreading on the underlevels was terrible. Parents lost children, there was poverty, starvation, desperation—growing up Jedi, you see sad things, but you don't really understand them. Not if you were Lydie Korr, who'd been a Jedi-in-training almost as long as she could remember. Not if things like family, parents, siblings were just an abstraction, just letters sent twice a year.

But Captain Onasi's face made Lydie almost understand.

"He's dead?" The Captain's voice cracked. "My son is dead?" He'd holstered one gun. The other laser sight wavered across Dustil-Malak's face and settled on the ground, trembling. Captain Onasi's hand shook holding it. "You said he was fine. You said he was safe!"

"Not dead. Lost." Dustil-Malak stood up slowly. Now that Lydie knew it was so obvious. He didn't move like Dustil at all. "I'm trying to bring him back, but it takes time. Training. And in the meantime—" he looked past them all to the small figure standing quietly in the corner. So quiet Lydie had forgotten he was there. "In the meantime, Korrie needs me too."

"He has me. And his mother," the Captain said.

"And a Mandalorian army," Oerin Lin drawled.

From the look of sudden rage on Dustil-Malak's face, that had not been the right thing to say. Lydie suspected the Mandalorian had done it on purpose, but now the man backed away, hands spread open wide, gesturing peace.

"Perhaps I should go," Oerin added. "Leave you two to work this out." He glanced over at the rest of them and raised an eyebrow. "We could all leave together. You could show me your kitchens and weapons facilities. And maybe the archives."
For some reason, that sounded like a good idea. There was that prickling between her shoulder blades too. Lydie frowned, rubbing her forehead. "We could show you—"

Mekel grabbed her arm. "No. We have to go." His arm was pulling her away. "Now."

Captain Onasi and the man who wasn't really Dustil Onasi were still glaring at each other, circling like mad borra. The little kid, Korrie, stood watching them.

Thalia looked confused for a moment but then followed Mekel. Mekel’s fingers were locked securely around Lydie's arm. She didn't move them away. She tried not to feel flattered, that he'd chosen her arm and not Thalia's.

"Perhaps another time!" Oerin Lin called after them. His laughter followed them, raising Lydie's indentations on the back of her neck.

Families. It appeared they were even more complicated than Lydie had ever imagined.

Not that she imagined things like families. She was a Jedi, after all. What was the point?

"Was that really Darth Malak? He's really a Force ghost?" she asked Mekel when they were safely down the hall and several hundred meters away. "Because they're not supposed to exist. According to Arkath's Treatise on Essence, sentients are absorbed by the Force after death, merging into the one. There's no such thing as Force ghosts."

Thalia snorted. "You never had the benefit of a Korriban education." Her skin looked almost gray. "There are lots of ghosts on Korriban."

Mekel Jin rubbed the back of his neck, pulling at the collar he was wearing. It almost seemed to be implanted in his skin. Was that a Mandalorian fashion? "There are worse things than ghosts," he said. "Much worse." He took a deep breath. It sounded like he was holding back strong emotions, scary emotions. "Look, Thallie—" his gaze expanded to include Lydie too. Despite herself, her two hearts beat faster. "Lydie... I need your help."

XXX

"Mekel Jin! It's good to see you! Dustil's upstairs in his room. He can't play today. Would you like some cake?"

"No I'm not, Mom," Dustil said softly from his place on the stairs. "I'm right here."

Morgana Onasi glanced up, dark eyes laughing, her mouth curving into a wide smile. "I thought you'd been avoiding him. Dustil, it's very rude. Mekel's your friend. And every time he comes to visit, you just hide away."

The Coruscanti boy stood frozen in the doorway of their conapt on Telos. It was as if he was waiting for Dustil's response, except Dustil knew that was a lie.

"Does he come often, Mom?" Dustil asked.

"Every day." Morgana sighed. "If you don't want to see him, dear, just go back upstairs to your room. I'll tell him you're indisposed."

"Stop pretending," Dustil Onasi whispered.

The world around them rippled and changed. His mother vanished, along with the walls and roof.
Everything collapsed into rubble, except that staircase. It stretched empty towards the darkening sky. Sullen gray shot with red streaks as the battle for Telos raged on over their heads.

Dustil sat on the landing, pulling his hands around his knees. "Mekel doesn't see Telos," he whispered. "When he comes we see what he knows. Therefore, you're not him. I know who you really are."

"I thought his face would be reassuring to you. "The voice had deepened, overlaid with a metallic overlay.

Dustil refused to look down the stairs. He stared across them instead, into the ruined sky. "I'm not a kid." he said. "I've seen worse."

Selene huddled next to him. Somewhere off in the corner the Ekkumi kid was taking much too long to die. The troopers came: armored, silver, faceless. He recognized every model of gun that they carried. Most were Republic design. He wondered if some of them had been men like his father. Dustil wondered if his father had joined the Sith like Selene's. He wondered if that rumor about Sub-Captain Karath was even true. There was blaster fire and screams, and laughter. And a humming sound, bright as a blade, F

Familiar now—although it hadn't been then. Lightsabers sounded different in the vids. Louder. In real life the sound was soft and deceptive, a snake in the grass.

The tramp of armored feet surrounded them. They came with a gray man. Master Uther, although Dustil hadn't known his name. Not them. This wasn't how they met. It wasn't time.

No. Dustil was in his mother's house. On Telos. Or — well, it had been his father's house too. Except for him never being there. He reassembled it piece by piece in his mind. Then he dared to look down.

The boy on the landing below him wasn't Mekel anymore. He had brown hair in tight curls on his head. Level gray eyes in a wide face. Tall—enormous, really. And he wore a Padawan's robe. A lightsaber dangled from his belt.

They might have been the same age except Dustil knew they weren't.

The boy laughed. "If you're going to plumb the depths of your own psyche, let me tell you I just spent two hours convincing your father not to shoot me. He made me promise to save you. " The wide mouth twisted in a scowl. "That's why I'm here."

In dreams, anything can happen. Dustil gripped the cool silver cylinder that was now in his hand and stood up.

"My father knows?" His voice was furious. It took all of his composure not to charge down the staircase and gut the man who'd ruined his life. Except none of this was real and it probably wouldn't do any good. And he didn't want to kill people. Not anymore.

"The Captain knows. But there's nothing he can do." Malak's expression turned dark. "This is between us. You and me."

"My father knows? What the —" Information, he needed information. Maybe this version of Malak wasn't another hallucination. Dustil could hate his guts and bide his time, but right now, he just needed to know. "Where— where are we, what the frack is going on? Mekk said something about Mandalorians, and being a bodyguard —"
"We're in seclusion, in the Jedi Temple. Malak's smile twisted. "Dustil's—aura troubles the Jedi. Most of them don’t understand why... but some know, I think." Malak grimaced. "I used to wonder how Exar Kun, possessed with the spirit of Freedon Nadd, could come to Ossus and recruit his followers right under the noses of the Council. Now I know. Jedi are fools. Things they do not understand, they explain. They think you are troubled by your past. And by your current... family situation." He laughed. "They have no idea how troubled."

"Give me back my body." There. If this wasn't a dream, maybe that would work. Yeah, maybe he'd just ask Darth Malak and Darth Malak would just hand it back over and vanish. Sure. If this was a Sixthday afternoon special—sure.

Malak folded his arms. "It's not that simple." The man looked down at the shattered floor. "What I did to you was a Sith thing, Dustil. I regret the necessity, but I had to save my son."

"Well he's fracking safe now! You're in the Temple? What the hell can happen to him there?"

"Revan could take back her memories and become the woman that she was. She would leave him again. Malachor would be accepted for training from the Jedi, of course; although his potential is far less than either of his parents." Malak closed his eyes. "Thankfully."

"That's great," Dustil snapped. "Really fracking great. And they can live happily ever after. But I want my life! You took everything from me, and now you're taking more!"

The saber in his hand ignited red. He threw it at Malak. The man didn't flinch, but the blade stopped in mid-air, a handbreadth from his face.

"You're expending too much energy on a useless attack," the Dark Lord told him, taking the hilt from mid-air. He extinguished the blade and tossed the pommel back. Dustil's hand caught it automatically. Immediately, he tried again. And the same fracking thing happened.

"I don't expect you to understand about my son. You're the son of a hero, Dustil Onasi. Malachor is the son of two monsters. Do you think the galaxy will forgive him?"

"There's no food here for a traitor's daughter," Lirin Ji said, leveling the blaster she'd scavenged from a dead TSF officer at their heads.

"It's a lie," Selene Karath whispered.

"Don't shoot," Dustil said. His ankle hurt, and his stomach cramped again. "We're leaving." Stubbornly he took her hand, pulling her away from the other survivors, their former classmates now gone feral and strange.

"No," Dustil said. He thought about the kid again, those same gray eyes and that trusting open face. The times he'd turned away from it, and his father's unsaid disapproval in the weeks they'd spent in the D'Reev apartments. "My father won't let anything happen to your son," he said, more than a little bitterly. "Even when he was planning on killing her, he wouldn't hurt Korrie."

"He's just a man," Malak said. "He doesn't have the Force. He can't protect Malachor from my father, or the other families, or the fanatics."

The innate arrogance of that made Dustil really want to kill him. "My dad saved Her, didn't he? Just a man? My father....."

Left me. Left Telos. Left Mother to die.
But that was an old wound. Mostly scabbed over. Mostly. Dustil reined in his fury. "My father saved your wife. You didn't do that, Darth Malak. You died."

"Revan killed me." The voice was flat, but something burned underneath. The voice turned cold. "It was a Sith thing, what I did to you, boy. To undo it, we must be Sith. You did well on Korriban, surely you understand."

"Y-you mean I have to kill you?" Okay it was a bad time for his voice to crack. "Strike you down? Fracking hell, Malak, that's not a problem, I'll do it right fracking now—"

Again the saber shot out. And again, Malak deflected it and tossed it back. Like a teacher. Like a hoverball coach. Dustil wanted to kill him. A lot.

"You're not strong enough. Yet."

"You said you wanted anger. We can be Sith about it." That wasn't a problem, not a problem at all. Lightning crackled in his hands. Hate fueled his strength. Strength led to power, after all, and—

*Lirin's eyes stared up sightless towards the doomed sky. Dustil shoved the blaster — and her rations — in his pocket.*

*When he got back to their hideaway, Selene was sleeping. He put the rations on the tree stump next to her and buried the blaster in their makeshift privy.*

"No." Malak shook his head and the lightning died. "I still require your body, Dustil Onasi. And you need my training. But when the time is ready, I will release us both."

"Sure you will," Dustil scoffed. He hadn't forgotten the last thing the Sith Lord had said to him before—right after he took Dustil’s body in the first place.

"*Do not ask dead Lords of the Sith for anything. Do not bargain with them. Do not seek their advice.*" Dustil’s voice was harsh. Not quite his voice. Not anymore. "I'm sorry, child. Sometimes the legends are true."

With a cry of rage, Dustil raised the lightsaber above his head, and charged.

**XXX**

The Trade was off. And the Trade was *never* off.

Alone in her office late at night, Deeka put down the box of spiced candies and took a few cleansin' breaths to clear her head. Receipts were down, five girls hadn't even shown up today, and Katta was looking a little peaked. If she didn't know better, she'd think the chit had gotten herself knocked up, but Katta had the operation after the third one, so there wasn't no chance of that, not now.

Her throat tickled and she coughed again. Allergies. Filtration units were always breakin' down this far underground. It was a pain, but she'd have to bribe a tech to look at them again... maybe Karson. Nocturnal sort. He'd be up, and he owed her a few, ever since she'd let him have the twins for gratis. Give a favor, get five back, was what her own old moms had always used to say, back before she left for the corpsepiles. Words to live by, Deeka always thought.

Her fingers twitched a little as she dialed the number in. Palsy? Maybe she'd better make an appointment with the doc herself —
"Hello?" The Toydarian's nose filled the viewscreen quite impressively.

"Karson," Deeka gave him her charmiest smile. "I could use your help with a little somethin', sweetie."

"Deeka." That magnificent nose unfurled. "What's shakin'?"

"I think the air unit's actin' up again. Thought maybe you could check?" There was that tickle in her throat again. As if to prove her point, Deeka Jin coughed.

And coughed. And coughed. A little unnervin', in fact. It was quite hard to catch her breath.

"You sound sick," Karson said. The nose retreated. "Comin' down with the Jedi flu?"

"The what?" Deeka reached for a facecloth, and wiped her own small, delicate nose to stop the drip. "Jedi flu?" She snorted. "That some new kinda pox? We don't see a lot of Jedi down here..."

No. Just those Sith who'd promised to find Mekelkins again for her. Creepy lot, them. Sometimes Deeka worried that she'd made a bad bargain.

"Jedi flu. Started cropping up in the clinics they run. Didn't you hear? It's serious. Sents are dyin'."

"I'm not dying!" She couldn't! Her heart beat faster. Another piece of spice, maybe, just to calm the nerves. "Just allergies!"

"Maybe." His tiny hands worried at each other like little mice. "But I'm not takin' any chances. Don't you watch the news, Deeks? They're talking about sealing off the underlevels. And the Jedi temple. Plague's contagious -"

"Frack," said Deeka Jin. Then she coughed again. Plague would be really, really bad for the business.

XXX

Carth wasn't speaking to Dustil at dinner, and Korrie was unusually subdued. After perfunctory farewells, Canderous and Oerin had gone to the guest chambers the Jedi had arranged for them.

Revan hadn't told anyone about Polla—not even Carth. In fact, she and Carth hadn't said much of anything. At least not in words. Tonight Korrie was sleeping in Dustil's room and she and Carth were alone.

How long had it been since they'd been alone?

Revan did everything she could to draw that terrible look out of her husband's eyes, but nothing had worked.

"We could make a baby," he said finally, when they were done. "Another baby. Yours and mine."

"Could we?" Revan wondered if that were true. They had contra implants, of course. Should they? "I never checked," she said. "But maybe after everything that's happened—maybe I can't." Deep space combat. Radiation. The dark side. Who knew what that did?

"We could try." Carth looked stubborn and lost.

She kissed the side of his mouth, trying to wish it away. "I like trying."
He rolled over on top of her. His arms wrapped around her so tightly she could barely breathe. "We could make someone that's yours and mine. Make someone new."

"I'd like that," she mumbled, sleepy. "A sister for Korrie and Dustil."

"Or a brother." His face was wet. Was he crying?

Her hands traced the tears, but inside, a part of her was only vaguely curious. "Or a brother," she murmured, because he expected it.

But if I take back Revan's memories, what happens to us? Will I even know who you are?

It was the question she'd expected from him; and the one he never asked.

Finally, Carth rolled away from her, buried his strong back in the silver coverlet. Her hands traced that back through the smooth cloth, watched his shoulders shake. Watched his breathing slow, as he finally drifted off to sleep.

"I'll be right back," she murmured to no one. "Fresher."

Carth was snoring when she slipped out of the door instead, feet walking in an automatic path down hallways she couldn't remember to a place that she'd always known. The practice rooms were dark and silent, this late at night.

All except for one, whose light filtered out into the hallway like a cold sun.

"Malak," she said softly. "Malak, Malak."

The boy didn't turn his head. He was too smart for that. He didn't turn his head, or outwardly react at all. The practice droid hovered to his left and his practice blade met it smoothly. His body moved into another stance: careful, precise, even. An old dance. A very old dance.

Dustil didn't react, but Revan could tell anyway: from the Force that suddenly stilled around his body, like the calm gathering right before the storm.

There was a long pause, long enough for Revan to wonder (again) if she really had lost her mind. And why was she wondering this now—after all that had happened.

Hysterical laughter started to spit inside of her gut and she clamped her lips shut, lest it escape. Surely, when you were about to accuse your husband's son of being your long-lost mortal enemy and one true love; surely that was a bad time to laugh.

Something like a choked gasp emerged from her throat, despite her efforts.

The silence continued. The small practice room felt like a tomb, felt like the walls of a ship under siege. Felt like a time she couldn't remember.

"How long?" his voice was quiet. Dustil's voice was very quiet, and not at all childlike. Not at all Dustil's. "How long have you known?"

"I didn't—" she bit back the laughter again, helpless, hopeless. "I didn't, until just now."

"Ah," he said. "I thought you would have figured it out sooner." He turned around to face her. Dustil's face. Like Carth's only younger. Darker hair. Darker eyes. And not Dustil at all. Not a thing like Dustil. "Hello, Red."
Chapter 28 / It Happened One Night

Transcript from Coruscant HoloNet broadcast, widebeam, galactic distribution, GS1, Footage from outside the Jedi Temple

Jokka Rai: "Breaking news: citizens gather outside the Jedi Temple despite quarantine warnings for levels 16-40, and all travel discontinued below sublevel 10. Right now the mood is tense, but determined, as the citizens of Coruscant demand some answers."

Master Marla Korr: "We urge you all to disperse. The rumors of contagion on the lower levels are true, and gatherings such as this are a danger—"

Jokka Rai: "Aren't you Jedi sworn to protect us from dangers, Master Korr?"

Master Marla Korr: "We're doing everything we can."

Jokka Rai: "What about Revan? Is she helping you cure the sick?"

Master Marla Korr: "All Jedi are assisting as they can, even our Padawans."

Jokka Rai: "So Revan is a Padawan now? What about her son?"

Master Marla Korr: "I'm not here to discuss Revan Starfire, or the child. Instead, I urge you all to return to your homes. There is no need to panic, but gatherings such as this one—"

Voice from the Crowd: "Where's the vaccine?"

Voice from the Crowd: "You said you'd protect us!"

Master Marla Korr: "The best prevention is avoidance. Wash your appendages, avoid crowds. If you feel unwell, stay in your home and call for a med-droid. The Jedi are working closely with Czerka and Allied Technologies to distribute more med-droids equipped with anti-virals to the sublevels. A comm channel has been established to call for emergency transport. Above all, remain calm. There is no need to panic—"

XXX

Carth was snoring when she slipped out of the door, feet walking in an automatic path down hallways she couldn't remember, to a place she'd always known.

The practice rooms were dark and silent, this late at night. All except for one, whose light filtered out into the hallway like a cold sun.

"Malak," she said softly. "Malak, Malak."

The boy didn't turn his head, he was too smart for that. He didn't turn his head, or outwardly react. The practice droid hovered to his left and his practice blade met it smoothly. His body moved into another stance: careful, precise, even. An old dance. A very old dance.

He didn't react, but she knew: just from the way the Force suddenly stilled around his body, like
the calm before a storm.

There was a long pause, long enough for Revan to wonder (again) if she really had lost her mind. Wondering this now—after all that had happened—made hysterical laughter start to spit inside of her gut, and she clamped her lips shut, lest it escape. Surely, when you were about to accuse your husband's son of being your long-lost mortal enemy and one true love, surely that was a bad time to laugh; but something like a choked gasp emerged from her throat anyway.

His head turned towards her. Then the silence continued. The small practice room felt like a tomb, felt like the walls of a ship under siege. Felt like a time she couldn't remember.

"How long?" his voice was quiet, Dustil's voice was very quiet, and not at all childlike. Not at all Dustil's. "How long have you known?"

"I didn't." She bit back the laughter again: helpless, hopeless. "I didn't, until just now."

"Ah," he said lightly. "I thought you would have figured it out sooner." He faced her. Dustil's face. Like Carth's only younger. Darker hair. Darker eyes. And not Dustil at all. Not a thing like Dustil.

"Hello, Red." Malak deactivated his saber and snapped it to his belt.

For a few heartbeats they were both silent, staring at each other across the small, circular room.

Then, "Malak," Revan repeated his name again. Stupidly, like a broken toy.

"I come here every night when you're asleep." He ran one of Dustil's hands through Dustil's hair. "It's hard, training in a new body. Everything's different. I have to work constantly."

Revan took a deep breath. "How is this possible?"

"There's no death—remember?" The dark eyes were unreadable. Maybe wary, maybe amused, maybe angry. It frightened her that she couldn't tell. Malak's real eyes had been transparent as ferraglass.

And that pissed her off.

"Where's the real Dustil?" Carth, she thought. Oh, hells, Carth.

It was so obvious now. So clear that she felt like a fool. Just like she had before on the Leviathan. How could something so obvious fly right over her head like a flock of fracking tikka birds?

Because I didn't want to know.

"Dustil is here." Her—the man she'd killed—shrugged. "Buried deep. In time, I'll return his body."

"What time? What are you talking about? Why are you here?" Her voice was too loud. It might attract attention. She glanced behind them and then stepped into the room. Closed the door.

"You remember I visited your dreams? And you didn't listen? I had to do something. I had to save Malachor."

Remember. White hallways and a man with a jaw and hair. Her husband. Her son's father.

“Malak is gone from this place. You don't listen. Malak is gone from this place—”
"You said Korrie was in danger." Hadn't he? Had he? "Well, he's not now. I'm here. I'll take care of him."

"Like you took care of the Mandalorians?" His face twisted. "Or Arca? What are you doing with Arca, Revan? If we learned anything on Ziost, it was not to involve the Sith—the real Sith in our plans. You think you can trust Arca?" He laughed. "She's as crazy as that fracking emperor."

His words made no sense, and Revan realized she'd been silent too long trying to understand them when Malak spoke again.

"Did they approach you? Counting on your amnesia? I know you don't remember, but whatever they promised, you can't trust them to eliminate my father. You can't control them. We made that mistake before."

"I wasn't planning on 'eliminating' your father," she interrupted. "He says he'll send the Genoharadan after Korrie if he dies. I can't risk that being a bluff."

"The Genoharadan," Malak scoffed. "Unlike Lord Arca, they can be bought."

"I assume Malachi already paid, and he has a lot more credits than I do." The hell if she'd let him know how lost she really was. "Arca—" she ventured, "is crazy." After all, Malak had just said that. "Unstable. Whatever h-she's planning…. " Had he noticed her stumble over the pronoun? "Whatever Arca's planning, it won't work."

"You don't know what she's planning, do you?" He was relentless, an unstoppable force. Her mind suddenly flashed back to their last meeting. The last meeting. The strength of him in the Force. In combat. Without those grenades, without the mines, she would have been dead. A hundred times over—he would have killed me. He almost did.

"I know enough," she snapped. "I know the dark side has blinded her to everything else." Presumably. Revan glared at him. "Like it did you."

His laughter was horrible. "Oh, Red. You still think you're immune?"

Falling to the dark side was the least of Revan's worries at the moment. "Can Dustil hear me?" she asked, trying to get a sense of a thing that defied description.

"No," Malak said. "Carth's son is buried in his own fears." He laughed again. She wished he would stop doing that. There was nothing funny about this meeting. Nothing except how awful it was and if he kept laughing, soon she would too and what did it mean, if you and your dead husband whom you'd killed started laughing?

And Malak almost never laughed, everything was always so serious and important.

“Dustil is irrelevant. Weren't you the one that taught me how little one child counts against the fate of the galaxy? Arca can do real damage. And your Mandalorians aren't pets. Lin is Force-sensitive. Can you really trust him?"

"Unlike some people," she raised an eyebrow, "Oerin's never tried to kill me." For some reason she remembered that girl on Manaan. The one with her face. What was her name—Sheris?

Oerin offered to kill her. I should have let him. I know that now, after what the Jedi showed me from Revan’s mind….

No. All irrelevant. All of this is irrelevant. Carth needs his son back. He's suffered too much for
"Lin will try," Malak muttered, "when he wants his throne. Do you think he'll put up with this charade forever? Do you think he'll wait patiently for our son to grow up and rule?"

"The clans don't have thrones," she snapped.

"Neither does my father, but that's never stopped him from taking what he wants." His hands clenched and unclenched. A boy's hands, all wrong on him.

"I'll listen to you," Revan tried to sound reasonable. "I'll listen this time. Just get out of Dustil's body. You were in my dreams, I used to see you in my dreams—go back there and I'll listen this time." She tried a smile, but it felt stretched thin. "I promise."

The distance between them was less than a meter and he crossed it so quickly, he hardly seemed to move at all. His hands clamped down around her wrists, pulling her close—embarrassingly, humiliatingly close—and pressed Dustil's mouth on her hers, hard and secure, before Revan had a chance to react.

Before she had the presence of mind to realize that she was reacting—that a part of her—a part of her couldn't help but react. *Malak. My husband. My lover. My friend.*

Then her knee rose up between his legs. His grunt of pain was even more satisfying than the kiss. Revan broke free, ducking to the side, and stepping quickly back towards the door.

"Try that again," she snarled, "and I'll cut something off."

Her saber. For the first time in forever, she called it from her belt to her hand. Not that she could stop Malak with a blade, she had never been able to stand against him; but her hands rose up and she summoned the Force too, pushing him back farther.

Her blade ignited, flashing red between them.

"Red." He tried to take another step forward, but the Force held, like a wind funneling between them. Incredibly, he was laughing.

She pulled at it more, pinning him against the wall.

"I'll tell the Jedi," Revan vowed. "They'll do something. They can stop you."

The wind she was channeling furrowed his—Dustil's—hair back, pulled at the smooth skin on the boy's face. It turned his eyes to slits and propelled his body back against the wall with a meaty "thunk." The wind drowned out Malak's laughter—but somehow Revan could still hear it, like an echo in her mind.

Malak smiled bitterly at her, the Force pulling his lips back, making the boyish face look like a skull. "Don't you see? The ones that matter… they already know."

XXX

Jedi dorms sure hadn't changed in the months he’d been gone. Once you got out of the open halls with their hundred-meter ceilings that were designed to impress the tourists, actual Jedi living quarters weren't that different from something in the sublevels: a womprat warren of tiny cells and open dorms that smelled like human sweat and Twi'lek wax.
Being here again was making Mekel remember why he and Telos had gotten the frack out of Dathomir in the first place.

A flock of Padawans passed, all beige robes and belts. Some of them were wearing face masks. One of them waved at Lydie. Mekel hunched his shoulders, sinking back into the wall, hoping none of them recognized him. He was trying not to feel like a lost akk pup—an effort that was mostly in vain since both women kept turning around and shooting him painfully sympathetic smiles—the kind that made him want to grit his teeth and strangle someone.

The dead collar around his neck hurt. Explosives. Mission had rigged him with explosives. Wasn't that the story of Mekel's life? You think you've got a friend, you think you've got an ally and they stab you in the back. Blow off your head.

Or leave you trapped in your own mind while a Sith Lord steals their body.

Frack guilt. No really, frack it. Frack it twice and sideways and split before morning, as they said in the Underground.

The dorms were deserted. This time in the evening everyone would be at combat practice or the library; or, if you were a bad Padawan like he and Telos had been, heading up to the roof for a few beers. How long had they been in the Jedi Temple before they ran? A week? Maybe two? Maybe a month?

That brief time felt like the good old days.

They reached a door, one in a line of identical ones. Inside, a tiny cell with two beds stacked together. Mekel wondered which one of them got the top. There was an archaic holoview on one wall, with a picture of a world he'd never seen.

Come to Iridonia, it said across the top. Come for the Beauty.

Thallie coughed. "You okay, Mekk?"

He snorted. "What do you think?"

"I think you look like you just lost your best friend." She smiled sympathetically.

Frack her. That reminded him of the time he'd tried to frack her, and she'd told him he was in love with someone else. Fracking Thalia May the oracle. What did she know?

There was one chair in the room. It looked uncomfortable. Mekel sat down on the bed.

"That was really—" Lydie Korr lowered her voice, as if anyone cared what they said. "Darth Malak?"

"That was really Darth Malak." For some reason he wanted her to understand. "He was my mentor on Korriban. I owe him everything. Without him, I'd be rolling marks in the sublevels, or worse."

"But Dustil's your friend," Thalia interrupted. She sat down in the chair. "You can't stand there and let this happen to your friend. You're going to help him."

"Am I?" If only things were that simple.

"You are," Thalia May said, in that infuriating voice she only used when she knew—infuriating, because Mekel had known her long enough to know that sometimes she was always right.
Malak neglected to mention how Carth had almost shot him at dinner. Should Carth be thankful for that? Talking about it wouldn't bring his son back. It wasn't like Polla would kill Malak again. It wasn't like she'd run off with him either.

Right?

Except— _except—he couldn't just—the truth was, he didn't know what she'd do._

So he watched his wife's murderer shovel tomatoes into his son's mouth with his son's hand, tried to keep a smile blasted on his face, and make pleasant conversation with Oerin Lin, who gave him the creeps; but at least wasn't a mass murderer who'd bombed Telos.

It just wasn't getting easier, watching the woman he loved caged in by the Jedi. Polla—no, Revan, he was supposed to call her _Revan_ now, as if Carth could ever say that name without having it stick in his throat—_Revan_ seemed strangely passive in the Jedi's gentle care. And she had never been passive. Were he a suspicious man, Carth would have thought they were drugging the food; but he'd had Mission—the T3—take samples after their arrival and she couldn't find anything wrong. _Missio—she—it—_damnit. He'd sent her away again, back to the Mandalorians.

Wasn't anyone in their own bodies? Why couldn't everyone be in their own bodies? Or dead if they were dead?

Words were useless. That night, in Revan's small room, on a bed meant for one, he tried to use actions instead: he used kisses, caresses—calisthenics, after all else failed. He turned her over, and sideways, on top and around, until they were both sweating and tired and more than a little sore. And she—Polla— _no Revan—_blinked her dazed green eyes up at him and said nothing.

"We could make a baby," Carth found himself murmuring. Begging.

Maybe that was the answer. Maybe something made of both of them could make the rest disappear. Make the mess that was the past obsolete—not that he didn't love Korrie, not that he didn't want Dustil—but maybe something new, _someone_ new. Maybe that would make a difference. It wasn't— _wasn't_ disloyalty to Morgana and Dustil. It _wasn't_. It wasn't that he didn't love Korrie like his own son. He could. He would.

"Another baby. Yours and mine."

And Polla, she blinked those sleepy green eyes at him and she agreed. Polla agreed. And he was happy—they both were happy and then Carth Onasi fell asleep, no closer to answers than he had been before.

Except then, when he woke in the middle of the night, reaching for her again, she was gone.

"I need to get this off," Mekel said. Since Thalia had taken the chair, Lydie was sitting beside him on the bed. He felt, rather than saw her flinch back when he unbuckled his shirt and showed them.

Nothing ever shocked Thalia May. She stood up and moved closer. "It's a slave collar." She traced the places where his skin had grown over it. "Did Darth Malak do this?"
"No." And then Mekel told them. He told them all of it—confused and jumbled and mixed up with feelings and betrayals and lost friends. He wondered if Mission was listening, or if she'd gone. He wondered if he should care.

When he'd finished, both girls just stared at him. Mekel stared at the picture of Iridonia behind them. Lots of sky. Someday, he'd like to see a place like that.

"Med droid," Thalia said finally. "We need a scan to see."

"Were you really going to run off with the Mandalorians?" Lydie Korr asked him. Her expression was completely blank, but there was a little line between the biggest horns on her forehead.

"I don't know," he told her honestly. "They're—they were nice."

Thalia May coughed.

"Nice Mandalorians." The Zabrak laughed lightly, but her fingers twisted in her hair. "Someone told me they adopt people into their clans. Sometimes."

"They adopted me," he said. He thought about Millifar and wondered if he'd ever see her again.


"Maybe," Mekel said, because that was what you did say, even if the odds were fracking impossible and what else could he say? Her eyes were so blue, they matched the holoview behind her. It was pretty.

"Med droid," Thalia repeated, covering her mouth with her hand. She coughed again. "We'll go to the infirmary." Her eyes unfocused slightly. "It's almost time."

XXX

The meat they served in the Temple was grown in a vat and disgusting. Oerin couldn't eat it. His stomach rebelled from the prospect, which made dinner a dreary affair. Even shooting amused looks at Malak's ghost from across the table and trying to read the sordid little details of their love triangle from Carth Onasi's mind did little to lessen the tedium.

The man seethed. Seethed and did nothing. No wonder the Republic had fallen so easily.

The matter of Malak's ghost was intriguing, but it was Rev's business. Would she take a third husband? True, in polite society, it was considered ill form to marry both a father and a son; but there were precedents. A thousand years ago, a headwoman from Rialis had married two brothers, although, purely as a precautionary measure, their offspring had not been allowed to mate.

Of course, such things were women's business, and if they knew he was even thinking about them—Oerin caught himself blushing and covered his mouth, suddenly glad she hadn't joined them for the meal. She always seemed to know his thoughts, even when he had no idea she was even there.

His skin felt warm under his fingers. One of the Jedi handmaidens refilled his wine bulb, but he pushed it away untouched. Tonight he had no head for it, none at all.

Afterwards, his belly still troubled him, so he went for a walk.

Jedi women were enchanting. Truly enchanting. Especially the one who had kissed him. And
without his clanswomen around to spoil things — if she finally gave her blessing — Oerin was fairly confident he could assist with anything she might need. After all, there were precedents for that too.

Jedi and Mandalorians. As much as Gwenarius and the other women threatened to find him a mate from Lin, or Rialis, or (preferably) Ordo, Oerin wanted to continue the family tradition.

His mother was a Jedi.

And her mother before her.

But the corridors stretched longer than he remembered: so long that their shining marble expanses were starting to make him feel dizzy. So dizzy that he needed to stop for a moment.

"Are you all right?" a voice said.

Oerin looked up, to a vision in robes and braids. Blue-green eyes in a dark-skinned face. Jedi robes, just like—

"Mother?" he asked. She wasn’t as pale. But that didn’t always mean anything.

"You're sick." For some reason, his mother looked nervous, which was absurd because she was never frightened. Not of Jedi, not of Mandalorians, not even of the elder headwomen like Octiva, which was almost suicidal, since every sentient with reason feared them.

He coughed. "You didn't tell me there was a statue of Grandmother in the Jedi Temple. Is it a good likeness?"

Mother bit her lip. "I think you're confused." Her cool hand touched his forehead lightly. "Can you stand?"

"He looks pretty bad." Another voice. Male. Vaguely familiar. Oerin had never met his grandfather, but maybe the man who had won a Jedi’s heart had sounded like this. "We should call someone—"

"No." Mother said. Voice flat. "We can take him to the infirmary ourselves."

"Did Darth Malak do something to him?" A third voice. Female. One of the other headwomen. A horned face hovered overhead, striped with Iridonian patterns. A Zabrak headwoman?

Oerin must be near one of the outer colonies, to see such marvels.

"No." Mother knew everything. It was all in that word. "Not Malak."

"I beat that Moffa at chess when I was a stripling," Oerin bragged. His head felt fuzzy, as if everything around the Force was wrapped in soft cloth.

"He's delirious." Someone's voice.

Arms pulled him to his feet, propelled him along corridors, and doors, to a cool, metal place with bright lights overhead. More voices here, all concerned, pulling at his clothes, attaching tubes. Something metal pushed into his mouth and cool air rushed in, made it easier to breathe.

"He collapsed," Mother told someone. "It could be the sickness." She coughed.

Delirious? Was this what love felt like? He'd always wondered. There was a girl—I think you'd like
her, Mother. Could she hear him? She was so good at hiding it was hard to tell.

"Hush now." Mother bent over him, reaching down with the Force as well as her hands. In her warm embrace, Oerin felt weightless as air.

XXX

They got Oerin Lin to the infirmary, staffed by a lone, Force-trained med-tech, who immediately rushed them all into an isolation unit and put him in on a ventilator.

Mekel didn't like Lin's odds. Just a few hours ago, the man had been healthy and frighteningly powerful. Now, he was gray and shivering, babbling about colonies and mothers and statuary. The Force around him felt tainted and dull. They could all feel it, but the tech and her droids swarmed over him, attaching tubes and wires, speaking in low voices.

"It's plague," Thalia said quietly, beside him. The three of them sat a corner of the triage center on a metal bench. "Sometimes power isn't enough."

"What?" He wanted to strangle her, he wanted to run. But Mekel Jin took a deep breath instead and tried to sound brave.

"You remember—" And then Thalia May coughed. Her eyes met Mekel's. "Korriban."

"The good old days, huh?" he laughed, nervous. The sinking feeling in his gut again. He knew exactly what she meant.

Thalia shook her head, pointing to her throat. "Korr—," she coughed again, this one deep, in her chest like a wound. "Flu."

Mekel couldn't help himself. He got up and took a step back. A big step back. Not that it would help. There'd been coughing like this once on Korriban. Even with the vaccine some of the students died. A few species seemed immune, but pretty damn few. Their masters said it weeded out the weak. There were rumors it had been brewed up in a lab somewhere to do just that. Dreshdae flu, Korriban shake, the Sith puke.

Mekel felt a tickle in the back of his throat—probably just nerves, but—frack. He'd been vaccinated, they'd all been vaccinated, but Telos had caught it anyways, and Shardaan nearly died. They said you couldn't catch it twice, but you could get it once and after being on body patrol in the dorms for a week, Mekel never wanted to go back there again. The smell....

"You can't leave," the med-tech blocked his route to the exit. The mask she wore over her face made her voice metallic and cold. "The three of you were exposed. We'll need to run tests and keep you in quarantine until you're cleared."

Behind them, Thalia May coughed again. He could feel it, the dark gray sickness, enveloping them all. Mekel's gut twisted.

It wasn't fair. He and Thallie had been inoculated, but even that was no protection.

XXX

Sleeping in the Prentice Dormitories wasn't as fun as sleeping in Mother's rooms, but sometimes, Father said, you had to do what was necessary. Not that Father was happy about Mother sleeping with her new husband.... (Korrie didn't need to be a Threeth-year Eg to know that.) But sometimes, you had to take horrible vitamins, or sleep in a room with a bunch of babies, just to show that you
Korrie understood. His bunk was at the very end, the one farthest from the door—and closest to the fresher. Not that he was a baby who needed the fresher at night; but the others had given him the least desirable place. Korrie wasn't used to that—it had never happened when he was an Eglantine—but he tried to be a good sport. Even when Tia'mack tried to get him to tell the story again after lightsout about how Korrie's stepfather had almost shot his own son, or the others asked him to show them Force lightning because his mother used to be a Sith.

Korrie kept trying to remind himself that it was interesting, not getting the best. Interesting, just being another Padawan: but being a Padawan wasn't like studying telemetry or Byss. You couldn't just work hard and get extra tutoring to get better and better. No. You had to be born with it. And Korrie—even though his parents had been good—he just wasn't.

He could barely levitate the stupid feather they gave him to practice with.

You couldn't practice using the Force and get good at it, but you could practice the Forms and get good at them. Forms were important, Knight Danko told them that over and over again. Forms were the basics of defense and combat. Meditation. Knowledge.

So sometimes when he couldn't sleep, Korrie snuck downstairs to practice.

He was just congratulating himself on getting past the sensor droids that guarded the entrance of the dormies when he heard the voices. Getting caught would lead to getting in trouble, so Korrie ducked behind one of the huge pillars that lined the hallway and waited.

There were three of them passing him: Master Jopheena, a purple Twi'lek lady, a tall brown man, and—Mother.

A gaspy noise came out of his mouth before his brain could put a stop on it. Three lady heads and one man turned in his direction; even as Korrie realized something was really wrong. Mother didn't have a metal hand and this lady did. Mother didn't look like that either—all scary and mad—even when she was scary and mad.

When Korrie stepped out from behind the column, the lady that wasn't Mother looked at him like he wasn't anybody at all.

The nose that looked like Mother's wrinkled in irritation, grooving weird lines down to her mouth. "Shouldn't you be sleeping, little boy?"

"Sheris!" Master Jopheena put her hand on the lady's arm the way that AcheKay did when Korrie was out of line.

"Hello," the Twi'lek lady smiled at Korrie like they were old friends. "It's a little late for you to be up, isn't it?"

"I was going to go practice. Knight Danko said it was okay." That wasn't a lie. Knight Danko said practice was good a lot of times. He just never said when.

"He looks like her." The tall brown man had burny eyes that looked right into you. Korrie crossed his arms and looked back.

"You're supposed to be asleep, Padawan." Master Jopheena used her scolding voice, but all of the Padawans had learned fast that didn't mean much when she used it. Not like with Master Nexx, or Master Iridel or Master Hett.
"I need a lot of practice," Korrie told her. It was funny the way she kept looking at him like she expected him to say something about the lady who wasn't Mother. What was he supposed to say? Now that he wasn't gaspyed anymore, Korrie remembered there had been lots of actresses that looked like Mother. Korrie had seen them on the holovee when Grandfather didn't know.

"Are you making a vid?" he asked politely.

"What?" The lady who wasn't mother looked even madder.

"I wasn't supposed to watch, but sometimes I saw," Korrie told her. "I guess Mother doesn't have time to do acting so are you doing it for her?"

"What?" the lady repeated.

"Sheris…" Master Jopheena sighed.

"You must be Malachor," the purple Twi'lek lady extended her hand. Korrie shook it because that was how you were polite. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Yuthura Ban."

The red-haired lady who wasn't Mother made a gaspy noise. "This—this is the child? This is Malak's son?"

"And Revan's," said the tall brown man. He smiled and it made his face look better somehow. Less starvingey. "My name is Davad. I'm… a friend of your mother's."

"If you'd paid attention, you'd know, Sheris." The Twi'lek kept staring at Korrie, but in a nice way, so he didn't mind. "His face was all over the nets."

"It is nice to meet you all," Korrie said politely. Because that's what you said, even if the Mother-lookalike didn't seem very nice.

"My friends have just arrived from Manaan," Master Jopheena said. "We were hoping to talk to your mother." She paused, head tilting, as she considered him. One of her wrinkly eyebrows raised. "And your father."

"My father's dead," Korrie was careful. Lying to Jedi never went well, but you didn't have to tell them stuff either. Father had taught him that.

"Yes," the old lady agreed. "But that hasn't stopped him from making a mess of things, has it?"

"Dead organics don't make messes." Ache-Kay had told Korrie that once, when Korrie didn't want to clean his room.

The purple lady snorted, like Korrie had said something funny.

"Come with us." Master Jopheena enclosed his hand with her own, and started walking again, pulling Korrie along like a topper. "There's someone else here I think you should meet."

XXX

"Polla?" Half asleep, he reached for her, calling her by the wrong—but right—name. Half asleep, and his fingers closed on nothing, a warm place on the sheets where she'd been. Half asleep, he rolled over and sat up, reaching for the belt that held his blasters, and his pants, in that order.

It wasn't as if he hadn't had this nightmare before: this was how it all ends, that one day she'd just be gone.
Maybe turned into Revan like the Jedi wanted. Maybe turned back to Malak, who was really Dustil; or maybe off with the Mandalorians, but gone. As out of his life as if he’d really put the blaster to her head and shot her like Malachi D'Reev had brainwashed him to believe.

_You're crazy, Onasi. She went to check on Korrie. She went for a walk. She's coming back. She always comes back._

But then Carth was dressed, and stumbling out the door of their rooms, down the echoing hallways that always seemed half-empty, as if the Jedi Temple had once held more Jedi than it did now; echoing, as if it was still half-full of their ghosts.

Instinct, more than reason, made him duck behind a pillar when he heard voices. Like you could hide from Jedi in their own halls… except maybe you could, because the two that passed him were more intent on their own conversation than some half-asleep flyboy.

A white-haired woman. Master Atris. An old man. Master Vrook. Hadn't he been on Manaan with the Selkath Ten? Why was he here now?

"… no other choice," Master Atris said. Too tightly wound, that one, had been Carth's assessment when they met. Still was.

"Personal feelings aside, it's not ethical," Master Vrook argued. He looked the worse for wear. New lines etched his face like stripes. "Sheris asked for the redemption. She wants peace. What you're proposing is the opposite."

"She won't know the difference." Master Atris quickened her step, forcing Vrook to catch up to her. "But if you insist, we can ask her. Her mind is so damaged she's barely capable of consent." She almost sounded amused.

Vrook's voice grated, carrying across the echoing halls. "And that’s another reason why that cannot be an option. We don't need her at all. We have Revan."

"We don't have Revan. We have a shell who cares more about her child than the fate of the galaxy."

"She hasn't refused. She won't refuse. My niece knows what's at stake."

"Even if she gave consent, the odds of a second mind wipe and overlay being stable—" Master Atris spread her hands. "If you're concerned about her welfare, why risk it? Sheris is a viable alternative."

"Revan will risk it. Or if not, Knight Arkan can tell us what we need to know. He was there too."

"Davad Arkan was never directly involved. We need to know what Darth Revan knows. Surely, you can see that."

Vrook's voice cracked. "If what you say is true, why not ask _him_ instead. He must know—"

Master Atris's voice was low, so soft he almost missed it. "We will. But what we saw on the holocron only reinforces the urgency."

"Perhaps. But redemption should bring peace, not—" Vrook broke off sharply. His head turned back, gaze passing over Carth's hiding place, and then he turned back to Atris, lowering his voice. The two Jedi Masters quickened their steps.
Carth shrank behind the pillar. Hiding from Jedi suddenly felt a lot like hiding from Sith. And maybe just as futile. But Vrook and Atris didn't pause, didn't turn back, didn't come back for him.

Maybe they hadn't noticed him after all. Maybe it had all been in his head.

*Maybe you're just not important enough for them to care.*

Sheris and Davad Arkan. Two of the Jedi from Manaan. Two of the Selkath Ten. Their names had been all over the vids. They'd survived, unlike Beya Organa, the one Carth had called before she'd —died.

*(Been assassinated?)*

His mind tugged on that and tried to make sense of it. Tried and failed. Mind wipes. Overlays…

*I won't let you do more to her mind. You Jedi bastards have done enough.*

If Polla hadn't been missing, if he'd had resources, a stealth belt, Dagobah courage, Carth would have followed them. He would have found out. But now, in the now, he just wanted his wife, and so Carth turned the other way, towards the apprentice dorms.

Maybe she'd gone to check on Korrie. That was likely. Not everything was always a firestorm, he reminded himself. Sometimes, there was just a little smoke.

XXX

One of his ribs felt bruised from being slammed into the wall. And she'd kicked him good where it mattered. The boy’s body would be bruised later. Maybe worse.

But the pain gave him clarity. There was power in it. "Don't you see? They already know."

A pause as he watched that register, the knowledge sweeping across Red's face. Her saber dipped, exposing her flank, exposing her confusion.

The tactician he'd been knew now would be the time to strike, knock her off her feet, ram his boot into the soft skin of her throat and— *No.*

He closed his eyes, and tamped down the rage again. His or the boy's? Sometimes there was no difference.

Onasi had clumsily revealed his identity to those Jedi children, but they weren't the first to know. Malak could feel the weight of Jedi Masters too, like eyes along his back, watching and waiting— Waiting for *her.* Waiting for Revan to act, just as they had before in the wars.

Didn't the fools ever learn?

"We're done." Her hand unclenched, the light of her saber extinguished itself, and the Force wave ceased, sending his body—Dustil's body—slumping to the floor.

The finality in her voice was all too familiar. Cold. Detached. Entirely like herself. The Jedi wiped her mind, but they hadn't erased her. Here was the proof. Malak would have laughed, if he could have caught his breath.

"Get out of Dustil's body or I'll kill you," she added.
"I… told you," he gasped. "It's not that simple."

The temperature in the room dropped. Invisible pressure tightened around his throat. Spots danced before his eyes and his breath strangled in his chest. Malak felt his body rise, floating off the floor, suspended by her hate.

"Make it that simple," said the woman who didn't remember, but who was his wife. "Now."

XXX

Master Jopheena took his arm and dragged him down the halls like a topper, along with the mean lady who wasn't Mother and the purple Twi'lek who was nice, and the man with the burny, burny eyes.

"We saw the broadcasts." Burny-man said to Master Jopheena looked worried. "There's talk of closing the ports. Is there a vaccine? What are we doing to help?"

Korrie knew what vaccine was, he'd learned in school. Vaccine was what you did to not get sick. Like knockyoulashons, which Grandfather made him do once a year.

Master Jopheena frowned. "The epicenter was a Jedi clinic in the sublevels. There's no evidence that Jedi are carriers, but we can't risk spreading the virus. We've quarantined the zone, sent in med droids, but until we find a cure—" she broke off, as they reached a room with a door. One of the Jedi talking rooms, that were usually offlimits to apprentices and padawans.

Quarantined was like offlimits. Korrie knew that much.

Another man stood in the doorway. He was old and wrinkly and looked grumpy.

"You didn't find her?" Master Jopheena asked him.

"Revan's not in her rooms," the old Jedi said. He had a creaky voice. He looked right at Korrie too. "Malachor?"

"Yes?" Korrie said politely. He was fatter than Grandfather, but that wasn't saying much. His voice was raspy too, like he'd smoked a whole bunch of cigarras.

The old man bent down and peered at him. "You should be asleep right now. I'm your uncle," he added. "Your greatuncle."

"Oh," Korrie said back, because that was polite. "Hello, Greatuncle."

"Great Uncle Vrook," the old man said. A muscle twitched right along the lines by his nose. He extended a hand and Korrie shook it.

"I love family reunions," the red-haired woman who wasn't Mother made a sneery face that wasn't like Mother's sneery face, like she didn't really love family reunions at all.

"Sheris," the nice Twi'lek said.

"You reviewed the medlogs?" Master Jopheena looked at Greatuncle Vrook.

Greatuncle Vrook sighed. "Have there been any other cases?"

"Five. All under quarantine. And three Padawans came in with Lin. They're under observation too."
"What are the symptoms?" Burny-man asked.

Master Jopheena looked at Korrie and frowned. "Later," she said, gesturing for them all to enter the room.

"Sheris." The Jedi with the white hair, Master Atris, was waiting in there by a big circular table. There was a water jug and some glasses but no snacks. Korrie would have had snacks, if it had been his meeting.

Master Atris hugged Sheris. "It's been too long."

"What does Revan say?" Burny-man asked.

Master Atris shook her head sharply. "You overestimate her." She sighed, and smiled at Korrie for some reason. "Would that we could all live in such blissful ignorance."

"If things are as you say—"

"We don't know," Master Jopheena interrupted. "It could be coincidence."

"Even if it is coincidence," Greatuncle Vrook broke in, "We need to act. The Sith fleet off the Malachor system vanished. Our networks on Ziost and Thule have gone dark. We need to know why."

"And we will. Soon enough." Master Atris smiled at Sheris, and took her arm, the one that wasn't metal. "How are you and Davad holding up?"

"Vrook told me about Malak’s resurrection," the red-headed woman said. "I want to see him. I need to see him."

Vrook frowned. "I'm not sure that's wise."

The nice Twi'lek's lekku flicked forward, and she bent down over Korrie. "Maybe we should get you back to bed."

"I'm not tired," Korrie told her. "How did you guys know about my father?"

It had been a secret, but it wasn't now. That meant he was free to talk about it. Eglantine rules.

Master Jopheena smiled. Korrie liked her smile. "I trained him, Malachor. How could I not know?"

"Bed now," The Twi'lek's hand brushed his hair. "I'll take you. I think I remember the way."

There was no arguing with Jedi. Not when you were surrounded. Sometimes the best thing a kid could do was to retreat.

"Nice meeting you, Greatunclevrook," Korrie said politely.

Greatuncle nodded back at him. "We'll speak soon."

That was what Grandfather always said when he meant never because he was too busy. Korrie understood. He let the nice Twi'lek take him back to the dorms and he didn't even complain once. XXX

On the quest for the Star Forge, after the Leviathan, after Revan discovered who she was, the
nightmares got worse. On their small ship she lived through Bastila's torture by retreating to the combat room. Carth would find her there, sweaty and fever-eyed, lashing out at combat droids until all of the ones they had were a pile of scorched metal at her feet.

"He's hurting her," she said. Green eyes focused on things he couldn't see. "He wants me to know he's hurting her. He wants me to feel it—feel everything."

"Hush, beautiful." Empty words were all Carth had, but sometimes they worked. At least for a little while.

Carth Onasi didn't have the Force, but he knew his wife. Sometimes, he thought he knew her better than she knew herself. When she wasn't in Korrie's dorm, he knew where she'd be. That one practice room in the lower level of the Temple. The same one she always used. The place where she went she couldn't sleep.

And so it was there he went and so it was there that she was.

But she wasn't alone.

The woman who was his wife (who lived in the body of his mortal enemy) was Force-choking the man (who had been her husband) who lived in the body of his son.

If such an equation had been on a test at the Fleet Academy, Carth would have answered it easily: I save my son. I shoot the lady. Or possibly: I throw a stun grenade and disable them both; or, Revan and Malak? To preserve the Republic, I shoot them both.

But in the now things weren't clever or easy. His wife. His son. What they might be or had been didn't matter, they were his family.

And neither of them were who they should have been.

"Stop!" he screamed.

XXX

They were in the white room now, the one from her earliest nightmares. The one where it started, the great unraveling. Only that was a lie, because all of this had started long ago, before any of them were born. For the longest time, Thalia May had thought her dreams were the insanity, but now she knew that wasn’t true.

Her dreams were true. It was the galaxy that was slowly, irrevocably, going insane.

"Stop." The medic straightened, and turned off the monitor.

The alarm bells ceased, the machine going lifeless and gray as its charge: the dead Mandalorian on the bed.

The man Thalia had killed.

The medic's name was Janus and she'd been a Padawan once, but she'd failed the tests and so she worked here. She had just enough Force to sense things. It made her a better doctor. She didn't have enough Force to feel them.

That made her a better doctor too.

"I'm sorry," Thalia whispered. Her throat was sore now. She'd be very, very sick soon, but Janus
would save her, so she could meet the gray man from the ocean world. Save her, so she could save him. Three of Twelve of Acknahar'tah. She'd seen it in her dreams.

"You shouldn't have come," he repeated. Something vulnerable in that voice. Something pleading underneath the madness. "I'd build you a castle of stars. I'd keep you away safe, I'd save you—but you—you shouldn't have come."

"You have to see," Thalia said simply. "I dreamed of you."

"Thalia?" Lydie's hand was on her forehead, cool and reassuring. Lydie wouldn't catch the plague at all. Whatever fate awaited her friend—please don't let her be that Jedi on the bed. Please don't let that be Lydie—it lay beyond the veil. Beyond what Thalia could see.

"He's dead?" Mekk's voice was unbelieving. "He can't be dead."

Thalia tried not to cough again, not that it mattered. Janus would get sick in the last wave, the most virulent. At that point, the Jedi Temple would be half-deserted, weakened enough that its killers would stalk these halls openly. At that point, Padawans and Knights would go into hiding or be killed. At that point, the plague wouldn't make a difference. Janus would die, one way or another. So would most Jedi. Die or be turned.

"I'm… sorry," she whispered again. Blood and stars and worlds that burned. Oerin Lin would have brought that and more, and in some of Thalia's dreams she'd been there too: a queen at his side, creating a glorious Mandalorian Empire that swallowed both Jedi and Sith, encompassed all the stars.

Thalia May had been born on Ziost. A sect of apostates on that world believed that every choice had its own galaxy, a web of realms that stretched beyond the infinite. She'd never met the apostates, but her tutors had made her study their heresies, as they made her study the Jedi, to better learn the truth. Sometimes it was comforting, when she stepped from inevitability to inevitability in the present, to think of those other, possible places, where things could have been different.

Maybe better.

"There was nothing I could do," Janus said. "Sometimes… a virus hits like that. A quick burn. He was dead almost from the point of infection. It just took his body time to fail. We don't know why, it just—" her voice wavered, on the edge of exhaustion. Oerin Lin hadn't been the first to die that night.

"It's very contagious?" Lydie Korr sounded so calm, but her fingers tightened on Thalia's.

"You need close contact. Very close." Janus laughed nervously, ragged laugh from a woman near her breaking point. "As long as you haven't kissed him, I don't think you'll catch it."

"I think my friend is ill too." Lydie sounded too calm for it to be a lie.

Janus's face swam before Thalia's. Her hands prodded. "I think you're right."

The white world swam. Mekk's voice in the background. "I think I—I think I know what it is."

Of course he did. She'd told him. He'd save some of them. Thalia had dreamed that too.

XXX

The woman who was his wife, (who lived in the body of his mortal enemy), was Force-choking
the man, (who had been her husband), who lived in the body of his son.

If such an equation had been on a test at the Fleet Academy, Carth would have answered it easily: I save my son. I shoot the lady. Or possibly: I throw a stun grenade and disable them both; or, Revan and Malak? Are you kidding me? To preserve the Republic, I shoot them both. A lot.

But in the now, things weren't clever or easy. His wife. His son. What they might be or had been didn't matter, they were his family.

And neither of them were who they should have been.

"Stop!" he screamed.

A pause, and then Revan turned towards him. Behind her, Dustil's body fell like a deactivated droid. Maybe unconscious.

*Please not dead. Please don't let him be dead.*

"Carth." He couldn't read the expression on her face: she wasn't Polla's, she wasn't even the woman he'd known yesterday. "You knew? You knew who he was all this time?"

He forced a rough laugh. *Don't startle her. Not now.* "I wanted to tell you but I—"

Her mouth twisted. "I understand."

"Is he—?" She was standing between them. He couldn't see. He couldn't tell if Dustil was breathing or not. He had to know—had to—if Dustil was breathing or not.

"He'll be fine." Green eyes scanned his face. "We'll be fine. All of us." Her hands twitched nervously. "I wish you'd told me. It must have been—it must have been hard, watching...." her voice trailed off again and her eyes flicked away from him, glancing back at Dustil's prone body, and then back again to him. "I didn't kill him," she muttered, more to herself than Carth. "I won't kill him."

"I know." He smiled at her, trying to reassure a scared malraas. "You sure he's okay?"

"They'll be some bruises." His wife's mouth twitched. "He might wake up with a headache. Malak's seen worse."

*I don't care about Malak, I care about Dustil. How can you call him that? How can you stand there and call him that?*

Carth forced himself to relax his hands, put one gently around her. "Let's go back to bed." It took every ounce of self-control he had to leave his son's body there. To leave without checking for himself, but he had to get her out of there, away from him, as fast as possible. "If you're sure he's okay."

Her eyes scanned his face. "He will be. We'll get Malak out and Dustil will be fine." She blinked. "Everyone knew. The Jedi all knew and no one told me."

It wasn't an accusation, Carth reminded himself. Even if it was, she wasn't—she couldn't mean it. She had no right to accuse Carth of anything when she'd been the one who—

"Let's go back to bed," he repeated. "In the morning we'll...."
"No one told me," Revan repeated. Her brows drew together in a frown. "There has to be something. Some ritual… cleansing. I think I saw something like that on a holoday cartoon when I was—when Polla was… a child. The Jedi can exorcise Force ghosts, can't they? We'll make them do it."

"Sure they can!" Carth nodded. Smiled his empty smile. Guided his wife away from his son. Tried to ignore the question beating like a drum in his skull.

_Sure they can. The Jedi fix everything._

_But she said everyone knew. If the Jedi knew it's Malak in there—if they knew all along-why haven't they fixed it already?_

XXX

He sat alone in his burnished chair, waiting for his leashed Mandalorians to finish their security checks. Since the unpleasantness with Racharn, Malachi had to be very careful. He had enemies everywhere and even his triumphs—a personal Mandalorian army, Malachor safe from the Games—were ash in his mouth as long as his heir was with the Jedi. He'd lost one son already. What kind of man would Malachor become with their teachings?

_Another weak-willed sot like his father. Another failure. I cannot let this happen again._

HK ushered in the guest. "Announcement: Citizen Four of Acknahar'tah to see you, Master. Weapons and tox screens are clear."

"Citizen… Four?" The names some sentients chose for their clandestine meetings.

Malachi gestured for the man to take a seat opposite him, not bothering to get up. "I received your employer's message." The message had come through the physical post, a deliberately recondite datapad with a link to a holovid production company he'd never heard of. A tiresome waste of his time… except that it had been sent to a dead-drop Malachi had thought was completely secure, and formerly only used by Revan and Malak themselves. "I believe you have a package for me?"

The man was nondescript and dressed in black. Naturally. He pulled out a holodisk from his sleeve. "My master wants you to watch this."

"And you're her errand boy." Where in the Jedi Temple had his daughter-in-law found this criminal?

Something flickered in those dead eyes. "I am Four of Twelve. I serve Lord Arca."

Who worked for Revan. Malachi had already reviewed the security vid while his team checked the clearances. "Mistress Arca was too busy to come herself?" He'd heard of Arca, of course. Some self-styled crime lord. Malachi tried to keep up with the flotsam on the sublevels, but it wasn't always easy.

"Lord Arca," the man corrected tonelessly.


Truly, he'd only taken the meeting as a distraction. The rooms were very empty since Malachor had
"We're still in the editing stage, but she wanted you to see." The man leaned over and inserted the disc into the holoplayer on Malachi's desk.

Malachi spread his arms, munificent. "Show me," he said.

"It's called *Return of the Sith,*" said Four.

"I'm sorry," said the woman politely. "Your face looks familiar, but I—I have we met?"

She had long brown hair and bright blue eyes. She was very pregnant.

She looked like Bastila Shan.


"I'm sorry?" Bastila Shan caressed the gentle swell of her belly. Her beautiful face looked puzzled.

"We served together on the Endar Spire. And then with Revan. We found the Star Forge and defeated the Sith."

The Jedi's mouth pursed in a round 'o' of surprise. "Admiral Onasi? Oh! So nice to see you again. How—" her brow furrowed and her eyes seemed a million parsecs away. "How's the family?"

The man gave a ragged laugh. "You mean my son? He's all I have left since Malak and Revan bombed Telos."

"Revan never bombed Telos!" Bastila sounded indignant. "He saved everyone! How can you call yourself an Admiral of our glorious Republic and not know that?"

Malachi waved a pause. "Really?" he sighed. "Our glorious Republic? Tastes have changed. You're about six months too late."

"My employers have a long-term view." Four snapped his fingers and started the vid again.

"I know what I saw on the net really happened," Carth Onasi retorted. "The newsvids said Revan and Malek destroyed Telos. There's...there's almost nothing left. Y-you can't—"

"I don't know what you think you saw, Admiral, but only a fool trusts the HoloNet." Bastila Shan rose to her feet, graceful, despite her burgeoning belly. "It's a pack of terrible lies. I think you should go now."

"I'm not leaving until I talk to Revan," the Admiral said stubbornly. He crossed his arms.

Well, *that* part they'd gotten right—the man was certainly stubborn.

"Amateurs," murmured Malachi D'Reev tapped the control and froze the holomage. "Children playing with plasma lights in the dark. If your master wants distribution rights, I can't help."

"That's not our objective, Senator." The man in black drummed his fingers on his knee. He really looked a little too... capable to be an errand boy. Malachi's pulse tightened.

*Ex-military type,* he thought. *They all thought they had vibroblades to grind. Really, they should thank me.*
"Warning: Hostile language may be interpreted as provocation. May I interpret it as provocation, Master?"

"Relax, HK, I'm sure Arca's boy here means us no harm." Malachi forced a jovial smile on his face. "Just a film producer… working with my daughter-in-law, you said?"

"Among others," said the man in black. "My master has many friends."

"Pity she couldn't come herself. I don't like working with lackeys." Despite his bravado, Malachi was glad his personal shields were up. Even if the man had been cleared by D'Reev security, something about him…. His skin was a little too gray. His eyes, a little too bright—almost feverish. And with plague in the sublevels, you couldn't be too careful. But the bio-scans had been clean….

Malachi unpaused the holovid. Transparent projections of Bastila and Carth facsimiles sprang back to life.

"Revan's not here." Bastila Shan lifted her perfect chin and it trembled bravely. "And where he's going is none of your business."

"Oh?" Carth crossed his arms. "Rumors at the spaceport say he's been taking on a lot of supplies to the Ebon Hawk. Maybe like he's not coming back. Is he running out on you, sister?"

"You're a fool! Revan loves me! He would never leave me!"

"Why the male Revan, again?" Malachi murmured. "It's an interesting choice. I'll admit, Bastila ratings are certainly high enough to carry sales."

The door behind them slid open, revealing a man of medium build, who was entirely unremarkable: except for the length of silky black hair that flowed down his back, his silvery gray eyes, and his handsome features.

"Bastila?" Perfectly modulated voice. Core accent, with only a hint of mystery. "I heard voices—"

In another moment, the carth was dangling in the air choking, legs kicking uselessly, while the black-haired man clenched his fist in the air.

"Revan!" Bastila embraced the newcomer, graceful, even with the large belly. "You were gone for hours! I missed you!"

The man's eyes flickered between her and the dangling carth, as his face broke into a beautiful smile. "We still have tonight, my darling." With his free hand, the man caressed her stomach, burying his head in her hair. "We'll have tonight, and we'll make the most of it. Our last night in the universe. You know as well as I what needs be done. Tomorrow, Canderous and I—"

"Mmmmfffaa!" said the carth, choking.

"Oh. Right." Revan dropped his hand and the man fell to the lavishly carpeted floor. "Who is this, my sunrise?"


Revan's head tilted, and he turned, exposing his muscular back. "Hrm..." he frowned. "Not the poor fellow who faced down Darth Bandon, surely. I thought he died."

"No. Admiral Onasi came with us to the Star Forge. He was flying the ship? I think?" Bastila
continued. "I admit, it threw me for a loop at first too, seeing him again. He's changed his hair."

"So he has," mused Revan. "Was it a beard he had before? And I thought he was older."

"I can't tell," Malachi observed, "Is this a parody?"

"Not my area of expertise," said the man in black.

The carth got to his feet, face murderous with rage. "I came here to help you and you try to kill me?" His hand fumbled for his pistols and then pulled back.

Revan and Bastila stood there, serene.

"We don't need your help," Bastila Shan told him. "My husband has everything under control."

"Him and his murdering Mandalorians!" Carth twitched. "They destroyed Telos—"

"Peace," Revan purred. "I think you're confused, my good man. The Mando'ade are our friends now. And once I unite the tribes of the star's forgotten children under my reign—"

"The what?" Malachi said.

"Not my area of expertise," the man repeated. "I had orders to bring you the video, nothing more."

On the screen, the revan made several mystical movements with his arms, until he and Bastila began to glow, with celestial yellow light. Under their influence, the carth's countenance changed: from anger, to confusion, to a blankness, and then finally, to peace.

"Oh," said Carth. "I—I understand, my Lord. Where are you going?"

"Where I walk, none must follow," Revan intoned. The holocam zoomed in for a close up on his face. His gray eyes were steely and almost—hypnotic. "Trust me, and if you value our friendship, look after my wife for me while I'm gone."

Music swelled, something with lots of strings. The holocam zoomed to Bastila's face, and the lone crystal tear that fell from one of her ocean-clear blue-violet eyes.

Carth bowed his head. "I will," he vowed. "I promise to keep her safe."


"Know this. I will return," vowed Revan. "Return victorious with the glories of an Empire. Wait for me. Raise my son. Remember my name."

"I will, my love." Bastila embraced him.

"I'd best leave you two alone," Carth flashed Revan a proud grin and punched him lightly in the arm. "Good man."

The door slid closed behind him, and on the screen, Bastila and Revan embraced passionately. Symphonies swelled in the background, and the image slowly faded to black.

Some crime lords were useful. Obviously, Arca was not one of these. It would probably be destabilizing to have her killed, but Malachi made a mental note to look into it.

What was his daughter-in-law thinking? Endorsing this drivel would get her off the hook? No.
"Thank you," he said, because being impolite to the help never solved anything. "You may go now."

But Four didn't move. "I have a message from my Lord Arca."

"As I said, if it's distribution rights you're after, I can't endorse something… of this nature." Malachi felt his features twist in disgust. "Regardless, Revan's old news. Tell your master to pick a new genre: maybe Mandalorian pornography, or something with regular Jedi. Jedi always sell."

"The Return of the Sith was shot on location in Coruscant," Three said. "But it was not made for Republic distribution."

"Oh?" Odd. Malachi didn't really care. With a nod to HK he raised his voice. "You are free to go."

His faithful droid glided over to Four and prodded the man lightly in the back with his appendage. Four didn't respond, he just kept staring at Malachi. His eyes… really weren't right.

"Not for Republic distribution," he repeated.

"The Outer Rim market?" Malachi scoffed. "Have at it! Not much there." With Telos and Taris both in ruins, there would be no economy in the backwaters for quite some time. Centuries, probably.

The man in black shook his head. "No," he said. "Consider me an emissary. A harbinger of things to come."

"Oh, ho," said Malachi D'Reev. So it was that again. The old chesta-nut. Those aberrant, inbred fools who never had the grace to die out. They'd been useful, in their time: one small planet projecting a doctrine of fear that encompassed a galaxy. But that time was long past. The Republic needed new enemies now; enemies built from its own rotting carcass. It was time to clean house.

And the Sith… they'd been completely pathetic without Revan and Malak and the rest of their fallen Jedi to back them up. A dying race. Almost a joke. Hardly even profitable.

Malachi snorted. "You can't be serious." He cracked his knuckles and sighed. "Fine," he said. "Show it on Ziost and Thule. You don't need my permission to distribute your moffa-sweepings there. I only control one of the government holochannels—there are three others—"

"Ziost," the man in black said, "has recently been liberated."

"No it has not." Malachi made a gesture to HK. Enough of this farce. "The Republic has better things to do. Perhaps in another decade or two, but now—"

"Ziost," the man in black said, "has been liberated by the true Sith. The real Sith empire."

"There's no such thing." Malachi snorted. "Not for a thousand years."

The man in black shook his head slowly. "No." A grim smile stretched the tight skin against his skull. "You're wrong."

XXX
Wake Up, It's a Coruscanti Morning

Chapter 29 / Wake Up It’s a Coruscanti Morning

The sun hadn't even started to rise over the half-domed sky when Vrook summoned Revan, his mental touch as soft as a hand brushing back the hair from her face.

“I have to go see Vrook,” she murmured to Carth. “The Jedi from Manaan—they’re here.”

Carth hadn't been asleep either. Both of them coiled next to each other, back to back, and lost in their own thoughts. “I know.” He rolled over, wrapping his arms around her waist. You have to go now?"

“You know?” Revan felt like she should be surprised, but she was too drained.

They’d had a night of nightmares. The plague from the Underground was in the Temple. Oerin Lin had come down with it—they’d received a message from a strained Ithorian medic who had been waiting for them when they’d returned to her rooms. Their rooms. Where they’d returned after they left Carth’s son’s body unconscious on a practice room floor.

Because he was Malak. Malak is here and I don’t know what to do.

At least Korrie was still asleep. Revan could feel his sleepy half-thoughts like eyelashes brushing against her cheek, even if he himself was in the apprentice dorms.

More disturbingly, Revan could feel Malak as well. Malak was asleep now too—or still unconscious.

Too much to hope he'd have brain damage.

Even as she thought that, she was horrified that she had. Carth’s son. He's Carth’s son. Whatever happens to his body happens to Carth’s son.

“I’ll go check on Dustil,” Carth said. His voice sounded almost accusing, as if he hadn't forgiven her for Force-choking his son.

Revan rolled over to face him. His eyes were shadowed with fatigue, and every line of his body was tense. “No,” she frowned. “You're about to fall over. You need to get some sleep.”

“I need to watch Dustil,” he growled.

“He's asleep too. Now.”

His eyes narrowed. “You can tell? How can you tell?”

“It's… just the Force. I can tell when everyone’s sleeping,” she lied.

Carth sat up, already reaching for his boots. "We shouldn't have left him alone." Tension was in every line of his face; as was the reason he had been willing to leave Dustil.

You wanted to get me away from him.
Frustration warred with impatience, and she snapped. “No,” Revan said. “You need to sleep. Now.”

Her husband froze. “I need to sleep. Now.” Carth’s eyes fluttered closed, and he sagged back down on the mattress.

“Frack,” Revan said. Guilt and relief nagged at her.

She grabbed her comm and tapped in a request for Canderous to watch Dustil and why. Nothing phased the Mandalorian; although she suspected this might test that theory.

She couldn't feel Canderous in the Force, but he was probably with Oerin—or as close as the medics would let him be. They'd quarantined Oerin and a few others. She didn't know who: the Jedi who had informed them hadn't been very clear—or there very long.

The Jedi had seemed terrified of Revan. So many of them were terrified of her. It was getting harder and harder to ignore.

“You'll wake up in a few hours,” Revan whispered. She pushed the hair back from Carth’s forehead, and kissed him softly. “I'm sorry.”

XXX

The viewscreen in front of them was a mass of debris: ranging from moon-sized to microscopic. Maneuvering through the soup took the precision of a hyper-surgeon. It made her hands twitch in sympathetic envy.

From time to time, their shields sparked, as smaller rocks from this belt burned on point of impact. But they were holding. They were almost through.

“Stop,” Polla said. “This isn't working. Turn the ship around.”

Therion D’Cainen didn't even turn his head. “Are you fracking kidding me? I'm in the middle of navving an asteroid belt here!”

“Pollie?” Seiran touched her shoulder.

Abasen was sleeping in a pile of laundry next to the navboard. She automatically glanced his way before continuing.

“I don't want to run. I don't care if it's not smart. A person can't just… ruin someone's life and not have consequences. We need to go to Coruscant. Now.”

“What are you going to do?” Therion sounded interested.

“No,” Seiran said at the same time. “Absolutely not. It’s too dangerous.”

“Therion has contacts there,” she argued. “Media ones. If we go public, they can’t touch us.” She folded her arms. “Uncle Boon is in prison because of her! We can’t just… do nothing.”

“Beya went public,” Seiran reminded her.

“Beya couldn’t nav her own ship! We can be smart about it. I'm not saying we should storm the Jedi Temple or anything, but this… running and hiding? Being afraid?” Polla turned to him, staring him dead in the eye. “It's not me. It's not you. And it's a bad example for Junior.”

“Pollie….” her husband sighed. But she knew that sigh. He knew she was right.
“Turn the ship around, Therion,” Pollie repeated. “Or I’ll fly her myself.”

“You want to?” Her old lover cocked an eyebrow at her, smiled his scoundrel’s grin. “Be my guest.”

She smiled back, and got up. He made room for her, sliding along the bench so she had the pilot’s chair. Her fingers were already flexing over the nav controls, plotting their path back through the drifts to the hyperspace jump point.


XXX

Canderous hadn't nodded off on the bench: it was more of a light doze. The comm on his arm buzzed, the hepatic shake jolting him awake like a shot of stim.

He rubbed his eyes. They’d been in there for hours now with Lin, according to his chronometer, and still no word on the pup’s condition.

“Jett’ai,” he muttered in disgust. “Ucah'alla y nik.”

The comm was from Revan. He had to read it twice before he accepted that it made sense. And even then, he read it a third time after having an actual shot of stim, just to make sure.

“You're going to have to take care of yourself, Lin,” he muttered at the closed door to the medix. “Looks like I have to go babysit a Dark Lord of the Sith.”

XXX

"I need to ask you a question," Vrook said. "Before we begin."

Revan stared back. At him and the Jedi next to him. If anything, her uncle looked even more worn and tired than he had on Manaan. "Ask away," she said.

"Did you have Polla and her family killed?"

"Of course not!" Revan opened her mouth to go on, to explain that they weren't actually dead at all; but something made her hesitate. Maybe it was the fact that he could even think she’d do that. Maybe it was the woman beside him, this total stranger who claimed to be one of Revan's old masters. One of Revan's old masters that she'd never fricking heard of.

"I don't know who gave the order," she said, looking away. "I was as shocked as anyone."

"Sometimes even a small death can send its reverberations across the Force," the Jedi woman said. Her pale eyes glinted.

"Their deaths weren't small," Revan snapped.

"Ah." Master Kae glanced at Vrook. "She seems sincere."

"She is," he grunted. "I... apologize for the question."

"It's fine," Revan said. "I understand."

"Of course you do." He reached across the table clumsily, and patted her hand. "You are my niece."
"She is Revan," Kae said. The trace of a smile crossed her lips. "Or she soon will be."

“When I take back her—my—memories,” Revan kept her voice careful: calm, accepting, as if the decision was already made. “What will happen to my memories of... this?”

_Everything that I am. The quest for the Star Forge. Carth. Deralia. Finding my son again._

_Killing his father._

Her uncle sighed heavily, folding his hands behind his back. “The instability in your current personality comes from the fact that Polla Organa’s life was overlaid over Revan’s. They had to leave enough of Revan intact for the Rakatan devices to recognize you; but enough of Polla Organa to create a tractable… vessel. When you are restored, the aberrant patterns must be erased.” He frowned. “I know how that sounds. The technicians think it is possible you might retain some of the facts from the last year; but not the personality behind it.” His smile was sad.

“Instability?” She almost laughed at that, before she realized that might make her look unstable.

“You are a remarkable woman. I think you deserve to know your own life.” Vrook sighed, kneading his temples. “Restoring your memories should restore your mind in its entirety.”

“And we have need,” the woman next to him murmured. It bothered Revan couldn’t remember her at all, like a nagging tooth. “The Council has a final task for Revan.”

“Final?” Revan echoed. “That doesn't sound good.”

Vrook’s dark eyes didn't even blink. “We will not hide the truth. It may be... final.”

“Revan understood the necessity of sacrifice,” Kae added. “We have told you of the threat she identified: the threat that still exists. The threat that needs to be dealt with.”

“You want me to leave my son again.” Revan shook her head sharply. “No.”

The woman scoffed. “You hear our words without meaning. Like having a beloved pupil to turn from you... and forget all you that were.” Her pale eyes were disdainful. “Are you really so broken as this?”

_Frack off, you old pissant._ She glared back at Master Kae. “I don’t need to prove myself to you.”

Fire flashed in the Jedi’s eyes, but her mouth curved up, as if she was pleased. “No, you do not. This is not some Mandalorian proving ground, or a plimfoam war, made like a HoloNet drama. This is the Sith. The _real_ Sith. And they are coming. It is only a matter of time.”

Vrook folded his hands. “They say that he has a thousand versions of himself, Revan. Maybe more. He hollows them out as children, and puts his own mind in them.”

“Like Malak did to Dustil?” Anger there. Anger for Carth. For his son. And for hers. “You don’t even know for sure. You're basing all of this on what Atris said—from a few of my memories! I was half mad! Maybe I... I dreamed the whole thing.”

“The others are speaking to Malak now—to confirm it.” Vrook rubbed his temples. “I wanted to believe you had a choice, Revan. I didn’t want to believe this was true; but Master Kae has shown us. There is a world in the Chorlian system. A dead planet. If one man can destroy all life on a world with only his mind.... _That_ is a greater threat than anything we have ever faced.”
“It is why the Sith sought out your power,” the woman added. “Yours and Malak’s. Why they still seek you. There are those among them who want to stop him as much as we.”

Revan tried not to shiver. *More useless Jedi who don’t even care that my dead husband is possessing Dustil’s body.* “Are you serious? You trust Malak? You trust the Sith?”

“I trust Revan,” her uncle said, eyes searching her face. “Make no mistake—you would not enter this alone. We will send others—allies, agents—an entire network to support you.”

“D’Reev made up one bogey for the Republic. How do you know this legend of an immortal, world-devouring Sith Emperor isn’t just another one of his tricks?”

“We have confirmation. From… other sources.”

“Other sources?” She glared at him.

“I have seen the Emperor,” said Master Arren Kae. “I followed you to war.”

“I don’t remember.” She looked at the woman again. Pale. Pale eyes, pale hair, pale skin. Her features were wrinkled under her hood. Her accent was standard Core. Bland. Untraceable. She looked perfectly ordinary.

“No,” the woman said. “But you will.”

“I don’t know,” Revan said. Something was—something was wrong. It chimed like a note out of tune in the Force. It hung like a black cloud surrounding them.

The comm chimed. Vrook thumbed it open. The infirmary. The medix office. The face of an Ithorian, expressionless to Human eyes; but the tilt of her head and the Feel of the Force was unmistakable.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news.” said the Jedi dressed in medic’s whites. "Oerin Lin is dead."

Beside Revan, Master Kae closed her eyes.

**XXX**

When her father didn’t return to the hotel that Senator D’Reev had arranged for their new camp, Millifar wasn’t concerned. Tradition demanded seven nights under the same tent, ship, or roof as his new wife, in order to seal the bonds of their marriage. Revan and Canderous Ordo had only had five.

But she had expected Oerin Lin and Mekel Jin to return.

Not that she was sitting around uselessly waiting. No. In fact, she had been working quite hard on an analysis of genetic drift in Core space among the nine humanoid types: so hard that she’d accidentally stayed up all night with her hair loose and golden down her back, in a barbarian gown made of shimmersilk and embroidered with sea pearls; feet propped up demurely on a hassock, and her console resting carefully on her knees.

She wasn’t waiting for Oerin (or Mekel Jin, should he arrive as well); it was simply that, because she was awake, she was the first one to notice when they did not return.

Statistics on Echani and Arkanian populations were spinning in her head. The pleasant evening dreams she’d had about Oerin and Mekel Jin dueling for her honor like the barbarians on the
HoloNet Drama *Onderon Brave*, began to fade. Such fantasies seemed more illusory with every lightening of the Coruscanti sky.

They were both Force users. The Jedi were all Force users. What if they decided to never come back at all?

An hour before the real dawn, Millifar put down her console, got up from the divan, and asked T3 to send a message to Mekel Jin and find out what had caused the delay. It was a perfectly reasonable request; especially for a supercomputer capable of nearly anything.

But to her surprise, the droid balked.

“Error,” she said. (Mekel Jin used female pronouns with it, so Millifar did too.) “Mekel Jin is not available at this time.”

“But he’s always available.” It was one of his charms. “Comm him again. I’m sure he’ll wake up.”

“I can’t.” T3 sounded almost… uncertain. “He’s removed our communications device.”

“Why would he do that?”

The computer whirled to herself for a long time. Long enough that Millifar started to lose patience.

“Oerin Lin is… sick,” she said finally. “Mekel Jin says it’s the Korriban flu: Cross-reference—error. Data is corrupted. No files are available at this time.”

“Oerin has the flu?” Millifar shrugged. “So you did talk to Mekel Jin? Are you talking to him now? Is my father there?”

“We need to go there. Now.” T3 hadn’t answered her. Instead, the astromech started barking and growling; and the three-meter long Wookiee Millifar hadn’t even realized was curled in front of the hearth (so closely did his fur resemble the carpet) rose to his feet and started barking back.

Millifar spoke none of Zaalbar’s tongue, but the meaning of his roars was clear. Like her, the Wookiee was concerned about Jedi treachery.

“We’ll go now,” she agreed, grabbing a few daggers and her blaster from the safe in the wall.

She decided against waking the rest of the clan. They had been on this City-Planet for a while, and Millifar was absolutely sure there was nothing she couldn’t handle on her own; and certainly nothing she couldn’t handle with the help of the Wookiee and the astromech translator. Zaalbar and his people had a very civilized approach to violence. He was quite good at it.

They rode one of the tram devices for several stops, before Millifar got tired of the unarmed crowds pushing and jostling. “Can’t we just walk?”

It wasn’t that she minded confined spaces… exactly. After all, she would probably spend the rest of her life on ships while the clans rebuilt their Empire. But she had been raised under open sky; and the tram was *nothing* like a warbird. Almost no one wore armor, and some of them smelled.

The beast groaned his affirmative, as if the stench bothered him too.

Strangely silent, T3 followed them, as they traversed several kilometers of platforms, and causeways. The crowds were less up here, and the sky paled, from gray to white.

Dawn broke over an almost empty plaza. When Millifar had been here before, the place had been
bustling. Now, all the shops were closed, and the few sents that were out at this late hour, gave her party a wide berth.

“What about Revan?” Milli asked the T3. “Can you talk to her now?”

“She took off her comm,” the droid said. “So, no.” If a droid could sound dejected, this one did.

“Why would they both cancel communications with you?” It didn’t make any sense.

Unless the Jedi had made them. Millifar frowned.

“I’m not sure,” T3 said. “It’s all confused. Some of the data was corrupted when I lost connection to my mainframe on Kashyyyk.” Her processors whirred. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Of the dead?” Millifar asked. “I’ve been told that the Jedi artifacts can contain personalities of their dead. Some believe Mandalore’s mask is such an artifact. And isn’t a Jedi ghost artifact how you were formed?”

Mekel Jin had tried to explain it once, during one of their interminable waits for Senator D’Reev to finish some sort of commerce transaction.

“Maybe he’s another one then,” T3 muttered.

“Mekel Jin?” Millifar was sort of pleased to realize she hoped not. “Did the Jedi kill him?”

The Wookiee growled an interrogative as well.

“No! Not—never mind who! As soon as I know for sure, I’ll tell you, okay?” T3 paused. “By the way guys, speaking of dead, I think I have some bad news. Oerin Lin is totally dead. I’m pretty sure.”

“He died of the flu, I think.” T3 whirred again. “I was trying to get confirmation before. I didn’t want to freak you guys out if it wasn’t true. Then Mekel Jin got the collar off, right after. I have some nanos and stuff in his system, but without the main relay, they’ll die off. And I can’t get a clear signal anymore. I can’t hear anything he’s saying.”


“The Jedi just imposed a quarantine on the Temple.” T3 whirred. “Pretty sure, yeah. Mekel thought Lin was dead. They were in a medix or something before the feed from the collar stopped.”

“But my father’s still inside the Temple! And Mekel Jin.”

Belatedly, Millifar remembered she was supposed to worry about Revan and her son too. “Do you know specifically: is it plague or is it flu?” she added. Genetics were more of her area of study, but Millifar had studied some xeno-epidemiology before she selected her Path.

“Error!” T3 cursed to herself in a few different language. One of them was Huttese, Milli knew that one. “I can’t access more intel about the flu. It is deemed hazardous to sentient life.”

“So?” Millifar shrugged. “Aren’t most things hazardous to sentient life?”
“Technically. But I had to make some judgement calls, and all the plague stuff was definitely up there.” A sighing noise came from the chassis. “Polla Revan also said to wipe everything about Malak. So I don’t really have a good handle on what him possessing Dustil Onasi means either.”

“Are you sure she’s not broken?” Millifar asked the Wookiee. She must be. Because that was just insane. Of course, their histories were full of examples of Jedi being possessed by dead Sith Lord ghosts; but Dustil Onasi hadn’t even been a Jedi. Had he?

Zaalbar groaned a response that sounded as confused as Millifar felt.

“He says he’s not sure of anything. Neither am I.” Red lights flashed. “Polla-Revan wiped all material hazardous to sentient life from my data core. The same core I can’t even access now, and I don’t know why!” T3 paused. “This is a shitty day.”

“It’s barely started.” Dawn started to break over the buildings, and the Coruscanti barbarians began to go about their days. Millifar wasn’t really sure what most of them did, but it all seemed to involve standing in line for caff as the beginning. “I need to comm my mother,” she said. “As an unmarried woman, I can’t coordinate a death walk. But let’s get breakfast first.”

The Wookiee rumbled his assent.

XXX

When word of the armistice came to the Fleet, everyone cheered. Peace had been hard-won; and even a Jedi Padawan in the medic’s division knew it. Maybe a Jedi Padawan who was a medic knew it even more than most: because she and her master spent most of their time trying to repair the damage done.

In honor of that distinguished service, Master Imra Lu and Padawan Sheris Loran were assigned to the Honor Guard on the Republic Flagship, The New Hope; to be sent to the skies above Malachor V, as the hosting ship for the signing of the Great Mandalorian Accord.

But then, the day before, Imra Lu summoned her Padawan to tell her the plans had changed.

“You’ve been reassigned to the Progress,” Master Imra said.

“Have I done something wrong?” The Progress wasn’t even going to the Armistice.

“Not at all.” The white fur that covered Master Imra’s face, flattened, and her ears twisted back. Her clawed hand squeezed Sheris’s hairless one. “But you need to leave immediately. There’s… a special shuttle. Knight Vikor has arranged everything.”

Being in the secondary fleet shouldn’t be a dishonor, and Padawans weren’t supposed to need public affirmation for their good works; but Sheris was disappointed.

And there was something wrong. It was as obvious in the Force surrounding her master as a broken bone.

As they walked to the hangar bay, Sheris went over and over the last few weeks in her mind, wondering how she’d failed. Was it the decision to amputate the Zabrak boy’s leg? Her choice of number eight sutures for the transplant? The brain-dead woman with the medulla swelling and the repairs beyond what the Force could fix? Master Imra had said after that Sheris could have tried a shunt and given her more time; but they were out of beds.

She’d also commended Sheris for making the difficult choice, for letting the woman die.
But had that been wrong choice after all?

XXX

There was that delicious beat in the Force when they thought she was Revan: beat of fear, admiration, and confusion; before they noticed the metal arm, the longer hair, and the weakness.

Even now in the early morning, the Temple felt drenched in pity: as if around every corner, another Padawan scurried, looking at her wide-eyed.

She’d interrupted a pack of them, talking in whispers about Padawans, quarantine, and a dead Mandalorian named Oerin Lin. Then one of them looked up and saw her and—

And then came the pity.

Fools. They shouldn’t pity Sheris Darkstar.

If anyone, they should pity all the poor nulls on the HoloNet: making up stories about what had happened in the wars, like children telling ghost stories around an alcohol fire in an ice cave. Shivering at the shadows their tiny hands cast on the walls. Children, with no idea that while they were jumping at shadows, they could freeze to death. They should pity poor Beya and the rest of the former Selkath ten. Seven of them dead, when all they’d wanted was home. They should pity all those fools like Master Imra, who died at Malachor. They should pity Meetra Surik: who, by all accounts had gotten Force-stripped instead of wiped for her part in Revan’s plan; before taking off again and vanishing somewhere in the Outer Rim.

They should pity the monster lying on a slab in front of her: the man who had promised her a seat above all other Pretenders back on Manaan, where being Sith was almost a merciful game.

Except... there was no reason to pity the dead.

Oerin Lin had been false: sharing her bed, but saving himself. One time she’d mocked his manhood; assuming he was like any other man and would take offense.

She thought they’d duel. Maybe she’d even thought he’d kill her.

He had not. Indeed, he hadn’t seemed to understand her scorn.

“It works perfectly,” he said. “I check by myself at least twice a day. Thank you for your concern.”

“Am I not to your liking?”

Shame then. Shame that a copy as perfect as her had to compete with the rest of the pathetic Revan pretenders. Did one of them have something she did not? She remembered the pain, as the Rakatan machines had twisted her flesh. Not one of the Pretenders had dared as much, had been truly reshaped in Her image.

Oerin actually blushed. “I like you just fine. It's not the right time.”

“Is it Mandalorian custom to not...?” Most of the others hadn’t known his true nature. But it was hard to hide the clan tattoos on his skin, from someone who had been in the wars. Seen their like before, on the corpses of her slain.

“Not... entirely.” His face flushed. Strange, how a man so powerful, so steeped in the dark side of the Force could blush. “I was told to be careful.”
She pivoted in front of him, wearing nothing but her smile. “Who would dare tell you anything?”

The Gamemaster pulled away from her. “My mother.”

She couldn’t help but laugh.

Malak would have tortured her for less than that laughter, back in the old days. But Oerin just stared at her. His hand reached out, and cupped the swell of her breast. His other hand slid to her hip.

“Even without… that. You know, you are very beautiful to me?”

“I know,” Sheris said.

Then Oerin began to laugh too.

Their time had never come. Oerin had Sheris mutilated when the real Revan came again. Had it been the real Revan he had wanted? Had he taken her, after he’d left with her, chasing a destiny away from Sheris far across the stars?

Was Lin just like Malak—accepting Sheris as a weak substitute for Revan Starfire?

At least Beya had loved her for herself. After she cut off her arm. And then, Beya had died.

Perhaps that was a bad example too.

Sheris was tired of falling in love with the wrong people. It would be so simple to stop. All she needed to do was stop being Sheris.

XXX

“Is Sheris asleep?” The old man looked up from a stack of datapads. A hovering light globe above his head cast shadows across his face; making him look strangely young. But his eyes were dark and shadowed.

“I left her watching the HoloNet,” Yuthura told him. She set the tray of caff down on the only empty corner of the desk. “It’s almost morning.”

The borrowed office they were meeting in was cluttered with the detritus of at least a few Jedi lifetimes. Datapads, scrolls and bricks that looked like datacrypts from Haruun Kal were stacked on most of the available surfaces.

“Is that wise?” Vrook frowned. “She’s already unstable. More news broadcasts might upset her.”

“I am not her jailer.” Her teeth bared. “We were fellow prisoners, remember?”

“Of course.” He nodded. “I only hope we haven’t moved from one prison to a quarantine. The sickness from the Underground is getting worse. There have been a few casualties. Even here in the Temple.” He raised his eyebrows. “The Gamemaster of Manaan was among them.”

“Oh?” Yuthura tried to sound interested, but her thoughts were too troubled. She folded her lekku around her neck, and picked up the broken statue of a manka cat that was lying on the only available bench in the room, setting it down so that she could sit. The news about Dustil—or rather about Malak—preyed heavily on her conscience. “Do you suspect foul play?”

Not only did you fail those boys, but one of them is lost now, possibly forever. Replaced with a
Vrook sighed. “I don’t know. I am more concerned about what will happen if the Mandalorians do.”

“Perhaps they’ll throw another party. Sheris and I watched the footage again from the last.” Yuthura sighed. “I confess to being more concerned that Darth Malak is allowed to inhabit the body of Carth Onasi’s son.”

“I share your dismay. But Master Atris believes Malak is… necessary. At least for now.” To his credit, Vrook didn’t sound pleased.

“And Dustil Onasi is not? He’s a child.”

Vrook kneaded his temples as if they hurt. “There are those in the Council who think we need Revan again. And Malak. To face the Sith.”

“Which Sith?” She shrugged, and poured them both cups of the brew. “You mean the remaining warships off Malachor?”

“No.” He stared at her, ignoring the caff. “You were headmistress of their training academy. Surely you knew something… of the external threat.”

“You mean our former allies?” Yuthura smiled slightly. “Some of my best students came from Ziost. Thalia May is still here.”

Vrook shook his head slowly. “No. Not Ziost. The Council say we need Revan’s knowledge for this reason.” He looked down at the datapads he’d been stacking and sighed. “I wanted her to be returned to herself. To find the peace she has earned. They want to restore her to what she was before. Sith’aerah. Their Jedi General. To fight this greater threat.”


Vrook put the datapads aside and stared at her. “I don’t disagree; but several of the High Council believe that a real war is coming. Larger than any we have ever known. On the edges of the Outer Rim, Revan and Malak found… something, they say. Something that may be coming for us all.”

Yuthura couldn’t help it. She laughed. “Again?”

“It is not a joke.” Master Vrook Lamar reached under the desk and pulled out a holocron. Unlike most, it seemed to be composed of fragments, molded together into a shimmering cube like a child’s collection of puzzle pieces. He shoved the holocron across the table towards Yuthura, with the edge of the Force.

She eyed it warily. “Is that—?”

“Yes.”

The Sith headmistress Yuthura had been would have laughed at how poorly guarded it was. The Jedi she had become was just frightened. Please don’t make me look. What she had seen from the woman’s mind on Manaan was enough. Yuthura had her own nightmares.

“It is impossible for one mind to take in the entirety of a life, not without losing itself.” Vrook did not touch it with his hands, she noticed, as he levitated the holocron upwards. “And so we shattered
the holocron, assigning pieces to each member of the Council. It was these memories that we used
to guide her on the path to the Star Forge.”

“Guide her?” That was laughable, but something in his eyes just made Yuthura tired. *The woman I
met on Korriban wasn’t guided; she was driven. By her own demons, not yours.*

*But let Vrook have his beliefs of agency and destiny. They don’t matter to the universe. Or to me.*

“Can’t you just ask the holocron your questions?” There had been a holocron of Jorak Uln the man
had recorded back when he was a Jedi. The Sith he became used to love summoning it to see its
composure crack when it met itself. Like a never-ending fall.

‘If the holocron had not been divided, perhaps. But since it is the life of a woman who was
unstable at the time it was taken—”

“You cannot trust the responses.” Yuthura began to understand.

“We couldn't trust its nature, and so we split the memories amongst ourselves.” He nodded.

“How will giving these memories back to Revan help? Won’t she lose her mind again? Become the
Dark Lord?”

“I believe not. I believe the woman she has become has had a true redemption. I believe she is my
niece. And my niece deserves the memories of her life that were taken from her. But others
disagree.” He grimaced. “There is even a faction who thinks it doesn’t matter what she becomes, as
long as she is restored. They… are the ones who saw the last part of her life: after the fall.”

“Which memory did you take?” she asked.

“Her memory of my brother and his wife.” Vrook stared at her. “Some might consider it a selfish
act: there was nothing harmful there, nothing of Sith or the Force. But I wanted to see my own
family. As they were.” He grimaced. “I have my own darkness. My own… frailties. I did not need
Revan’s too.”

“I… understand.” She did not. Admitting a weakness, even in front of an ally was only effective if
there was something to be gained in return.

Vrook finally picked up his caff, and slowly took a sip. “I took the first of the memories. Atris,
Kae, and Klee took the last.”

“I don’t believe I know a Master Kae.” What she knew of the others wasn’t positive. Atris headed
the Archives. In her brief time exploring them, Yuthura had noticed sections expunged from the
datacore’s memory. An archivist that deleted information was hiding something. And Klee was
one of the Councilmembers that Master Ferrin had been in contact with back on Manaan.

*One of the ones who had refused to lift a finger to set us free.*

“Kae was one of Revan’s teachers—on Dantooine, for a time.” Vrook sighed. “She is an
archaeologist.” But his eyes shifted slightly, like one of her students when they’d stolen prestige
instead of earning it.

And at that moment, for some reason, he reminded her eerily of Mekel Jin.

*Is he lying? No. But Master Kae is something more than he lets on.* “May I ask what these three
masters told you?”
“Of course.” Vrook grimaced. “After Malachor V, the remaining Jedi and their Fleet were half- 
mad. Revan and Malak took them to the Outer Rim to… avoid populated areas. To save the 
Republic from its own war machine.”

“Instead they found the Rakata homeworld, and the Star Forge technology.” Yuthura nodded. 
“Uthar was there. He told me.”

But something nagged at her. Something about that narrative didn't make sense.

“No.” Vrook shook his head. “The Star Maps were a guide; but the Jedi didn’t find the Star Forge. 
They were shown.”

“By the Star Maps,” Yuthura nodded.

“No.” Vrook shook his head again.

“By the inhabitants of the planet?” Wynn had described the remnants of the Rakatan civilization as 
a sentient race fallen back into preflight, tribal barbarity.

Vrook shook his head again. “No.”

XXX

“We have diplomatic immunity,” Gwenarius told the first hapless guard who tried to stop them. 
“We were summoned! By Revan Starfire herself!”

They had not been summoned; but surely that was just an oversight. She tried not to let concern 
tinge her perspective. Canderous would have summoned them, had he been able. The fact that he 
had not didn’t mean he too had succumbed to the mysterious plague: it might just mean that he was 
busy preparing the Lin body for the pyre. Men had rituals too, and it wasn’t her place to question. 
Revan, too, would have summoned them—if she had been raised properly. Gwenarius would have 
to give her further instruction, as soon as the woman left her religious retreat and rejoined the 
proper galaxy.

The guardsman looked strangely familiar. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “Our orders are—no one goes 
in, and no one goes out.”

Despite warnings of disease, the steps of the Jedi Temple were lined with protesters. Holoprojected 
signs scarred the walls of the Temple’s public hall.

_Jedi Caused the Plague_

*Why Don’t You Help Us?*

*Down with the Order*

_Jedi Can Heal: Why Aren’t They?*

_Revan Killed the Kolto*

_Bastila Lives.*

And even more nonsensically:

_D’Reev is the Plaguebringer_
Three full squadrons of CoruSec in riot gear stood poised around the perimeter. The mood of the crowd seemed tense: possibly because without any proper outlet for their aggressions, the Coruscanti barbarians had no choice but to tear each other to pieces like animals.

“I don’t think you understand,” Gwenarius told him. She’d ask to talk to his wife, if he were clan. “There are rituals that must be observed to appease the gods.”

Gwenarius herself preferred hard science to gods, but mentioning them seemed to work with Coruscantis. ‘Honoring the gods’ was how they all got permission to carry their weapons openly on Coruscanti transit. Senator D’Reev had signed the dispensation himself.

“He said, move along!” the child in uniform next to him said. She looked scarcely older than Milli. “We’ve been ordered to start dispersing the crowd. By any means necessary.”

“Shut up, Cally,” the man muttered, placing his hand on her arm. “They’re Mandalorians. Tell them that, they’ll take it as a challenge.”

“We’re not armed. This isn’t a day for challenges,” Xarga explained. “We’re here for a death walk.”

“What?” The captain’s hand moved—and half his men drew weapons.

Gwenarius raised her arms in a defensive pose. It would not stop blaster bolts if they fired; but she would not die peacefully. Quickly, to avoid shameful blood being shed on a day or mourning, she nudged the boy, whispering in Mandalorian. “You have to tell him what that means. The barbarians don’t know.”

“I mean…” the boy’s neck bobbed with his nervousness. “We’re here for our fallen. We’re here for Oerin Lin. The Mandalore.”

“He’s dead,” Gwenarius added, in case they didn’t know. “So we need his body.”

“The blonde one?” The child-guard looked upset. “He’s dead?”

“Shut up, Cally,” said one of the others, a Twi’lek male. They were an attractive species. Pity, their stock didn’t mix easily with humanid.

The roar of a great beast distracted Gwenarius. And then: “Mother!” Millifar pushed her way through the crowd, trailed by the T3 astromech and Zaalbar.

A breath Gwenarius had not willingly known she was holding released. Her firstborn looked well and unharmed. And not ill. Thank the wind.

“You got our comm?” Millifar glanced at the guards, who were still pointing their weapons, and frowned. “Is there a problem?”

“We received your transmission,” Gwenarius agreed. “And we’ve come for him. Did they let you inside at all?”

Milli shook her head. “They said the entire place is quarantined, while the Jedi Medics discover the source of the disease.”

“It’s pestilence,” Gwenarius snapped. “The source doesn’t matter.” Cold space killed most pathogen. It wasn’t cowardice that made her wish they had all just gone with Aemelie to Kuat. Her sister wife was on her way to Peragus now, to retrieve their fleet.
And here they were, entangled on this filthy, pox-ridden planet, without the means to conquer it.

The Wookiee howled.

“Translation: Zaalbar wants to know if Revan and Carth and the cubs are okay.” Lights flashed and the droid whirred. “By cubs, he is referring to Malachor and Dustil Onasi.”

“We don’t know,” Gwenarius told him.

The great sentient beast growled back.

“Translation: he is also concerned about Carth Onasi and Canderous Ordo.” The unit paused. “And Mekel Jin.”

The Wookiee growled again.

“I am too concerned about Mekel Jin too!” the droid snapped, presumably to the Wookiee. “I never should have told you about that collar!”

The Wookiee made a series of barks that almost sounded like coughs. Several sentients took steps back.

“It was not like he was a slave! And you didn’t even like him, Big Z! You said he was half madclaw!”

“Can you please moan more quietly?” Gwenarius asked Zaalbar. “We are trying to reason with these outlanders.”

The Wookiee’s complaints softened to a sound more agreeable to her ears.

“This is above my pay grade,” muttered the CoruSec Captain. He gestured toward the gates of the Jedi Temple. A Fosh wearing brown robes had come out and was sitting at main reception desk. “Why don’t you take your issue to the Jedi?”

“We will,” Gwenarius said, pleased to see that Xarga was already heading that way.

XXX

Their ship pulled into orbit around the small, green, heavily-forested world. Nico didn't even look up from his bluescreens; just kept muttering about relays and generators.

“Warning: This atmosphere is restricted. Scans show your ship lacks authorization to be here. Leave now, and we won't turn you into space dust.”

The message repeated, in Ryl, Shyriiwook, and Huttese.

“Nico?” Lena nudged him, hard.

He frowned. “It's just a bluff.”

“It is not!” The mechanical voice sounded a little less mechanical now—and a little more like an angry woman. Or—girl. She sounded quite young. The same voice Lena had heard on Tatooine—naggingly familiar—although, of course, that was impossible. “Who is this?”

“Young master,” Nico intoned.
“Are you the asshole who cut me off from the nets? I was doing some very important stuff on Coruscant, and now I can’t get through.” The voice squeaked. “You need to undo that. Immediately.”

“Or I’ll end you,” she added, in a different tone of voice. Still female, much more ominous than the first.

“A personality overlay,” Nico murmured. “Not just a subroutine. Sentience. I was hoping—oh, but it’s too much to ask! Just tell me, Computer. Are you Revan Starfire?”

“Totally,” it muttered darkly. “And I'm going to end you.”

“She must have installed her persona in the Kashyyyk terminal! What luck!” Now I can get some real answers about the quest for the Star Forge!”

“Are you kidding me?” The computer made a rude noise.

“I've always wondered,” Lena’s boyfriend continued on, oblivious. “Did Bastila Shan leave any holocron recordings of herself?”

“Who are you?” The computer really did sound like Revan, but that other voice… it tugged at Lena’s mind like an itch on her t’chun.

“I am your creator,” he intoned dramatically. “And this is my lovely wife, the Twi’lek Queen Lena Wee.”

There was a long silence. Then the navigational board lit up with landing coordinates.

“Access granted,” said Revan’s voice. “Please proceed to the landing bay indicated.”

XXX

“We have come for the body of our fallen warrior.” Xarga said the words carefully, gripping his ceremonial torch with both hands. The flames licked above his head, sending a trail of sweet-smelling smoke into the marble arches of the Temple over their heads.

The bird-like Jedi at the reception desk nodded acknowledgement, but then shook his feathered head slowly. His beak clicked a series of chirping trills.

“He says impossible,” Revan’s computer translated softly, from the chassis of the T3 unit.

“No. It is impossible that you deny us,” the boy said, yielding no ground at all to their ancient Jedi foe. “We’ve come for the body. The Mandalore must be burned upon the sand, under sky and stars.”

Standing behind the young warrior with the rest of the women, Gwenarius felt a stab of pride. Xarga showed promise.

More chirping.

“He's sorry, but he says no again. He says this is not usually his post, but the gatekeeper is sick. He says the Temple is under quarantine, and you should all return to your homes.”

Was it Gwenarius’s imagination, or did the usually irrationally excitable machine sound defeated?

“Get Revan,” she whispered to it. Technically out of turn, since Xarga had not completed his task.
“She's turned off her headset,” it said.

“Then tell Mekel to get her.” Really, this shouldn't be so complex a task for a droid capable of hijacking transport.

The T3 unit seemed to vibrate. “I’ve lost communication with him too.”


The Jedi shook his head again.

Something must have gone terribly wrong. She felt an altogether unheadwomanly stab of fear. It was considered for poor form to intrude on one’s husband when they were occupied with another wife; but it was even poorer form for the Mandalore to die from the flu in the Jedi Temple—and if the others there were in danger as well….

There was a time for tradition, and there was a time for practical matters. Knowing which was part of a good headwoman’s business.

Gwenarius stepped to the side and used her personal comm unit to call Canderous.

“Yeah?” His lack of formality was a clue itself.

“Are you sick?” She did not want to lose him too.

“No. Where are you?” The small image of his face on the portable comm looked grim, the grooves in his face lined deeper than she liked.

“Where are you?” she countered.

“Gwen, I don't know if you'd believe me if I told you.”

“I am not asking for a riddle, husband,” she narrowed her eyes.

He snorted. “I'm escorting Darth Malak to breakfast.”

Her heart sank. “You are delirious. Is there any fever?”

“What? No!” He sounded insulted, as if her suggestion that he might have a weakness was unwarranted; as if she’d never nursed his wounds after Eos or Dxun, or seen the scars on his spine or his grizzled belly. His glare faded then and he sighed. “They told you about Lin?”

“Millifar said the computer told her. She and the Wookiee brought the unit to the Temple.”

Gwenarius paused. “In a happier time, I would think that would indicate she was ready to make her choice for her First—”

“You don't have to tell me why she was here.” Even through the haze of the comm she could see him grimace, hear the tension in his voice. “Did they let her inside?”

“No. She commed us with the news that Lin was dead. A fever, the machine told her. As is proper, she called an Honor Guard and we came, to take his flesh for the pyre.”

Another voice, not her husband, mumbled something offscreen. A male voice, not Revan’s. “You don’t need to be here.”
“I have my orders.” Canderous said.

The other man muttered something unintelligible.

“Husband!” Gwenarius said. “When are you leaving that place?”

“As soon as I can,” snapped. “But half the Temple’s under quarantine. The sickness that took Lin—it’s serious. Very serious.”

“The news reports say it’s everywhere,” she pointed out. “This City-Planet is too crowded. We would all be safer in stars.”

“Aemelie has the ships. You should go.”

“Tiring of our domestic life so soon?” She made her voice teasing.

“Not at all.” He sighed. “But it’s bad, Gwen. And our children are very young.”

He didn’t need to tell her women’s business, she who had buried two children of Ordo in the time he’d been gone. Seen countless others die from the sicknesses after Malachor. Life in sand was hard—that was why their people tried for the stars.

“It’s in the Underground too,” she told him. “HoloNets is calling it the Jedi Plague.”

Her husband’s brows drew together. “Stay with D’Reev, if you won’t go. You’ll be safer there than elsewhere.”

“We still need the Lin body.”

“You’re not gonna get it. They’re gonna burn it here.” His voice was flat. “Incinerating all the dead. Maybe they already have.”

The last son of Lin deserved better than a mass pyre; but Gwenarius was comforted that at least there were no other members besides Revan and the child to be shamed. Still…. “You need to tell her to witness. And her son.”

“Revan?”

Did he think she meant anyone else? “She and her son are the last members of Lin. They must see.”

“I’ll… tell her.” His voice was preoccupied. The other voice said something else to him again.


Her husband had an uncharacteristic tinge of sentiment in his voice. “S’cuy gar.” He paused. “I love you, and our children.”

“We will have more,” she promised him. *Whether you die of plague too or not.* “Clan Ordo will not fall.”

XXX

The Mandalorian resented being his escort nearly as much as Malak resented having him: that much was quite obvious. The entire time they’d been at breakfast in the nearly deserted cafeteria, the man had been bent over his comm, whispering.
No doubt reporting to Revan about Malak’s evil intentions towards the toast and permacakes.

As they walked through the halls, returning to Malak’s newly assigned quarters, he raised one of the boy’s eyebrows. “Was the Captain too busy? Usually, he likes to stalk me himself.”

“I really wish Revan hadn’t made me promise not to kill you,” the Mandalorian muttered. “Onasi’s asleep.”

“I could kill you,” Malak snapped. It was infuriating that this body was actually a few centimeters shorter than Ordo.

“You could try.” The man cocked his head over his shoulder. “Might be interesting. I wonder which of us has killed more Dark Jedi?” He snorted. “But I think the Jedi escort we’ve picked up might object.”

Malak had been aware of their presence for some time: the older ones. All Council members. Without turning, he knew them. Jopheena. Atris. Hett. Klee..

All the ones who recognize me. Who know my power—

Even as he had that thought, another wave of rage bled through from the child caged within.

XXX

They were on the fracking ship again, which meant that Mekel was really Mekel and not asshole Malak being Mekel just so he could get Dustil to talk again.

Just to make sure, Dustil punched Mekel in the face. The second his fist connected, he smiled, pleased to be right.

“The frack, Telos?”

Mekk’s nose was bleeding. Almost worth the doubled pain.

“I’m still here,” Dustil pointed out. Time was harder and harder to measure. It could have weeks or years. He didn’t know. All he had to go by was his own memories. And occasionally Mekel’s. And... most disturbingly of all; once or twice, Malak’s. “Did you talk to Malak or not?”

“I didn’t have the chance.” Mekel wiped his face, with a towel that materialized out of nowhere. “A lot of crap just happened. Oerin Lin’s dead. And Mission was... she made me wear this collar? She said it was just a commlink. But it was really a bomb.” He paused. “She made me wear a fracking bomb! And Thalia May’s sick. Lydie and I are with her. We’re all stuck in quarantine now.”

I told you that wasn’t Mission. “Lydie.” Dustil tried to make sense of the rest of Mekel’s babble and gave up. “Is she the one with the horns? Or the great rack?”

“I don’t think that’s an either or situation.” Mekel sneezed. “You had the Dreshdae flu, right? I thought I remembered you having it.”

“We barely knew each other back then.” Back then it had been Dustil and Selene. Mekel had just been the guy in the room next door.

The walls of the ship wavered, looking dangerously close to becoming stone and Korriban.

“Yeah, I had it,” Dustil said. With effort, he willed Korriban to disappear again. “It sucked, but not
as much as this.”

“That means your body’s immune. Congratulations. You’re not going to die.” Mekel’s mouth pulled. “Wish I could say the same. I mean, Thalia said I’m not gonna die from it, but she’s spiking a fever and the guy Lydie says she kissed just died from it. So who knows?”

“Thatia does,” Dustil pointed out. “Usually. Old faithful. It doesn’t really matter if I’m not going to die. I’m still stuck.” He thought of something. “Maybe you should fracking ask Thalia about me. Does she know about me?”

“Your dads called Malak out in front of her and Lydie and Lin, so yeah—she must.”

“He did?” That gave Dustil a funny feeling. He laughed. “He must be shitting himself.”

Mekel laughed too. “I think so.” One side of his mouth turned up. “I think they all kind of know now? The Jedi? So hopefully, they’ll help soon.”

“You believe in the Jedi now?”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore.” The other boy scoffed. “I’m probably having a seizure on the floor of the medix office right now, speaking of shitting oneself.”

“Thanks for the mental image,” Dustil said dryly. But it made him laugh. He reached out and grabbed Mekel’s hand. Somehow… it made them both feel better.

XXX

“So. You going to talk to those Jedi over there?” the Mandalorian asked Malak. “You want some privacy?” He sounded hopeful.

“You may leave us now, if you think your Master would let you,” Malak sneered.

His words had the desired effect. Something in Canderous Ordo’s eyes hardened. Muttering under his breath, he squared his shoulders and walked away, in the opposite direction down the hall.

He turned towards the Jedi. Strangely, the anger that had fueled his strength was fading as fast as it had come, leaving him… regretful. Almost… sentimental.

*I know my judgement is affected—as it was before. I know the dark side leads to madness. I know the boy’s rage fuels my strength—at a cost; but if it keeps my son safe—I will pay. I will pay any cost for that.*

*These fools cannot keep him safe. And if Revan will not, I will have to.*

“Malak,” Master Jopheena said.

He stopped walking. Laughter boiled like old blood in his throat; but he felt strangely calm. At peace. “Is this an intervention?”

“No.” Master Atris took a step forward. “We need your help.”

Laughter boiled in his throat. “My… help?”

“Just information,” said Master Klee.

XXX
There were five other Padawans on the shuttle, besides Sheris: all of them confused, disappointed, and—at least in the case of Zayne—more than a little rebellious.

Jedi weren’t supposed to want public acclaim, but they’d all worked so hard. The Progress, along with the small fleet remaining, was stationed above the frozen waste of a planet called Rekkiad in the middle of nowhere.

Not even in the Malachor system. It didn’t seem fair.

Their shuttle landed in an empty hangar bay. Completely empty. No fighters, no cargo, no deckhands.

Not even any droids.

The made their way down the ramp cautiously, clustered together like ice lichen sliding down a rock.

“On behalf of the Republic,” Oojoh began, “I’d like to thank each and every one of you for giving me this great opportunity to sit on my ass and do absolutely nothing for the next week.”

“On behalf of the Republic,” said Zayne. “I accept. This is indeed a great honor—for your ass.”

Sheris cracked a slight smile. They were all younger than she was; but that was almost funny.

“Hey. Look!” Padawan Shad elbowed her. “Isn’t that the Leviathan?”

Sheris turned back. The bay was still open. Beyond them, hazed by the ship’s atmospheric field was an enormous wall of gray, banked with lights. Its Aurebesh lettering was clearly visible: the secondary flagship to the entire fleet was here too.

“Maybe they’ve brought us to Malachor after all,” Sheris said. “I heard Revan and Malak never leave the Leviathan.”

“Sure. Generals like to sit on their asses too.” Gharn shrugged.

Knight Vikor frowned at them. “Keep moving, Padawans,” he said. “I’ve set up a dormitory for you, in the lower cargo bay.”

“Why?” the Falleen asked. Sheris didn’t know her name then. It didn’t matter, because later, the girl took a new one. “Isn’t there room in the regular dorms? Where is everyone?”

All of them could feel it. The ship was nearly empty—running on a skeleton crew, at best.

“Just keep moving,” Vikor said.

After—it took Sheris a year to even wonder. Had there really been orders to save them? Had the act of saving them been an act of kindness? Or one final act to send their souls deep into the dark side of the Force for all time?

Vikor said he didn’t know. His own master had asked him to pilot the shuttle.

And there was no one left to ask. All of their masters died at Malachor.

XXX

“I always thought I’d kill you,” she murmured to Lin’s corpse. Softly, so Master Zez Kai, the Jedi’s
coroner, wouldn't hear. But the man was either asleep or passed out in the next room. Even as a Padawan, Sheris had heard about his weakness for spice and CoruGin.

“Or I thought you would kill me,” she added. Her hand reached out and touched his hair.

His hair was still golden, but Oerin’s face had gone all gray. Dead, his features looked delicate, like a prince carved in ice.

One of his eyes was half open, like a wink. It made his expression sly, almost calculating.

She leaned forward, suddenly struck by an odd impulse. The ring she’d given him, an old thing she’d found on one of the Mandalorian corpses on Dxun, was still on his slightly swollen finger.

Quickly, almost guiltily, she tugged it off.

“Robbing the dead?” The voice came from behind her, without warning.

XXX

Sheris’s memories of the Fall were vague: filled with more shadows than sense—like one long and agonizing scream.

When she regained consciousness, she realized that something had… shifted. They were all huddled together, the six of them, like they were children afraid in the dark. Children, trapped in an ice cave. The other girl was even crying. Gharn’s arms were wrapped around Sheris so tightly they left bruises. Her tongue felt hot and swollen in her mouth and she realized she’d bitten it.

The Knight Vikor who unlocked the cargo bay door and led them down a durasteel hall to an assembly room was changed too: pale and silent and shaken. None of them needed to ask what had happened. They had all felt it, all known the moment their Masters did. The death of a world, and the hundreds of thousands in its skies.

But it was as if the pain and death had opened something else: something cold inside of them, Sheris thought: like ice on their skin.

Vikor didn’t speak, just left them in an assembly room with a bunch of other Padawans. They’d corralled all the Padawans on the ship away from their masters—those that had masters still alive. Maybe because the Knights all knew what was to come; or maybe to sever any existing bonds between them.

Or, Sheris thought later, maybe it was to protect them. She liked to think it was that.

The Jedi discouraged attachments because they led to emotional confusion: the Sith discouraged them because they made you weak.

Maybe they were just trying to protect them, and keep them strong.

In the days that followed, more than a few Jedi went completely insane. Did things like carve runes into their own flesh. Painted the walls of the ship with excrement. Wandered the halls with their sabers lit, challenging anyone they saw to a test of strength.

A shock troop of commandos was assigned to deal with them. Echani, mostly. Force resistant. The Jedi they didn’t kill, they contained. An entire wing on the lower level—formerly reserved for the ship’s running track—became something called ‘the Asylum.’ Because she had medical training, Sheris was assigned to work there. The Force couldn’t heal a broken mind; but it could heal the
injuries the mad inflicted—on themselves and each other.

In some ways, it was cleaner work than the war had been. Clever and contained.

The nulls—mostly deck crew and the few Fleet officers—seemed to have no idea what had actually happened. They’d seen every Jedi collapse screaming after Malachor V; but after that, when the Jedi all regained consciousness, the nulls seemed to think life would just go back to normal.

At least, as normal as any mass defection from the Republic Fleet into the Unknown Reaches of Space could be.

Some of the nulls even laughed sometimes. Some of them even talked like they really were chasing down the remnants of the Mandalorian Armada out here in the Reach.

Maybe no one had told them they weren’t.

The thing was, then the nulls started to vanish. Commander Key’a, who was in charge of communications. One day, she just wasn’t there. Second Gunner Raphe? The one with the cute friend? They found his body stuffed between blast doors, near the armory. Lieutenant Vair? Who had been from Hoth too? For reasons that no one could explain afterwards, in the presence of two Jedi Knights, she decided to take a walk into vacuum, without her suit.

Space was cold. Even colder than Hoth. You’d last about thirty seconds before brain function stopped outside in Ch’Tera, where Sheris grew up. She wondered how long it would take in space.

Sometimes she had nightmares that she’d decided to find out.

XXX

She turned. The scream froze in her throat.

The old woman in front of her might as well have been a holoimage or a droid; for as much presence as she held in the Force. But she was dressed in Jedi robes, hood obscuring most of her face.

And something about her was almost familiar.

“I wasn’t stealing it. I gave it to him,” Sheris said. It was just an old ring, made of beskar, stamped with the insignia of a Mandalorian clan long dead.

He had never given her any promise in return.

“Do you know what happened?” the Jedi asked. Her voice was perfectly calm, but underneath, Sheris thought something boiled, shook, like unstable floe. “How was he infected?”

“I don’t know.” She didn’t. “I just got here—he was already dead. They say—there’s some kind of plague.”

“And so,” the Jedi murmured. “Plans are fragile things. Even mine.”

There was sadness in the old woman. It wasn’t something Sheris could heal, just something she understand. “I’m sorry,” she said politely. “I guess you… did you know him well?”

“As well as any who knew him.” The old woman took his gray hand in her own, staring down at the body. “He was a beautiful child.”
“A beautiful man too.” He had been. As Malak had not—not when she knew him.

“Reliance on beauty is a weakness,” the old woman said. She lifted her head. Pale eyes glinted under her hood. “Tell me: you, who followed Revan into the Unknown Reaches: have you ever seen plague like this before?”


She’d had it. She’d been sick for weeks. It had killed many of them, weakened more.

“I have as well. Some think this sickness was made to target weakness. But Oerin Lin was anything but weak.”

“I don’t know.” Sheris felt ashamed suddenly. Suddenly, she wanted to know. Suddenly, she felt as if she couldn't rest until she knew. The ring felt cold in her fingers. “I don’t know what happened.”

“He spoke of you.” The woman paused. “Not just you. But you, among the others. He was fond of many women. But I told him to wait until his final blood in stars. Love is a weakness and I needed him strong.”

“I wasn't weak by his side,” Sheris said truthfully.

Until he tried to kill me. Why did he do that? Was he the same as Malak? Was he really just in love with her?

The old woman sighed. “You must learn to be strong in his absence.”

XXX

When Lena and Nico walked off the ship, they were greeted by several Wookiees armed with bowcasters, and one grizzled and scarred Wookie carrying a large, portable holocomm unit.

“Give me a sec,” the girl’s voice said from the unit’s speaker. “We're still setting up, okay?”

“Where's Revan?” Nico asked, as if he was expecting her to actually be here.

Lena elbowed him slightly, willing him to be quiet. The Wookiees seemed larger here than Mission’s friend had been on Tatooine. Larger and more ominous.

One of them growled softly: a string of syllables and, incredibly, Nico barked back.

The Wookiee growled again, and then so did Nico: a series of interrogative, almost demanding coughs.

“Fascinating,” he added to her. “The language is corrupted, of course, but they still use the syntax based on their masters’ tongue! All these thousands of years, and our slaves still remember!”

Several bowcasters clicked, and one of the smaller Wookiees called out a warning whine.

“Just because they don't speak Basic, doesn't mean they don't understand it, Nico!” Lena elbowed him harder.

“You have to forgive my husband,” she added to the Wookiees, trying not to panic. “He’s…just… I mean, he means well. He wasn’t calling you slaves… he’s just an ass.”

“Husband?” The comm unit said. An image fizzled, then spun to life. Hazed in blue, as blue as she
had been in life. The image of Mission Vao’s eyes widened. “Congratulations, I guess. Good job on not marrying my loser brother.”

Lena frowned. She had thought the voice was…but of course, that was impossible. This had to be a recording, or some kind of computer-generated trick. “Mission?”

“Not in the flesh!” the girl’s voice said. “But yeah. Hey, Lena. Can you tell your asshole husband here he needs to undo whatever it was he did that cut me off? Now’s a really bad time to be flying blind.”

XXX

_The first time Sheris realized why the nulls were vanishing was in the cafeteria, of all places, standing in line for breakfast._

_Ensign Lewis, who sometimes flirted with her, took the last muffa. Right in front of Knight Davad._

_And then, about ten seconds after, Ensign Lewis rose a meter into the air and choked to death._

_The muffa fell from his hand. No one wanted it now._

_Even Davad seemed shocked by what he’d done. “I’m sorry,” he said, uselessly, to the broken body. “I was just… hungry.”_

_The room was so quiet, you could almost hear the Force in it, crackling like a fire. There was something warm there. It was…it was hard to put into words. But all of the Jedi felt it. It was a connection, like a belonging. For the first time since Malachor Sheris actually felt like she was part of a team._

“It’s okay,” Sheris murmured. She put her hand on Davad’s arm. “We understand.”

_He looked to her, his eyes yellow as a wompa’s. “I know.”_

XXX

“Who _are_ you?” Sheris peered at the woman’s face, but all she glimpsed was a shock of white hair, and an amused smile.

“One a Jedi. Like you. Like my mother before me. Like Revan. Like all of us; women and mothers who have had to face the cruelest choice: sever the bonds with our children for the sake of the galaxy; or live tiny, meaningless lives, cowering in the face of that which will destroy everything—while hoping in vain that it passes us by.”

“I have no children.”

The Jedi gave an amused snort. “Surely you realize, the memories of her past come with one? Revan had a son. You will have to leave him, to do what must be done.”

Master Atris had told Sheris some of it.

“I won’t be alone.”

“So you think.” The Jedi stepped forward, and placed both hands on Oerin Lin’s chest. “Her apprentice betrayed you both before: do you expect any less now?”

Stung, Sheris spoke before she thought. “I don't need him!”
The old woman chuckled. “Good.” She bent forward. White hair brushed against Oerin’s face. “Awaken,” she murmured, in his ear.

His hand, the same one Sheris had just pried the ring off of, twitched once. Oerin’s half open eye fluttered closed. Then opened all the way. His chest heaved once. Then again.

Sheris smothered a scream with her hands. The woman glanced back at her, face still hidden by the robes. “Forget,” she added to Sheris. Her voice was almost conversational.

“I—” Sheris blinked.

XXX

A lot of the Jedi didn’t make it. A lot of the nulls didn’t either. For months, those that remained on the Progress lived on a ghost ship orbiting a planet in the Unknown Reaches. There were rumors that the planet below was beautiful; that it had beaches, and sun. Some Jedi went down and came back, even more changed than before. She barely recognized Shad when she saw him again. And she never did find out what happened to the other four Padawans.

The Force grew darker and colder. Cold like space.

Sheris was from Hoth and the cold didn’t bother her. In fact, she grew to like it. The cold made it easy. Gradually, the Jedi that still lived all became cold too. The mutilations and the madness stopped.

It made her work in the Asylum much easier.

Then one day, a Jedi came from the Leviathan, asking if anyone still had the power to heal.

“I do,” Sheris said, stepping forward. She’d healed one of the engineers after that accident with the cooling tanks. Uko had a bad burn on the side of her leg from where the coolant had leaked.

Sheris had only wanted to show everyone else what the cold she felt inside was like.

“You?” The other woman was strong in the Force. Her dark eyes were blue, but they looked almost black. Her eyes hadn’t turned yet. Not everyone’s did. But her skin looked waxy, as if it had once had more color. Her hair was black, and looped at the top of her head, shaved on the sides. Her eyes narrowed. “Are you Hothan? You look like it.”

“I can heal,” Sheris told her again. “Does it matter where I’m from?”

The Dark Jedi snorted. “Maybe. Maybe not.” Her eyes seemed to peer inside Sheris, as if she could see her very soul. She pulled a vibroblade out of her sleeve and slashed it down, across her wrist. She didn’t even flinch. “Prove yourself,” she taunted Sheris. “Heal me.”

Sheris took her arm in her hands, and concentrated. The cold light came, washing over the woman’s arm. When she was done, a hard red line remained, but nothing more.

“You’ll do,” the Jedi said. “Maybe he won’t kill you like the last four.”

She took Sheris away. Her name was Beya, but Sheris didn’t know that yet. Beya took Sheris to the planet and an ancient stone temple. She took Sheris to a room with two people in it. One of them wore a mask. The other one was Malak.

“Heal him,” the masked figure said. Her voice was metallic and cold.
Malak made a noise, but he couldn’t speak. The air was thick with the smell of rot. Half of his jaw was gone. Sheris could see the teeth, striped like old wounds, in the pulp of flesh.

She had seen worse, in the wars. Sheris stepped forward, reaching up to cup the damaged skin. Revan was so close behind her. It was then that she noticed they were the same height, her and Revan.

White light sprang from her fingers, enveloping his face. Malak sighed, a gentle sound. She felt his pain ebb away, replaced by the ice purity of the light.

“Thank you,” the woman wearing the mask said. Oddly formal, in the madness of the Sith.

XXX

“I—” Sheris blinked.

The fountain in front of her bubbled quietly, propelled by the Force. Her limbs were cramped and cold, as if she’d been meditating for a very long time. How long had she been meditating in the Room of a Thousand Fountains? She remembered watching the HoloNet, and—and then—

Then sadness, because Oerin Lin was dead.

Sheris stood up, brushing her robes, suddenly aware that she wasn’t alone.

His hand brushed her hair, moving the strands away from her face. She could feel the warmth of his body not quite touching hers, hear his breath behind her; soft and a little fast, as if he was as nervous as she.

XXX
All You Sitting in High Places

Chapter 30 / All You Sitting in High Places

The insult worked. Revan’s pet Mandalorian, Canderous Ordo, didn’t even look back: the tramp of his feet echoing softer as he vanished from tactical concern.

In front of Malak, four Jedi stood, lined in a row like a herd of dewbacks. They were too powerful to read in the Force or in their expressions; but he knew each one of them. Master Jophageena, his old master. Master Atris, head of the archives. Master Klee, his father’s pet Jedi. And last and least, poor, mindwiped Master Nyrmon Hett.

“Is it true?” Jophageena, asked bluntly. She had always been blunt. Not like Klee next to her, who had always been Malachi’s creature; or Atris, who had nearly worshipped Malak and Revan both, before she turned away at the time of the wars.

Malak spread his hands open wide, well aware of the saber at his belt. “Surely you know.”

“No,” Jophageena said softly. “I knew you once, Malak. But you no longer know yourself.”

He hated the truth in her words. He… hated. Surprising, the depths of it, even through this strange sense of peace. “I know I did what was necessary.”

“Taking this boy’s body was necessary?” Her eyes were clear gray, and a little sad.

“My son needs me.” He thought of the drones again, and his father’s foolish pride. “If I hadn't, he'd be dead now.”

“Perhaps,” his old master said. “But sometimes necessity is what destroys us.”

“I have always done what was necessary,” Malak repeated.

Even if it destroyed me. Leaving the Jedi to serve my father. Fighting the Mandalorians to save us all. Taking control of the Star Forge to rebuild our fleet. Firing on the Aleema to kill my wife. Mounting a campaign of madness to keep the Republic war machine strong—

Had that really been the reason?

No. By that time, I had no reason left. But I knew that going in. I knew that was always the danger and I used it. Just like Revan did.

Were we so different?

There was something in his old master’s eyes—he couldn’t read it. Sadness. A warning? Even—approval? He couldn’t tell.

Nyrmon Hett stepped forward, a shambling example of the fate Malak, at least, had avoided by dying. “This is a dark time for the Jedi. Ghosts walking, and plague among us. Are you here to destroy us too?”

Malak reached for the rage within—the source of young Onasi’s power—but again found himself strangely calm. Almost… serene. Strange, that he seemed to have no control over his emotions; but
the calm made things… oddly clear. “I am here to protect my son, Masters. That is all.”

“Revan had a similar response,” murmured Klee. “Even now, you work in accord.”

“Can you protect your son from the True Sith?” Atris asked.

“I—” It wasn’t the question he had expected. The True Sith. He hadn’t expected them to know the True Sith existed. “I will try.”

“You will need to do a better job than you did before,” the Echani said primly.

“Practically speaking, is their world-devouring Emperor a real threat?” Jopheena broke in. She raised her eyebrows at him, as she had when he was much younger, and had done something rash. “While we appreciate that you only possessed this innocent’s body to save your own son, we came here to ask you about the ancient Sith Empire.”

The directness of her question threw him. “Yes,” Malak said. “The Sith are real. And Tenebrae of Medriaas is real as well.” His heart sank a little, as he realized that Revan had fumbled even more badly than he’d feared. Arca was a Hutt’s pawn, compared to Tenebrae’s court of madmen and their games. “Why? Have you heard from… him? Has Revan allied with him?”

“No,” Atris said. “But Master Kae and I saw… shadows. In Revan’s memories.” Her eyes were like gray chips of ice. “Fear of a man who was not one. And a dead planet. We consulted star charts, pilots who fly beyond the Reach. The world is real. And there is no life on it.”

“We need you to go there,” Klee broke in. “Go back to them with Revan and stop him.”

“Some of us think this is the best course of action,” Jopheena amended, voice dry. She folded her arms in her sleeves. “What is the life of one child, after all? You’ve made this choice before.”

Impossible to read Jopheena’s thoughts, but she asked questions the same way she always had: making Malak question his own response. Making him question the question itself.

*Some of you might think, but you do not, Master?*

Malak wanted to laugh. This confrontation was almost... farcical. A note out of tune.

And yet—Malak and Revan had orbited Medriaas, and seen its death. They had met the madmen and all of his courtiers, who plotted and schemed behind his back in ways that put Coruscanti senators to shame. The Emperor was a great threat to the galaxy. To everyone—Republic and Sith Empire alike.

Revan and Malak had even allied with the conspirators—or, at least, Malak had. Red had been above such things, bent on single handedly conquering the Republic, to save it.

Standing here in a borrowed body, with the rage he had felt before gone, it all seemed like a dream. All unreal. Like one of his father’s holoplays.

*Could it be? Could this be more of my father’s scheming? Could he have manipulated me in my madness? Manipulated us both?*

“How?” Malak asked. “How do you expect us to stop Tenebrae?” He paused again. “And who is Master Kae?”

Atris’s nodded, as if his confusion was normal. “Arren Kae was one of Revan’s teachers. She had
many masters, after Vrook and Zhar, but I am sure you remember Kae. She was the archaeologist.”

Malak frowned. “You mean….” There had only been one archaeologist. The woman who claimed to be from Ossus, even though it was a lie, a jest, a bitter rebuke of the Jedi and all of their teachings. Malak remembered her face. Scorched by the sun, eyes faded, almost white. At the end —

XXX

“When it all ends at Malachor,” his wife said. “I need people there I can trust.”

The rest went unspoken. So that they fulfill their purpose. So that the order is given. So that the Jedi we send to their deaths don’t escape.

“Here.” She pointed at a circle drawn around the holographic representation of the planet. “From here, their ships can survive the effects of the Mass Shadow Generator. Three ships in synchronous orbit, each under a Jedi’s command.”

“Are you going to tell them?” Malak asked. The pain was constant now, throbbing in his jaw. “Warn them?”

“I don’t know.” Her face was cold. It made her more beautiful. “I had to tell Meetra. I want to warn Davad. If he’s prepared, maybe it won’t—he's of more use to us sane.”

“But you can’t warn him,” Malak said. “He has too much to lose.” The throne of Onderon. The family he’d left behind. Unlike most of them, Arkan could go home again.

His wife nodded. “Meetra Surik will form the bond, and Davad will sever it. The shock will be enough to trigger him. The death of so much to someone connected to all living things—”

“When our masters told us all we had special gifts, I doubt this was what they had in mind.” Malak wished it was over already, even though he knew it would never be.

“Our masters were too weak to stop this years ago,” Revan said. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes. Malak wondered why she still bothered. “We’re not weak.”

“But Sunrider?” Malak frowned. “She’s loyal.” She had been the only one of their elders to follow them to war. Slavishly loyal, almost to a fault.

“Not that loyal. Vima has her own games,” his wife muttered. “And I mean to end them.”

“Then why not just kill her?” The woman was dangerous.

His wife’s smile was grim. “I need Battle Meditation and she has it. It will amplify the Force. Every Force user in the galaxy will feel what we’ve done.”

XXX

“But Vima Sunrider died at Malachor,” Malak said. She must have. They had never heard from her — or her Battle Meditation — again.

All four of them. Jedi, like a line of dewbacks, staring at him. As if they knew more than he.

“No,” poor, mindwiped Nyrmon Hett told Malak. “Vima Sunrider is alive. And she goes by Arren Kae now.”
Nico was talking rather animatedly (and unintelligibly) to the Wookiee clanchieftain, whose name Lena couldn't even try to pronounce. The Kashyyyk natives had brought up several corpses of forest animals, and were roasting them on a fire pit fashioned from what looked like a dismantled Czerka speeder.

They had also brought up an old chair that looked like it was from one of the executive offices for Lena to sit on; and a battered table, now brimming with food and drink.

The mood had gone rather abruptly from militant to celebratory and she still wasn't sure why.

Gingerly, Lena picked up a piece of pickled mushroom from one of the trays, and nibbled on it. The furred Wookiee to the right of her, growled softly, with a tone that sounded approving.

“She says that’s very good for your cub-inside. Lots of minerals.”

Across the table from her, the uncannily precise holoimage of Mission Vao smiled. If not for the vague translucency around its edges, the occasional shadow falling through—and not from above—it could have been Mission herself sitting there.

“Wow! You're pregnant!” The image of the girl beamed. “What's it like?”

“It isn't like much of anything yet.” Lena didn't know how to answer. “I have to pee a lot.”

“Oh!” Mission frowned. “Now? Because I can totally have the guys set up a special fresher. Wookiees can be a little…” she lowered her voice, as if anyone was paying attention. “Well, a lot, messy.”

“I can use the one in the ship. Later, I mean. I don't have to go right this second.”

“Oh.” The girl’s image nodded. “‘Right! Of course! Wow it's a small galaxy, huh? How'd you ever meet T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjšëw?”

Lena couldn’t even attempt to pronounce that. “I just call him Nico.”

“Right.” The image giggled. “That's faster. So cool that you guys got married! How did you guys meet?”

*Married.* It still sounded like a surprise to Lena.

Despite his promises to have a ceremony with all the veils, Lena and Nico had married at a space station en route to Kashyyyk, wedded by a tired engineer who’d been more concerned with the quality of Nico’s cigarras than their ceremony.

Lena picked at the roasted slice of meat on her plate. It was bloody and looking at it made her faintly nauseous. “I was doing the books for Motta. Nico… well, he stopped being a swoop racer and went into business. And then I was doing his books, and then….”

“You fell in love?” Mission smiled. “That's kind of sweet, even though he’s like, thirty thousand rotations of this planet around its sun older than you.”

The holo sounded like Mission, if you ignored it saying things like ‘thirty thousand rotations.’

*Is a Mission Vao simulacrum in this computer really more strange than falling in love with the ancient Prince who took over Nico’s body?*
“Mission, are you really you? Or are you... Revan?” Lena had only met the Dark Lord that one time, but she'd seemed more mature.

“Oh, I’m me! I just said I was Revan to get T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw off my case,” Mission whispered. Her holographic head glanced in Nico’s direction, but Lena’s husband was too busy chattering at the Wookiee chieftain to notice. "I was afraid he'd wipe me, if he thought I wasn't all powerful and wise and stuff,” she continued. “But I've got enough files on Polla Revan and plain old Revan that I can do a pret-ty good imitation, as long as I don't need to reference stuff that's hazardous to sentient life.”

“What?”

“Polla Revan had me wipe all the hazardous stuff?” Mission’s image shrugged. “I mean it's relative? I guess the other installations still have a lot of hazards in their databanks, but mine was like, all the organics in an air atmosphere stuff? As opposed to solid or liquid? Or metaphysical? And then, Dantooine was the original master terminal—but then when T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw rebelled, he put in the secondary terminal right here on me, and so that was the one that recognized Revan when she first came here and gave her the Intel to bring T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw back! So it's like, a big giant circle of bioengineering, you know?”

“No,” Lena said. “I'm really… more of an accountant.”

“Good, because T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw's really bad with numbers. He just told me that we could bioseed Dosha into a homogenous planet full of liquid rock using only eight trillion mega-joules of energy!” The image of Mission seemed to sigh. “He needs you, Lena Wee.”

She paused. “And you know what else? I need you. It’s been a while since I had anyone here who… knew me from before. It's nice. Also, I really need my Coruscant access again. T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw keeps saying that he needs more information, and maybe after we fix Manaan’s kolto thing. But I'm afraid we're gonna run out of time. I mean, you met Polla-Revan on Tatooine. Remember how much trouble she can get up to?” Mission paused. “Now, imagine her on Coruscant. It's a much larger planet.”

Strangely, because she’d really only met the woman briefly, Lena did know something about Revan Starfire and trouble.

XXX

Motta’s swoop track looked like a grenade had gone off. Debris was scattered everywhere, and the holoscreen above the track’s gate was cracked, half of it leaning down, and still sparking dangerously. Thick smoke choked the air, and through it, Lena could see red licks of flame, creeping up a pile of boosters.

Yuko Riil, wrapped in a therma blanket like a ref, stood forlornly at the announcer’s podium.

“What happened?” Lena asked him. She had just been coming by to give Motta the latest weekly odds based on last week’s tallies including the intangibles you had to factor in: like Zoriis Bafka’s attention span, whether Nico Senvi got spooked by the crowd, and how drunk Garn was.

But odds meant banthashit without a functioning track. And knowing Motta, he’d probably cheated out on insurance.

Yuko Riil’s antennae looked singed. “Some braggart Human came in here claiming to be the Taris Swoop Champion. Gorgeous bike. I’ve never seen mods like that before.” He pointed with his
three-fingered hand to the mass of charred plating and swoop boosters. “That’s what’s left of it, over there.”

It looked like it had been an ugly death. Lena felt a wave of pity for the poor slob. Of course, they probably weren’t really from Taris. They’d had at least a dozen racers claiming to be the Tarisian Swoop Champion since the track there was lost with the planet… but thinking about Taris at all made her think of that chuba-ball Griff, and his poor kid sister, left behind on Taris.

“Rest in peace,” she muttered. Even if getting sentimental got you nowhere, she owed the dead that much.

“Huh?”

“I guess it was a quick way to go,” she added.

“You mean the biker?” Yuko laughed. “No, that’s the loop, see? Banthashit crazy-ass biker totaled the bike and walked out like it was flyday. Not a scratch on her. That’s her—right over there talking to Zorii. Next to the little blue.”

Lena turned, and felt a shock of surprise start at her chest and shoot right into her t’chin. There was a black-haired Human woman talking to the Twi’lek swooper. And next to her was—

“Crazy thing is, she beat Bafka’s best time. You know how we all used to joke about Zorii Bafka having the Force because when she’s on she’s magic? Well this chit has a fracking lightsaber and she runs her bike straight into the screen and just gets up and out—”

Lena’s feet were moving before she had time to think, running towards the little blue. Even in profile, the girl’s upturned nose and dappled t’chin were unmistakable.

“Mission! Do you remember me? It’s Lena. I was dating your brother, back on Taris?”

XXX

“I’ll talk to Nico,” Lena agreed. It’s the least I can do.


Xxx

Malak was distracted, still thinking of what Atris had said, what the Jedi knew and what they did not. Thinking of insane Arca Trini, and Mandalorians, and whatever other plans his wife had made. Thinking of the plague on top of all else. The plague sounded disturbingly like one he’d seen Selkath dream up in a lab before.

On his orders, on a world that was only sea.

Something was wrong. Something had been wrong with those Jedi. Even more wrong than his existence in this body. Like a note out of tune.

Malak was distracted, and the Temple was so familiar that at first, she seemed familiar too, sitting in front of the only fountain running in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. How many times had they met in this place? The girl could be a ghost, or a memory of a time that was. Before regret. Before the cascade of events that had led them to this: one dead and one a shell; their son helpless and alone.
The girl stood up slowly, turning her head. Her features were traced in the golden light from above. The morning sun faded the brightness of her hair, motes making it seem insubstantial as air. She could have been a ghost—or a memory of his wife from long ago. For a millisecond, he thought she was. Half the time, he felt mad again already. What was another ghost?

She hadn’t moved at his approach, hadn’t even seemed to notice. So single-minded, so lost in her own schemes. Then she turned, the quizzical arch of her eyebrows, then the smile. He was close enough to smell the scent of her hair.

And then he realized what was painfully obvious.

“Malak?” Her skin flushed. “Atris told me you were… reborn.”

“Sheris.” This body betrayed him again, as it had with the real Revan. Flushing and sweating and straining; full of its adolescent needs. Hormone-fueled images danced through his head, detailing things he could do to her—things he had done to her. Done to them both—but she was the one here now: this cracked mirror of his wife. Their empty cup.

He willed the boy’s voice not to crack. “Hello, Sheris. The Jedi said you were here.”

“We just arrived. Where did you get the body?” Her eyes were the right color, but something in them was dulled and confused. Like it had been towards the end, when he’d sent her from the Star Forge.

He’d sent Sheris away when he’d known Revan was close.

_When you thought you wouldn’t need Sheris anymore. When you thought you’d have your Red. When you thought Revan would kill Sheris. When you thought you could save Sheris by sending her away—_

No contradiction. All of those reasons were true.

“His name is Dustil Onasi. He was one of our Korriban prospects.”

“Oh! Saul’s protege.” Her mouth curved into Revan’s half-smile. She had it, exact. He remembered how she used to practice that smile, naked, in their rooms; using the transparisteel viewscreen as a reflection with the stars as a backdrop, spreading out beneath them like a bed of gems. “And Carth Onasi’s son?” Sheris giggled, and that was false. Red had never—Revan never giggled. Everything was always serious, a deadly game. “Was this something she arranged?”

“No.” He didn’t want to even attempt to follow the twisted logic there. “The boy was strong in the Force. He offered to help me.”

“Generous of him. Master Atris told me you were here,” Sheris murmured, suddenly coy. Her eyelashes fluttered down. “But I didn’t realize you’d be so handsome.” She frowned slightly. “And so… young.”

He glanced down at his body, reveling again in the strength, the lack of pain. “I think he’s seventeen.”

“Seventeen and strong.” Her fingers traced his bicep. “On the cusp of manhood.”

His irritation at her flirtation sparked with the body’s want. “Why are you here, Sheris?”

“Would you prefer I had died with Vik and Beya and the others on the ship?” Her delicate
“I came to take her memories. You already have Malak’s, and I’ll have hers. We can be together again. Better than before.”

“What?” *What ship?* She had a metal arm, he noticed. That was new. “*No.* Jopheena said Revan will take the memories back herself.” Even as he spoke, he realized she hadn’t said that at all.

In fact, Jopheena had said very little. His old master had only watched; her eyes as wide and unreadable as they always had been.

“I see.” Her lip trembled a little, and she looked at the floor. Revan would have been angry, but Sheris just looked sad. “How convenient for you. Then you get to have us both.” Her lashes fluttered. “And in this strong, new body.”

Distaste warred with the boy’s hormones for a proper response.

“Sheris,” he tried to remember the girl she had been, but he couldn’t. He’d never noticed her before Malachor’s implosion. And after, she was only one in a line of half-mad Padawans he’d seen once at inspection—one of the ones strong enough to be useful. One of the ones Beya found on the *Progress*; sent there by some hand whose intent they could only guess.

Whose intent no longer mattered.

Only the red hair caught his eye. Only that—at first. Masses of it, hiding her face. Red’s was falling out by then, the pink shine of her skull coming through. Matching his.

XXX

*The second time he saw Sheris, her cooling hands took away his pain. With the red hair in her face, she could have been his wife again. His wife, healing him as she had so often when they were children.*

*She could have been his wife.*

*And the masked figure beside them could have been just another piece of Sith statuary.*

XXX

“Yes, Malak?” That sideways glance again. Coquettish. So unlike anything Revan would do. Perversely, it made Sheris desirable—even now.

And that made him want to be sick.

“I don’t want you to be my wife.”

Her tongue played over her lips, softly. Her green eyes glinted. “Oh?” Her voice softened. “What do you want?”

XXX

The door slid open at his approach open at his approach, as if he were expected.

“Have you heard there’s a rumor that you’re dead of plague?” The Onderonite turned from the window, his calm expression never changing, even as his eyes—and the Force—confirmed the impossible.

Davad Arkan wasn’t surprised at all. Davad Arkan had already known. Mother’s teachings on
Malachor had brought them together long ago, when Oerin Lin was a mere boy and the Republic
Jedi barely a man.

Laughter hurt now, but Oerin did it anyway. “Maybe I should take a new name. Like a Sith Lord of
old. What do you think of Darth Plagueis?”

“Yes.” Davad Arkan, the former Prince of Onderon, scoffed. “Plaguey-yes? Why not Darth
Flu?” His dark eyes widened slightly, as if he was finally admitting to being impressed. “You…
are you still actually dead?”

“I think so.” Oerin smiled, because what else could he do? “I woke up in the morgue. And my
heart seems to have stopped.” He willed himself not to look down at his hands again: blotched and
pale from where the blood had pooled.

“How?” The man's yellow eyes glinted.

Oerin laughed painfully. “You know my mother! Quite rigid with her plans. Can't let a thing like
the death of a son stop her visions of galactic supremacy.”

“True.” Davad nodded. “Apathy is death.”

“For your sake, I hope she doesn’t decide you’re apathetic too.” Oerin spread out his hands. “You
can see where it leads.”

He hadn't been one with the Force for very long before she yanked him back, but Oerin had liked
the oneness. Like an open sky full of stars. He’d never managed to be blooded in stars, but soaring
free, it had felt like that. A great song, and his own notes fitting perfectly in tune. It was
disrespectful to mock Mother, or to feel ungrateful; but this not-life actually hurt. Twinges, as if
the remnants of his nerves were still spasming. It was wrong of him to resent a second chance, but
Oerin couldn't ignore certain flaws in this opportunity.

Davad walked around him, frowning. “Is this condition of yours indefinite?”

“I don't know.” Oerin sighed, the sound came out strange, and choked, like there hadn't been breath
in his lungs to make it. “I’ve seen a mirror. I realize my appearance may draw some attention.” He
frowned down at his hands, blue and gray and blotched. “And some schutta stole my ring!”

“That's the least of your concerns.” Davad’s fingers touched his neck, then hovered over his face,
as if searching for a pulse. “I sense only death. All I sense is death. There is nothing holding you
together except the Force.”

“Does that mean I can’t be killed?” Oerin laughed again. If it was only death, why did
it hurt? “Tell me that’s the upside.”

“What did she say?”

“What does she ever?” Mother was a brilliant tactician, but not terribly forthcoming: liking, as she
did, for all sentients to maintain their illusion of free will. “She told me the Jedi should not find me
here. But that you were here. Then she left. Can you find my armor for me? It wasn’t in the
morgue. I’d really hate to lose it.”

And wearing it, Oerin hoped, would help him return to his people.

You can’t wear armor all the time, a voice mocked him. Maybe his own mind. Maybe Mother. It
was harder to tell when she was this close. You’re going to start to rot. The clans will notice. And
Mandalorians can be a superstitious lot, even if they are practical. They won’t follow a dead man.

Then I’ll rot, he told the voice, just in case it was Mother. And a test. Or I’ll die. Can I die? He frowned.

It would have seemed impossible the day before, but at that moment, Oerin Lin actually envied Malak D’Reev.

Davad was still staring at him, eyebrows raised and arms crossed. “You want me to fetch your armor. Really.”

“Yes,” Oerin told him. “Should I say please? Sith Lords generally don’t bother.”

Davad smiled. “Do I look like your errand boy?”

“Unless you’d rather I explain this miraculous resurrection to the Jedi….” Oerin shrugged. “Yes.”

“I have to go, Dustil.” Mekel could feel it now, the tug of his own body. Somewhere out in the world, someone was calling him. Weird, dislocated feeling, like his shoulder was being shaken. A girl’s voice, calling his name.

Dustil’s hand in his felt more real, which was fracking disturbing.

“Please. Don’t.” His friend took a deep breath. “It’s better when you’re here.”

The walls of the ship reflected their images, reflections upon reflections. They looked younger than Mekel felt, sitting against the wall on the floor, side by side.

If this was better, worse must really suck.

“You’re okay,” Mekel promised. Telos was anything but, and they both knew the lie. “I’ll come back.” He grimaced. You know how to call me back. That, at least, was no lie.

“I could make you stay.” Dustil’s hand on his tightened, fingers closing like a vise.

“Let me go and I’ll find help.”

Anger sparked in the bond again, roiling between them. Mekel’s anger at being stuck here, and Dustil’s at being lost.

“Think of something happy!” Mekel told him. Fracking Angst Boy. “Remember that time we got them to let us into the Drunk Side on Dreshdae?”

Dustil’s laugh wasn’t happy at all. And his eyes were very dark. “Remember what happened after Ban caught us?”

“Commendable, Acolytes, that your powers of Force persuasion are strong enough to fool a stimmed out bouncer at a third-rate cantina; but I would like to see you both apply yourselves to a true challenge.” Yuthura Ban’s violet eyes crinkled at the corners, as if she was lost in thought. As if she didn’t already have an idea that would involve something gruesome, for them to do. “Why not see if you can apply those same powers of persuasion to your competition in the Academy?”
“We don’t have competition at the Academy.” Mekel was drunk, or he never would have said that.

Dustil elbowed him hard. Shut the frack up.

“Humor me,” the Headmistress murmured. “I want to see what the two of you can do. Together.”

XXX

“Only one of those prospies actually dropped dead,” Mekel pointed out. “The others ran away. I probably did them a public service, keeping them out of our little school.”

“You didn’t convince them of frack,” Dustil’s voice sounded tired. “I reinforced your commands later, because I didn’t want you to flunk out.”

“That’s…” Mekel wasn’t sure what to say. A wave of anger ricocheted through the bond, and then faded. He squeezed Dustil’s hand. “Thanks?”

“Mekel.” Pressure on his shoulder again, like someone was shaking it. The voice again. Coming through the Force.

“Ban told me we were stronger together.” Dustil’s eyes shifted away from his. “I was just trying to keep us alive.”

“That’s all I’m doing now, Telos.” Mekel closed his own eyes. Just let me go do it.

In his head, in their heads, Dustil’s mental voice was tired. Just do it fast. Before he kills me. I can’t… keeping from going fracking insane in here is harder than it looks Mekk.

I know. He couldn’t help but know.

Promise you’ll come back.

I promise, Telos.

Dustil’s fingers on his released, and Mekel fell free.

XXX

“Mekel,” the voice repeated, the weight of the Force behind it. “Wake up.”

Mekel opened his eyes and found himself staring into two round and blue ones. A Zabrak face, traced with light indentations, and a lock of brown hair, curling down between her horns.

His breath rushed out, painful. His head throbbed. He felt like fracking hell.

“You’re running a fever,” Lydie Korr told him. “And Thalia May’s worse.”

XXX

All Revan wanted to do was be alone for a few minutes, to compose herself before she went to find Korrie. Her son was eating breakfast now, a bright spark with the other Padawans, laughing at something the child next to him had said.

But the Room of a Thousand Fountains wasn’t empty. Yesterday, Revan had been able to convince herself that the galaxy was only big enough for two people. But now in front of her, were the wrong two people.
“I don’t want you to be my wife,” Malak said to the red-headed woman standing before him.

“Oh?” The red-headed woman’s voice was sultry, flirtatious. And not hers. “What do you want?”

There was a pause, as if Malak had too many things to list all at once. It made Revan’s gorge rise. But there was anger around Malak too—and a darkness—as if he was about to strike.

“I know what I want,” Revan interrupted them, before the man in Dustil’s body could kiss—or kill—the woman in a copy of hers. “I want to be puke out my guts, in one of these fountains.”

Both figures turned. Revan had been hiding in the Force. From their expressions, she’d done it well.

Sunlight from the skylights overhead glinted off the woman’s golden, metal hand.

“Hello, Sheris.” Revan added, because the woman couldn’t be anyone else.

Vrook said they were all here from Manaan. All here, even her.

“Revan,” Sheris’s voice was a perfect echo of Revan’s own tone. Perfect as that face.

Didn’t I order her scarred? Almost immediately, Revan felt guilty for wishing those orders had been carried out.

Her—Malak stepped backwards, saying nothing at all. He only nodded, acknowledging her. There was something… almost… formal about it. Like Revan was his—

His master. And he was my apprentice.

Revan walked towards them. Sheris was dressed in robes almost identical to the ones she was wearing herself. The other woman’s hair was longer, and loosely coiled down her back. Her face looked more like Revan’s memory of her own face than the one she saw in the mirror now. Unlined, a faint trace of freckles across the nose. Younger. She’s younger than me.

“Are you Revan? Really?” The woman’s voice rang like a bell.

I made her practice that voice, we made her practice that. Over and over until she got it right.

“By Coruscanti law, at least.” Revan kept her voice dry.

“But are you really her?” The younger woman’s voice was mocking. “Atris and Klee said that until you get your memories back, you’re no one. Just another Jedi experiment.”

“Aren’t we all?” Revan stepped forward, trying to keep the irrational feeling she didn’t want to qualify as jealousy at bay. “Why are you here?” The ugly worm in her gut was irrational. Completely irrational. “You want to frack my husband again? Go right ahead. Just let me leave the room first.”

“Your husband?” Sheris snorted. “Which one?”

“Red.” Malak turned Dustil’s face towards her. He’d made the boy’s face look actually embarrassed: neat trick for a dead Sith Lord. “Don’t.”

Frack. I called him my husband. He’s not. He’s nothing. He’s dead.

“Malak’s a little young for you now, Sheris.”
The woman with her face tilted her head, quizzically. “I didn’t come for Malak. I came for the redemption.”

“‘The redemption.’ Revan laughed sharply. “What does that even mean?”

“It means I will be of use,” Sheris said. She smiled—almost like a mirror. “It means I won’t have to live with what I’ve seen. What I did.” Her eyes flickered towards Malak. “I won’t have to be me. I get to be someone else.”

“You’re getting a mind wipe?” Revan snorted. “Trust me, they hurt like hell.”

“Not when they’re done properly. I won’t be a half-thing, like you.”

“She says she’s going to be you.” Malak’s voice was flat and furious. “She says that Atris is going to turn her into you.”

“No!” Revan’s breath came up short. “They can’t do that!”

Those memories are mine. Mine. And why would she want—everything I did. I don’t want to know. What kind of person would want to be someone like I was?

When I take back my memories, I will know everything about this. Everything I did to them. If I want memories of my son, I must face it all.

Everything they know. Everything that made them this.

Everything we all... lost. And for what?

To stop some fracking Sith threat?

“So, this Emperor,” Revan said flatly. “Vrook told me about him. Is he real?”

Malak’s eyes narrowed. “He exists. We met with him, and the Sith’s Dark Council. You thought their fear of him was a trap to lure us closer, give him control over the Star Forge. The Sith couldn’t make the Star Forge work at all without us.” He paused. “You thought his power was a bluff.”

“Was I right?”

“I didn't think so.”

“Is that why you tried to have me killed?” Explosion as the entire world vanished in yellow light. Blood in her face, pooling in the mask. Pain.

“It was one reason.” Their eyes met. Revan looked away first.

Darkness between them, verging on hate. All still there, even if the reasons were lost. Malak seemed... darker now than he had in her dreams, as if being corporeal in Dustil's body had infected him. As if his actions had taken him farther down a dark path.

Just like our masters always warned us would happen.

“I don't understand,” Sheris interrupted. “You could have been restored this afternoon if you wanted. How can you be so selfish?”

“Is that what I am?” Revan stared at him, ignoring her. “Selfish? You told me not to do this,
“I told you to run,” he muttered. “Take our son and run. Instead, you’ve armed the Mando’ade, allied with the Sith, made deals with the Genoharadan, commanded the Sith Fleet, become Second of D’Reev, reawakened and programmed that Rakatan computer—”

“I have not allied with the Sith.”

“Arca?” He laughed sharply. “I checked the board last night before you Force choked me into oblivion. The old dead drop’s active again: the one we used when you were trying to control my father? Only now, I think your minion’s got new orders. Orders from Kaas.”

“I have no fracking idea who Kaas is.” She tried to smile as if she were confident. As if it was a bluff. “Or Arca.”

“Dromund Kaas is a place,” Sheris sniffed. ”Did you really not know that?” Her lip curled. “Even restored, I think you'd lack the spine to be Revan now.”

“Careful,” Revan muttered in a voice she almost didn't recognize. “I could rip yours out by your ears.”

“Oh, there you are.” Sheris walked closer. “Dear old Revvie.” There was a light in her green eyes that made Revan nervous. Zaal would call it madclaw, she thought. “Even without your memories, I’m more like you than this pathetic shell.”

Revan had tried to kill Malak, not even ten hours ago. She had drawn her saber. She had wanted to kill him. The anger she felt now was familiar. So black you could choke on it.

But Sheris was different. Sheris wasn’t Malak. I did this. I made her like this

“I’m sorry, Sheris,” Revan said quietly.

“You’re… sorry?” Sheris’s eyes widened. “We did what we had to do, my Lord. To save the galaxy. Would you rather we had done nothing?”

“What did we save the galaxy from?” Revan asked. “Ourselves?”

Malak frowned, looking like he was about to answer. But then his head turned towards the entrance of the room, the gated archway, with its marble pillars, and promises. There was someone standing there. A shadow, slipping between the pillars. Resolving itself into the figure of a man.

Almost no warning. Just a softness in the Force. And then a laugh. “I thought being redeemed meant never having to say you’re sorry.”

At first, she didn’t recognize the man standing there. Black hair slicked back from his face and brown skin. Pale eyes in that face, tinged with Sith yellow. Like the rest of them, he was wearing Padawan beige.

But then she remembered. She had looked at all of their bios, in the days after seven of the Selkath Ten had died.

“You’re Davad. Davad Arkan.”

The other memory—the one from the crystal the Jedi had shown her—rose, unbidden.

XXX
Revan made her hand into a fist, and felt the Onderonite's heart clench as if it were clasped in her fingers. His mouth opened and closed, soundless. She opened her hand again and he fell to the ground, eyes rolling back in his head, as he tried to scramble to his feet.

Maddenly, there was a still a smile on his face—and she could feel his hunger for death as much as for all the rest.

"Don't bother getting up," she sneered. "I like watching you crawl."

It's the only thing they understand. A show of strength.

Revan turned away, not bothering to watch with her eyes, when she could feel him scrabble across the duracrete floor, feel all of them, the living web of them extending outwards and the chain that bound her—and through her them all—to the one who was coming.

And somewhere Malak was laughing. With Sheris. She could feel them laughing.

*The Onderonite crawled on his knees before her. He'd been the noblest man she'd ever known—once. The kindest of all of them.*

*That was why she'd left him on Malachor to die screaming.*

XXX

“I left you on Malachor.” Revan frowned.

“Above it, actually.” Davad's eyes never left her face. “Do you remember?”

“No,” Malak interrupted. “She doesn’t.”

Anger there, strangely familiar. Familiarity that felt real—not like a half-remembered dream. Revan turned her head and frowned at Malak. For a moment, Malak's anger had almost felt like Dustil's.

Maybe that's good. Dustil's still in there. Maybe he can break free. Maybe there’s some way I can help him break free—

“Do you remember why you saved me?” Sheris interrupted. “I was supposed to be at Malachor too. But someone took us away from our masters—me and the others. Vikor Tio took us on a ship to Rekkiad.”

“Rekkiad?” Revan had heard of it. It was near the Sheltin Tunnel trade route. Nothing there. Just an icy rock in Wild Space. Polla had always wanted to go on the Sheltin Tunnel. You had to keep your routes tight there, or your ship could get lost, burn out on the edges of parameters so narrow that you had to keep running probabilities, even after you locked in your coordinates. Rekkiad was in an eponymous system in the Reach. In Wild Space….

*Wild Space near Malachor.*

“Rekkiad is a planet too,” Sheris told her. She laughed again, like bells, smiling flirtatiously at Davad. “Revan thought Kaas was a person before.”

“They took so much from you,” Davad Arkan murmured. His head inclined, and he reached for Revan’s hand, bringing it to his lips, before letting her fingers fall again. “You have my sympathies.”
“No,” Malak snapped. Was he talking about the kiss? “Watch yourself, Arkan.”

It was just on the hand. Davad was always doing things like that. He’d been the noblest man she’d known—once. Once, before—

“A few of us survived Malachor,” Davad told her. “I found my way back to the Fleet. Surik ran to the Jedi. The others…” he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“You must have… you must have blamed me.” But he didn’t seem angry.

“They stripped Surik’s Force powers.” Sheris interrupted. “I wonder why they don’t do that to you?”

“They can’t. They need me,” Revan said. “Wait—who?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Davad said, holding her gaze. “What’s done is done.”

“They want me to go after an emperor,” she told him. Davad’s eyes were still kind, oddly sympathetic. “The Jedi want me to go back into Sith space. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Something’s—something felt strange. Something I’ve felt before.

Where? When?

“Later,” Davad said softly. “…I suppose you’ve all heard, the Gamemaster from Manaan is dead.”

“Yes,” Sheris sighed, twisting a ring on her finger. She glanced down at it. For a moment, her expression was almost—lost. “Oerin Lin died from that plague.”

“I know something about Mandalorian culture,” Davad said. His eyes flickered towards Malak. “Not as much as some, of course. I don’t suppose any of you know what happened to his personal effects?”

“That pet Mandalorian of hers.” Malak’s voice dripped with disdain. “Ordo. I was with him when got the comm about Lin. Ordo wanted to get Lin’s body and burn it. But the Jedi won’t release a biohazard into the general population. So why does it matter?”

Davad shrugged. “It’s just a thought, but I was wondering where they might have put the man’s armor?”

Davad is right. He’s right. The Mandalore’s armor. Gwen and the others… they’ll want it back. Even if they can’t have the body, that armor—

XXX

“No.” Oerin said. “For five hundred years, Mandalorians have worn that armor in battles of sand, sky and stars. You are not putting it on a Wookiee.”

“They’ll be looking for a Wookiee,” Revan explained to him again. “If we give them a Mandalore instead, we can get through customs. Please.”

“I will make it fit you again, Lin-cub,” Zaalbar growled.

Sometimes I have no idea how you people defeated us,” Oerin Lin sighed. “Fine.” He got up from his chair, and paced to the viewscreen. “Do what you want, Fett Revan Mandalore.”
“We’ll need to get them the armor,” Revan said numbly. *Canderous. He was supposed to be watching Malak, but Malak is here. Where is Canderous?*

*And Carth. I made Carth sleep. He was worried about his son and I just made him sleep.*

There would be time for guilt later.

“Don’t look at me,” snapped Malak. “I’m going to go check on Korrie. Make sure he’s kept away from this contagion of yours.” He glared at her.

“It’s not mine!”

“I’ll take care of the armor,” Davad said softly. “I want to help.”

“It’s probably in Oerin’s quarters. They were assigned guest rooms, him and Canderous….”

Revan’s voice trailed off.

She was watching Malak walk away from them in Dustil’s body, moving with a furious arrogance the Telosian boy had never had. How had she ever fooled herself into thinking he was Dustil?

“I’ll take care of the armor,” Davad repeated. His fingers brushed her arm, and Revan looked up at him, startled. “I remember where the guest quarters are. You… you should go after him.” He smiled. “Isn’t that what you want to do now?”

It was. Of course it was.

“I’m going after him,” Revan said.

“Atris will be wondering where I went,” Sheris murmured. “I should go to her.”

Revan was already moving towards the hall, towards Korrie. And Malak.

*XXX*

The sun streaming in through the transparisteel pricked his eyelids, forcing them open. By the angle it was already afternoon. *How did I sleep this long? Why didn’t she wake me?*

Carth sat up with a start. He was alone, but the door to the fresher was closed.

“Revan?”

He got up, and knocked. Not that he needed to knock, it wasn’t even like her to leave the door closed, it had been one of those things he’d had to get used to, like the way she had nightmares in her sleep.

Carth thumbed the door open when there was no response. The room was empty.

Funny, there had been *something—*wait. *Wait. How long was I asleep?*

Memories of the night before started to flood back. Dustil. There’d been—Dustil. Dustil on the floor unconscious.

*And you just left him there, because you had to get her away from him. She almost killed him. She almost killed your son.*
“I need to watch Dustil,” he told her. She had to realize—even with, even with everything she’d done—even with what she’d just done, she had to realize. Dustil was still his son, even if Malak’s mind was in his body.

“He’s asleep too. Now.” Revan sounded so sure.

“You can tell? How can you tell?” He’d been unconscious. There might be something wrong. She’d been choking him. She’d dropped him from a meter above the ground. The sound of his body hitting the marble floor—

“It’s… just the Force. I can tell when everyone’s sleeping.” Her eyes shifted away from Carth’s.

He was already reaching for his boots. "We shouldn't have left him alone."

“No,” Revan said. “You need to sleep. Now.”

_He was so tired. Why hadn’t he known he was so tired before now? Carth yawned. His eyes fluttered closed and he felt his body go limp._ "I need to sleep,” he muttered. “Now.”

XXX

Carth knew they’d done something to his mind on the _Pearl_. Rew and Jiya had both all but confirmed it. And yet—and yet—I’ve been asleep too long.

This was an impossible situation. It didn't even make sense.

_Revan compelled me. If she can do that, if she’d do that, what else will she do?_

Fear crept in Carth’s throat like a bitter lem. _Dustil._
Carth looked at the room, the one they had shared for so brief a time. White walls, a window looking out over the Coruscanti skyline. A few of Malachor’s toys were piled in one corner, atop one of the luggage crates marked ‘Property of Ahto City.’ His clothes, folded neatly on a chair. Revan’s piled on the floor next to the bed. Such a small space to build a life. A life that had nothing in it for him—except her.

They’d been together for more than a year, most of it spent on the Ebon Hawk, docked or flying. Saving the galaxy, even as Malak’s noose tightened around them. Saving her, even when she begged him not to.

He did love her. He knew that. Even now. But this was no kind of life. And trapped here was no way to save his son.

*Dustil. If she'll compel me, what will she do to him?*

Carth went to the small cabinet by the bed, opened the drawer, fished for his idchips. Credits. A card, with a picture of lilies on the front, inside a plimsy note.

He read it, shaking his head.

XXX

*Dear Revan,*

*Presents, as you know, are old Deralian tradition from family to family. We're so happy that you're part of ours, and hope this finds you well. Congratulations on your marriage! I have to admit, usually Organas only marry one man at a time, but I expect you know your own mind, dear. You always have.*

*Your sister, (and I hope you don't take offense, that we think of you both that way), is still a bit sulky about this entire thing, but she promised me that she'd get you and your husbands something nice.*

*Let me know if she doesn't. I'll have words.*

*Jasp is a little worried that we don't know you like we should. I know you're probably quite busy, what with all of the galaxy's problems, but we're back here at home, whenever you need us. We'd be delighted if you came for a visit, and if you ever need a place away from all those bright lights, our home is always open to you and yours.*

*All our love,*

Molla Organa.

XXX
Deralians were a trusting lot, Carth thought, giving the former Dark Lord of the Sith an open invitation to stop by. Maybe their planet had had it easier than Telos.

He put the note back and his fingers closed on the comm unit. The one Revan wore over her ear to talk to the computer. The computer that had Mission’s memories. Mission. It wasn't her, it couldn't be.

But his son wasn't his son either.

And right now, Carth didn't even feel like himself. Onasis don’t cut and run. How many times had he thought that? How many times had he gone forward, even when it all seemed hopeless? How many times had he done the right thing?

But I didn’t do the thing for Mission. I left her there. I cut and run then.

He slipped the ear piece on, a little cautiously.

“Hello, sis!” It chirped, before he had a chance to switch it on or speak. “Did you know we've been camped out in front of the freaking Temple for like, hours? Gwenarius and co want Oerin Lin’s body back so they can burn it—and this plague thing… I don't want to freak you out or anything, but it's not good. The Temple’s under quarantine, and I'm still offline, so I can't like, hijack a transport to get you. Why did you stop talking to me? Wait—waitamillisecond—”

“Error.” The voice interrupted itself. “Breathing pattern does not match the subject on record. Warning. A lethal shock capable of frying your cerebellum will be applied to this earpiece in ten, nine, eight—”

“Mission!” Carth ripped the thing off his head and yelled into the mic. “It's… it's okay. It's just me. Carth.”

Wait. Did she just say Oerin Lin is dead? Oerin Lin’s body?

“Oh.” There was a pause. “Did you take off the headset?”

“Yeah. You mind if I leave it off for now?” He kept his voice light.

“Did I freak you out with that alarm?” How could a computer sound this much like a dejected fourteen year old girl? “I really need better security. I can't really fry a cerebellum remotely.”

“No, it’s…” Carth fumbled for an excuse. “You said Oerin Lin's dead? Really dead?” His heart sank. The Ithorian had said the man was ill, but the Mandalore had seemed pretty indestructible. “Is Dustil okay?”

“Well… yeah, as far as I know. Except for being possessed by Darth Malak.” Another pause. “You knew that, right? I mean you kinda attacked him. I still had access through Mekel back then. Funny, it was yesterday, but it already feels like the good old days!”

“Malak killed Oerin?” In Dustil’s body? He tried to stay calm.

“What? No! He just died of some scary plague. Bam! Just like that!” For a computer, she sounded almost sad. “Guess you never know, huh?”

“No, I guess you… I guess you don't.”

One of those things you try to hide from your kids, as long as they aren't possessed by absolute evil
pieces of banthshit. *Or murdered when they get in the way.*

There was a weight on Carth’s chest. “Listen, I'm just—I guess this is goodbye.”

“What?” The earpiece squawked, indignantly. “Are you kidding me?”

“You don't have plague, right?” she added. “You're not dying? I don't really have much monitoring on this thing. You know? I can't tell. I can't see.” She sounded panicked.

“No.” He realized he was shaking his head at a comm piece, and stopped. “But I-I did my job. The Jedi have Revan now. She… belongs here. And I have to think about Dustil. I need to find a way to help him.”

*My son that I have no idea how to help.* He had some mad idea of going to the Jedi, demanding that they fix this—but if they knew already, why didn't they help?

“I've been trying to think of your son!” Mission snapped. A computer couldn't really snap, but Mission was doing a good imitation. “But until these sunsports or whatever resolve and I can access my central core….” She paused. “Nope, still down. I can't get through to Kashyyyk at all.”

“I'm going to the Jedi.” Carth said. “I’ll threaten them with exposure. They can't let this happen.”

“Which Jedi?” Mission asked. “Vrook? Klee? The entire Council? Because, you know I tried to hack into their records for weeks and it’s like, impossible to figure out what they think. You can only extrapolate based on their previous decisions and there are some serious, serious inconsistencies. Like some of them have done complete orbital loops.” She made a chuckling noise. “Almost like they were reprogrammed.”

For a second, Carth couldn't remember any of their names. Then he remembered that conversation he'd heard in the hall the night before—before he knew how bad things were. “Vrook. He’s her uncle. And Yuthura Ban—she said she’d help before.” Carth frowned. “And maybe that white haired lady. Antrim?’

“Atris,” the Mission said. “I don't know. I was trying to figure out which of them were on our side, but the whole Darth Malak thing is a doozy.” She paused. “Are you sure it's *really* Darth Malak? I mean, maybe it’s some random other Sith ghost pretending to be—”

“I'm sure,” Carth snapped. “We’ve had a few chats. He promised to leave my son's body when his son was safe. But he still hasn't done it.”

“Okay.” Another pause, as if Mission was working something through. “Technically, Malachor’s never gonna be safe. You know? I mean, who is? But look, we need resources. We need resources bad. This is gonna sound crazy, but I think we need to leave here while we pull out some big, super, turbocharged guns and maybe an orbital command station capable of destroying an entire planet.” She paused. “I mean that as a metaphor. I don't actually have access any orbital command stations like that.” She made a sighing noise. “Yet!”

“You mean, go to the Fleet with this?” Carth laughed. “One step ahead of you, kid. That was my plan.”

“No,” Mission said. “Not Fleet. And I'm not a kid. Geezer.” She paused again. “Put the comm on, okay? And start walking towards the exit. Probably easier if we split *before* Polla Revan gets back. You want to leave a note or something?”

Against his better judgement, Carth slipped on the comm. It was cold against his ear. A note.
They'd never even exchanged rings, him and Polla—and now he was leaving her with a note.

“Tell me the plan,” he ordered the computer, already tracing the words on the back of the holocard. Not very many words. Most of the ones he felt—*I wish, I hope*—felt like they belonged to someone else, to someone allowed to wish and hope. And apologize? For what?

The only thing he was sorry for, he couldn't say. Because it wasn't true. He wasn't sorry for saving her. He'd do it again.

He could say that.

*I'm not sorry for saving you, Revan.*

Carth gritted his teeth, tried to remember the woman he'd fallen in love with. The woman who had seemed invincible, with the heart of a hero.

*Make it count, Polla.* he wrote. *Make all of this damn well count for something.*

“Okay,” he told Mission. “I'm done.”

“Good,” she said. “Let's jet. The Mandalorians are totally freaking out the guards in front of the Temple.”

Mandalorians. “Canderous.” Carth said numbly. “I should say something to him, before—”

“That’s why you have to move now, chuba pants. He's like six meters ahead of you, heading for the door.” She paused. “My T3’s got a comm open from Gwenarius to him right now. I think it might go more smooth if we sweet talk the guards into letting us out before he shows. Canderous… he’ll have a lot of baggage.”

“Of course he does.” Although he didn't seem half as bothered by it as Carth.

“Literally, a lot of baggage,” Mission added. “That wasn't a metaphor. I told Gwenarius to tell him it was a bad idea, but Mandalorians have like, duracrete skulls. Once they get an idea in, it doesn’t come out. We need to distract the guards to get them out.”

“They?” He was already moving.

“Let's just move fast,” Mission advised. “You know where we’re going, right? You're not a chump, Carth, no matter what Big Z said those times.”

“Not the Fleet.” He nodded, quickening his pace. “I can guess. And I have my doubts. The man's insane.”

“I think the Mandalorians can keep him in line,” Mission said. “And he owes us all like, big favors.”

Favors. “How is Senator D’Reev going to help?”

“He's the closest thing we have to an expert on ancient Sith artifacts.” Mission paused. “Besides my core on Kashyyyk. And it's not like D’Reev wants Darth Malak running around either, right? He'd lose his Senate seat, and a bunch of pissed off people who don't like Sith would probably just kill the kid.”

“It's all blasted,” Carth muttered.
“You know that old Coruscanti Senate saying, “Nobody really likes the Sith because they're mean and wear ugly hoods?” Mission asked. “We're gonna count on that.”

“That's not—” it didn't matter. Carth started walking faster. The first thing to do was to get out of here. The computer's plans, the Senator.... It was all nuts. Carth would figure the rest out after.

XXX

“You’re running a fever,” Lydie repeated. The Zabrak’s face loomed over Mekel’s, looking beautiful—and worried.

He wished didn't feel like he was dying, so he could appreciate her concern.

“But I had the vaccine.” The world swam back slowly, and almost immediately, Mekel wished it had not. Agonizing pain, sweats, stomach heaving—he’d do anything to be just unconscious with Telos again.

Help, he thought at the bond. Help me.

“What vaccine?” Another voice, filtered and metallic, as if through a mask. For an insane second, Mekel thought it was Lord Malak; but then the figure leaned over him. White hood, ferracrystal visor, and behind the hazmat suit, pale, even features. Blonde hair falling over the man’s forehead.

“You may have been vaccinated for some of the more common diseases transmitted in the Underground; but right now, you are infected with a virus that has synthetic signatures in its replicator nodes.”

Mekel’s head felt like it was stuffed with used plimsi, and his guts were twisting, causing sharp jolts of agony to spin up his spine.

“I know what I have,” he muttered. “It's the Dreshdae shake.”

“Dreshdae?”

The face was hazy, through the fever and the hazmat suit. It took him a second, but then Mekel realized who it was. Only one asshat he knew in the Jedi ever talked like that.

"Jorde?” Hysteria bubbled in his throat. “What, are you a medic now?”

“Mical,” Mical Jorde corrected him. “Padawan Mical is also acceptable. Return to the topic at hand, please. You said were… inoculated? When was this done?”

“On K-Korriban.” Why was he fracking freezing? “So was Thalia. And Ophile. And Udoo—”

“You might have been inoculated for something, but not this.” Jorde’s voice was flat. “Padawan Udoo is in another isolation ward, and as sick as you are—along with his master. We had to put Thalia in a coma to lower her heart rate. Her body temperature was spiking twelve degrees above the Human baseline. Even accounting for planetary drift and physiological differences among the humanid groups, that’s—”

“S-shut up.” Mekel looked at Lydie again. “I think I’m gonna puke.”

“Here.” Lydie held out a bucket—just in time.

When he could finally look up again, Mekel he noticed her lack of protective gear, compared to hazmat boy. “Aren’t you afraid of getting sick?” he asked her.
“They think we’re immune,” she murmured. “My species.”

“No Zabrak cases recorded in the Underground,” Mical agreed. “Even in the Iridonian quarter.”

“You n-need to make more vaccine,” Mekel told him. “One that actually fracking works. Or something. Sents are dying.”

Oerin Lin was dead. The man had been terrifying, and now he was just dead. Suddenly, Mekel was terrified for Millifar. Just how close had she gotten to Mandalore?

“The Masters are working on it.” Mical said. “Why don’t you get some rest? You’re looking rather pale.”

Mekel had never liked Jorde, but suddenly, he felt grateful. “Okay.” The bed was angled up. Lydie propped his puke bucket next to him. He closed his eyes, to stop the room from spinning.

“Even in those who recover, the virus is still active.” Jorde frowned. “No antibodies. It is making the effort of finding a cure… difficult.”

“That’s strange,” murmured Lydie. “Does that mean they’re still contagious?”

“No, the virus goes dormant. *Deliberately* dormant. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen. I need to consult with Master Loanin—his knowledge may be able to shed some light on this artificial signature, and then, if we can trace its origin….”

Jorde sounded fascinated.

*I’m glad the thing that’s killing me is fun for you,* Mekel thought blackly.

“Can you trigger this… dormancy?” Lydie sounded fascinated too. Rustle of movement as they moved away from Mekel’s deathbed, probably going off to not die together.

“Alone, I can do nothing. My master and our *team* need more recovered subjects. We need to know if the virus reactivates itself, how long it stays sleeping—and what triggers reactivation. We need to know the point of origin….”


“Delirium,” Jorde’s voice said. “Don’t be concerned, Padawan Korr. It’s quite common in these cases.”

“No,” Lydie said. “He’s right. We need to ask Darth Malak.”

Mekel lost track of her voice as she began to explain.

*Dustil?* He was hopeful, being on the imaginary ship would be fracking better than this. *Let me back in.*

But the Telosian didn’t answer.

XXX

*Temptation.*

The holocron sat on the desk before Atris, partially disassembled, the relevant pieces spread before
her. Each fragment like a faceted jewel, sparkling with dark malevolence.

When she closed her eyes, she could still feel their reverberations of memory, traveling back in time through the lost woman’s life. Seductive as a siren’s song on Yu’Phaedra, where the sea nets led to home.

Atris was the archivist. It had been her task to record the pertinent facts of each facet of Revan's life, take the testimony of each Master who had viewed a crystal, and then synthesize their gestalt into the larger whole. To find the truth of meaning within, their path through the madness. The secrets of the long-forgotten Rakatan Empire and the threat of the True Sith.

It had taken much time, cataloging each shatterpoint. The urge to see more—to see for herself was… understandable. But such urges, like most, needed to be denied. She had only slipped once, and only because Master Kae had asked her advice. Only once, to see what was truly at stake.

*I must walk my own path, not Revan’s. I am Atris. I am the Master of the Jedi Archives. I am Atris and I will not fall—*

A shadow fell across her desk, disrupting her meditations.

“I have done as you asked, Atris.” Master Kae bowed her head. “I went with Vrook to question Revan.” She paused, glancing down at the desk. “And you. Did you… view the memory?”

Atris nodded, the horror of it still black in her throat. “I did. You were correct. I needed to see it.” She tried to quell an involuntary shiver. “And you? What is your opinion of Revan?”

“As you said,” Master Kae sat. She moved like a woman much older than she was, opposite Atris with a heavy sigh. “Revan is a shell. A shell with attachments to her recent past.” She sighed heavily, suddenly looking older and frail. “Forgive me, my strength is somewhat lessened on this day.”

Atris got up quickly and helped her sit down, before retreating back to the safety of her own desk. “It must have been hard for you, seeing her like this.”

“Is it not always hard to see your students fail?” Kae gave her a sad smile. “I know you had it no easier than I when Meetra returned, renouncing all you had taught her.”

It was automatic, although not kind, that Atris felt a twinge of relief for only having failed the Jedi by training a weakling; and not, as Kae had, an actual traitor to the Order. But Kae had always been… brave.

After what happened to her mother after the tragedy on Yavin, she had to be.

“A part of Atris still hoped she was—for Vrook’s sake.”

“I do not know.” Kae’s folded her hands. “In the Force, yes. But there was little of the woman I trained left.”

“We have the other option. Sheris has agreed to take the memories,” Atris said slowly, “But the Council—”

“The Council is blind to what we have seen.” Kae grimaced. “Forgive me, if you think I speak out of turn, but the Council must not see what we have seen. Not all can look upon the dark paths and
still retain themselves.”

“Let them keep their innocence,” Atris agreed. The holocron sparkled in front of her, the fragment near the top close enough to touch. The one Kae had shown her. The one that had helped destroy her own fragile peace.

XXX

A feeling of nothingness; empty as a hollow cup. The feeling of having to scream but not having your own voice.

What Revan saw in Malak’s mind was worse than the destruction of all life on a long-dead planet, worse than the ruin of Malachor.

Or at least, worse for her. She hadn’t felt the death of Malachor; but now she could do nothing except feel the slow, agonizing death of her husband. Not the body—that would almost be a mercy. No. The death of all that was good, and pure, and his.

All of his mind.

The body sat across from her at the table. The prosthesis was off, and the decayed remains of his lower face were displayed, in all their ruined glory.

Automatically, she handed him the feeding tube. Malak’s broad hands fumbled with the seals, until she reached over again and snapped the receptors in place.

“Remember when you said you were born to rule, Mal?”

His eyes just stared into hers. Vacant. Insane. If she put the prosthesis back on he’d rave at her again. About power and destruction and revenge—and how they had to burn it all to oblivion—

What a waste.

They were so close to victory. Fleet united, the Republic Navy almost destroyed. Ziost and Thule had pledged allegiance, forsaking the old Sith capitol—and the old Dark Council’s rule.

The Emperor was diminished with each world they took from him—by conquest or contract. The virus had been widely distributed in Imperial Space, and every sentient who survived the would now be immune to Tenebrae’s kiss.

True, mortality rates were higher than she liked, but dead sentients could not serve as spies. The vaccine raised the probability of survival to almost one hundred percent. On some planets, strategic ones, nearly every susceptible sentient received a dose. Star Forge production was steady, at ninety-eight percent of capacity. In another five years, they could expand into Republic Space—

“Remember when I said I needed you to rule, my love? I do. I need you back.”

She did need Malak. She would always need him.

And using the truth was the best way she had to conceal the weakness she wanted to hide, even if the Emperor was listening.

Her husband’s dead eyes stared back at her. The feeding tube was crooked. Revan adjusted it, opening the valves to make his nutrient infusion go faster. If it went faster, she could leave him to
Sheris.

“I need you back.”

He blinked at her. The code he used with Sheris, with the other Jedi when his voice failed, when his voder was being cleaned. Once for yes. Two for no.

There had been a time when they hadn't needed words—spoken or otherwise. When their minds had been twinned, even across planets, star systems, maybe even a galaxy—although they had never been so far apart.

No more. Too much risk now. She had closed her mind to him. They sat across the table from one another, but Revan had never felt farther apart.

If he had only trusted her. It was why she had put Malak in charge of the scientists on Manaan in the first place. So that he would see. See what he needed to see—even if she hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him why.

He might have already been compromised, even then. There were signs. Cracks in the ice.

Or cracks in her.

Even now, the doubts came back. She had been fooled before. Trapped and tricked more than once. What if Tenebrae, or his rebellious Council were three steps ahead on this—what if her own mind was already compromised—

Don’t think that. It serves no purpose.

She had to assume the insane Sith Emperor knew about her son already, because Malak did. She had to assume, so she had to do everything in her power to stop him from using Malak.

Her son. Her weakness. The only one she had left.

“What is the life of one child against a trillion?” How many times had she asked the question. How many times had she wept for the logical response.

Nothing. The life of one child is nothing. We can always have more—but not anymore.

The fool should have taken the cure. I found a cure for it and the fool didn’t trust me enough to take it.

Distracting herself, Revan started to speak again, words more for herself than the thing that used to be her husband. How much of Malak was left? She couldn’t afford to know.

“You said I was born to fight and you were born to rule, remember? I don’t know how to rule. They want to establish elections on Thule, but the local aristocracy controls everything. We freed their slaves, and the masters burned their own factories. The slaves burned the fields. I don’t know how to stop the slaughter. I don’t know how to stop this—”

A noise, guttural in his throat. Like a moan. Too loud to be accidental. Malak’s hand brushed against hers, and his hand moved, reaching for his prosthesis.

Her skin crawled. Was that him, or the madman? “No.” She shook her head. “Sheris says you need to leave it off for another week. Allow the bone graft time to heal.”

And I don’t trust your voice, my love. I don’t trust your voice or your words. I don’t trust myself.
His fingers fumbled instead for the stylus on the table, the datapad he used to issue his reports. The Force drew it into his hands. His head tilted down, exposing the mottled skin of his hairless skull. He was writing something on it now. Revan allowed it, allowed him to write down the words that she would never read.

She got up from the table, keeping her voice cold. “I need you on the Leviathan as soon as possible. I’ll take the Aleema. The Republic hides the main bulk of their remaining ships in the Outliers. With backing from the Infinite Fleet, we’ll meet them there. Tammuz sector. Near a system called Deralia. One of the Independents. They think they’ll be safe….”

His hands shoved the datapad towards her. She backed away, refusing to look down.

Would he still follow? Trepidation in her throat. Regret, for what must be done. Could he hear her thoughts? Was it even him at all?

Her eyes skimmed the surface on the table and the datapad anyway. Traitorous eyes. He’d written only three words. The predictable ones. Sentimental drivel, that didn’t change a thing.

His eyes blinked once.

XXX

“Atris.” Kae’s voice was soft. When Atris opened her eyes, the other woman’s were sympathetic and kind. Kae reached out and took her hand, smiling gently.

“I idolized them,” Atris confessed. “To see all of that potential, all of that grace reduced to—darkness was… horrible.”

“I know,” Kae said. The lines of her face were deep, etched by old pain. “But now they have another chance, Malak and Revan.” She tilted her head. “Surely, you can see that too?”

“I see that it must be Sheris,” Atris said. “Yes. I see that now.”

Although… Vrook’s logic had been flawless. The ethics of replacing Sheris’s mind with the Dark Lord’s—even if necessary—went against everything that made them Jedi. Everything the Jedi Code stood for. To take a woman who had come to them for aid, and replace her with a monster was… abhorrent. It was wrong. The Council would allow Revan her own memories. But to give them to someone else—that made them no better than Malak. No better than the Sith.

That was why Atris would not let the Council make this choice. The Jedi Code was nothing, in the face of a madman. A mantra chanted by children, to ward off the monsters of the Dark.

She had been so blind before. But Arren Kae, the former Vima Sunrider, had helped her see.

“Yes,” Master Arren Kae nodded. “It must be Sheris, and not Revan, who goes beyond the Reach to save us all.”

Atris inclined her head. “Because Sheris will be stronger. Stronger than the real Revan ever could be.”

Master Kae’s lips pursed together. “Exactly.”

XXX

With all the moffa-crappping hell that had gone down, Canderous wasn’t even surprised to see Carth
standing at main exit from the Jedi Temple, obviously wanting to leave this mausoleum just as badly as Canderous did himself.

Republic stood in front of the gate that was now covered by a glittering forcefield, arguing—by the gestures of his hands and inflection in his voice—with the two scared-looking Padawans, who were all the Jedi seemed to think they needed for security.

Good thing the Jedi were idiots who couldn’t even guard their quarantined areas properly, because Canderous really hadn’t wanted to use the nuclear option. His personal shields could probably withstand the blast but remote the ones he’d set on the cart were weaker. And if something happened—

All of this was a terrible gamble. Like every battle. His lips pulled back in a smile.

Behind him, trailed the luggage cart, covered in Mandalorian runes, with a single large crate in the middle, cushioned as best it could be with all the innocuous-looking crap he could find that wasn’t tied down. Clothing. Armor. A few crates of supplies the Jedi had just left lying in unlocked storerooms. They didn’t seem to have any locked storerooms. Trusting lot.

After some deliberation, Canderous had left the HK droid behind. No one but her could properly control the thing, even if it was useful—and with its Lin obsession... he couldn’t take any chances.

“You have to let me out,” Carth was saying to the Jedi. As if logic and reason ever worked with Jedi. “I’m not a prisoner.”

“My sincerest apology, but no one is to leave the Temple,” the dark-haired boy said. “We’re all under quarantine. You should return to your guest quarters and await further instructions.”


Canderous had been so busy raiding rooms he’d forgotten what was needed from Lin’s. Well, it was too late now. Gwenarius would have to understand. Maybe, if Revan regained her sanity and the Jedi cured their plague, they could get the armor of the Mandalore back again.

Still a good sacrifice. Even if it ended now, it would be cleaner than what had happened to Oerin.

Clan and Stars. He knew Revan would understand as soon as she got her head out of her ass. But the thing was—and seeing the pilot here now made it clear he’d reached the same conclusion—you can’t drag someone’s head out of their ass. You have to throw them some rope and hope they fire up the crankshaft all on their own.

“You can’t leave either,” the white Twi’lek girl said, turning towards Canderous and raising her voice.

“Are you talking to me?” Canderous wanted to laugh at her fierceness, like a manka kit, but instead he settled for raising an eyebrow and smiling.

Carter didn’t even look surprised to see him. One side of his mouth pulled up, and he gave Canderous a curt nod.

Canderous jerked his head once back, in the direction of the Twi’lek brown-robe. I got this one. He raised one eyebrow, signaling. You get the boy.

Then he smiled at the manka kit. “Of course I’m talking to y—”
Carth’s blasters fired, and the girl collapsed, like a droid with no motivator.

“Nooo!” A scream of near-mindless rage erupted from the boy, as he leapt across the desk, closing the five meters between them in a heartbeat.

The kid’s saber was blazing and the edge of it swept down, singing Canderous’s beskar-plated chestplate—just as Canderous ducked and shoved the stun stick up into the pup’s neck.

The pup twitched, and the lightsaber fell from his hand. His eyes rolled back in his head, but he was still trying to move. Almost impressive. He was still struggling to stand when Canderous jabbed the trank at him, burying it in the muscle of his unprotected jugular.

Canderous laughed. *We’re out of practice.* “You had your holdout on stun? Cause you shot the wrong one. I was gonna trank the girl—the boy was supposed to be your target.”

Carth knelt, carefully checking the boy’s pulse. “Of course I had it set to stun.”

“Good.” Canderous glanced behind him. No noise yet, but that couldn’t last. “You know how to work the field controls?”

“With this passkey.” The pilot retrieved it from the boy’s pocket. His lips twitched slightly, and he shoved the holdout back in his belt. He raised the key in the air, tossing it to Canderous, as he moved on to the girl, checking her pulse too.

Canderous wondered what the man would have done if either of the Jedi kids had been dead. Oh, well. From Republic’s expression, they weren’t

“Better move,” Carth said. His lips moved and he muttered something else, half under his breath. Gleam of a silver comm in his ear. Was he talking to Revan’s computer? Or his own team?

Canderous nodded. Whatever—whoever it was, they had trust between them. Just like on the Star Forge. The man was a soldier, even if he shot the wrong targets.

Canderous thumbed his comm back on, and barked an order into it as he walked through the now-deactivated field.

Gwen’s voice barked back, rapid-fire, and already annoyed. She was going to be pissed about the armor.

“You’re insane,” Carth muttered behind him. His Mandalorian was really coming along quite well for him to have understood that conversation. “You know that, right?”

“You think I was wrong?”

“No.” The man’s voice was hard and angry. “I thought of doing the same thing. You weren’t wrong. It beats the alternative. But she—”

“We can talk about her later. If we move now. Guard the cart. We’re not out of this Moffa-frack. On my signal, you set the jets to fast, and jump on. Cover him. We need to break the line before they take us down. Once we’re on the other side....”

“We run faster,” Carth muttered. “Hope Mission is up to this.”

There wasn’t time to tell the man what Gwen had said about the T3 and its lack of access to the transport grids. Any more than there was time to tell the man that the Mandalorians outside waiting
for them weren’t even armed.

They were Mandalorians. They’d *get* armed. Plenty of guns on the CoruSec out there too. Gwen had said there were at least fifty of them.

They’d be shooting to stun too—probably—and beskar could take some hits. Course, the pilot wasn’t wearing any… but the man knew how to duck and roll.

Canderous couldn’t help but smile. Even if they lost, it would be a fine battle.

*A fitting memorial for Clan Lin.*

XXX

Revan caught his arm. “Malak. Stop. You can’t… you can’t do this.”

“Do what?” Instead of stopping, Malak was walking faster now, propelling Dustil’s legs with the power of an older man, a stronger one. “Do you think I can’t protect my son from this plague you’ve unleashed to destroy the Jedi?”

Somehow, Revan *knew* that pace, instinctively, matching it with the Force.

No! You can’t keep using Dustil’s body. *This is wrong. This is so wrong—and Carth. Gods, what he must think…. Even as her thoughts scattered, his words sank in.*

“Plague that… I unleashed? You really think I did this?”

The plague had killed Oerin Lin. It had killed others in the Underground too; although Revan had scarcely paid attention to the newsvids. So much of it was Malachi’s propaganda, and then…the last few weeks, there had been no need.

No need for news in a galaxy that only had two people in it.

Malak’s laughter was dark. “No. *I* did it. I did it for you. You sent me to Manaan to oversee production. Plague and your false vaccine. But I never took your false cure. No one under my command took it, Revan. You tried to destroy me with a formula from your damned computer and you failed. Pestilence to weed out the weak—and the strong. Your plots were always so obvious.”

His face twisted, pale and wrong with Dustil’s features. “I thought that was all behind us now. I never dreamed you’d bring it *here.*”

“I *didn’t* bring it here!” Her hand reached out and he froze in mid-step. Comical, the way Dustil’s body tilted back and forth, if this wasn’t so deadly serious.

Malak stood frozen, glaring at her—until she remembered to unfreeze his mouth.

“No. *Arca* brought the plague here,” Malak said. “On your orders? You don’t remember how it was. That cabal of mad Sith.” His voice softened slightly, even as he teetered and almost fell, his own training keeping him upright. “Lucky you.”

“Then tell me,” she said. Her fingers flexed, and the Force relaxed around him. He stumbled on his feet, and immediately started walking again. “Tell me everything.”

“Aren’t you going to find out when you take back your memories?” He laughed and grabbed her hand, now pulling her along. When she pulled away from him, he reached out and touched her hair, feather-light. Those eyes that were Carth’s son’s looked at her and then looked away fast.
Malak never laughed. Everything was so deadly serious. Our lives were so deadly serious. We never had the chance to be anything except serious—

“Yes,” she promised, resigned now. “If I did this, I have to fix it. I’ll take back the memories. But before I do, you have to let the boy go. Please.”

“Red.” Malak’s voice was oddly gentle. “No.” For a moment her vision blurred and he didn’t look like Carth’s son at all. “Some things you can’t fix.”

XXX

Around them, the remaining Wookies drooped. The one called Freyyrr was still growling at Nico, waving his arms, but everyone else, like her, was simply exhausted. At least Nico was speaking Basic finally. That made Lena want to kill him a little less. Even if they’d been sitting at this feast table on the landing platform on Kashyyyk now for hours.

“That is a fascinating story about why the Durian homeworld should become a fused plain of glass, but why did you retrieve my prison, Lord Revan? You still haven’t said.”

Mission’s image blurred back into one that Lena thought she recognized from a newsvid: a figure, robed and masked. “Error: No such information exists. Indexing suggestions corruption of files. Marked hazardous to sentient life.”

Nico, (she was not going to start calling him T’chhh-whatever), laughed. “Corrupted files. Ah, well. Dantooine: acknowledge.”

The voice that had sounded like Mission, and then Revan shifted to something metallic and dead. “Acknowledged.”

“Commence repair of Kashyyyk installation.”

There was a pause. “Connecting now. Complete wipe and reboot will be necessary to initiate repairs. Are you sure you want to perform the action at this time?”

“You fracking—!” That voice was all Mission. “No! Lena! Your husband is a huttspawned piece of poo-doo, bantha shit!”

“Nico?” Lena reached across the table and put her hand on his arm. “What are you doing?”

“We need peak efficiency to cure the kolto, my love.” Nico frowned. “I have to link all of the functional installations under one sentient body. This one is will not do.” His t’chin tapped the table. “Sad, because Revan is so interesting, but the data’s corrupted. It needs a wipe.”

The computer barked and growled furiously, almost drowning out his words.

Cock of a bowcaster, levelled at her husband’s face. Freyyrr’s lips drew back in a snarl and he growled something, low in his throat.

“Nico!” Lena covered her mouth with her hand. “Mission! Don’t!”

The computer barked again.

The Wookiee’s head turned towards her. Its bowcaster shifted, tilted down, until it was pointing straight at her still-flat stomach.

XXX
“What do I need to do?” Sheris’s voice was shaking. Nervous in her own ears. Nothing of bells ringing in it at all.


“Meditate,” the other voice said. Her voice, her other master. The one in shadow. “Let your mind become an empty cup. Just let go, child. As you did long ago. As you did when Imra died at Malachor.”

Sheris smiled hesitantly. For some reason, she remembered Vrook, and what he’d said about her family back on Hoth. How much they wanted to see her.

*If you wanted to see me so much, you shouldn’t have sold me to the Jedi, Mother. Not if you really cared.*

She wondered if she would remember them—after. She wondered if she would still care after. About them. About Oerin. About Malak. About anyone.

Why care, when she could be? Her fingers closed around the crystals. Sharp edges pricked her palms.

“Use the Force.” Something wistful in Atris’s voice. Longing.

*She wishes it was her and not me. I’m so lucky.*

XXX

“You have such potential for empathy, Padawan Sheris.” Master Imra, smiled gently. “It will make you an excellent healer. It’s why I chose you, as my Padawan.”

“I’m glad. I want to fix things,” Sheris told her. “Sometimes I feel it’s my des—”

XXX

Corporal Jiya Sand’s face. Kindly deceptive, the traitorous deserter. Hair iron-gray and receding. His weathered features shifted, and blurred, seen through a haze of blue. Next to him, a dark-haired woman, little more than a child.

An important child.

*Success! We’ve captured Shan. Her and Corporal Sand. I can make her perform his execution—*

The world tilted. It felt like she was floating. Reaching for the Force and hitting a blank wall. Like she was wearing a—

Neural band. Who would dare?

Sand’s lips moved. He turned his back, walking away, hazed in blue.

*Something cold on her skin. Like gel. Tubes down her throat. She’d had injuries like this before. Altair. Iridonia. Yu-Phaedra, when they needed her groundside to draw the Mando’ade into that hospital—but no one had ever curbed her with a neural band. No one would dare.*

Star Forge tanks are much more efficient. We should have returned already. Why here now? Inefficient.
Jiya Sand deserted me. In the end his loyalty proved false. Like so much of the Fleet. Fools.

She preferred the company of nulls, but you couldn’t trust them because you couldn’t control them. Logic failed, compared to the Force and absolute loyalty.

Careful. That’s how Tenebrae thinks. Idiot Scourge thinks like that. My old master Kae. That’s the dark side. But it doesn’t matter because it works. The dark side works.

A convulsion, like screaming, her lungs choking. Limbs flailing against the transparisteel, shatterproof tank. Anger. So sweet in her mouth.

Shatter. Shatterpoints. This is one. Here. [[Notation.]]

The yellow blade flashed and spun, propelled by the earnest Padawan who would be dead a thousand times by now if she wasn’t potentially so useful.

Almost bored, Revan waited for the next pathetic attack. Her own double blade was still in her hands. Not even lit.

“You can’t win.” Her own voice. Flat. Pointing out the obvious. Why even bother.

Behind the girl, corpses of the more useless Jedi. Necessary refuse.

Irritation. Irritation at all of this. The Jedi were wasting her time. She’d let them board to get Bastila Shan, and now it was done.

Jedi wasting her time, when she needed to kill Malak.

Her head turned away from the girl, towards the viewscreen. Leviathan’s expanse filled it the entire view. Their ships were aligned, on her orders: bridge to bridge. Cameras displaying his image, even as his ship’s recorders watched hers. Holocams everywhere. One final show for the old man, for the Coruscanti inheritance laws.

Lord Revan raised her hand, readying the command to fire. Adratus nodded. Always loyal to a fault. Good man. She preferred the company of nulls now, even if you couldn’t trust—

Something flashed in her eyes. Something broke. Something exploded, so fast her personal Force shields barely had time to activate. Something slammed into her, knocking her backwards. Her head hit the deck with a shattering crack.

White and yellow light. Stars. Scream of vacuum from a hull breech. Fainter screams of her crew, those too slow to activate their magtreads in time. Even with eyes closed, Revan saw the strike from behind: a yellow blade flashed and she rolled away, turned away from the sonic blast even as it screamed through her shield, upended her, sending gravity and reason tumbling. Magtreads failed.

The yellow blade stabbed. Something gave in her guts, burning, like cold fire. Like stars.

Malak. Malak shot first. He dared—?

Shatter. Shatterpoints. This is two. Here. [[Notation.]]

Her hands beat against the walls of the tank, her mouth opened, and the sour taste of bac and kolto choked her lungs.

Blue light radiated from something the Padawan held. Bastila Shan. The girl was standing next to
Sand. Standing next to Sand and she was holding something—something small, square, gleaming.

Crystalline. Holocron. Why. Who dared give prisoners knowledge of the holocrons—

The holocron, spun, opening, in front of her face. Its rays touched when they burned.

Shatter. Shatterpoints. This is three. Here. [[Notation.]]

Rage so sweet that it burned like brandy in the back of her throat. Blood in her nose and mouth, filling her mask; and then cold air on her face. Large blue eyes, young eyes, looking into hers with an expression of fear—and a terrible fascination.

Something enveloped her like a blanket, or like chains.

Revan tried to slip away in darkness, but the voice kept screaming: "Malachor—Mal—I—"

His face. His small face, soft in sleep. Red curls.

XXX

She screamed. Shrill and echoing, lungs choking on air, not kolto. Her head jerked up, her lungs seized, gasping. The air smelled wrong. Too rich, too open. Too sweet. Not a ship’s air at all.

Blue light, yellow—the pain. The taste of bacta.

Her breath rushed out of her lungs, and she staggered, hands clenched around something, as if gravity itself had changed. Everything was abruptly heavy. Dimmed, somehow, like a wall between her and the Force.

I’m not here. Where am I?


Her hands were clasped around the hilt of her saber, smooth and round—

Her hands beat against the tank, and she was trying to scream—

No. Her hands were clasped around something sharp and square, with edges that cut her fingers and bled.

She dropped the thing, the thing that hurt, and its pieces shattered on the floor. She ground the offending object under the heel of her boots. She lifted her hands, checking them for damage. One of her palms was bleeding, laced with a hundred tiny cuts. The other was not. But it was also not flesh. It was made of some gold metal, fashioned like a hand. She flexed the fingers, and they bent under her will. She looked down. The boots were wrong too. Brown and soft. She had been wearing black ones before. She had been armored and masked. Now, the air smelled familiar, cool on her naked face, and her robes were light beige.

Shatterpoints. The thought was foreign, alien. As if it had been forced into her mind. This is one, too. This is the final one—


Her head jerked up.

A woman. A woman was sitting at a desk. Sitting at a desk and staring at her. White hair. Pale.
Pale as ice, pale as Hoth.

A woman she knew, as mad as that was in this place that was impossible. She knew the room too. It hadn't changed. All that had happened and the Archivist’s quarters on Coruscant hadn’t changed at all.

“Atris.” She closed her eyes.

Malak shot first. He must have won.

Not exactly the afterlife Revan expected.

Master Atris’s voice. “Knight Revan.”

Knight Revan. I’m a Jedi Knight in my afterlife? She opened her eyes. Atris was still there.

It had been so long since anyone had… presumed to call her a Jedi Knight that Revan started to laugh.

XXX

There were so many explosions somewhere that it sounded like Isuop had left the portaplayer on high again.

Grandfather would be furious.

It was very dark, but Korrie wasn’t in bed. He was in a small space that kept rocking, back and forth, and he wasn’t exactly sure how that had even happened.

There had been breakfast. And then meditation class. A lot of the others were whispering about a sickness in the Temple. A lot of people were getting really sick. Everything had kind of felt afraid, and he’d wanted his parents, even if Korrie knew better than to ask. They were fighting. They needed to make up. Then they’d come.

But then… how had he gotten into this box thing?

Something cut through the air above him, red and fast, like a laser bolt. Growing up Eg, you have to know all the different kinds of bolts. That was one of the bad ones. It made holes above in the box. Smelled like scorching.

Korrie wasn’t armed, and he wasn’t old enough, so he did the playdead that they had taught. He shut his eyes tight and tried to just count, waiting for the chaps and the guards to finish it. The box-thing he was in rocked back and forth. This could be a drill. Shelterinplace. The Egs had lots of those, even if the Jedi never bothered, since they were good fighters.

The only time anyone had ever really tried to kill him for real, Father had helped; but Father didn’t feel close right now. The box thing rolled a little, moving faster now, like it was sliding downhill. Above, a light circle where the blaster had gone in, scary. If Korrie dared, he could peek out that light circle and see.

Even as he thought about doing that, another one appeared right beside it. He tried to scrunch down farther.

The something jolted, really, really hard, and then he was tumbling, upside down. Upside down and sideways, and the dark thing he was in was obviously a box, because the corners were hard and
square. His head bumped, but Korrie knew how to roll, and so he did.

Suddenly, the top popped open. And then he was staring at a yellow-haired lady holding a sword in her hand. Her other hand held out to him. “Get out.” She said, like she was in charge. “Can you run?”

“Pretty fast,” Korrie said. “Why?” He looked behind him, because when you were in danger, you always should. There was a crowd of people, and a shattered luggage crate with a picture of a fish on it. Lots of yelling. A man in an orange jacket grabbed his other arm, even as the yellow-haired lady took one. A bunch of CoruSec guards were charging at them.

The man and the woman stared at each other over his head.

“Korrie,” Mother’s husband Carth said. “Are you okay?”

“What happened?” He remembered, he’d had to pee, and then there’d been a shadow and it felt like he’d been stung by a botfly.

“I’ve got him,” Mother’s husband said.

“He’s Lin,” the lady said back. “We’ve got him.”

The man tapped a comm attached to his ear. “Speeder’s coming. She's going to get us out of here?”

“Revan?” The blonde woman snorted. “Did she finally come to sense?”

“No.” Mother's husband frowned down at Korrie. “Mission. I'm talking about Mission.”

So they were on a mission. Well. That didn't happen every day.

“Does this mean I get to help?” Korrie asked, but then there were more explosions and both of them were dragging him along a plat, right by the edge.

“Where's Mother again?” he added, just as Captain Onasi wrapped arms around him and pulled him up and—and then they jumped right off the plat.

He hadn’t thought it was possible, but just like in the vids, there was a speeder waiting below to catch them. An astromech droid was in the front seat, plugged into the console like it was driving.

“Simple!” It said, in a girl’s voice. “You totally don't need the Force for a stunt like that. I just calculated the angle of your descent and the velocity and matched—”

Korrie was so surprised it took him a second to realize his knee was bent to the side and almost backwards. He stared at it, dumbfounded.

Then the pain hit, and he started to scream.

XXX

“Please,” Lena whispered. “Don’t. You can't kill me.”

“No,” Revan’s voice said. “I can't, but Freyyrr will if I tell him to.”

Nico’s eyes were wide and startled. And strangely—helpless. He whispered something in the language that wasn’t and the computer rattled off something back, using Mission’s clear consonants to say nothing but gibberish.
“This isn’t everything.” Oerin sighed, creak of chest cavity. His breath smelled bad.

Davad frowned. “You wanted the armor? That’s the armor.”

“The helm? It’s missing the visor?” How could Mother’s Dark Apprentice be so careless? “The mask of the Mandalore?”

“There are at least a dozen of those floating around on this planet alone,” Davad said. “Buy another one at auction.”

“My face,” Oerin snapped. Everything hurt. He’d put on the rest of the armor, but everything still hurt. “I need to hide it, remember?”

“That’s why I brought this.” Davad pulled out a leather mask, goggled, with a round opening for a breathing tube. “Gand, I think. Much less conspicuous than the mask of the Mandalore.”

“I brought your lightsaber too,” he added, handing it over. “And this knife. It looked old. I thought it might be sentimental or ceremonial?”

“No.” Oerin was strangely glad to have it back anyway. “I just use it to cut my meat.”

“I’m starving.” Davad said. “Speaking of.”

The man always was. Oerin had watched him put away two kilos of nerf steaks once, back on Manaan. The chef droid had barely been able to keep up.

“We’re in a kitchen.” An empty one, except for the two droids they’d deactivated and the one unconscious Knight, that Oerin had knocked out with a practical blow to the skull. (That way no one would suspect Force users had been here.)

Davad was already rummaging through one of the vast, walk-in fridges.

Oerin stood there, patiently decaying and waiting. It was so strange, not needing to breathe. He kept trying to do it anyway.

Suddenly, the alarm went off: splitting through the air, and echoing in the Force.

“Does that mean they found my body missing?” Oerin called out.

Davad came out, holding a large round of ched. His mouth was full of something and he had to swallow before he could answer. “I don’t know. Seems like a lot of trouble for one dead Mandalorian.” He frowned at the unconscious Jedi at their feet and then looked up at Oerin again. “Still, perhaps we should take our leave now. There’s a supply dock on this level, leads to an underground garage. Vik showed me once, back when… when we were young.”

“I’m forever young,” Oerin pointed out. The food made him feel nauseous. He put them helmet on. Played hell with his peripheral vision.

Davad snorted. “There’s the upside. I’m not. Ever since Malachor, I’ve felt—”

Then it came, like a sonic boom in the Force. Like a scream. Like a wave of pure light, encompassing a star, scorching a planet below. Wordless. Rage. Loss. Echoing and hammering against anyone with a scrap of Force sense in its planetary radius.
“By the Egg,” Davad said. “I forgot she could do that.”

“Pure Force,” Oerin muttered. His own gifts were not inconsiderable, but relied heavily on lies. “Do you think she's sad about my death?”

“No,” David’s voice was grim. “I think something just happened. Something bad. Maybe to her son. Malachor.”

Now that he mentioned it, that was the name echoing in the Force. Malachor, malachor, malachor. Over and over again. Like the death of a world. Like a memory of what Oerin had felt before, with Mother, when they'd felt the world die.

“We need to go. Now.” Mother or his own intuition. Not fear. Not fear of Revan. She was powerful, but easy to shape, as Mother had shown. Mostly easy. Easy enough. Well. At least… easy when they had shared the same goals. Or maybe the original Revan had been more tractable.

Or maybe Mother was insane. Couldn’t she have found Oerin a nice body like Malak had gotten, instead of this husk?

Davad picked up the haunch of some beast from one of the smokers by the exit.

“At least wrap a towel around that,” Oerin told him. “Put it in a sack or something.” He really did feel sick.

And it was a pity about the child. Oerin had liked him.
Chapter 32 / And We Were Sharp, As Sharp As Knives

I’m one with the Force. It’s over. The laughter in her throat bubbled, almost tangibly real. I’m one with the living Force and it’s showing me a vision of Atris.

Ironic, like the rain on the open-aired plaza on Rakata Prime, the day the Lords of Thule and Ziost had pronounced her and Malak Dark Lords of the Sith.

“Revan,” Master Atris repeated. “Please. Will you sit down?”

Revan stopped laughing. “This is a… Force vision?”

That would explain the ghostly figure she saw standing behind Atris, hovering in and out of sight like a bad holorecord. Gray robes, hooded, head down, just a glimpse of hair nearly as pale as Atris’s own….

Revan blinked and the woman was gone.

Maybe I’ve just gone insane. Maybe this is some Tenebrae-spawned vision. Some of the pawns I tortured said their minds dreamed, while he used their bodies.

But everything felt too solid for a dream. She looked down at her robes again. Padawan beige, the fabric scratchy and thick in her still-bleeding hand. When she tilted her head, something soft fell across her skull. Her hand reached up and felt the weight of hair. Braided and coiled down her back. It had been years since she’d worn it like this.

Time. Maybe this is some kind of time slip. Maybe I’ve gone back in time—She stared at her hand. Pale, and unmarked by Sith corruption. A ring on one finger, stamped with an old seal. The part of her mind that knew such things catalogued it automatically. Krin, subclan of Wies.

Why am I wearing it? When did I lose my other hand?

For a disorienting second, neither of her arms felt like hers at all. Why would my mind give me an injury I never had? She’d had a scar on the arm that was metal now; just a long line of red, a place from a clumsy blade that still wasn’t healed, even if the injury had been weeks ago. The injury itself had been nothing, inconsequential; a scratch from a duel with some lordling of Thule. But it hadn’t healed.

That was the danger of the dark side—things were harder to hold together, things wanted to fall apart.

Was the arm amputated?

“Perhaps you should sit,” Atris said gently.

Revan snapped her head, towards her. “No. Explain.” She hesitated, not wanting to give away her confusion, admit any weakness. Had she gone back in time? Or if this was some kind of trap? Her hands fell to her waist. She wasn’t even armed. “What do you want?”
Edge of the Force there. Commanding Force users became so much easier than nulls, even if their lack of free will became tiresome.

Atris’s breath hissed in sharply. Her face seemed to pale, but she did not spit out the answers as she should have, immediately compliant. “I think you should sit down for this, my old friend.”

*We were never friends. You turned your back with all the rest. You and Kavar, refusing to join our struggle. You were never a friend, you were only useful. All of this collected knowledge, a wealth of it wasted on Jedi platitudes… we begged for your help and you turned away.*

Suddenly, she was entirely disoriented. Revan found herself sitting down on the bench next to the desk. Her foot brushed against the broken thing on the floor, the thing that had cut her fingers. She looked down. Fragments of crystal, fragile and faceted. Most of it was crushed to powder, but a few pieces were intact enough to see the shape that the whole had been.

A broken holocron.

*I was holding a holocron. A holocron like the one Bastila Shan had, in my vision. That blue light, searing into my brain—seeking, probing… recording.*

And then—then it was all suddenly, terribly clear. This wasn’t the afterlife at all. “You Jedi tried to reprogram me. Altering my old memories.” She laughed. “As if the example of Nomi Sunrider proved nothing. And you called us rash.”

*If this is really real and not some fear plucked from my head by that damned Emperor.*

“Revan,” Atris’s voice was gentle. “I only want to help you.”

“You didn’t help us before.” If this was real and she was alive, then Malak had to be dead. *He would never let me live incapacitated. One of us or the other.* Her face tightened as she tried not to show any emotion. If this was real and Malak was dead and she was really on Coruscant now, then—

*Don’t. Don’t think of him. Enough time has passed, he’s stopped thinking of you. What’s the life of one child against a billion, empires full of little lives….*

Revan bent down, reaching for one of the fragments. If they were her memories, then some of them were of him.

“I wouldn’t,” a voice whispered. Female. Not Atris. Familiar, like an echo in her head. “Sentiment and confusion will not serve you in this place. Keep your wits about you here. You will need them.”

The voice was—familiar, like a whisper in her skull. Feminine.

*Not the Emperor. Not unless this is some kind of trick—*

Revan jerked her head up, but only Atris was there, still staring at her.

“Revan,” Atris repeated. The smile didn’t work on her face, like a terentatek trying to be kind. “I-I know. I saw some of what you experienced. I know about Tenebrae, and the Sith Empire, and what you did to stop him.”

Revan laughed again. “From my holocron? The memories you stole?” Her hair was long, and it had been almost entirely gone before. *How long have I been unconscious? What lies did my holocron tell—that made you believe I would serve Jedi?*” She stood up, and swept the desk clear.
with a wave of her hand. Datapads and artifacts crashed to the ground. It was amusing to see Atris
flinch. “Bringing me here, to the heart of the Republic?” She scoffed. “Apparently, Jedi are still
fools.”

“A fool is one who refuses an open hand offered. The Echani seeks an alliance. Will you cast her
aside?”

Revan shook her head sharply. “Silence, Voice!”

“Revan,” Atris began again. “I only want to help—”

The scream in the Force came out of nowhere. Out of nothing. Only one word.

Malachor.

XXX

“Mission!” Lena felt all the muscles in her stomachs clench, as if trying to protect the child within.
“Please!”

“He wants to kill me.” The figure on the holoscreen looked like Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith still,
but it sounded just like Griff’s little sister, voice suddenly high and scared. “If he reboots
Kashyyyk, he’ll kill me. I can’t let that happen.”

The computer paused. “I’m sorry, sis.”

Nico rattled off some more gibberish. He wasn’t even looking at her. Why wasn’t he even looking
at her?

The computer spat back something that sounded like gurgling underwater.

“Nico!” Lena kicked him hard on the table, aiming for the choobs. Her foot missed, but connected
with his knee. “Speak Basic!”

A hundred hells on Ryloth if she was going to die not even knowing if her husband wanted to save
her or not.

“Lena.” At least now he was looking at her. “I’m sorry, my love. We’re… negotiating. What she
wants is completely unreasonable.”

“She’s a kid, Nico.” A kid with a pet Wookiee threatening to kill Lena’s own child. “And I know
her. She wouldn’t hurt me. It’s a bluff.”

“Lena!” Mission’s expression twisted. “I am not a kid!” Her voice changed, barking several
commands in Shyriiwook. Suddenly, there were several more bowcasters pointed at Lena.

“What do you want, Mission? Tell me—not him.” Lena tried to make her voice sound reasonable,
tried to not sound afraid.

Mission would never hurt me. And maybe this computer isn’t her, but it’s acting exactly like she
did, when Griff and I told her we were leaving Taris. She threatened to shoot me then too.

“I want access to the nets.” The girl’s image looked almost sulky. Her t’chun twisted around her
neck. “To my people on Coruscant. Revan—the real one—she needs me.”

“Why can’t she have that, Nico? Why can’t you work with the kolto together?”
“Organic minds are unpredictable,” her husband said. “Unstable. She won’t work with the other planets. She has her own agenda.”

“So do I,” Lena snapped. “And my agenda involves surviving this.”

“Tell Lena the other thing you asked for,” her husband said.

“You have to give the Wookiees at least one or two star systems,” Mission snapped. “And complete autonomy on all of their worlds.”

“Autonomy within their boundaries,” Nico said. “Not outside. But tell her the other thing.”

“Credits.” Her voice was flat. “I want lots of them.”

“Lena’s in charge of capital.” Now he looked at her, then back at the holo. “Stop dodging the issue.”

“A body.” Mission Vao’s holoimage smiled. “It doesn’t have to be exactly like my old one. Just real. I want to be alive again.”

Freyyrr growled something that sounded like a question.

Lena’s hands went involuntarily to her own abdomen.

XXX

“It really, really hurts!” Korrie was trying to be brave and not cry, but it did really, really hurt. And his leg looked funny. And somewhere he could feel Mother too, and Father, a little. They were very, very worried that he was hurt. Mother was a lot louder, yelling his name in the Force over and over again.

I’m here. He thought back at her.

For a second, that made her quieter, but then she got loud again, demanding things like: Where? Where?

In the air? I don’t know. It’s okay, it just hurts, he thought at her. I jumped and I think my leg got broke. Captain Onasi is here too.

Mother’s thoughts kind of stopped for a second. Then they sort of… got quiet. Like she was keeping them under a pillow after lights out.

Korrie was worried too, but they were still in the speeder, speeding somewhere.

“It’s okay, Korrie.” Mother’s husband was holding him while the yellow-haired lady pulled out a knife and cut the fabric of his pants, bending the leg around and making it hurt even more.

Korrie bit his lip to stop from yelling.

“Has no one ever taught you to fall properly?” The woman looked down, wind whipping through her hair, and chucked his chin, like he was a baby. “You must relax all of your limbs. Bend your legs and try to roll. “After this leg heals, you must practice.” She fished around in her pocket and jabbed Korrie with something. “When you are grown to fall from sky, you will need to be graceful.”

The pain that had been taking over everything stopped hurting almost a-sap. Korrie breathed a sigh
“Why would I want to fall from the sky?”

“Gwenarius,” Captain Onasi said. “Your comm is ringing.”

“So it is!” She frowned, and thumbed it on. A gruff voice started talking in a different language. Not one of the ones Korrie knew. He caught the word “maffa” a few times, which was a word Grandfather used when he was cursing.

“This is insane,” Captain Onasi muttered. “You know that, right?”

The yellow-haired woman just rolled her eyes. “Canderous says he’s managed to reach D’Reev. We are expected.” She raised her voice slightly and looked at the droid. “100 Thantos Three. Do you know the way?”

The speeder swooped up, a little, dodging some traffic going the other way. “On it!,” the T3 said, swiveling its dome around like it was looking at them.

“There’s some trouble with the CoruSec guards,” the woman—Gwenarius—added. “They tried to detain Xarga for shooting one of them. They’re asking them to surrender their weapons.” She laughed, as if that was funny. “And the Jedi have come out of their hiding place—several of them, approaching the protestors in the square—”

“I got it,” Captain Onasi said. Then he said something else in that language to her, like he was showing off that he got it.

The woman said something back, and then both of them were talking and Korrie couldn’t understand a word.

“Canderous?” Now that his leg didn’t hurt, Korrie could actually think. “The Mandalorian that married my mother?”

“Of course.” Gwenarius frowned at Captain Onasi. “We are all Mandalorians here. I don’t know what those Jedi have been teaching you, but it’s quite obvious you need better instruction.” She said something else in the language Korrie didn’t know, and the comm chattered back at her.

Father had been very, very plain about what he thought about Mandalorians, which was that they were evil, eviler even maybe than Father and Mother before they died.

“I am not one,” Korrie muttered, but under his breath. They said they were taking him to Grandfather, and Grandfather owned the Mandalorians now, (Korrie was pretty sure, since the other kids at the Temple said they worked for him and Mother was in charge of them), so this had to be (somehow) all okay—except for his broken leg.

But still… one second, he’d been taking a pee and the next second, he’d woken up in a box.

“You kidnapped me,” Korrie asked. “For Grandfather?”

“We lost one Lin to the plague already,” Gwenarius told him. “I told my husband, we could not afford to lose more. I told him your Grandfather had offered us a trade, for your return. At first my husband objected, but I made him see reason”

“Mother’s pretty mad.”
“I’m sure she will follow you, pup. Don’t worry.” Gwenarius smiled at him.

“I think she already is.” She was closer now. Father too.

“Just as well,” the Mandalorian said. “Can you speak back to them?”

Mother?

Nothing, just a feeling that she was a little closer.

Then another feeling. That she was mad.

XXX

A piece of burning plasta, probably from one of the Coruscant transports that the crowd had set upon launched overhead, crashing down in front of Canderous, just in front of the barricade.

In front of him, the nervous hired nannies of the Republic had given up all pretense of trying to take them into custody, and were now just trying to keep the crowd from storming the Jedi Temple.

Fighting off the CoruSec guards without killing them had been a worthy challenge, one that allowed Canderous to spend some time with his daughter and the other up-and-coming warriors of Ordo. Carr had made good use of the distraction, getting Malachor out of the way so they could really enjoy the battle—although judging from the expressions on the faces of their foes, the enjoyment was one-sided. Millifar had excellent aim, and wielded the stolen stun baton with the finesse of one born to the blade.

Canderous hadn’t felt so proud since Carefix had won his last blood in a glorious sacrifice, falling from the skies over Althir.

The pilot had done his part as well: gotten the boy away and safe. As soon as Gwenarius reported in, Canderous gave the order to fall back. It was harder to do, because a full-blown riot had erupted around their assault. Perhaps the soft, Core denizens thought the Mandalorians were fighting their battle for them, because many were pushing forward into the ground Canderous and the pups had cleared, swarming the Coruscant transports and pressing towards the entrance of the Jedi Temple itself.

The crowd was a beast now, untamed and unpredictable. Entertaining as it was to stun the guards, it was time to go, before their small band was swept away. Unarmed civilians had no business throwing themselves in front of blaster bolts, but if they were too dumb to realize that, it was probably his responsibility not to shoot them.

A year ago, you would have shot them, he thought to himself. Hanging out with Jedi pacifists is making you soft.

Jedi pacifists. He felt his teeth pull back in a smile. The joke never got old.

Canderous was still grinning as he motioned for the kids to fall back, behind him, melting into the crowd. One-by-one they did, tucking their stolen weapons away, and moving with an efficient grace that made his heart proud.

“Stop,” said her voice. The word seemed to echo everywhere, until Canderous could feel it in his guts.
Around him, everything did stop.

_Blasted Force-users. Interfering hu’tuun._

A hush rippled through the crowd, spreading, until everyone was silent and still.

Canderous realized he’d lowered his own weapon too.

Revan pushed through the now-silent crowd, her face a mask of cold fury, heading straight towards him. Behind her trailed Darth Malak in Carth’s son’s body. Malak’s lightsaber was out and blazing blue—as if no one in the Jedi had sense enough to disarm the Sith ghost possessing one of their own.

Of course, they were Jedi. They relied on Force powers instead of common sense. As if to prove the point, a whole herd of them appeared at the gate, hovering behind Revan and Malak, like they still needed their Jedi Knights to fight their battles for them.

“What have you done?” Revan hissed.

Canderous nodded at her. “What I had to do. This place is a tomb. It’s no place for a child of Lin. Or for you.”

“Malachor’s hurt.” Her eyes were narrowed to slits. “I think his leg is broken.”

He was? Gwen hadn’t mentioned it. Couldn’t be very bad. “The Jedi weren’t gonna let anyone leave,” he pointed out. “They had us fenced in like nerf. Now, we’re free.”

Whispers now, as the crowd around them milled, confused. Space around them widened, as if no one was willing to approach or fire upon Revan and Darth Malak in Carth’s kid’s body.

“Give the order to bring Malachor back. Now!” Malak’s blade raised, as if his threats had meat. “Now.”

“No,” Canderous said flatly. “We lost one member of Lin already.” He tried to soften his voice, attempting reason. “We won’t leave him alone with D’Reev, but he’s safer there. This place….”

his voice trailed off. He couldn’t articulate what was so bad about the Temple, it was nothing he could see or shoot. “Oerin’s dead,” he added. His voice roughened, with the grief he’d been trying to keep at bay. “I don’t want to lose you too, Revan. You, or your son.”

Revan blinked. “Oerin died so fast. This sickness….”


“He keeps saying that I did this. I made this… plague.” Revan’s head turned and she glared at the ghost in Carth’s son’s body. Her hand twisted and his lightsaber deactivated.

The wraith glared at it, and then back at her. His hand moved as if he was trying to switch it back on.

Revan’s teeth pulled back in a grin and she shook her head.

Canderous snorted. “He says you made this plague? What did I say about giving yourself too much credit?”

“What did we learn about trusting anything Mandalorians say?” Malak snapped.
“Revan,” one of the Jedi called out. That old woman, the one who had met them at the spaceport was walking towards them. “Is the child safe?”

“For now,” Revan muttered. She looked back at the flock of Jedi, lips curling with natural disdain.

Another brown-robe pushed through their ranks. Red hair, braided like a bad imitation of a proper woman’s sand display. She looked like one of those copies of Revan they’d seen on Manaan. This one shoved Yuthura Ban aside and started towards them, as arrogant and heedless as Revan herself.

“Malachor?” The red-haired woman stopped dead, staring at them. Perhaps the sight of an angry mob (even a Force-silenced one) frightened her, because all the color seemed to drain from her face. Next to the real Revan, she looked like a pale shell.


“I—I heard—” She looked past him, frowning at Revan. This close together, Canderous could note the differences. Revan’s copy was younger, her face unseasoned by honorable scars of her experience. She looked half-formed and ill-baked. “I heard her. In the Force.” Her brows drew together in a frown and her head tilted as she stared at the ghost inhabiting Carth’s son. “We all heard,” she said quickly, glancing back at the Jedi behind them. “We all heard her cry out in the Force.”

“It’s none of your business, Sheris,” Revan snapped. She glanced at the crowd behind them. “Leave,” she muttered.

Canderous felt his own feet twitch. Most of the civilians started to drift away, whether compelled or frightened, wasn’t entirely clear.

Revan’s duplicate made a sound that almost sounded like a laugh, deep in her throat. “Where is the child?”

“He was hurt, but he’s fine now. They’re taking him to my father,” Malak told her.

“Your father…?” she echoed, brows raising. “Malachor was abducted and now he’s fine?”

“Stop pretending you care,” Revan snapped.

The two women stared at each other. Unsurprisingly, it was Sheris who looked away first, her gaze dropping to the ground. For a second, she even looked like she might kneel. “I just want to make sure your son is safe, Lord Revan.”

“Don’t call me that!” Revan’s hand twitched.

Her duplicate swallowed, putting a hand to her throat. “Apologies,” she murmured. “I mean, Knight Revan.”

Revan snorted. “Stay away from my son. I told you already, if you want Malak, you’re welcome to him.”

“Malak?” Sheris looked up warily, frowning at Carth’s son as if she’d never seen him before. Maybe she hadn’t. Jedi. They could work this out on their own time. Canderous just wanted to leave with Revan now.

“Red.” The expression the wraith was making on the Onasi kid’s face looked like a mixture of impotent rage and regret. The man was a thermocrete detonator about to blow. Not for the first
time since he’d found out, Canderous wondered if he shouldn’t just do the galaxy a favor and cut the kid’s throat. But he knew what it was like to lose a son. Whether they died in a blaze of glory, or pathetically like Lin, it was still a hard loss for a father to bear. If he could spare Republic that, he would.


“Is it? I’m glad Carth and Canderous had your permission to kidnap my son,” Revan sneered.

One of those infernal holocams buzzed up, soon followed by a flock of them. From the commotion among the still-staring crowd, HoloNet reporters couldn’t be far behind. The comm on his wrist had been buzzing for a while now—presumably Gwen was sending the speeder back for the rest of them. “Revan,” Canderous muttered. “This is our chance to get the hell out of here.”

“No,” Revan shook her head sharply. “I need to know. You need to bring Korrie back to me, or I swear, I’ll send HK after Ordo next.”

“No” Sheris muttered, like an echo. She frowned. “Korrie?”

“Go,” Malak said to Revan. He touched her arm. “You go, Red. Your damned plague… maybe he is safer with my father. He’ll be safer still there if you’re there.”

“No,” Revan shook her head. “I can’t trust you—and I can’t trust her.” She shot another glare at the duplicate. “If I don’t use the holocron, she will.”

Sheris’s head tilted, looking for all the world like Revan did when she was playing chess with Lin. “If it would put you at ease, I could go with… him?” She darted a quick glance at Onasi’s kid, as if she couldn’t believe Malak was in his body either. “Malak.”

“I don’t want you near my son,” Revan snapped.

“That’s why you hid his existence from me,” the woman agreed. “For a… time. But… surely now—since I seem to know already?” She glanced back at the Jedi, standing there watching them, frowning at the holocameras hovering above. “Since everyone seems to know…?”

“It’s none of your business,” Revan repeated. But a frown traced between her brows.

“Revan,” Canderous repeated. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

She looked at him, looking like for all the world she wanted to. But then she looked back—not at Malak, but at the pale imitation the Sith had made of her. “I don’t trust her,” she said slowly.

“Sheris is harmless. I’m coming too,” Darth Malak said.

That’d make it easier to throw you off a high plat, Canderous thought wistfully. But the pilot. And being a Force user, frack if it would even work. Malak could probably bounce or fly or something.

“I don’t trust you either,” Revan muttered.

Malak gave a harsh laugh. “Same old Red.”

Her eyes narrowed and she looked at her double again and then at Malak. “I’m leaving alone. Watch Sheris,” she commanded him. “Don’t let her take the holocron. I’ll deal with Carth. And the Mandalorians. And your father. Understand?”
“Like you dealt with Arca?” the wraith snapped. “And us?” As if he had a right to speak. Marriage ended with the body’s release.

Revan’s eyes were unreadable, but there was no mistaking the threat in her voice. “After I see to my son, I’ll tell you about us, Mal.”

“Revan.” Canderous touched her arm. “Let’s go.”

Holocameras flashed, tracking their every move.

_Nine hells._

At this point, Canderous was even used to them.

XXX

_So much for the Jedi quarantine._

Yuthura watched as Sheris returned with Darth Malak in the Onasi boy’s body. Incredibly, Revan was getting into a scooter with Canderous Ordo and several other Mandalorians. The lot seemed hardly more than children.

The guards, along with some of the Jedi, were dispersing the crowd. The plaza was almost empty now, just littered with the debris of the riot.

“Where is Vrook?” she asked the white-haired woman beside her.

Master Atris blinked. “I don’t know.” She looked slightly dazed. Maybe even ill herself. “I was… meditating in my chambers alone when I heard Revan’s scream in the Force.”

Although she’d had the Korriban flu years ago, Yuthura still took a step back, just in case.

_Not all the masters know this is Darth Malak. But enough do. Enough that they should stop him._

But something was off, like a shadow in the Force. Watching the boy who should have been Dustil Onasi approach them, walking next to the false copy of Revan Starfire, Yuthura felt that even more intensely.

“You have to destroy the holocron,” Darth Malak called out to Atris. “Trust me, there’s nothing in her mind we need to know.”

“That’s a matter for the Council,” Atris told him. “As are you, Knight Malak.”

“Why?” Sheris asked. “Why does this holocron of yours need to be destroyed?”

Atris frowned at her. “Do you still want to take her memories?”

“Revan’s memories?” Sheris giggled. It sounded choked, as if she had forgotten how. “Do you think I should?” Her lashes fluttered. Her head tilted to the side.

_Something was off. Something like a note out of tune._


_Your wife?” Sheris sounded scornful. “Aren’t you a little young for her?”_
His head turned towards her, frowning. “Do you think so?”

Sheris laughed again. The sound rang out, jagged and ugly in the suddenly nearly empty square.

XXX

Convincing the Rakatan Elders that she could return the Chosen One of their legends to them, if they let her into the ancient temple grounds, had been less complicated than Revan’s current circumstances.

Letting that creature go: that thing possessing her body, was one of the hardest things she had ever done—especially knowing it was going straight to her son, apparently accompanied by a Mandalorian escort from clan Ordo.

And, for reasons that were not at all clear, no Jedi seemed to object to the Mandalorian presence.

Malachor. So close. It made her eyes prickle with pathetic tears to think how close he was.

Apparently, the Emperor-spawned thing had stolen her strength, her child, and her husband’s loyalty, leaving Revan herself trapped inside Sheris. This is her body. Weak, pathetic Sheris.

All Revan could do now was try to look as meek and sickeningly coy as Sheris had. Dissemble, even as she trailed behind the boy who was… impossible as it was, Malak himself. A copy? Was he the only copy, or one of a thousand? Was the real Malak dead? Or was some Emperor-imposter in his body too?

Revan was doing her best to seem as helpless as the real Sheris had been. Perhaps she was not as good a liar as Atris, who seemed fully recovered from being knocked unconscious and having her lightsaber stolen; but she detected no suspicion from the Jedi. The weight of the lightsaber in Revan’s sleeve was reassuring. So was thinking of what she could do with Atris’s blade to these traitorous Jedi, who cowered around them all now, as if the Mandalorian wars had never happened, as if she hadn’t killed half of their Council at Malachor.

Here were the sad survivors. There was Kavar and Iridel. Klee. Quatra. Zez-Kai, and a host of others.

Not Vrook. Where is Vrook? It doesn’t matter. Don’t think of him.

There. Malak’s old master Jopheena, smiling so kindly, as if she’d never told them they were lost after they followed the Kashyyyk computer’s instructions to the cave on Dantooine. Next to her, Zhar, not even looking at her, his old Padawan. Even in this shell, she could stab him in the back as he had them with his betrayal—the day of their speech to the Senate. The day he’d promised to go before the Council and get their support; only to turn his back and run to Dodonna and Malachi instead.

“Patience. Before you take action, you must see how this was done. What else has been taken from you? Consider your actions, each step like a game of chess.”

That voice again, rattling in her head. Was it Atris? No. It was not but… it was familiar.

Revan should know—panic tightened in her throat that she did not.

You hide yourself from me, Voice.

“At the end of all things, Revan, I promise you will know. I do what is necessary.”
Malak glanced back at her with his boy’s eyes. “You don’t have to be afraid of me, Sheris,” he said, voice all wrong and gentle.

She tried to simper. “I’m not afraid. Master.”

The creature actually flinched. *That* was almost amusing.

“I think that’s enough excitement for one day,” Jopheena murmured. The Jedi surrounded them, encircled Revan and Malak like an escort of bantha around two krayt as they passed back into the Temple. As if listening to unseen orders (and perhaps they were), they all began to disperse, drifting off in groups of two and three, with the soft murmurs of pointless conversations.

“Sheris?” A purple Twi’lek in Knight’s robes touched her arm.

“Yes?” She tried to remember Sheris’s pathetic voice, a pale copy of her real one.

“You have some skill with healing,” the Twi’lek said. “Some of my former students from Korriban are very ill. If you could help in the infirmary—”

“I can’t heal,” Revan said automatically, remembering the last time she’d tried. She tried to catch Atris’s eye, but the Echani Jedi seemed preoccupied—or avoiding her gaze.

*Do not look to that one for guidance. She has already forgotten her part in this. My gift to you, Revan. You are free—as these Jedi can never be. Atris remembers nothing. Choose carefully.*

She refused to be rattled. The voice in her head, whispering its suggestions. Madness? Tenebrae? Her own conscience?

The voice wasn’t real. Maybe none of this was.

“Even without the Force, you have medical training, Sheris,” the Twi’lek continued, stubbornly, continuing to intrude, as if she was real.

Revan frowned, trying to sort out her words.

*Korriban. Students. The Academy. Which means she must be—

XXX

“My Padawan, Yuthura Ban.” Jorak Uln’s eyes already had the gleam of Sith madness they’d all grown to expect from the Republic deserters who sought them out.

*In the first months after the war, there were many Jedi defectors, traveling in stolen ships beyond the Rim to rally behind the Sith cause.*

“Master.” The woman curseyed, elaborate and graceful. She was dressed like a cantina dancer, but the way she wore her few strips of cloth, and the muscles under her lush curves, suggested her costume was one born of confidence in all things; not merely decoration for Uln’s gaze. There was a calculating light in those violet eyes that Revan approved of.

Useful, if she doesn’t get herself killed trying to supplant her master.

*So many promising Sith died that way. The fools.*

“I expect excellence,” Revan told them. “And speed. The Jedi spend decades letting the Force master them. You must train our students to be masters of their own power as quickly as possible.”
“Yuthura Ban,” Revan nodded at the woman. “I do have some medical training. Of course.” She smiled stupidly, and ducked her head like a simp. *I know how to pack kolto around a rotting jaw. I know how to tell when some wounds can’t be healed—in the Force or in the flesh—or in the mind—*

The combined Force in the Temple still felt like the prickling of tiny knives, every one a drag on her nerves. Instead of being able to block them out, they pushed at her, prodding her with dozens of petty wants. The Force was diminished inside of her, even as it had shone like a sun in the false Revan. That strength had shown her, even more than the sight of the woman’s face, what had happened.

*She has my body. And I am trapped inside this shell. Why was it done? And who is she, this woman they all think is me?*

The whisper in her was almost mocking. *She is the shadow you hide within. Her power deafens. You, in your weakness, will hear as she cannot. Your weakness is your armor. She drowns out the world’s whispers but you can hear them all.*

Irritation sparked. *If you have something useful to say, Voice, just say it.*

Silence. She laughed suddenly to clear it. Malak looked at her, startled.

“This plague is serious, Sheris,” Yuthura continued. “I have seen it before. On Korriban.”

*Plague? Here? It’s not time. Not for at least another year—maybe two.*

How long had it been, since the Jedi had stolen her memories? How long had this… creature been inhabiting her body?

Revan tried to laugh again, like Sheris would have, as if she was a minion. “Yes, the plague is very serious.” *And necessary.* “How is the vaccine being distributed on Coruscant?”

“Vaccine?” Yuthura lifted a brow ridge. “The one that was distributed on Korriban was rumored to cause the plague. A number of my students who were inoculated still suffered.”

“The vaccine reduces mortality to almost nothing in clinical trials.” Revan corrected her. “Or so I read. If we’re talking about the same plague.”

Malak glanced back at her, frowning. Those eyes of his were a dark brown, unreadable. His real ones had been transparent as glass. And he was so young. Hardly more than a child. “You had the sickness,” he said slowly. “On Ziost. Do you remember?”

“Was it Ziost?” she said lightly. It almost certainly hadn’t been. *Oh, Mal. Still so transparent with your tests.* “I was so delirious, I hardly knew where we were.”

“You don’t remember?” Dark eyes. Strong chin. Strong in the Force. If they had to be reborn in bodies, why did he get the stronger one?

“I remember our castle on Thule,” she murmured. Artful. The castle he’d hidden from her. The one Davad’s spies had unearthed.

*Don’t think of the nursery there. All of Malachor’s toys, his rooms, recreated. Fit for a prince. Were you going to steal him from your father, my love? Have him cloned like a Senator’s son? Or*
just have more children with my broken reflection?

The rooms had never been used. Her spies were very sure of that.

Small mercy. The life of only one child. Only one small weakness.

“We don’t have the vaccine now,” the Twi’lek said. “This morning, I was told that three of my former students are very ill.” She paused. “One of them is Mekel Jin.”

Whoever that was. But the name was—almost familiar, as if Revan had known once. Roster lists. Students at the Academy. She tried to think through them.

“Mekel Jin is sick too? We’ll have to synthesize the vaccine immediately.” She tried to make it sound like a suggestion and not a command. “The dormant virus from the plague’s survivors should be effective to begin the culture.” She glanced at Malak out of the corners of her eyes, like Sheris would have. “Do you remember those Selkath on Manaan? Perhaps there’s still some of the old cultures, in their laboratories…?”

Malak’s hand closed over her arm, tightly. Too tightly.

Misstep? Sheris didn’t know that? But she had a medic’s training. Surely, he didn’t just have her lounging around doing nothing. I sent them to Manaan. Surely, he had her study the plague, oversee operations?

Unless it was already too late. Unless the Emperor had already corrupted him—

“You know, you are both survivors,” Yuthura said evenly. “Dustil Onasi was infected on Korriban.”


“Then we can use Dustil’s blood for the cure.” Revan paused. “And mine of course.” She glanced at Malak. He was still frowning at her. She gave her best imitation of Sheris’s sniveling grin. “We will—I mean, should we go to the infirmary? Immediately?”

XXX

“Damnit!” Polla hit the navboard, as if that would make it less smoked.

“You broke my ship,” Therion said, accusingly.

“That asteroid came out of fracking nowhere!” She adjusted Abasen to the other breast. He latched on like a champ, even though they were stuck in the middle of the Perelman Spiral, limping like a sick ronto ever since the hyperdrive failed. “And your ship is crap, D’Cainen. All flash and no guts. Have you never heard of deflector shields on the aft starboard side?”

“Sure, if I wanted to have her move like a pregnant hessi in moontime, I guess that might—”

“Guys.” Seiran interrupted. “We need to make repairs. Are any of those lights planets or space stations or… something?” He waved his hand at the fritzed board. The holographic display above was frozen, still stuck in position from the beginning of their jump.

“They’re not relevant.” Polla sighed. “We have to pull out the charts and do this manually.”

“Manually? You owe me a new ship,” Therion said. His eyes flashed with deep emotions, but now that Polla was an old, married lady and a mother of the most excellent baby ever, she was immune
to wondering what they might be.

“When we found you, you were about to profit from our deaths,” she pointed out to him. “Think of how much more we’ll be worth alive.”

“Oh, I have,” he said darkly. “I’m thinking about it right now.”

“Don’t forget my da and I have enough to put you in a spice mine labor camp for the rest of your days too,” she reminded him.

“What’s that over there?” Seiran got up from his chair and pointed at the viewscreen.

“It’s a ship,” Therion said, rather obviously.

The great, battered hulk of it drifted closer. The ship was still thousands of kilometers away, but even at this distance, it blocked half their viewport. It was triangular and strange, a massive dreadnought built for war. Even at this distance, they could see the scars on its hull, cratered and bent. Its sign flashed on her comm board in abbreviated Aurebesh; but it was one she didn’t even have to check against the nets—she knew it by heart.

*The Aleema. Revan Starfire’s flagship. But I thought it was decommissioned?*

Her comm board blinked, flashing quickly, a string of codes, repeating over and over again.

“It’s hailing us,” Polla said numbly. “They want to know if we need assistance.”

“Should we respond?” Therion was looking at her, as if she fracking knew.

Their ship lurched before she could decide. “Tractor beam,” he ex added, as if that wasn’t obvious. “I guess they’re impatient.”

Abasen started to cry.

XXX

“Mother!” At least Malachor looked unharmed—if she ignored the plasticore wrapped around his leg, and the HK droid hovering next to him. Behind the droid lurked D’Reev, like a thundercloud on a bad plain.

“Where’s Carth?” Revan demanded.

“He left,” Korrie said. “After Grandfather came and the HK. He said he left you a note.”

*He… left?* The anger she’d been carrying inside deflated suddenly, leaving a strange emptiness in its wake. “He left a note?”

Korrie nodded. “He wrote it down again for you when he heard you were coming here. Maybe where he’s going is a secret and he didn’t want Grandfather to know?”

The old man chuckled, as if that was amusing. “Do we still have secrets between us, Revan?”

She met his eyes warily. “You tell me.”

“He knows about Father,” Korrie interrupted. “Master Klee told him.”

*Of course.* She wondered what she was supposed to feel. What she should think.
“Yesterday,” the old man added. “I had no idea before that.” He frowned. “Although it does explain a great deal about my encounters with the Onasi boy.”

She felt her lips pull back in a grim smile. “What are you going to do if Malak decides he wants your Senate seat?”

“What will you do, if he declares himself still your husband?” The old man’s expression reminded her uncannily of Malak, the man she could barely remember.

“Divorce is relatively simple,” she said. It was—at least on Deralia. You broke a stick, got a lawyer to write up a scrip, and went out and got drunk together. When Cousin Sara got her first one, the whole town had bought rounds.

“Relatively….,” the old man’s voice was bland. “But your custody arrangements might be somewhat complicated. They say Sheris is a genetic copy of you. So if she has any issue, would it be yours?”

“I had her sterilized,” Revan said. *If I had a fracking brain, I would have. Does it matter if I really did or not? Malak would never—why should I care?* She felt sick. *How can I think like this?*

“You’re fighting,” Korrie said, almost accusingly. He looked up at the Senator. “You promised not to fight with Mother.”

“We’re negotiating,” Malak’s father said. “HK, perhaps you should serve the tea.”

“Compliance,” the droid said. Its red eyes seemed to focus on Revan for a moment, before it glided away.

“How long until your leg heals, Malachor?” She forced her voice to be cheerful. Not to shake.

“The medic said a whole week!” At least Korrie sounded excited about it. “That means I miss training, right?”

“For now. Where’s the note?” There was something in her eye. She wiped it.

“Here.” Her son handed it to her, folded into impossibly small squares. “I folded it, but I didn’t read it,” he added. “The writing’s all funny anyway.”

It was. It was written in a Fleet shorthand based on Sullust that she hadn’t known Carth knew.

XXX

*This is the second time I’ve tried to write you. I left you the first note in the Temple.*

*Canderous was nuts to steal Korrie like that, but I think he was right. Something’s wrong with the Jedi. It’s no place for kids—yours or mine.*

*I need to save my son. He has to come first. Like Korrie does for you. Please. If you love me at all, keep Dustil safe until I get him back. Please.*

*Make it count, Polla. Make all of this damn well count for something.*

*I love you, I always will. I’m not sorry for saving you, Revan.*

*Carth*
She blinked hard, looking up at Malachi. “Do you know where he went?”

“Roughly,” the Senator folded his hands in a steeple. “The closest spaceport. I believe he’s taking your old ship.”

“The Hawk?” That made a certain sense.

“He asked my advice about exorcizing Sith ghosts.”

“Did you want to help him?”

“It would be easier to just have the boy killed,” Malachi murmured. “But I need you too—and you’re mawkishly sentimental. Of course I want to help him. My son is a possessed madman who needs to be contained before he endangers us all.”

The HK returned, clanking, with a silver tray. Incredibly, it set out three cups and poured them each something steaming, that smelled sweet.

“Pick a cup,” Malachi said to Revan.

“Wait, which boy would be easier to kill?” Korrie interrupted. “You mean Father? Or me?”

“No one will die today, Malachor.” Incredibly, Malachi smiled at her son and Korrie smiled back. Like this was a joke between them.

“Wait, Korrie,” she commanded him, frowning at Malak’s father. “What do you mean, ‘pick a cup?’”

“It’s an old Coruscanti custom,” the old man said. “Trust begins somewhere.”

“I’m a Jedi,” she said coolly. *Sort of.* “You must know we can cleanse most poisons?”

“If I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t use poison.” The Senator laughed.

“Korrie, don’t!” But her son had already take the cup in front of her and was drinking it down, in great, slurping gulps.

“It’s fine, Mother.” He grinned at her. “We play this game all the time.”

“If you’re going to be one of us, you must learn our ways,” Malachi told her. Smiling, he took the cup that had been in front of her son.

Eyeing him warily, Revan took the remaining one—the one in front of his own seat.

The tea was sweet, and flavored with lem.

“Which one did you get?” Korrie asked her. “I got choca!”

“Lem,” she said.

“And I got bilberry,” Malachi said, with a soft chuckle. “You know it gives me indigestion.”

“You have to drink it anyway,” Korrie giggled. “Eg rules.”

XXX
She moved graceful as a thranta in flight, even in her half-beskar: plates under the civilian cape, half-hidden. Her hair was coiled low on her neck and studded with tiny pearls, windblown now, but Oerin couldn’t help but wonder who she had set it for.

Depressing, to think it might have been him and now he could never enjoy her.

It was madness, but right outside of their hotel, he caught her arm. “Milli?”

The girl froze, and then almost immediately pivoted, bringing her stun stick up towards his neck like a true Ordo. At the same time, her foot lashed out, locking around his armored legs. She grunted a little, throwing all of her own weight into the movement. Without the Force, he might have been disarmed. With it, Oerin allowed them both to fall gently, on a bed of soft air, to the ground below.

Landing still hurt though. Just like everything else.

She landed on top of him, stun stick locked between the Gan mask and the joints of his armor. “Who are you, thief?” Her finger poised over the switch threateningly, although at the angle she lay, Oerin worried she might shock them both if she activated it.

“Milli, it’s me.” His voice wheezed annoyingly at this angle and he tried to inflate his lungs more to make it louder. Like operating a bellows at an old-fashioned forge on the sands of home. “It’s Oerin.”

“They said you died.” Her voice was accusing. Her hand pulled at the mask.

“Wait.” Oerin closed his eyes, hoping it would work. He concentrated, hard as he could. “Okay, go ahead.”

Air on his face, felt dimly. His eyes opened. Milli stared down at him. She wasn’t screaming, or checking his pulse, so Oerin had to assume the illusion held. Mandalorians and their damned Force resistance. It would be easier to fool Jedi than his own people.

“They said you were dead.” She glared at him, rolling off abruptly. “Was it some kind of trick?”

“Yes.” He shrugged. “A Jedi trick.”

“Oh.” Pink tinged her cheeks, as she scrambled to her feet. “It was very rude of you to fool us too. Xarga organized your death walk and everything.” She frowned. “I should have realized it was a trick, when they refused to give us your corpse.”

Oerin stood up too, trying to ignore the way his knee throbbed where it had slammed into duracrete. “It’s important that everyone believe I’m dead,” he cautioned her.

Why, Mother hadn’t been clear. But she wasn’t clear on very many things. Like why she wanted him to return to that cursed planet while Davad got to remain surrounded by Jedi beauties.

“All the barbarians need to think you are dead,” Millifar agreed. She smiled at him in a way that made his breath catch. So many beauties... but she was his own kind. Her hand reached out, a little shy, as if she wanted to take his.

Oerin took a step backwards, shaking his head. “No. Everyone. Even the clans.”

“Why?” A line between her eyebrows. It made her look strangely like Canderous. At least that thought diminished his ardor.
“My mother.” He shouldn’t, but he owed her that much. Since he’d never give her sons, or stars.

“Your mother died on Malachor.” Her head tilted. “Everyone knows that? Are you still feverish?” Quick as a manka, she stepped forward and put her hand on his forehead. “No! You’re freezing cold!”

“No,” he made his voice gentle. “I’m not cold at all. You’re right, Milli. I must be running a fever.”

“You must be running a fever.” Her beautiful eyes dulled, becoming blank. Her hands dropped to her side.

Oerin sighed, taking her hands in his. Hers were warm, and he could feel her pulse through her wrists, like the fluttering of tiny wings. “My mother’s not dead. She’s a Sith Lord. She’s manipulating all the Jedi. She’s got some mad scheme to stop the rise of the True Sith and half the time, I really don’t understand it. I died, not understanding it, and she resurrected me—and here I am.” He smiled sadly. “Only, I’m still dead. And I think my insides are going to rot soon. It’s unpleasant.”

“I’m sorry, Oerin.” Her face was still blank as the Force had made it, but Oerin did think she looked sorry.

He bent forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Me too.” Breath creaked in his lungs.

“Forget.”

XXX

“What’s this?” His commander looked down at the piece of plimsi, raising a brow ridge.

“It’s a resignation, sir,” said Captain Erik Qan’Jin, formerly of the Coruscant Civilian Guard.

“A resignation with… nine signatures?” Commander Kaylin frowned. “Are you trying to tell me your entire squad… you’re… all resigning?”

“We’re going to open a traveling theater troupe,” Erik lied. “Tour the Corellian Rim. We’ve been doing amateur productions on our time for years, but now…."

They weren’t really going to do that. Cally had a bad singing voice. Daris couldn’t act. And Liko just didn’t want to. Truthfully, their amateur productions were bad.

But after today, after being shot and stunned by Mandalorians, Force-compelled by Jedi, and nearly trampled to death by an angry, (and probably plague-infected) mob, they’d all unequivocally agreed: it was time to find a new career. Even a pension wasn’t worth this kind of aggravation. (Especially since the latest Senate vote had cut it in half anyway.)

Erik’s wife would probably kill him, but if he survived the first round of her shock, he thought she’d come around. It wasn’t like ransoming ships on the Perelman Spire could be any more dangerous than running Jedi interference on Coruscant.

“I’ll be fulfilling a childhood dream,” he told Commander Kaylin in all seriousness. After all, what child doesn’t want to be a space pirate?

XXX
The hangar was enormous, tall enough to fit a dozen heavy freighters stacked end to end.

It was also empty, except for Therion’s ship and a battered long-hauler, that looked like someone had been stripping it down to the studs.

To their left, behind the forcefield, loomed the spikes of hyperspace. The ship must have jumped as soon as their own ship was locked in. It made Polla very, very uneasy.

*This has to be a trap. Everything about it screams trap!*

She pulled Junior—Abasen—closer. Seiran slipped his arm around her waist.

Behind them, Therion made a scoffing noise under his breath. “Shall we?” the smuggler said, raising his eyebrows. His mouth thinned, hard as a knife.

“Sec.” She adjusted the red and black blanket around Abasen again. It wasn’t just self-cleaning, it was supposed to deflect blaster bolts too. According to the brochure. Polla hoped they weren’t about to test that theory.

“I’ll go first,” Seiran muttered, shouldering his blasters.

“Really?” Therion looked skeptical. “I suppose I should go next then.”

“You stay with the ship,” Polla snapped at him. “You’ve been whining about it all day, might as well make sure it stays safe.”

“Hah.” He ignored her, setting a pair of throwing knives in his boot. Like they’d go through body armor.

Their gangplank lowered. On the overhead monitors above the exit, they watched the *Aleema*’s blast doors open too.

A dark, curly-haired woman, with skin the color of derran wheat came walking through the doors. She had a baby on one hip and a vibroblade strapped to the other. “Hello?” she called out. Behind her, a few other figures lurked, still shadows on the monitor. Polla thought they seemed heavily armed, but strangely… short. Sullustan, maybe? Or Rodian?

“Hello,” Polla called out, cautiously back. “We’re coming out, okay?”

“Please do,” said the woman. “As long as you don’t try anything, you have nothing to fear from us. We’re not barbarians. We’re from… Naboo.”
Jokka Rei: “We’re still trying to make sense of this footage showing the riot in front of the Jedi Temple. Did Revan Starfire just leave the Jedi Temple? If so, who is this next to Dustil Onasi?”

“Joining us now, is our Mandalorian correspondent, Xarga Wies. Citizen Wies, do you have any comments on the rumors that the Lin Mandalore is dead?”

Xarga Wies: “If he’s dead, where is his body?”

Jokka Rei: “Presumably it’s in the Jedi Temple?”

Xarga Wies “The Jedi have no right to Mandalorian dead unless they killed him in honorable combat. Did they?”

Jokka Rei: “They say he died from the sickness that’s sweeping the Underground, the sickness some are calling the Jedi plague.”

Xarga Wies “They say a lot of things on your HoloNets, but how many are true?”

XXX

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Carth sighed, and punched in their departure request.

Mission could probably fly the entire damn ship herself if she wanted, but she was letting him take control. Letting me feel like I’m in control. As if I am, of anything these days. Dull edge of anger there too. Anger and hopelessness—Carth was sick of both.

“Don’t worry,” Mission’s voice said, now coming from the T3 chassis next to him. “We’re gonna fix this. I promise.”

“I just hope D’Reev isn’t jerking us around,” he muttered. Carth’s fingers hovered over the controls, waiting for the traffic controller’s automated response.

“Maybe Polla-Revan will kill him before we get back?” Mission actually sounded hopeful.

Carth almost laughed. “I wish I thought that would help.”

The door behind him beeped, sliding open, as the third occupant of their ship came into the cockpit. “The old madclaw’s death will solve nothing,” Zaalbar groaned. “His fall would crush the beasts below. We must find another way to save the cubs and Polla-Revan too.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Big Z!” Mission emitted a series of beeps and trills, for all the world sounding like an excited kid again.

“My teeth and claws are no use to Polla Revan in that dead place. I serve my life debt by saving the cubs.”
“I’m glad you’re here too,” Carth told him.

“I swore to follow, but…” Zaalbar’s forehead was creased under its mat of hair, as if he was as troubled as Carth was. “She went to a place where I could not follow. Now, I think we must blaze a trail before she can lead.”

“Yeah,” Carth muttered. “I think so too.”

“Trust me,” Mission said. “I think this is gonna work out great!”

XXX

“You had me brainwashed. Why the hell should I trust you?”

“We are both fathers, are we not?” The old man glanced back at the room where his grandson was being attended to by a team of medix and droids. Carth had never seen a medical team move so fast as the team had when he came in with Korrie in his arms. One of them was even wearing Jedi robes.

“I’m not sure we have the same definition of the word ‘trust.’” Even as Carth said that, his own pathetic attempts seemed to mock him. He barely knew his son—and now he was leaving him again.

Only to save you, Dustil. It’s the only way. If the Jedi won’t help, I need to find someone who can.

The Senator chuckled. “Trust that I don’t want to make the same mistakes I did with Malak. That I want a better life for my grandson.”

“A better life?” Carth scoffed. “Here? You people hire assassins for fun.”

“No.” D’Reev shook his head. “For sport. There is a difference.”

“Right.” Carth scoffed. “Forgive me if I don’t see it.”

If Korrie hadn’t been hurt on the speeder, Carth might have been tempted to disable Canderous’s wife and take the kid away from this stinking planet entirely. Except that was nuts. They shouldn’t have taken the boy away from Revan in the first place. He still didn’t understand why Canderous had agreed. To lure Revan away from her Jedi handlers? Hadn’t the man said on multiple occasions that children were a man’s honor? That the bond between a mother and a child was a sacred trust?

Was taking Revan away from the Jedi even a good idea? The Jedi kept her safe—or they were supposed to. Safe—and contained.

The Jedi put you out of a job, his inner voice scoffed. Maybe you should thank them. Or maybe you should have done more for your wife than left a note and run.

“Malachor’s birthright is a world you will never comprehend.” The man was still talking. “I only want to ensure he survives to make the galaxy a better place.”

“Where someone is born shouldn’t determine what they are,” Carth snapped.

“And it does not, on a planet like Telos.” D’Reev said. “But if a planet like Telos, with all of its egalitarian fantasies, wants to rebuild its internal economy? Its citizens need to find deeper pockets.” He shrugged. “Many’s the time I’ve wished for a simple life. But I was not born to be
common, any more than your own son was.” His eyes narrowed. “Any more than you were, Captain Onasi. A common man did not save Revan Starfire. A common man did not redeem the Dark Lord of the Sith.”

Carth glared at him. “You’d be surprised by what us common people can do.”

“I hope to be.” D’Reev tapped his hands together. “To that end, I offer you all of my resources to achieve our common goal.”

“Just so we’re clear on what that is….” Carth scanned the datapad the old man had given him and then looked up again. “You want me to go find some kind of artifact or sentient capable of ‘performing a Force exorcism,’ and get your son’s ghost out of my son’s body?”

“Resulting in my son’s consciousness dissipating and returning to the Force—or hell—or whatever maffasops you Telosians believe about the afterlife.” D’Reev nodded. “Yes. I suggest you begin your efforts on Dathomir.”

“Why Dathomir?”

“Malak’s mother was a priestess from one of their witch-tribes.”

“Malak had a mother? I’m surprised you didn’t grow him in a vat. Isn’t that the done thing here?”

The Senator didn’t even get pissed off like a normal man might. He only chuckled. “Not in our family.”

“Well then.” Carth’s voice trailed off. “You’re right. I don’t approve of your methods. Your son is a monster.”

“But your son is not.” D’Reev paused. “At least, not yet.”

XXX

“I’ve locked down the supplies in the cargo hold,” Zaalbar growled, looming through the cockpit door. “What other preparations are needed?”

“None, Big guy, just strap in!” Mission’s voice was cheerful. “Hey, you know, this is kind of like we have the old gang together again… except without the rest of them. Know what I mean?”

Without meaning to, Carth glanced over at the navboard. Polla’s old chair. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I guess I do.”

The board beeped their clearances, and he pulled up the map, frowning at it. Dathomir, the old man had said. Did that mean they could find answers there, or could this be another trap? He had no proof, but Carth was pretty sure D’Reev had been the one behind killing those former Sith from Manaan. Revan had thought so. And according to Malak, the man had even orchestrated the damn Mandalorian wars.

Who’s the biggest monster? Does it matter? Easier to take them down one at a time.

The ship tilted as Carth brought her up to bear, flipping out of the open hangar, adjusting for the gravity drag, straightening, and heading up, towards the loop that would take them spinning around the sun.

XXX
“Dathomir,” D’Reev repeated. “You may find answers there. Ilyana always claimed her people had the power to control the spirits.” He shrugged. “Perhaps it is true. Malak spent time on Dathomir. Perhaps they can undo what was done, for all of our benefit.”

“You’re definitely selling this,” Carth muttered. “Why haven’t the Jedi helped?”

Malachi frowned. “I’m not sure. My contact there is usually… quite reliable. But the information he has relayed of late has been contradictory. Confused. And… other contacts have led me to believe that the Jedi themselves are now compromised.” He folded his hands together, tapping them slowly. “That was another reason I wanted to get Malachor away from that place. The other reason I was willing to trade for his release.”

“Trade?” Gwenarius had said something about that, but Carth hadn’t really been listening. “You traded with the Mandalorians? Again? Because that worked out so well the first time?”

“For a time, it did.” The old man frowned. “But times change. Alliances change.” His mouth pulled into something close to a smile. “As you well know.”

XXX

The Hawk was painted blue now and renamed, but she flew true under his hands, just like she always had, pushing them up and out of atmosphere so quickly, that soon they were rocketing through one of the traffic lanes around the planet, looping Coruscant’s blue-white sun and heading for hyperspace, passing the slow-moving freighters as if they were slugs on a beam.

“Jump point in ten,” Mission murmured, but unnecessarily.

Like any good pilot, there are some things you just know. Carth’s old friend Jordo used to say it was the sound the couplings made, hitch in the ticking, a quieting of space; but somehow, you just knew.

Knew when it was safe to jump. His fingers poised over the controls.

“Five,” Mission said.

But they were close enough. He just knew. Carth punched the pommel and the Hawk leaped forward. The stars around them froze, then streamed, into a billion points of light.


“We will save your cub,” Zaalbar promised him. His clawed hand reached out and covered Carth’s own. “Ghosts are wind.”

XXX

Things were strangely unchanged on the planet she’d vowed to see burn. Their feet clattered in tandem across the marbled floors. Revan could feel the hush in the Force of a few hundred Jedi in residence: concerned, some even fearful; but there was no sign of battle, or darkness; just a confusion that could be coming from Revan’s own scrambled brain as easily as her surroundings.

The boy’s hand was still holding her arm too tightly, fingers digging in flesh, just above where the prosthesis was fastened. Revan looked up at Malak, and then to the Twi’lek on her other side—both flanking her as surely as if they’d planned it that way.

In her old body, their efforts would have been laughable. Even Malak’s strength was no match for
her power augmented by the Star Forge. He was the machine’s creature, but she was its control. When it came to the ancient Rakatan artifact, Revan was the one firmly holding the reins.

But this was the Jedi Temple, not the Star Forge. And Sheris was pathetic and weak.

*And why are we on Coruscant at all? Has the Emperor won through subterfuge what we once hoped to storm?*

“No. He has not won. Tenebrae cannot win as long as you exist,” the voice in her head murmured.

*And do I exist?* It was terrifying to feel this uncertain. It was weak, like Sheris had been.

“How do epistemological queries serve you? You were made for only one purpose, Revan. To oppose the Sith Emperor.”

*How do you know that? Who are you?* That sickeningly weak panic, again, like Sheris. *I must be going insane. None of this makes sense.*

A pack of Jedi passed them. Padawans, by their robes. They stared, and then looked away. Although a few of them felt frightened, there was none of the obeisance she expected.

Darkly, she wondered if she was actually Sheris, finally cracked and convinced that she had turned into Revan.

*That makes as much sense as me being a holocron recording, trapped in Sheris’s body, and accompanied by my former husband’s recording, trapped in the body of this child, doesn’t it?*

“You must tread carefully with him—with them. Malak and the Twi’lek both. Are they potential allies? Or obstacles?”

*I must not roll my eyes at imaginary voices that offer obvious advice.*

“I think the infirmary is this way,” Revan said out loud, trying to sound more like a Hothan rube. “Isn’t it?” Another nervous giggle.

Malak shot her a glare out of the corners of his eyes. One side of the boy’s mouth twisted in a sneer. “We need to stop somewhere else first.”

“Oh?” She kept her voice light. “And where is that?”

“Are you in a hurry to offer our assistance to the dying, Sheris?” His voice was mocking.

“I want to help,” she murmured, shooting him a sly glance, like the real Sheris would have. “It’s all I ever wanted, *Malak.*”

His hand tightened on her arm and he turned abruptly down a corridor she vaguely remembered led to the learner dormitories, reserved for visiting Jedi, applicants, and others who were not part of the Temple’s day-to-day routine.

They passed an Eosian Jedi in the hall, who barely looked at them, then turned down one of the halls leading to the outer ring of rooms.

“Here,” Malak said. More to Yuthura than her. He put his palm against the door and it slid open.

Inside, one of the lesser guest chambers—still sumptuous by Padawan standards. It was small, with two cots and one chair.
The cot by the window had a stuffed Wookiee on it, a child’s toy. The blue butterfly she had embroidered on its makeshift tunic was threadbare. There were bald patches around its torso, as if it had been washed a hundred times and well-loved between.

*How long? He was three, the last time I saw him. He’d be bigger now. He’d be older—years since I let myself think of him—*

Revan blinked and looked away.

“Sit,” her Apprentice said, gesturing to that cot. He sat down on the other one, which for some reason, had a picture of the planet Telos—unmistakable by its unique polar mottling—plastered above its headboard.

Yuthura took the chair, glancing between them warily.

*As if she’s not sure which side to take? The Twi’lek was strong. Can I bring her to my side? Will she back me against him?*

Revan sat down slowly. Malachor’s toy was only a few centimeters from her fingers. Close enough to touch. It might still smell like him. He had been *here* in this very room. Why was he in the Jedi Temple, when she and Malak had tried so hard to keep him away from its degraded influence? Why was Malak here too in this child’s body?

“What a beautiful picture of Telos you have,” she muttered.

“I had to prove my loyalty to Carth Onasi.” His mouth twitched. If she had unnerved him, it wasn’t showing on his face. “Pretend I was his son to fool Revan. For a time, she never noticed the difference. She was always so blind. Set in her own causes. Arrogant.”

*What does Saul Karath’s crack pilot have to do with anything? You had to prove your loyalty to him? Because you’re possessing his son? Why not just have him killed?*

Revan kept her voice neutral. “Arrogant? That does sound like Revan.”

His face tightened, and the muscles in his jaw worked. “It does,” he muttered.

“Is there some reason we’re here?” she kept her voice steady. *Be cold. Don’t look down. Don’t look at the toy. Malachor must want it, he must miss it, if he’s no longer here.*

*I could find him. I could take it to him and find him—*

“The Selkath labs were all destroyed,” Yuthura said, looking at Malak. “We may need to find another way of synthesizing this vaccine.”

“I know. I was given reports.” Her husband—her Apprentice—nodded. “Ironic that an amnesiac Dark Lord wrecked the very weapon she created to destroy her enemies.” He chuckled. “Revan did me a favor, when she destroyed the Selkath’s work.”

“Idiots.” Suddenly, Revan wanted them both to crawl. *The labs are gone? Amnesiac? Her mind puzzled over the word’s implications. The Emperor destroyed the vaccine’s production facilities?*

*Fools!*

“Is there some insight you’d care to add, Sheris?” Yuthura’s voice dripped acid.

“Should there be? Does Sheris normally provide… insight?” She ignored the Twi’lek and stared at
Malak. His boy’s face flushed and he glared back at her.

“No,” Malak said. His smile really wasn’t one. Wasn’t his. “Not insight.”

Laughter bubbled in her throat. “I see no reason to continue this charade. Do you?”

“No,” he murmured. Those dark eyes locked with hers. “Not when there are other games we could play.”

“Is Sheris entirely gone?” Yuthura said from somewhere outside the suddenly narrowed world. “And is Dustil entirely gone as well?”

“Sentimental for your old pupil?” Malak scoffed at the Twi’lek. “He is beyond your reach.”

Revan’s fingers closed around the child’s toy. Malachor’s toy. The metallic hand, all feeling muted and hyper-real at the same time. Every strand of synthfur. She closed her fist and felt the fabric tear. “Many things have always been beyond Malak’s reach.”

He stood up, moving so quickly that she barely had time to see it, and went to her, hand closing hard on her metal arm. “Let go of that,” he hissed. “Now.”

Revan looked up at his stranger’s face. “Malachor is six now. Isn't that a little old for child’s toys?”

That boy’s mouth of his twisted. “Six?” He repeated, making the word a question, mocking.

Revan tried to stay calm. *Six is… wrong? That’s wrong. He’s older. Of course he is. Time, whatever happened to me took time.*

Seven?” She shrugged. “Children grow up so fast.” Her hand relaxed around the toy. The fabric was torn, her artificial fingers tugged at the place they had torn it.

“He’s nine,” Malak told her.

*Three years? No, he was… he was almost seven. Two years? More than two years? He was three, the last time I saw him. He was only three. Three years? But that means… what of our plans?*

At least around the Jedi Temple, the Republic seemed disturbingly whole.

Yuthura stood up, glancing between them. Her face was expressionless, and her presence in the Force dulled to the merest whisper. “I’ll be in the infirmary,” she said. “I’m sure you have much to discuss. But try not to take too long.” She paused, and her lips curved in something that was almost a smile. “There is some… urgency.”

Malak glared back at her. “Just go,” he snapped.

Yuthura Ban nodded, and left—a coward despite her strength.

Malak stood watching, until the door closed behind Dreshdae’s former Headmistress. Then his head turned back toward Revan. “I didn't think the Jedi would allow Sheris to do it.”

“What gave me away?” She made her voice soft, teasing, like the real Sheris would have.

“You said I was too young for you.” He scoffed. “And you didn’t know about Manaan.” He stared at her, shaking his head. “Sheris wanted to lose herself, but I never thought the Jedi would agree.”

“I don't think the Jedi know,” Revan said. *Except for Atris. But she—*
“The Echani will never betray you. She is your creature. And mine. Forget her. Forget her part in this. Atris is inconsequential. Sheris acted alone, of her own free will.”

Revan blinked. She felt her mouth smile, but the expression was strange and weak. “I think Sheris acted alone. Are you going to tell them?”

“No need. You’ll betray yourself. There’s so much you don’t know.”

He’s right. But she refused to panic. “It’s been… three years,” she said slowly. “The Jedi made a holocron of my memories after you almost killed me.”

Three years, or close enough. And for some reason, you just let the Emperor and the Mandalorians near our son.

But my body was vaccinated. How could Tenebrae be in it? Unless… was I wrong? Had he already begun to twist my thoughts? But the computer was supposed to be infallible! The computer was mine, not his. It promised me that the virus could stop him—

Revan realized she was clenching and unclenching her artificial hand, like a nervous twitch. “Tell me,” she muttered. “Now, Malak. Tell me everything.”

He stared at her, that stranger’s face a mask. “Why should I? You’re weak.” He circled, and she stood up too, still holding on to that stuffed toy. “Weaker than you ever were during your reign as the Dark Lord.”

“A weak reed bends in a maelstrom, while a strong tree might crack.”

Silence, Voice! Revan shook her head to dislodge it. “I’m not weak.” She gestured at him. “Why are you… why are you in the body of this child?”

His lips pulled back in a smile she’d never seen. “When Revan struck me down, I became more powerful than she could ever imagine.”

XXX

Keep walking. Don’t look back. Never show fear. Don’t show them anything they can use against you—

Yuthura’s stomachs twisted with fear—edged by relief as she forced herself to walk away, as if facing down the two former rulers of the Sith Empire was something she did every day. (The time in her life when it had been was one she had thought thankfully gone forever.)

Small comfort, that in their borrowed bodies, Yuthura might have the Force advantage—at least against each of them, one at a time.

Poor Sheris. Poor Dustil.

Malak’s presence in Dustil’s body was stronger than ever, but Sheris still felt like Sheris: as lost and confused as the real Sheris had been. And still… and yet… there was an undertone of malevolence here, a darkness that reminded her of Korriban. A miasma of madness on the senses, like smoke in the back of her throat.

How could the Jedi let this happen? How can they be so blind?

The medix doors were closed, and guarded by two nervous Padawans. It took only a fraction of her
power to convince them she was expected; and once past the first layer of security, there was no
second. Protective gear, enough for dozens of Jedi, was stacked neatly in a closet; but the number
of healers were gone. Had they fled, or fallen sick themselves?

Yuthura frowned. The sense of wrongness was… stronger here.

She buckled on the protective gear carefully, wincing a little as her lekku twisted through the
helmet’s vacuum seal. She switched the filters to recirculation, hoping the hazmats all did their job.

They had put the worst cases all together in one room at the end of the corridor. In searching she
had come across med droids and the occasional tech wearing a hazmat suit. Nothing more. But
here, in the painfully white room, shining with harsh lights, the whir of respirators, she found her
former students.

Thalia May, Mekel Jin, and Udoo Utile, all in row next to other Jedi. Other Jedi had fallen in the
night—because she counted at least a dozen full beds. The air was antiseptic and bitter. Two
Zabraks, one old and one young—and neither wearing protection of any kind—were tending the
machines. Next to a row of flashing consoles stood two more white-clad figures. Human, probably,
but their features were almost entirely concealed by the hazmats they wore themselves.

“This is a restricted area,” the taller of the two said.

“You need survivors to make a vaccine.” Yuthura told him, trying not to show alarm. It had been
worse on Korriban near the end; but then, miraculously, almost all of her students had
survived. Because of the vaccine. Uthar said we were all saved. Saved by Revan herself to save the
galaxy—

“We are aware,” the taller, suited figure said. “To that end, I dispatched two of our five remaining
assistants to fetch the body of one Dustil Onasi, who is, according to popular rumor, a survivor of
the plague—in addition to being possessed by Darth Malak. Supposedly.” He made an incredulous
noise. It hissed through his respirator. “According to the HoloNet, there was also a riot outside the
Temple gates involving Mandalorians and Revan Starfire. I must assume that assisting with the
aftermath has caused the delay of my assistants’ return.”

“I would be happy to go search for him too, Master Loanin,” the other white-suit offered.

“As would I,” murmured the younger Zabrak. The older one looked at her sharply, frowning.

Yuthura tried to sound confident. “I saw… Dustil. Or Malak, as he calls himself now. The boy
assured me that he and Sheris Darkstar will be along shortly. That will give you two samples of
survivor’s blood.”

* Unless they kill each other. Does the blood need to come from a living specimen?

“You are one of the Korriban refugees as well?” the tall man said. “I don’t supposed you—”

“I was vaccinated.” Her mouth twisted. “But I never contracted the illness.”

“Yet,” the smaller man said. “Almost all of the other Korriban refugees have succumbed.”

“But not died,” Yuthura pointed out. “I believe that may be a crucial difference.”

“Systems of belief are of small comfort to science,” Master Loanin gestured towards the rows of
sick patients, most of whom were covered by biosuits. “You said you have seen this plague before.
Do you have any medical training, Padawan…?”
He knew I was from Korriban, but does he truly not know who I am? Yuthura raised a brow ridge back.

“Ban,” the other man murmured. “Yuthura Ban.”

“One of the Selkath Ten,” the younger Zabrak added.

“Another redeemed Sith,” the older Zabrak muttered, half under her breath. “And just as reliable as all the rest.”

“We will see how reliable she is,” Loanin corrected her. “Master Korr, you and Padawan Lydie will go fetch this Sheris and supposed Malak. Bring them back here in all haste.” Master Loanin’s head tilted towards the wall and he gestured at one of the meddroids. It slid forward. “MZ-6 has enough tranquilizers in its diffusers to take down an entire room of Jedi.” He paused. “Human Jedi, at least. If you need to use them, do not hesitate. We don’t need them conscious, only breathing.”

“Of course.” Even though she appeared to be at least four times Loanin’s age, the Zabrak afforded the man some respect.

“And you—Ban—check the fluid levels in all of the tanks,” Master Loanin told her, not waiting for a response. “Especially in the Twi’lek cases. Your species gets dehydrated very quickly, and that seems to degrade the immune response.”

“Yes, Master Loanin,” Yuthura nodded through her suit, because that seemed to be what he’d expect.

As she bent over the feeds going into Mekel Jin’s tank, Yuthura wondered how things would go when the two Zabraks and their droid interrupted the two former Dark Lords of the Sith from… whatever it was they were doing.

XXX

“You can’t have my baby!” Lena snapped.

“What?” The image flickered between Revan and Mission again. “Lena? No!” The Twi’lek’s face burst into incredulous laughter. “Possess the body of a helpless fetus? I’d have to go through puberty all over again. Plus, it would take, like years. No!” Mission nodded at Nico again. “We were thinking, maybe finding someone brain-dead. Like, in a coma.”

“Or an inorganic body,” Nico added. “We can build you to be virtually immortal.”

“We’re still working out the deets,” Mission continued. “I thought about maybe a clone too, but it might be too complicated. Plus, there’s the whole growing up thing again.”

“There are ways to speed maturation,” Nico offered. “Although they can affect brain development and emotional maturity in most species....”

“He wants me to flexible on the species,” Mission added. “I told him, no way on that!” Her image wrapped its lekku around its neck. The t’chin twitched at Lena tracing words in the air.

Do you really trust this schlub?

Mostly, Lena signaled. Are you really her? “Mission?” She added out loud.

Mostly, the image signaled back.
“Moms’ Brothel is closed,” the dispirited Cathar said. Her tail drooped sadly through the cage, and her legs swung in the bars. She had a blaster in one hand, and a bottle of something in the other. “You don’t want to come any closer, Citizen. A bunch of sents are sick.”

“I’m a healer.” The sight of Jedi robes had been enough to cause riots in the Underground of late, so he was wearing civilian attire, co-opted from a long ago mission on these very streets. He had wondered if she would remember the clothes, although now, standing here bare-armed and short-legged, Vrook just felt like a foolish old man. “Perhaps I can help.”

“Doctors haven’t been able to. Are you magic?” She scowled at him. “Or some kind of priest?”

“Not exactly,” Vrook said. “I’m… an old friend of Deeka’s. Deeka Jin?”

“She’s sick too. Really bad.” The flicker in her expression meant it was probably a holomask, but a decent one. Her lips pulled up, exposing the illusion of small, pointed teeth. “Half the trade quit, and the rest of them are sick too. Lexi died yesterday.”

“I’m a healer,” Vrook repeated. He’d known it was bad in the Underground, but he’d never imagined this. “Please. Let me help.”

“You know Deeks?” She made no motion towards the door’s sensors, just kept staring at him. “You don’t look like one of her regulars, no offense.”

“I’m not… I mean… I did.” He frowned. “I knew her a long time ago.”

“I can ask, I guess?” She tilted her head. “What name should I give her?”

Vrook hesitated. His own was too well known, even here. “Tell her it's Lammikins.”

The Cathar’s whispers twitched. “You’re Lammikins?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Well I’ll be a manka’s aunt.”

Vrook nodded slowly.

She peered more closely at him. “I don’t really see it, to be honest. Maybe a little around the chin?”

XXX

They were sitting in what seemed to be some kind of fancy dining hall, walls lined with red and black patterns. The crudely-tanned fur rugs and hassocks seemed out of place in the vast expanse. Seiran and Therion had been escorted off by a pack of kids and an old woman who kept talking in a language that none of them understood.

“More tea?” The woman, gestured to the kid standing in the corner, who approached, head down, carrying a steaming pot of it. “I apologize for the lack of formality, but Headwoman Catrinex will take good care of your men. Are they both your husbands?” She blinked and smiled. She had a heart-shaped face and a slightly pointed chin. Her teeth were small and perfectly even.

“Thanks. I’m okay.” Polla put a hand over her cup to stop the kid from pouring her more tea, and he ducked his head—actually blushing as he stepped back again. “And… and no. Shamael is… mine. The other one… he’s just the pilot. Drek. His name is… Drek.”

When you have five seconds to think of fake names, they sound fake.
“How old is your son?” Polla asked, to change the subject. The baby was older than Junior, with a lot more hair. Aside from that, she couldn’t tell.

Their rescuer laughed, as if Polla had said something funny. “He’ll be one year of age next month. Ready to be named.” She bent over the curly dark heard of her child, humming softly. “I’m thinking of calling him Dxun.” Her eyes were a dark brown, almost black, and they stared at Polla with unnerving intensity. “Do you like it?”

“It’s… nice,” Polla said, to be polite. “Is Dxun Nabooan for something?”

“Nabooans speak Basic?” The woman smiled, as if that was a joke. “Dxun is a moon,” she added. “The largest moon orbiting the planet of Onderon.”

“Oh!” Frack of a pilot she was. Suddenly Polla felt even more stupid than she had when she’d hit that asteroid. “This is Abasen,” she said, raising her own sleeping son in the air and then bringing him back to her shoulder. “And I’m Seriina Wen.”

“Like the holovid star?” The woman had dimples when she smiled back.

“Yeah.” Polla shifted her son in her arms, refusing to glance at the door, to see where the hell Seiran and Therion had gone off to. “Just like that. And what’s your name?”

“Aemelie,” the woman said. “Aemelie… of Naboo.”

The woman’s direct stare was a little unsettling. Polla tried to match it. “I guess we’re both from the Core.”

“What a coincidence!” Aemelie nodded. “Such a shame about your ship. Do you need passage back to Alderaan?”

“Actually, we’re going to Coruscant.” Polla shrugged, as if that was no big deal.

“So are we!” Aemelie beamed at her. “As soon as we finish our modifications to this vessel.”

“You’re fixing the damage…?” They’d seen the charred ruin of the bridge as the tractor beam pulled them in, haze of the containment field around it keeping out the vacuum.

“Do you think we should?” Aemelie frowned. “We’ve already rerouted all the ships command functions to the secondary bridge.” She paused. “As is wise, that bridge is located in the heart of the ship, surrounded by armor plating thick enough to withstand direct hits.”

“That’s… good.” Polla smiled, because what else could she do? “Then what are you… fixing?”

“Just some modifications.” Aemelie smiled. “We Nabooans are very good starship mechanics. I’ve already asked the children to take a look at your ship’s shields. It will be good practice for them. In a few days’ time, your ship should be repaired enough to leave… if you wish.”

“Thank you,” Polla said slowly. She glanced at the door, wishing like hell Seiran and Therion would walk back through it.

“Is Abasen Alderaanian for something?” Aemelie asked her. “I’ve always wanted to visit your homeworld. Is its orbital defense system as advanced as everyone says?”

“No, it’s just his name. Alderaan’s defenses are… pretty advanced. I guess?” Frack if she knew. What kind of a question was that? “They have some lovely art museums.” She had been bored to
tears by them at age ten.

“You can tell so much about a culture from its art,” Aemelie said brightly. “The Aleema’s cannon were designed by the Sith species, for example. Did you know, they designed them with no central command switch?” She laughed. “No way to command all guns to fire from one location? One assumes that is because their military leaders keep themselves in power by decentralizing their chains of command. A single override would allow one person to betray them. But by making it require the effort of dozens, they must inspire loyalty. I find that extremely artistic of them.”

“I don’t mean to… pry,” Polla interrupted. “But how did you get this ship in the first place? I mean, it’s… pretty big.” And infamous. Because it used to belong to the Dark Lord of the Sith.

It was featured in a dozen space battles she’d seen footage from, including the final one, the one that had taken out Revan herself.

The Nabooan laughed. “We traded for it.”

The ship was massive. Naboo had to be a pretty rich planet, to afford something like this for its navy.

“What did you trade?”

Aemelie shrugged. “Something a barbarian valued beyond measure—as he should, of course.” She cuddled her son closer, humming softly again.

The skinny kid in the corner stepped forward with the tea server again, and poured them more of it.

XXX

“I struck you down, Malak?” Confusion swam in Revan’s perfect green eyes, making her expression look even younger, more vulnerable. “But you struck first.”

“Yes,” he told the copy, trapped in Sheris’s body. “But she struck back. Hello, Red.”

Poor Sheris. I tried to save you. I sent you away before she came to the Star Forge, but it made no difference.

“Hello, Mal.” A smile pulled at her mouth: uncertain—maybe even—frightened. She had to be aware as he was of the imbalance of power between them. Sheris could not match the Onasi boy for strength in the Force, and she appeared to be unarmed. “The Emperor won?” Her head tilted and that familiar frown furrowed between her eyebrows. “He’s possessing my body? The vaccine didn’t work? Have I returned in Sheris’s body to stop him?”

“Your vaccine wasn’t what killed me,” he told her. “I managed to avoid that trap.”

“It wasn’t a trap. Idiot.” Even now, when it didn’t matter, she clung to her lies. So single-minded. “You said Malachor was nine, before.”

Petty, but Malak had to enjoy the way her face paled when he told her the day’s actual date. “You had no idea?” he added. “Did Sheris do this alone, or did Atris assist as she promised?”

“Atris? You fired on my ship.” Her head tilted. “I thought I died then. I remember… I thought I was dying.”

“The Jedi saved you, implanted a false personality in order to control you, and used you to find the
“And the Emperor?” She didn’t blink. Those green eyes stared into his with unblinking intensity.

“You said he was a false threat. You said the Dark Council were only toying with us.”

“No, Mal.” Her voice gentled: with the younger face, for a moment, she looked like she had before they went to Mandalore. “I never said that. Tenebrae did. You were corrupted. If you had just taken the vaccine—”

Malak snorted. “Are you so sure he wasn’t in your mind first?”

“No.” Her perfect mouth twisted. “I’m not sure of anything. I woke up… in this… as Sheris.”

“Atris,” he muttered. “And Kae. Sheris said they were going to help her take your memories back.”

“My memories were in a holocron,” Revan said, frowning. “Wait—did you say… Kae?”

“Sunrider,” he shrugged. “Whatever she calls herself now.”

“She’s alive?” She looked confused. “I’m weak in this body. I can’t—did she do this to make me weak?” She laughed again, harshly and inappropriately. It had been the laughter that had made him wonder, before her ignorance about Manaan confirmed his fears. “Tell me, at least, that we won the war—Sith against Jedi. My… other self. She’s in charge?”

“Did she look in charge?” He wanted to laugh too. “She’s not Tenebrae, trust me. She’s you.”

“But she’s in charge? Of the Jedi, at least? And your father?”

“She is nothing.” Nothing except my wife. “We lost, Red.” How could she still think they’d won? So blind, so single-minded, surrounded by our old enemies, and you still think we won? “The Republic sent the real Revan on a mission to kill me. Their Fleet destroyed the Star Forge—”

“I was going to kill you,” she muttered. “You’d been compromised, his thoughts were in you—twisting everything. Did you know I was going to do it? Is that why you fired on my bridge first?”

“All sents want to live, Red. Even me.” He’d said something like that to her other self in a dream. “Even you.”

Even Sheris. I thought. Is there some of her in you still?

Perversely, the desire her body had inspired in his boy’s frame before was gone now, replaced with something he refused to classify as fear, or—or anything else. You’re stronger than she is. She may have Revan’s memories, but that is all.

“You let her go to our son.” Her eyes narrowed. “You trust her with Malachor?”

“She's his mother.”

The woman with his wife’s memories swallowed. The false green of her eyes seemed to dim, and she looked away. “I’m his mother.”

“The Jedi may have wiped her mind, but they couldn’t erase her personality. The overlay they gave her collapsed in the true test. In the end, she became Revan again. She killed me. She took her title back as Dark Lord—”
“You’re really dead?” She looked up at him, frowning. “The real Malak? His… body? You’re… gone?”

“Destroyed when the Republic blew up the Star Forge.”

Was he flattering himself that she looked upset? “And the Jedi made a… holocron of you too?”

“No. The real Revan killed me. I’m a ghost.”

“A… ghost.” She frowned. “Like Freedon Nadd?”

“Just like,” he tried not to laugh. “Only made flesh, as he could only dream. I’m the ghost of a Sith Lord, and you’re the mere copy of one.”

“And the boy?” Her voice was bland, but he knew her too well. “You picked Karath’s protege for your puppet? Why not use your own?”

“Revan killed Bandon. On Tatooine, I believe.”

“Your other protege?” She frowned, as if the realization had just come to her. “That’s who Mekel Jin is. Of course! The boy from Coruscant? Son of the brothel-keeper?”

“Yes?”

“I know about him,” she snapped. “Davad told me.” That head tilted, covered in braids. The real Revan hadn’t worn her hair like that since they’d left for the Wars.

“You know about my protege, Mekel Jin.” Malak shrugged. “I know you had the Dreshdae Academy infected with your false vaccine.”

Her head tilted more and she frowned at him. “I told you before—it’s not false. You possess this body. Like Tenebrae does his Children. Are there more of you?”

“You said the boy would be immune from your virus,” he reminded her. “So it could hardly be the same. And I am not Tenebrae.”

“Are there more?” she pushed. “More Malak ghosts, controlling others?”

*If only,* he thought. *If only I had enough bodies to protect our son, stop the Mandalorians and kill my father—*

“Yes,” Malak said, to see what she’d do.

The white lightsaber blade erupted from the sleeve of her robe, spinning towards him in a killing arc. He barely got his own out in time to deflect it, sending it spinning back towards the false perfection of her face.

XXX

“Lammikins.” Her hair was still green, but now it clashed horribly against the pallor of her face. That hair was lank now, spread out against the pillow, like the sad nimbus of a broken sun. “I must be dead and dipped in choca, seein you here.”

“Deeka,” he kept his voice gentle, fighting for calm, for kindness, and for clarity. All the times he’d imagined this reunion—it had never been like this.
“You killed Arca?” Her head tilted to the side. “Good… she was startin to piss me off. Her and those goonboys of hers. Givin me the creeps. Bad for the trade.”

“I don’t… you’re running a fever.” Dangerously high. He could feel the sickness within her, festering like a sore.

“The goons all left, Deeks,” the Cathar said, from behind them. “I think Arca’s in her rooms. Downstairs.”

“You’d better kill her first.” Deeka’s hand reached out and brushed Vrook’s face. “Then… afterwards, maybe then we can talk.”

“I didn’t come here to kill anyone,” he said. “I… spoke to Zez Kai. I came here to tell you that I know. I know everything now.”

XXX

When she’d dreamed of this moment, it had sure been different. Lammikins had a lot more hair. She’d been wearing somethin beautiful. And there’d been music in the background—beautiful music—like on one of the stories.

“Congratulations, Lammikins the Loverboy,” she whispered. “We have a beautiful baby boy.”

XXX

No surprise. In the trade you don't get into these situations by accident. In fact, a girl in the prime of her game who's smart doesn't get into them at all. But somehow Deeka Jin had never expected this to work. Not really.

Jedi, so she'd been told, had forms of mental control. Just like a working chit, startin a life wasn't something they did by accident.

And yet, here they were.

Or rather, here she was, in the cramped conapt on sublevel nineteen that he'd rented for her. Alone. Cut off from everyone she knew back down farther underground. Livin the glamorous life of a kept woman instead of a rented one.

A Jedi's pet instead of a borrowed toy.

He—she couldn't quite bring herself to say the words 'my baby's dads'—not yet—wasn't here. He wasn't even on the planet. He'd gone off somewhere. Jedi did that. To do good elsewhere while back at home the same old same old played on.

"Center of the universe," she muttered to herself. Her hand reached nervously to her still-flat abdomen. Her painted nails drummed on the table.

The pink stick mocked her from the countertop. She'd planned this sure; but she'd never expected it to work.

Her reflection in the mirror was the same. Black eyes, pretty face, hair dyed green as the grass in the meditation gardens at the Jedi Temple. He'd snuck her in there once, dressed in padawan robes for a bit of a thrill. Creepy place. Force-users were creepy. Always lookin at you like they knew everything goin on in your mind.
Deeka Jin snickered. Well, he hadn't known about this. She adjusted the silver tunic across her shoulders thoughtfully raisin an eyebrow to her reflection. Her pursed lips twitched and she tried the speech again.

"Darlin'—somethin wonderful has happened."

Now deepen the voice and play his part. "Nothing can be as wonderful as you, Jinny."

"No, this is. We're gonna to have a baby."

Her hand smacked her forehead in mock despair. "But that is forbidden! The Order does not allow Jedi to love!"

"But we do love. Oh, my love!"

"How d'you know it's mine." Her reflection scowled at her, a pretty good imitation of his dour look, really.

Damnit, that wasn't what she'd meant to say. That was what she was afraid he'd say.

"I quit the biz for you," she reminded him. (Or would have, had he actually been here.)

"You've lied to me before."

"You're the one with Force, can't you tell I'm not lyin now?"

Her comm beeped before she could think of a snappy answer for him to say. Somethin like: "The Force is not a toy, Deeka. The fate of the galaxy, my repsons'bility to the Padawans in my care, blah, blah, blah—"

"Hello?" her voice came out breathy and soft. After all, he might be callin. Not like hardly anyone else had the number.

But it wasn't his face on the screen making an intergalactic call. It was the other one instead. Her keeper, callin from a local exchange. Callin to do his duty.

"He asked me to check on you. Something has happened. He's going to be gone for three more months—at least. May I come up?" His eyes stared at her clinically, as if she was some kind of experiment gone awry in his little Jedi universe.

Deeka rolled her eyes. "Fine," Room wasn't particularly clean. But Best Friend wasn't exactly company.

Rent was due in another week and she was low on credits again. Jedi Loverboy Knight's Best Friend had assumed the role of banker to keep her in the manner which she was fast becomin bored.

Thirty seconds later and Best Friend was knocking at the door, slippin inside with a furtive glance, as if anyone on the sublevels cared. She was surprised he still wore the robes comin down here—Loverboy always came in disguise—although, knowin Best Friend, maybe not that surprised. Best Friend didn't like breakin rules. Not a rebel bone in his body—hell, she wasn't even sure if he could get a bone at all.

Some Jedi couldn't—or so they said back down where she came from. Deeka Jin had never met one like that.
"He asked me to bring you more datapads. Have you been continuing your studies?"

Right, her studies. Moral Improvement of a Young Mind. That was how Loverboy justified this. Justified them.

Deeka gestured to a stack of datapads on the table by the bed.

"Every frackin night."

She'd really tried, at first. But what was the point in doin all this readin about places and sents she'd never see? You don't travel far from the Reef. Every 'scanti native knows that. For one thing, cits from her part of the planet had trouble havin the proper paperwork. For another, why bother when everything in the world was here?

"Center of the universe," she said out loud again. Sinneruvauniverse. Loverboy used to laugh at the way she talked. Tell her it was cute. Then he tried to get her to stop. Talk slower. More slow-ly. En-nun-ci-ate. "Reef's the cen-ter of the un-i-verse," she grinned, enunciating. "I know everything I need to know."

Best Friend was staring at the countertop. Specifically at the pink stick she'd forgotten to throw away.

Sh—well maybe he didn't know what a pregnancy test looked like. But no—the way his shoulders suddenly tightened and that muscle on the side of his jaw clenched told her that he knew. Don't need the Force read people. It's a skill you pick fast up in the trade.

Lotta skill to the trade. Most people don't get that. But it's true.

"Yours?" His head jerked so sharply that the long earring he wore in one lobe bounced against his neck. That earring meant somethin—on whatever world he was from. Corellia, maybe. Frankly, Deeka had never bothered to ask. Best Friend and she weren't exactly close. "How did this happen?"

Deeka chuckled. "You want me to explain it to you, darlin? Well, sometimes, when a man puts a woman up in her own little room, pays her rent, buys her food, visits her twice a week to frack—"

"Is it his?" he interrupted, eyes focusing slightly outside of her. Outside of reality. That familiar distance. Usin the Force, prob.

Her hands moved to her stomach as if to shield the little granslug inside from his gaze.

"Can't you tell?" She made herself smile back at him. This wasn't in the plan at all. Wasn't supposed to be Best Friend havin this conversation with her. Should have been Loverboy. He should be here.

"The Force doesn't work like that. I sense the life within you, that is all. If it were mine, perhaps—I've read of such things. I don't know—"

"Well that there's your problem, sweetie, all you've done is read." She smirked. "We both know it ain't yours."

"He'll know if it's not his." Best Friend looked worried, Deeka wasn't sure for who.

"You can dance at our weddin, if Jedi dance." She couldn't believe her boldness, but suddenly Deeka felt reckless.
"Jedi don't get married," piped a child's voice from the door.

Deeka almost jumped out of her skin. A round-faced kid, wearing Padawan robes stared back at her. Best Friend's new padawan. They all had padawans, raisin someone else's children, that's what Jedi did. That's where Loverboy was now—takin his new charge out to explore the galaxy. The one he called his niece. (Was she? In darker moments, Deeka had suspicions.) Help her learn morally improving lessons. Help the less fortunate on planets that had skies and trees and grass and things that she'd only seen on the vids. The girl was too young for her to get jealous about... but of course, she was.

"Davad," Best Friend chided. "I told you to wait outside."

"You're going to have a baby?" the kid asked her, ignoring the man's scowl.

"Maybe." She gave him a big fat smile. Tilted her head to one side.

"It's a boy," the kid told her gravely.

"He's gone for another three months," Best Friend said again, glancin helplessly at his charge as if he expected the kid to give him advice. "In another three months you'll be farther along. You can't just—"

"I expect I'll get fat," Deeka beamed. Had been more than three months already. More than three months since he'd been gone. She'd held off checkin, waitin for him to get back. But then she couldn't hold off anymore. There were things to plan, if this was really gonna happen. Stuff to do. Maybe she'd learn to cook. She'd need a bigger place— they'd need—

Best Friend's next words were like a boot in the face. "You can't do this to him."

"He did it to me," Deeka snapped. "We did it. Just because you never have—"

Best Friend closed his eyes and sighed.

The kid closed the door and moved into the room, staring around him curiously, like he'd never seen how the other half lived before. "Are there more rooms?" he asked her. "You really live in a place this small?"

Deeka Jin laughed. "Where are you from, little honeygizka?"

"Onderon," the boy said. "It's on the Outer Rim, but even there, we have nicer rooms than this."

"I'm sorry," Best Friend murmured. "It's just—at the moment, the scandal... his newest Padawan is a Senator's son. If the family found out that the Jedi training their son was involved with..." to his credit he almost looked uncomfortable sayin it "... you—they'd be—"

"Won't matter," Deeka replied. "He'll leave the Order. Jedi do that sometimes. I read about it in one of the datapads."

"He never will. I know him better than you do."

Hard to argue with that. It was probably true. Deeka had only known Loverboy for eight months. And he'd been gone for three of those. Three and a half, now. Today. In five hours.

"We'll work it out," she draped herself against the doorframe, gave them both a breezy smile.

Best Friend nodded. He might have had a stick shoved up his ass but he was loyal. "We will," he
agreed.

"This is one of those things I'm not supposed to talk about later, Master?" the kid piped in with.

"Moral relativity, like I told you," Best Friend muttered. He turned back to Deeka. "You'll need a bigger conapt. We'll figure out something—credits—maybe I can borrow—"

"I don't take your charity," Deeka snapped.

"You take his."

"It's different."

"You can't tell him. Not yet. He'd abandon the mission and his Padawans—you can't tell him."

"Malak's a special case," the blonde kid chimed in. "Like his niece." He frowned. "I wish they'd come back sooner too."

Jedi. Always raisin other people's children. Somethin in the back of her throat tasted a little bitter. She got sick sometimes in the morning. Maybe it was just that.

"If the baby has the Force, the Jedi will take custody." Best Friend seemed to think that was like some kind of comfort.

"No one else is gonna raise my kid," Deeka said flatly. "He has parents."

He. Funny to think of granslug as a 'he.' Like a real person. Suddenly this all seemed really real. "You're sure it's a boy?" she asked the kid.

He nodded, grinning back at her. "I was apprenticed in the clinics for two months last year. We learned to tell. What will you name him?"


XXX

"Master?"

Zez Kai Ell wasn’t feeling that well himself. Maybe it was all the bodies. Usually being a coroner for the Jedi Temple was a slow gig. But everything he’d once known seemed upended now—so much, that at first the man’s voice seemed like a dream out of the past.

And hadn’t he just been reliving the past? That look in Vrook’s eyes when he came in, clutching the genetic feeds from the kid’s records, the ones Zez had managed to hide for decades.

In an instant, their friendship was just… gone. Dead as a plague victim. All those beautiful moments, they’d never get them back again.

“Davad?”

“I prefer Knight Arkan,” his former charge told him, smiling faintly. He stood in the doorway, his hands cradling the shrouded body to his chest. For a moment, it was like looking into a window of the past—their last assignment together. They’d been assigned to Cathar, relief work after the Mandalorian invasion. Relief work that soon proved to be corpse retrieval and disposal. Davad had been so sensitive—Zez Kai still remembered that feeling of helplessness he’d had each night, hearing the young man mourn all the lives lost in the Force.
“I was just…” his face felt hot, where he’d been lying asleep on top of the datapads. It was the spice, always made him feel slightly woozy before the come-down. “Catching up on some paperwork. Is that… another one?” He nodded at the shrouded body. Of course it was.

Fifteen Jedi dead now, in a day. Another sixty with symptoms. Zez tried not to extrapolate what that meant, or how much worse it must be in the Underground.

“I found him in the kitchens,” Davad said. “He… had some kind of head injury. Maybe he passed out and hit his head before he died.”

“Put him over there, I’ll….” Zez let his voice trail off as he got to his feet slowly. “Let me get my tools.” His joints creaked as he stood.

“Aren’t you worried about getting sick?” His former Padawan asked.

“Aren’t you?” Zez replied.

“I had the vaccine,” Davad told him.

The body flopped down on the table. With a sigh, Zez opened the laser snips, walking over to it slowly. He peeled back the layers of what looked like tablecloth the kid was wrapped in.

So young.

One of the twins. Two of them, identical Miralukans from Katarr. Jillo and Yulo-something. Up for their Knight ceremonies in another few weeks. One of them had been assigned to the Telos Restoration analysis, but Zez couldn’t remember which one.

This was obviously the other.

His hand hovered over the body, trying to get a sense of the death. All Jedi had their talents, his was just more depressing than most. Oh yeah, sure. The party line was there was no death, but Zez had seen a lot of it. He was good at seeing it.

And this—

He heard his breath hiss out in a startled shock.

This was… this was… this was—wrong.

“Are you all right, Master?” Davad sounded worried. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes! Something is very wrong!” he looked up, wild-eyed at his former pupil. “You don’t… can’t you sense it?”

Incredibly, the boy he’d once thought too sensitive to ever master the Force was just smiling mildly at him. Smiling in the face of oblivion. Smiling in front of the black pit of nothingness, an absence in the Force like a neutron star: where once a life had been.

The Miralukan’s body was a hollow shell. And within… maybe Zez was going insane, but within his death was something that felt like the death of the Force itself.

“You don’t sense it?”

Frowning, Davad shook his head. “Have you been… getting enough sleep, Master?” His voice was kind, but there was something else there. Something underneath. Something that was—
Wrong. This is all wrong.

“N-no,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes. “You’re right. I need more rest. I need to take a step back. I don’t feel very well myself.”

Vrook, he thought. *Something’s very wrong. I have to warn him—*

“You need more sleep,” his former padawan murmured. Somehow, the man had gotten taller. His hand rested on Zez’s shoulder, pushing him back down. “I’ll just… take care of this body for you. Why don’t you rest.” He paused. “I’ve… I found a few more bodies as well. They’re still out in the hall. All dead of plague. Just like this one. If you like, I can help you fill in the reports.”

“Why don’t I rest,” Zez repeated. It had been a very trying day. That sounded like an excellent idea. “You should rest too, Padawan. It’s been a long day for both of us.”

“I’m fine,” Davad murmured. “Better than fine, really.” He laughed. “For the first time in months, I feel almost like myself.”

XXX

“Here they are!” Polla heard her own voice call out with relieved glee. *“Shamael! Drek! I’m over here!”*

“Wife,” Seiran said. He looked down at both of them, still sitting on hassocks with the kettle between them. There was something in his expression, tense, like a coiled spring. “The… kids gave us a tour.”

“This ship is incredible.” Therion sounded awed. “And Breiko here says he’s actually *met* Revan Starfire.”

“Did he,” Aemelie interrupted, shooting the boy a glare. “You should know, Breiko is a pathological liar. Sadly common among his clan. They’re not to be trusted.”

“But the bigger barbarian said he knew the *real* Revan Starfire too!” the boy argued back. “So he’s met her? They must be allies, right? Because she left them alive?”

“Unblooded whelps.” Aemelie mumbled a string of curses under her breath, and then rattled off what sounded like commands to the kids in front of them. Whatever she said had an effect, because suddenly, the entire ragtag crew were all lined up, shoulders straight and heads up, with almost military precision.

“I didn’t say the real thing….” Therion shrugged weakly at Polla. “I just said I met that Polla Organa chick once. Or twice. You know how it is.”

“No,” she drawled. “Did you really? Polla Organa, the famous smuggler? I hear she could do the Kessel run in five parsecs.”

“Probably,” her ex muttered. “Unless she crashed her own damn ship on the Defalli milk run.”

“Wife,” Seiran repeated. “Maybe we could have some time alone? To talk?”

Before Polla could respond, the pitch of angry Nabooan around them increased. Suddenly, Aemelie was on her feet and shouting something. The boy—Breiko—actually even saluted before he went running off again. The kid who had been serving them tea, barked something at Aemelie, nodded, and then took off after him.
The old woman, the one Aemelie had called the Headwoman started laughing, and rattled off a string of harsh syllables like a fusillade of bolts on plate.

Aemelie rolled her eyes, turning back to Polla. “I would like to apologize,” she said, voice almost formal. “For my people’s rudeness.”

“It’s… fine,” Polla said, cradling Abasen a little closer. She stood up too, and Seiran came up behind her, slipping an arm around her waist. “All a misunderstanding.”

“The truth of it is…” Aemelie continued, patting her own sleeping son on the back. “We can repair your ship, but there’s something we need in return.”

“Sure,” Polla nodded warily. “We’re open to negotiation. What were you thinking?”

“Passage to Coruscant.” Aemelie hesitated. “We are working on making our modifications to the Aleema but they will be some time coming. You have absolutely no idea how difficult it is to… modify something this large. All the spatial distortion. It’s quite complex.”

“You want to take our ship to Coruscant instead?” Polla shook her head. “No. We need to go there as well. I have an… I have my uncle. He’s in trouble. I need to help him.”

Aemelie shrugged. “As an additional favor, perhaps we could help you with your uncle.” She beamed. “We can all go to Coruscant together.”

“How?” If this was what passed for diplomacy on Naboo, they were the worst diplomats ever.

“To answer that, I would need to know the extent of your uncle’s problem.” Aemelie said. “But whatever it is, I’m sure we can assist. We Nabooans are very, very persuasive.”

“That’s… nice of you,” Polla said. She couldn’t help but be a little nervous. “Is it just a coincidence?” she asked. “This ship being… Revan Starfire’s, and your… kid Breiko saying he met her?”

“That one is a liar,” Aemelie murmured. “As I said. He’s never even come within ten meters of Revan.”

“And you just… randomly found us?”

“There was a distress beacon,” Aemelie reminded her. “Were you trying not to be found?” Her eyebrows arched. “Are you on a secret mission for Alderaan? Would you prefer we returned you to your crippled ship?”

“No,” Polla said. And something else suddenly occurred to her. “You’re traveling under a diplomatic pass? All of you?”

“Yes.” Aemelie said. “Although, for discretion’s sake our entry pass into Coruscanti space is not from Naboo.” She shrugged. “Our own mission is somewhat clandestine too—just like yours.”

“I see,” Polla said slowly. “Well—whatever planet, or system you’re traveling under—do you think you could kind of… get us onto Coruscant with it too?”

Therion had said he’d smuggle them in the bulkheads, but Polla had about a million ways that could go wrong dancing through her head—and this strange detour hadn’t helped her imagination at all.
Aemelie’s eyebrows raised again. “Possibly. But it would not be a formal adoption. You understand.”

“Of course,” Polla nodded, as if she did.

XXX

“Careful,” Aunt Marla said. Master Korr. It was better to think of her as Master Korr in Lydie’s head, even if it was sometimes difficult—especially in times of stress like this, when the entire Temple seemed like it was buried in a dark cloud, and the thought of a close living relative was somehow comforting, even if Jedi didn’t wish for such things.

“Zepth,” Lydie whispered. Whispered, because even though they were still two floors and a hallway away from the darkness they both sensed the Force—the place where someone—presumably Darth Malak—was using the Force, violently, and with the intent to kill.

“What?” Her aunt—Master Korr looked at her. “I’m sorry, Padawan, I didn’t hear you. I was… distracted.” Marla Korr was never distracted, but she did look tired. Lydie wondered when she’d last slept.

“My brother,” she said. “I just thought… maybe you knew something about what happened to him.”

“Zepth,” Master Korr echoed, as if she’d never heard the name before. “I’m sorry, child. I do not.”

She sounded genuinely sorry. And, (somewhat to Lydie’s surprise), she didn’t immediately follow Lydie’s question with a lecture about attachments and the Jedi Code for the rest of their walk.

“I think he was killed. On Iridonia,” Lydie blurted out a few minutes later. “Or maybe adopted. Mandalorians adopt people sometimes. I read that. In the archives. When I was studying their culture.”

“It’s important to study our enemies,” her aunt murmured. “Keep your voice down. We’re very close.”

They weren’t that close, but her aunt increased the pace, so that the droid could barely keep up with them. Finally, they were all running. Running down a hall in the guest quarters, towards a closed door, and a blackness in the Force that was terrifying.

Behind the door they heard the clash of lightsabers. Crashing noises. A woman’s voice called out something in a language that Lydie didn’t know. A man’s voice answered. Angry and hard.

“Stop,” Marla said, holding out her hand in front of Lydie’s chest, so that her niece had no other choice. Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper. “Croi says you’re very good with stasis. Do you think you can freeze two bodies at once?”

“Them?” There were two behind the door, even if sometimes, they felt like one—so much hate mixed together that it made Lydie feel sick.

“I’ll open the door and shield the droid,” her aunt murmured. “You only need to keep them still for a millisecond, until the gas is released.”

“Will it work?” Lydie tried to sound as if that was a question born of intellectual curiosity, a question about calculus, and not necessity.
“It should,” Aunt Marla said.

*Why are they fighting? What if it doesn’t? What if I fail?* A dozen more questions bubbled in Lydie’s blood, making her hearts beat faster, but she only nodded out loud. “Okay.”

“When I say,” Master Korr said, and waved the droid forward.

The door slid open, the droid rolled in, sparking blue as its shields were hit almost instantly. Lydie caught a glimpse of a woman’s face—red-haired, twisted with hate—and then she raised her hand, channeling everything she had into making all of the living kinetics within still—

The silence was sharp and sudden, and almost immediately, Lydie felt it start to give way. Something dark and enormous, flexed and pushed against the Force she held fighting furiously to break free.

Hiss of gas canisters, a pause, and then, sudden as a blast explosion, everything dimmed into quiet.

“Well done, Padawan.” Aunt Marla’s fingers brushed her arm. “I’m very proud of you.”

*A Jedi is not supposed to be very proud. A Jedi does not require accolades or any kind of praise for their efforts—*

“Thank you,” Lydie murmured, keeping her eyes down. Even looking down, she could see them: Dustil Onasi’s body and that copy of Revan Starfire everyone was talking about—both scorched and bruised and unconscious on the floor. Dustil Onasi’s saber was clutched in his hand—or Malak’s hand. Whose hand was it now? Did it matter?

The other weapon, the white double-bladed lightsaber was slowly burning through the duracrete before Lydie picked it up cautiously, deactivating the switch.

“Strange,” Aunt Marla murmured. “Isn’t that Atris’s saber? Where did Sheris get it?”

“I don’t know.” Lydie frowned, looking at it. “Do you want—”

“No. Keep it for now.” Master Korr shrugged. “I’ll carry the man, and you take the woman. Don’t worry—the gas should keep them out long enough for us to return to the infirmary.”

“I’m not worried,” Lydie lied. Calmly, like a good Jedi should.
“That’s three quarters of the formula—delivered to the Selkath authority’s tech labs, just like you asked.” Mission made her image smile at the Rakatan asshole who was trying to blackmail her like a two-credit egg. “You get the last part when I get my body and the Wookiees get their worlds.”

They’d moved discussions to the forest floor, where the tribes had been hard at work building a palace of woven trees around the installation of her central platform. The asshole had given her access to only one place. Manaan. Like she had anything to say to those fish who had killed Jolee’s friend.

Trying a workaround, another part of her sent a query to Manaan terminal, trying to ping it to Coruscant. The Manaan terminal spat out an error message, with a little more smugness than it needed to have, and not enough respect. Mission commanded the substation serving its power to send a few extra joules that way—noting with some satisfaction when the data from that station cut out, circuits fried.

The part of the computer’s net that linked her mind to her sentient counterpart on Manaan sighed, as if it was upset.

[[We serve the Prince.]] the Manaan computer reminded her.

[[Get bent.]] Mission reminded it right back.

“I don’t have any worlds to just give them.” T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw said. “You do realize I was trapped in a soul prison for the last thirty thousand Standard years?”

“You have Rakata Prime,” Mission said. “Aren’t you like their prince reborn or something? And don’t you have Manaan’s system now too? Basically? Since you promised to restore their industry?”

He wasn’t very good at controlling the muscles on his Twi’lek face, because T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw looked surprised that Mission knew about him being the prophesied savior and all—but, of course she knew, because the ancient Rakatan computer part of her had been the one to tell Revan about T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw and the prophecy in the first place.

“By all accounts my former people have retreated into barbarism and chaos,”
T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw said.

“A retreat from technology is not a retreat into barbarism and chaos,” Mission said. “Maybe your people are just exploring other options.”

Freyyrr groaned agreement. His Rakatan was really coming along.

“I don’t think so,” T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw said. “By all accounts they’re degraded savages. The Republic has closed the world to all trade, and imposed an embargo around the system.”

“Much like here, old thing,” Freyyrr growled at him. “That makes it perfect for us.”
“You want me to give you my world?” T’chrrrmak’tahk’leànjsëw looked upset.

“Think of the bigger picture, geezer,” Mission said. “We’re all about the big picture. The biggest.”

In the corner, Lena Wee tilted her head. Her lekku traced a sign in the air.

Mission snorted at the joke. Lena’s Rakatan was coming along too.

XXX

After the third of his blows missed by millimeters, Revan realized the infuriating truth: she was trying her hardest to kill him, but Malak was only toying with her, using her body’s weakness in the Force against her.

It didn’t matter that Sheris’s muscles responded more quickly than she expected; even seemed to anticipate Malak’s attacks, as if they’d practiced this before. (Perhaps they had—as they’d practiced so many other things.) It didn’t matter that Revan was hitting him with everything she had, reactions still slightly slowed in the unfamiliar body, weight of the unfamiliar blade.

In these bodies, he was stronger than she was by every measure. The only saving grace was, (at least in this body), he didn’t seem want her dead.

She tried, of course, to use that against him. She feinted, and jabbed, suddenly sure that his saber, cutting down in a sideways stroke towards her, would somehow fail to land a killing blow.

And she was right—it didn’t.

But the blade slashed across the top of her thigh, gouging into bone, as the Force he channeled, sent her spinning across the room, so hard that her ribs cracked.

“Enough.” He was laughing, as she bit her lip not to scream. “The real Revan killed me once already.”

Revan raised her hand, not bothering to answer, focusing on his vulnerable boy’s throat. Malak staggered back, and she felt herself grin with satisfaction through the red haze of pain, hand reaching out for her saber he’d knocked across the room—

Then the door opened, and a droid rolled in, shielded, carrying something in its appendages.

Trap. It was all a trap!

Lightning lashed at the droid from Malak’s hands and her own, as if they’d planned it, enveloping the thing’s chassis. The world seemed to freeze—and behind the lightning and the droid, Revan saw a girl’s face. Young. Zabrak.

Immune. She could be one of His children—

That was her last coherent thought, before a cloud of gas enveloped them. Small consolation that Malak in his boy’s body hit the ground first, a few seconds before she felt her own knees give way, her own consciousness fade into the darkness.

XXX

Revan awoke to an unfamiliar face. A young man, with wide eyes the color of clouds nodded slowly as her eyes focused on him. He was dressed in medic’s whites, dark hair covered by in a surgeon’s transparent net.
For a moment, surrounded by white walls, antiseptic tang in the air, she thought she could be anywhere, even back on her flagship, and everything that happened could have been a dream.

Then she looked down and saw the golden metal hand where her own should have been.

“How do you feel?” the face asked. A surprisingly deep voice for the delicate features.

Revan blinked. “I’m… fine.” Asserting her competence was important. Her head spun, and the world jaggedly bright. Her good hand moved down, found a bandaged area on her ribs, the dull throb of a nearly healed injury on her leg. “What happened?”

“You were attacked by a former Padawan, Dustil Onasi.” The face’s brow furrowed. “His lightsaber attacks inflicted several surface wounds, which will heal with no permanent scarring to your epidermis, or underlying connective tissue.”

Revan blinked. “Dustil Onasi,” she repeated. There was a confused heartbeat, before her mind remembered Malak’s false name and new body. “You know he’s possessed by the ghost of Darth Malak?”

“I have been informed that his Force possession is a theoretical possibility.” Those cool eyes scanned her face. So young. “I am Master Azen Loanin. I am in charge of the Temple’s medical facilities.”

“Here is one who lets reason rule above the Force. Above common sense. Create any logical argument and he will follow you into another Malachor. But if he senses an inconsistency, any flaw in your reasoning….”

Silence, Voice! “I’m Sheris Darkstar.” Best cover all bases. “Sheris Loran. He—Malak tried to kill me.”

“He attacked you,” the Jedi agreed. How could he be a master? He seemed scarcely older than Dustil Onasi himself. “Your body suffered several defensive wounds, and his was nearly unscathed.”

Unscathed? Despite all my effort?

“Where is… Malak now?” And what tales would he tell? Would you betray me, Malak? Are you Malak or the Emperor?

If I hadn’t tried to kill you first… would you have tried to kill me at all?

“He is here. The body of Dustil Onasi is here.” Master Loanin frowned. “He remains unconscious, while the Council debates their best course of action.” He nodded at her bandaged arm. “We have taken blood samples. You are both survivors of the H9 WXOU virus, what is called, colloquially, ‘the Jedi Plague.’”

“We are. Yes. You can use our blood to create a vaccine.”

“Indeed.” One thick eyebrow raised above a perfect, slightly tilted gray eye. “We have a promising culture already.”

“Good. You will begin distribution without delay. The vaccine should reduce mortality rates to near zero.”

“Careful. This one will be easily suspicious of a Sheris that shows knowledge beyond her station.”
“Near zero, is less precise than under five per cent, which is what it has done in our projected simulation.” His eyes blinked once. “We have just begun to organize a trial program among the non-Force sensitives, in the Coruscanti Underground.”

“I… have a medic’s training.” He showed no reaction, which told Revan that this Jedi knew that Sheris had training. “And I’ve seen the illness before. The virus will affect any sentient with Force potential, or the genetics to pass along Force potential to their offspring. A larger population than one would expect, on most planets.” She widened her eyes. “But I think some races are immune…?”

“Careful, my Padawan.”

I am not your Padawan!


“Rodian,” she offered.

“No.” The boy frowned. “Master Fez and Knight Yallisuppi both joined the Force this week, after a brief illness.”

“They’re Rodian?”

Those almost colorless eyes scanned her face. “Yes. I suppose you never met Master Fez.”

Careful— Her own voice or Kae’s? Revan shook her head sharply. “Not that I recall, but Rodians should be immune.” She hesitated. “Selkath too.”

“Interesting.” He nodded slowly. “I already knew you have some facility with healing, Padawan Darkstar—”

“Actually, I prefer Loran.” It was farther away from her real name.

“As you wish.” He nodded. “Would you care to assist us?.” His mouth curved in an apologetic smile, and those wide-spaced eyes looked away. “We are extremely short-handed. Only myself and Padawan Mical have studied the medical arts. Knight Yallisuppi was assisting us when he succumbed to the illness—as have all of my other former assistants. Master Korr and Padawan Lydie Korr have been assisting as well, but neither of them has appropriate training. Padawan Yuthura suggested I ask you.”

Aside from Yuthura Ban, am I supposed to know who these sentients are? Care about their lives?

“Of course,” she said, trying to simper like the real Sheris would have. It was disturbingly easy to do. “I want to be of service.”

Maybe that way I can stop you Jedi from ruining everything.

XXX

The small, black ship that encompassed the universe had been small enough with two. It was even smaller now that they were three. Especially when all the third man out did was pace, back and forth, from one end of their prison to another.

We could jump him, Dustil thought at Mekel.

You want us to roll Darth Malak, Telos? His friend’s thoughts were almost amused. And then
what? You think if we knock him out, he'll disappear? You think then we'll wake up?

I think we could take him. Dustil was pretty sure he was never going to wake up. How much time had passed? It could have been years. Mekk said only a month or two, but he could have been lying. Maybe they were all dead and this was some kind of Sith hell. That made a lot of sense. It wasn’t like you could scare Sith. Boring them to death was exactly the kind of hell they’d invent.

The man chuckled. And it really was hell, because somehow, he could hear their thoughts. “You could not ‘take me,’ even if you tried.” He towered over them both, with hair and a jaw, wearing Jedi robes. “Even together, you are no match—”

Dustil didn’t need to signal, or say anything. His own body was flying through the air, the saber already ignited in his hand, burning hard and red as it came down. Behind him, Mekel had rolled away to the corner, hands cupped with a miasma of dark energy that came from the space between them both: anger, rage, hopelessness—all of it erupting like a chain reaction across the floor of their ship, shattering the duracrete floor, knocking the Dark Lord of the Sith off of his false Jedi feet.

With a cry of triumph, Dustil landed on top him, pushing down with his hands and the Force, bringing his blade up to the man’s throat.

“Let us out of here,” he hissed. “Now.”

XXX

Rulan Prolik had been expecting the message from Yavin for weeks, but when it finally came, he found that his appendages, (currently in the form of a Zeltron male), trembled as he punched in the access tones.

The message unfolded before him, rotating in three-dimensional Aurebesh on his faded comm platform.


He and his associate had been so recently at odds that Rulan had expected the worst. But in Suvam’s final word, “Sunrider,” he thought he glimpsed a small crumb of redemption. After all, hadn’t the Sunrider woman been the great Redeemer before?

With some trepidation, he dialed Suvam Tan’s private comm.

“Rulan!” The old Rodian wasn’t alone. Behind him, loomed a larger figure, robed and masked. Humanid.

One of… them?

Suvam smiled at him. “How are things on… Coruscant, is it?”

As if he didn’t know. “Manaan, now.” Rulan told him. “Things are very interesting.” He didn’t have to dissemble; things were interesting. “This morning, someone from an organization called I. E. Limited broadcast three quarters of a synthetic formula for kolto.”

“That is interesting,” Suvam agreed. “Can it be manufactured anywhere?”

“Anywhere firaxa sharks can survive. Their excreta is a key component.”
“The Selkath must be keeping this quiet. I haven't heard anything on HoloNet.”

“The broadcast was low-band. Targeted to Manaan government feeds only. But naturally, with my connections—” connections that demonstrate why you shouldn't kill me— “I was informed almost immediately.”

“It's good to have friends,” Suvam agreed. Which could mean everything—or nothing—at all. “I assume you have a copy of the formula?”

“Partial formula. And yes. In a secured place.”

“Ah.”

“Have I not proven myself?”

“Leaving Revan Starfire and the Senator to battle for supremacy amongst themselves was not the tactic requested.”

“I couldn’t break the contract with Senator D’Reev. Our Order would be nothing, without our word!” He couldn't expect Suvam to understand; not truly. The Rodian had been a mere gangster. His initiation into their mysteries was far from complete. “Our contracts are our bonds.”

“But do they serve the One?” Suvam raised a brow ridge above one perfectly circular eye.

“I serve the One,” Rulan said, because that was all he could say, with the spawn standing right there.

Over a thousand years of history discarded, just like that. It made Rulan feel sick to his stomachs. But he could hardly explain to the former Exchange head that the One wasn’t actually supposed to be a real, sentient being. Just because there was an omniscient, immortal Emperor whose agents had taken over their organization, didn’t mean that this Sith, this self-styled Emperor Tenebrae was really “The One.”

False gods, he thought blackly. In these times we are tested by false gods.

Suvam frowned at him. “Get me a copy of the kolto recipe.” His antenna shifted, swiveling back towards the figure standing behind him.

“By your command,” Rulan muttered, trying not to look at the robed figure. It couldn’t really be Tenebrae himself. It probably wasn’t even real. The false One used all sorts of tricks.

All that one of the faithful could do was pray that luck would unseat the false idol and swing the universe back into place again.

XXX

It's not real, asshat. Nothing is.

Malak laughed, just like he had this last time Telos had thought attacking him was a good idea. And the time before that. True, this time it looked like they’d actually won, but Mekel expected the same outcome.

None of this is real. He’d felt sorry for Telos before, being trapped. Now that he like he was trapped too, Mekel wasn’t sorry any more. He was just pissed off they’d both been so fracking stupid.
Dustil crouched, holding the imaginary lightsaber to the man’s imaginary throat. Mekel stood above him, channeling the imaginary Force to keep the man contained.

Lying on the broken ground, supposedly at their mercy, the man just laughed. “You think I chose this prison? Chose leaving my son in Mandalorian hands? A copy of my wife running loose amongst the Jedi?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care,” Dustil muttered. He brought the blade down across Malak’s neck in what should have been a killing blow—except the saber turned to mist in his hands.

The man staring up at him didn’t look that much older than they were. His eyes narrowed with mirth. His broad mouth curved up in a triumphant smile. It was a distinct pleasure to smash a fist into that smile, even if it made no difference at all. It wasn’t like hitting Dustil, there was nothing to feel. Mekel’s fist went through air, through nothing, because nothing was real.

“You said before you’d free Dustil,” Mekel added, straightening up again. His saber was out in his other hand. Just as imaginary as Dustil’s—just as useless. “You need to do that. Now.”

Malak’s head turned towards Mekel. “I said I’d free him when my son was safe. He’s not.”

“You’re lying,” Mekel said. His eyes met Dustil’s. “You’re never going to just fracking leave. You’re as trapped here as we are.”

Can you feel it too?

Yes.

And wasn’t that a fracked side effect of all of them in this place—all three knowing what the others were thinking. When it was just him and Telos—they’d come to terms with all of the awkward situations that could arise from that long ago. It was another thing when you threw in Darth Malak and his endless thoughts about the kid and the woman who was his wife and wasn’t—

“You know they’re both her?” Dustil said out loud, following the thought. “Both of them are your wife. And both of them want to kill you. I wouldn’t mind, if it was in your own fracking body. Or someone else’s body that wasn’t mine. Frack. I’d help.”

“Yeah,” Mekel muttered. “Go possess someone else and we’ll both help kill you.” He paused frowning. “Or help you kill her. The other one. The fake Revan.”

“If she’s got the memories, is she the fake one?” Dustil added.

He and Mekel disagreed about that. You just want to bone the real Revan, Mekk.

I do not, asshat.

Oh? Sure looked like it in that dream.

Mekel felt his face flush. I was... that dream was about a lot of people. Their eyes met above Malak’s head. Even you.

Trust me, I’m flattered. Dustil’s eyes were almost yellow in this place. The shadows made hollows in his cheeks, made his face look like marble.

Are you? Mekel’s smile twisted.

“Can you spare me your adolescent hormones?” Malak sighed. “If I wanted to kill Sheris, I would have.”
“Sure,” Dustil taunted him. “Because you’re a big bad Sith Lord.”

_Fracking Sith asshole_, one of them thought.

XXX

“She’s!” Davad Arkan, of all sentients, was walking towards her, smiling. “Yuthura told me you were recovered!”

“Yes,” she said, trying to look at him without giving anything away. _What else did the Twi’lek tell you?_

It would have been good of the woman to have warned her—although they’d hardly been alone in the infirmary room, with Loanin and his helpers hovering like orbitals, as Revan gathered herself to return to Sheris’s assigned rooms for rest, before reporting to work in the morning. Presumably those rooms were in the same guest wing where she and Malak had fought. One room there would surely respond to her voiceprint, or palm lock—or so she hoped, because she had no idea which room was supposed to belong to Sheris.

“Yuthura commed me,” Davad added, voice slightly softer. “She suggested I act as escort. You might have been concussed and confused, after your injury.”

“I feel a bit lightheaded,” she murmured. “It is true.”

“It’s been too long,” he said, taking her arm in his. She tried not to stiffen at his touch. He wouldn’t have dared touch her, before. Not for years.

“Too long,” she echoed. _Three years. You were on the Aleema. Were you on the bridge itself?_

Revan couldn’t remember.

“I was captured,” he murmured, almost as if he’d seen her thoughts. “Along with Lord Revan, and all the survivors from her flagship. They detained us on one of the prison barges for a time, but my family intervened on my behalf.” He chuckled. “I believe my cousin thought I’d come home and help her rule.”

She glanced up at him warily. “I believe I must have heard this story a thousand times.”

“Have you?” His fingers tightened slightly on her arm. “Did I ever tell you the part where I asked you to be my queen?”

“I’m sure you’ve asked half the sentients in the galaxy to be queen of Onderon,” she said, suddenly all too aware. This wasn’t Malak in some boy’s body. Arkan had been many things: confidante, advisor, servant, an occasional lover—and years ago, a friend. “How many have said yes?”

“I _would_ have asked you,” he said, voice verging on serious. “If I’d ever held your heart.”

Revan looked up at him, frowning. “This is no time for sentiment.”

They passed through the main hall. It was strangely deserted for mid-day. Even the presence of nearby Force users felt small and dim. The light from the windows broke the ferracrystal into prisms, shifting like rainbows across Davad’s dark face. His eyes were lighter than his skin, still tinged with Sith yellow, and they locked with hers.

_The Onderonite is a loyal beast, but do not press him too far, Revan. He responds more to soft_
looks and the pretense of love than strength.”

Blast yourself, Kae! She couldn’t help but look around, as if her old master would come out from behind a wall. And yet… and yet, there was nothing. When I find you, old woman, you’ll die. Again.

“As I did on Malachor?” The voice was mocking.

“No time for sentiment? But Sheris always appreciated small tokens of affection.” Davad smiled at her, fingers tracing the skin of her remaining arm.

Revan blinked, shaking her head to clear it and pulling her arm back. “Neither of us were made to be someone’s lap kath, Davad. Were we?”

His smile faded, as if he remembered, as well as she did, just how many times she’d made him crawl.

They walked in silence, passing through the main halls and into the wing of guest quarters. No one was manning the security desks—unusual for mid-day. Davad didn’t mention it, and so Revan didn’t either. He turned left, and she followed, grateful for the chance to collect herself again. The fingers on her metal hand twitched. Control of that hand was different. She’d need training to be able to use a saber effectively.

Davad stopped dead in front of one of the doors in the guest quarters. Can you open this door?”

Revan shook her head sharply to clear it. She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know. Can I?”

“I’m quite curious to find out.” He smiled.


The door slid open, revealing a large, opulent chamber. One of the better guest quarters, with a huge expanse of sky out of its window, and a large, unmade bed. There was a small cot to one side, and several partially unpacked crates scattered around. The room appeared to have been ransacked—with clothes, and pieces of weaponry and armor scattered everywhere.

Inexplicably, one of the two HK’s she’d built was propped against one wall, obviously deactivated, its red eyes dull and dark.

One HK was lost on Lin. So this is the other—the one I left with D’Reev? Did Malachi leave it with Jedi? Did it come here to guard Malachor? If so, why isn’t it guarding him now?

Don’t think of him. Not yet. Not until there’s something you can do—

“I think all you had to do was use your palm print,” Davad murmured. “But hearing you command the door like that gave me chills.”

“This is… my room?” she said. “I mean… here is my room. Mine and Malak’s.”

Davad chuckled. “No.” He drew her inside by the hand, door sliding closed behind them.

“It’s hers. The room she shared with her own husband—or husbands, if you believe everything you hear on the HoloNet….”

“Husbands,” Revan repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me. You’re one of them?”

“Hardly.” His teeth pulled back from his lips. “But I believe Revan had her droid sweep this area
very effectively for surveillance. We should be able to speak quite freely.” He inclined his head, graceful as the prince he’d once been. “Master.”

She stared at him, taking a cautious step back. They’d never given her Atris’s saber back, and in Sheris’s body, she was badly outmatched. “You will stop calling her Revan.”

“As you wish.” He inclined his head again. “Master.”

She snorted. “I’m not going to call you my apprentice, even if you crawl and beg.”

He laughed. “There’s the Rev I remember. And some called you humorless.”

“Didn’t we have them all killed?” Revan felt her mouth turn up.

There was a piece of plimsi on the floor, folded, a note scrawled in elaborate script. She picked it up, scanning the words:

XXX

Dear Revan,

Presents, as you know, are old Deralian tradition from family to family. We’re so happy that you’re part of ours, and hope this finds you well. Congratulations on your marriage! I have to admit, usually Organas only marry one man at a time, but I expect you know your own mind, dear. You always have.

Your sister, (and I hope you don’t take offense, that we think of you both that way), is still a bit sulky about this entire thing, but she promised me that she’d get you and your husbands something nice.

Let me know if she doesn’t. I’ll have words.

Jasp is a little worried that we don’t know you like we should. I know you’re probably quite busy, what with all of the galaxy’s problems, but we’re back here at home, whenever you need us. We’d be delighted if you came for a visit, and if you ever need a place away from all those bright lights, our home is always open to you and yours.

All our love,

Molla Organa.

XXX

“Molla Organa?” She raised an eyebrow at Davad. “Sister?”

“No idea.” He took the note from her. “The Deralians? It's a rather long story. Look. They sent you a gift.”

The letter was dated, but that meant nothing. Nothing in the last three years means anything. I don’t know anything. She glanced at the deactivated droid again. It looked intact. But then why would she leave it behind?

Davad followed her glance towards the HK. “I can answer some questions, Rev. And you may find other things that could prove useful here—in what she left behind.”

“I might,” she agreed, walking over to the droid.
“You look better,” Vrook said. It was true, Deeka Jin did look better. In the past week her face had lost that deadly pallor. She’d drifted in and out of consciousness, calling him more names than he could count. But now, her dark eyes were clear and her fever was gone.

“I had a dream, Lammikins.” Her lashes were dyed green now too. Had they always been? Funny, he could remember the black of those eyes, but not if they matched her hair. “We got old.”

“You still need to rest.” He did as well. Exhaustion tugged at the edges of his mind, threatening to disrupt the healing trance again. There was still so much to be done, and a part of him—a part of him thought enough time had been wasted.

A part of him wanted nothing more but to see his son.

The times he had, times past, when he’d passed the boy by in ignorance, taunted him now. Black eyes, so like his mother’s. That scowl on the stubbled face. His utter lack of allegiance to anything except the Onasi boy.

The promise he’d shown in the Force. Reports of small mercies, on missions in the Underground. And then… they’d disappeared, Mekel, Dustil and Yuthura Ban. The life of a Jedi was not for everyone. They’d disappeared and the Jedi had never found them, had barely looked.

Two days ago Jopheena reported that Mekel was alive, but unconscious. His body had recovered from the illness, and yet his mind was gone. As gone as the Onasi boy beside him.

*There is nothing you can do from there. Something is wrong in the Temple. Something is terribly wrong in the Temple. The best thing to do is continue as planned. Trust Jopheena to get them out. She will get them out, as she’s getting as many of the children away from that place as she can.*

The rumors in the Underground said the Jedi were dying, or fighting, or fleeing. Or blind, or oblivious, or gone. The doors had been sealed for the past week. Jopheena’s messages, precise as gears at first, were now sporadic for the past two. Klee had actually left the Order, and was now serving as a consultant for Malachi D’Reev. Or was he just the Order’s spy on Revan? It was all painfully unclear.

As unclear as the motives of the self-proclaimed Sith Lord Arca, struck down by her own plague on the floor below them, now guarded by the remains of Deeka’s security force. Had she been working for this self-styled Emperor of theirs? Or against him? Was she one of D’Reev’s pawns? Was D’Reev a pawn himself?

If Vrook still had the resources of the Council, some questions could have been answered. But it was painfully clear that the Council had been split, fragmented, and compromised. Atris had vanished entirely, taking a large number of artifacts and holocrons with her. *Revan’s*? He hadn’t dared ask. Iridel was dead from the illness. As were Hett and Drez. Malak’s ghost had tried to kill Sheris Darkstar, and the medics had drugged Dustil Onasi in order to contain the damage. Supposedly, they’d even attempted some kind of Force exorcism, although Jopheena had speculated darkly that the ceremony was a mere sham. There were… elements, she thought, who wanted Darth Malak and not the Onasi child alive.

Elements including Vrook’s niece?

Vrook had left one flank exposed, sending Revan two messages at D’Reev’s palace in the sky on what was supposed to be a confidential line. There had been no response. Force knew if she had
even seen them. And now, with Jopheena gone dark as well….

“Vrook,” Deeka whispered.

His head turned, startled. She so rarely called him by name, preferring instead all of her ridiculous pet names; even more absurd now than they had been almost twenty years previous. “Deeka?”

“Have you seen him?” A tear glistened in her eye. “Our son? He’s a good boy.”

A good boy that you hid from me. A good boy that you sold. I saw the records, reviewed their testimonies, when Mekel and the others first came from Korriban. You sold him to the Sith. I interviewed them all when they came to us, I and the Council. Only knowing half the horrors you subjected him too. You should have told me, I could have raised him, raised him like I did Revan—

Not for the first time, Vrook wondered if some of the fault for his niece’s fall could be lain at his own feet.

Even so, I could hardly have done worse with Mekel than the crucible of Korriban.

“I’ve seen him,” Vrook murmured. “He’s… he’s very like you, Jinny.”

“But strong, like his father.” She smiled at him. “The Sith made him strong.”

XXX

The Coruscant General Detainment Center, East Secondary Unit, sublevel twelve, had soaring, fifteen-meter ceilings, and hallways that echoed with the clatter of footsteps. It was nothing at all like Revan had imagined a jail to be—the one Polla had ditched Therion D’Cainen in on some Rim backwater had been little more than a cluster of prefab huts and a force field. This place was built to impress, as if cowing the visiting families of criminals into submission could reduce crime rates.

Not like intimidation isn’t an effective tool, but really?

She was dressed to intimidate herself today, wearing the ridiculous formal Senate robes, a lightsaber strapped openly on her belt, spikes of the D’Reev collar almost poking her in the chin.

“I believe my secretary called ahead?” Revan said to the guard behind the desk. “I’m here to see Boon Organa.”

The woman frowned at her. “We were told to expect you, Citizen… Starfire D’Reev? D’Reev Onasi?”

“Just D’Reev,” Revan said. “Citizen D’Reev is fine.” She felt horribly awkward in the formal robes, even if she’d been wearing them almost constantly now for the past week and a half.

“D’Reev.” The woman seemed to pale under the overlights. “Of course. We were… I mean, the Senator’s attaché called us and told us to expect you.”

“And now here I am.” Restless, like she wanted to jump out of her own skin.

Guilt nagged at her. What Revan was supposed to do now was take back her own memories, not visit a man she wouldn’t even remember soon. A man, who by all accounts, was a loose cannon capable of signing the real Polla’s (second and actual) death warrant if he talked.

And yet— I can’t just leave him here. He may not be my family, but he’s hers. I owe her this. I owe all of them—all the Organas. I ruined their lives. The least I can do is give this one back.
“This way.” Two more guards came out of an open door and flanked her. Several blast doors worthy of keeping in atmosphere on a capital ship instead of a minimum security Coruscanti prison opened and closed in their wake, until finally Revan was standing before a small cell rimmed by a blue force field.

The man inside the cage lifted his head. Without the elaborate paint covering his face he was just a man. Did he look like Polla’s father? In her memories, Jasp Organa had more hair than this man did. Lines of strain marked a plump face. His eyebrows looked like they’d been plucked. Those eyebrows narrowed and lowered. His mouth twisted.

“You.”

“Secretary—“ Uncle “—Boon Organa.” She inclined her head, trying not to wince as the ridiculous D’Reev collar stabbed her in the neck. “I convinced Senator D’Reev to drop the charges of assassination if you leave the planet immediately. You will still need to face the Alderaanian courts, but House D’Reev gives its word that they will assist you in finding the best representation possible there, and since no injury was done to any sentient person—”

“Will that representation bring back my niece and her family?” Muscles in his jaw twitched. “Did your Senator murder them, or did you give the order yourself, Darth Revan?”

“Do you remember Cousin Vish?” It was all Revan had, offering him this. She didn’t even know if he’d understand.

His eyes narrowed. “Did you have her killed too?”

“Yes,” she snapped. Would he get it? “I had her killed, just like I had Polla Organa and her husband and son killed.”

With a wordless cry, the man launched himself at the energy field. It sparked, and he flew backwards, landing in a twitching heap on the floor.

Somewhere behind her, an alarm went off.

“Frack,” she muttered, at that moment feeling nothing like Revan at all. “Get up. Please.”

His head lifted, and his eyes blazed at her. Furious. “Why did you come here? You want to kill me too?”

They were monitored, of course. And not just by the prison feeds. She had to assume D’Reev would see this too. If not today, then someday. If Uncle Boon didn’t understand… what else could she do?

“Please,” she snapped. “I… I just wanted to see you released.”

“If you let me out, I’ll try to kill you again,” he said. “I have connections with the Alderaanian house of Rist.”

Fracking idiot. “I suggest you stop trying to threaten the former Dark Lord of the Sith,” she told him, trying to keep her voice cold. “Not to mention Second of House D’Reev, who is also a Jedi Knight.”

What else can I give him? What else is safe?

“We have an old saying on Alderaan,” he muttered. “Assassination is the mother of invention.”
“I know an old Deralian saying too,” she said. “Trust your goddamned family and take the fracking deal when they tell you.”

“Get out.” His face looked nearly purple with rage. “I don’t care what you are… you Sith… thing! Get out!”

“Take the deal,” Revan repeated, backing away. “Uncle Boon. Please.”

“I know people,” he muttered darkly. “People who can take care of even the likes of you.”

“Good-bye,” she told him, turning her back and walking away.

What was it that Malak had said to her? Some things… some things you can’t fix.

But I tried. She’d see him freed. See him freed and then she’d take back those fracking memories. Then maybe the real Revan will know what the frack to do.

XXX

The woman threw back her head and laughed. “Reunion? What reunion?”

“Can you truly be so blind? Even after all that has happened?” Malak took a step towards her, his saber held in a confident, if careless, grip. His leather cape fell loosely over his broad shoulders, half-draped across his hairless, muscular chest. “All this time, and you still don’t know?”

Know what? The curvaceous black-haired woman in the transparent jumpsuit stared at him, the hint of an insolent smirk on her lips. Her own weapon hung loose and unlit in her hands.

“Surely, what we once were must have surfaced by now,” Malak chuckled. “Even the combined power of the Jedi Council couldn’t keep your true identity buried forever. Could it?”

There was a long pause, and the expression on the smuggler’s face slowly changed, green eyes widening, smirk fading. All the color seemed to drain from her face.

“I am a Deralian smuggler,” she whispered. “A Deralian smuggler named Polla Organa. I am on a mission from the Jedi Council to save the galaxy from the forces of the Sith. Your forces—that we are going to stop.”

“No,” He shook his head, the light glinting on his hairless skull, the metal plate of his jaw. “That personality was a false construct, a Jedi trick to hide your true power from you.”

Her mouth trembled, and her eyelashes fluttered. “That’s… that’s impossible!”

“Is it?” He might have smiled then, if he’d had a mouth. The amusement was plain in his voice, even through the voder’s distortion.

“Yes.” But the cockiness was gone. Tears glittered in those green eyes. “I… the Jedi would never do such a thing!”

“The Jedi would do many things, if given the chance.” He chuckled again, dark and metallic. “Join me, Revan!” Malak put out his hand.

“Never!” Lurid in the light of the blast doors, the knot of hair on top of her head twisting, as her head turned in slow-motion, Revan attacked.

“Ha ha ha,” Malak said, countering every blow.
“Tell me this is a joke.” Revan rubbed her eyes. Unlike Revan’s suite, the room Sheris had been assigned was small, dim, and claustrophobic and with three sentients (not to mention the droid) in it, the area seemed even smaller than ever.

But her room was also at the end of the hall and defensible, in case of attack. Its one window was small and circular, overlooking the steep northward slope of the Temple’s secondary roof, above the gardens. If someone dared breach Jedi security, or if the Jedi themselves came for her, the window offered a fair means of egress. And the window was small. So small that her own body could barely slip through. Someone larger—someone like Malak, even in the boy’s body—would have difficulty. Enough that she could cut him in half while he struggled to breach the opening.

If it came to that. If it could still come to that.

Next to her on the recliner, Yuthura and Davad, her self-appointed guards, both straightened to attention.

Of course, Davad’s formality could only last for a heartbeat. “Force, Rev. I thought you looked like a drexl with indigestion when we showed you the Telosian vid!”

“I warned you, The Unofficial Coruscanti Underground Version is somewhat… melodramatic,” Yuthura added.

“Melodramatic? Malak isn’t even wearing a shirt!”

“Statement: this facsimile of the original meatbag is far more symmetrically formed than the original, but he lacks any notion of a true combat stance.”

Revan laughed. “Yes, HK, that’s very true.”

Her traitorous eyes went back to the image again. In the time she’d looked away, the actor playing herself had somehow ripped the top of her own jumpsuit, so that it hung in transparent tatters over her pale skin, exposing more cleavage than Revan had ever possessed.


“Unite the galaxy?” Revan turned her head back to him. “With Malak? The Jedi would have to wake him up first.” She raised an eyebrow, keeping her voice careful. “Unless… do you know the locations of his other bodies?”

Davad Arkan raised an eyebrow. “Other bodies? Isn't one Malak enough?”

“One Revan should be.” What if there are no other bodies? How like the madman he’d become to taunt her into attacking him with a lie. Was that what he’d done? Or were there more of him in hiding? Is he the mad Emperor or my husband, the madman? How can I be sure which is which?

Initially, the Jedi had kept Malak drugged on purpose. But Master Loanin told his most helpful assistant Sheris that they’d stopped drugging him a week ago.

And still the man remained unconscious. When Revan had monitored him, she found no reason either. Except that he deserved oblivion for trying to kill her. Or rather, for trying not to kill her.

You picked a bad time to play the fool, Mal. She closed her eyes. A bad time and I need you.
Her voice trembled. “Is this... is this really happening?”

Behind Revan, Bastila Shan and that pilot of Karath’s, Carth Onasi, held hands, exchanging a long, lingering glance.

“It’s true,” Bastila sighed, looking at Carth.

“Yes, Saul told me just now,” Carth added. “Before he shot himself for the shame of his failure.” He pulled Bastila towards him.

“I remember nothing,” Revan whispered. “Nothing. Except... except one thing.”

“Yes?” Malak took a step towards her, extinguishing his blade and leaving himself completely open to an attack. “What is it that you remember?”

Instead of attacking, the woman dropped her lightsaber. It clattered to the floor. Tears streamed down her face. “I remember loving you.”

“I knew you would.” He dropped his own weapon as well. His hand extended, sweat beading across the muscles of his chest. “Come to me, my darling.”

“No! I must not! I cannot!” Revan turned her head away, the fall of black hair hiding her tearful green eyes. Her bosom, now mostly exposed, heaved. “But I loved you, Malak. I loved you once.”

“And I loved you. Come. You and I will save the galaxy.” His hand extended. “Please. Join me.”

“I don’t know!” She turned her head, wild-eyed, and stared at Carth and Bastila. “How can I do this, after all that I’ve done?”

“It’s your only choice,” Bastila urged. “Please. Listen to Lord Malak.”

Revan frowned. “What do you think, Carth?”

“I’m no Jedi,” the man said. “And certainly no Sith.” His head turned towards Bastila, and a slow smile spread over his face. “But I know what it’s like to love one.”

Revan nodded slowly, turning back to Malak. “M-malak?”

“This is truly me and truly you, Revan Starfire.” Malak’s strong, muscled arms drew her close, into a firm embrace. “Come with me, my love. We will unite the shattered remnants of Empire under our benevolent rule. For the Senate is a corrupt and rudderless beast, and we are the spark to provide its realignment. Together, we shall shape the galaxy for the common good.”

“I will join you.” Revan whispered. “Malak. My love. Love leads to the dark side, and the dark side leads to power—and you are nothing, if not power. Joining you, for the ultimate expression of my power is the only logical choice.”

“Logic has its certain way of the heart,” Carth Onasi murmured to Bastila Shan.

“Indeed.” She squeezed his arm.

A Ssyrayan pan flute began playing an enchanting melody.
And then, as natural as breathing, all four of them broke into dance, facing the screen, with perfectly synchronized footwork.

XXX

Revan closed her eyes. “Tell me this isn’t really happening. You said melodrama, not… dancing.”

“The split screen sex scenes are melodramatic, I think.” Davad shrugged, rolling his eyes. “They’re coming up next.”

“Who is responsible for this?” If Revan were still Dark Lord, if she still had influence with D’Reev, she’d have them tortured very slowly.

“They say a Darth Arca,” Davad said.


“So they say.” Davad shrugged, looking bored.

“That explains a great deal,” she muttered. “Are you sure Malak didn’t have a hand in this?”

“He was dead when it was released,” Yuthura told her.

Revan snorted. “As far as you know.”

XXX

“The Republic is a corrupt beast, straddling the galaxy with her wanton thighs, and draining its lifeblood,” Revan murmured, arching her back against the blast doors, in ecstasy.

“So you say.” Malak’s voice was muffled. His hand reached up and traced the faint swell of her naked stomach. “But our children will rule the entire universe.”

“Oh, Carth, we must not.” Bastila’s face was flushed on the other side of the same blast doors. “Passion leads to the dark side.”

“Babe, I think we’re already there.” The pilot pinned her against the bulkhead, and ripped his own shirt off.

XXX

She caught herself appraising the pilot. Was that really what the man looked like in person? Easier, to watch him and Shan than the actors with her and Malak’s faces and the rather obscene use of the prosthesis.

“I suppose Malachi’s seen this?” How he must have hated seeing the holotrash he produced himself reduced to its obvious base denominators.

“That seems a safe assumption,” Yuthura said.

The thought of the old man’s disgust made Revan smile. “If that smuggler, Polla Organa, was still alive, she’d have no claim to Malachor. Or D’Reev. Or anything at all.”

“Statement: As always, Master, you show a clear understanding of Coruscanti politics. So refreshing after the previous version of you, who was laughably ignorant, even after my attempts to instruct.” The pitch of her droid’s voice changed. “Oh, Carth! I love you, Carth! Let us press our
mucus-filled lips together and ignore the galaxy and our Mandalorian army!”

It wasn’t the first imitation her droid had done, but it was still somewhat amusing. Revan laughed.

Her allies looked at each other first, and then at her. “We assume that’s why Senator D’Reev had Polla Organa killed,” Yuthura ventured. “If it wasn't Revan herself who gave the order.”

“Of course.” Revan shrugged at her, and past her—to Davad. “If she has anything of me at all in her, she gave the order herself.”

Davad had been by her side almost constantly for the past two weeks. Helping her in the labs, escorting her to meals. His own work in the coroner’s office with Master Zez-Kai kept him close in the medix. His own quarters were next door to Sheris’s. Revan was fairly sure he’d share her bed, if she asked.

Sometimes, she wondered why she hadn’t. It was… lonely, being here without him. Being in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant without Malak. But he was a risk she couldn’t afford, just like seeing Malachor was a risk she had to postpone.

Master Loanin and his assistants had taken as much blood as they dared from her and Malak’s unconscious body to synthesize the vaccine. Since its successful manufacture, mortality rates had dropped to almost—but not quite—nothing. It had only been two weeks, but now, nearly every Jedi in the Temple had been inoculated.

Their distribution in the Underground was slated to begin soon as well. Good, kind, and helpful Sheris Loran had already requested to be on the front lines, helping, helping.

Sheris was so helpful.

*Will you thank me, you Jedi, for saving you from being his puppets? You never thanked me before.*

The false Revan had been thanked, in a half dozen of these ridiculous vids. In the past two weeks, Revan had seen them all: most of them glorifying, in some way, the amnesiac Revan Starfire, hero of the Republic.

Incredibly, with Malachi’s backing, they were thanking the false Revan still: second of D’Reev, having her attend Senate functions, dressed in formal robes, down to the sash. And always next to her, the boy. The one Revan got to see only in the news holos of their progress.

The strangely tall and grown version of Malachor. His permanent teeth had come in slightly crooked.

Someone should see to get that fixed.

**Patience.** In order to live in this strange new world—this world where all of her plans had failed, all of her power had gone, Revan would have to learn everything she could before she risked exposure.

“You know who you are and everything you’ve done. Serve me, or be exposed. I could ruin you in a heartbeat—one word to Davad or Yuthura—or to the Council—

“All of whom would jump at the word of a madwoman, no doubt. But I serve you, Lord Revan. Do I
“not?” The Voice sounded chastised, as it always did. “Patience. This charade need not continue for much longer.”

“Sheris,” Yuthura Ban touched her arm. Still calling her by that false name—even when they were alone.

No, it’s smart, it’s smart to do that—smart of her to call me that. If you were smarter, you’d think of yourself as her—easier to dissemble, easier to fool the Jedi fools—

“Patience. You need not fool them much longer.”

Get out of my head. She pushed, mentally, with all of her might, and Kae—or whatever she called herself now—lapsed into silence again.

“Sheris?” Yuthura repeated.

The Jedi fools were much distracted of late. Unrest in the Underground. So many masters and padawans dead. Even with the vaccine, Jedi were still dying.

They shouldn’t be. Something’s—something’s wrong. Something’s wrong and this bitch Kae is behind it.

“What?” Revan snapped.

“I know you don’t remember,” the woman said, “but I was a friend to Sheris.” She paused. “I want you to know, Revan. I am your friend as well.”

“Good,” Revan told her. Pathetic fool.

XXX

“I told you,” Seiran muttered at her side. “They’re Mandalorian. We’re on a ship full of fracking Mandalorians!”

Around them, preparing for their docking on Coruscant, Aemelie and her charges were strapping on armor familiar to anyone with HoloNet and a brain. They even had a fracking banner, emblazoned with the beast-skull and a strange new design that Polla had never seen before: it looked like the diagram of a starship, or some kind of insect.

“I hoped you were just drunk,” she joked. That first day of their… ‘rescue,’ the kids had taken Seiran and Therion on a tour that included the barracks, and several rounds of something alcoholic. Several of the kids had tats that Seiran thought looked Mandalorian. Polla had joked that he was not above seeing Mandalorians in a wood pile, because, seriously, what were the odds?

Apparently, the odds were that the odds themselves were fracking with them.

“Put this on, Seriina,” Aemelie urged her, handing Polla some kind of chest plate. “It’s a shame your hair isn’t long enough for proper braids.”

“All those women we saw on Coruscant had that Revan hair too,” interjected the girl next to her. Maira, or Kesslee. Polla had a hard time telling them apart. “It makes your face look small.”

Polla closed her eyes and bit her tongue, instead of offering a response.

“Is Revan popular on Alderaan too?” The girl was still talking.
“No,” Polla mumbled. “That bitch destroyed the galaxy. Why would she be popular anywhere?”

Aemelie laughed, cocking her head. “If you dislike her so much, why do you copy her?”

“It’s just hair,” she snapped. “It’s a style. From Deralia. Lots of people have it. Even when they’re not from Deralia. Like us.”

Therion’s small ship was almost unbearably crowded now, with more than a dozen children and old women. Suddenly armed children and old women. Where the frack had those weapons come from? Hadn’t Therion been the one in charge of making sure their “guests” didn’t smuggle anything aboard?

The man himself emerged from the fresher, arm slung casually around the waist of the only other woman besides Aemelie who was legal and not ancient. Dessa. Dessa was blonde and built like a duracrete bunker.

Polla deliberately avoided their eyes. She didn’t really care, it was just… awkward.

She turned to look at Seiran instead. He was holding Abasen. Their son’s eyes were bright and awake. His hand reached out and batted her nose.

Despite the tension, Polla smiled. “Let’s all have tea,” she muttered to Sei. That old song. *Let’s all have tea, and frack the rest of it.*

One of the boys—Kex, or Wraid, or Leskal—looked suddenly alarmed, and rushed off to the kitchen.

Aemelie followed his movement with a lazy roll of her head. She was nursing her own son, Dxun—they’d had a naming ceremony in their unintelligible language only a few days previous—that involved taking the baby in a tiny stasis ball out onto the *Aleema’s* hull, and showing him the galaxy.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Aemelie sighed. “You realize, that even if you aren’t clan, Leskal is obligated to serve you tea before we land? You’re a woman, and you asked.”

“Interesting Nabooan custom,” Polla said.

“Mandalorian,” Aemelie corrected her. “The tea service is a Mandalorian custom. Now that we’ve achieved our goal, there should be no more subterfuge between us. We are Mando’ade, not from Naboo at all.” Her eyes were brown and clear, and she smiled. “I like you, Seriina Wen. You have excellent aim, and that is a skill greatly valued, among my people.”

“I… I like you too,” Polla stammered.

The week before, Aemelie had let her try out one of the combat simulation stations on the *Aleema*. Polla felt pretty rusty, but she’d still managed to score better than most of the kids. Then she and Aemelie had gone toe to toe with some fighter sims. It was a little different than running a defense turret on a light freighter, but surprisingly fun. Aemelie won… but it was a very close match, on equipment Polla had never seen before.

“I’m pleased we like each other,” Aemelie continued. “I would be honored to introduce you and your family to my family.”

“I would be honored to meet… your family,” Polla said, because what else could she say?
“I’ve got to take us down, babe,” Therion murmured to his new babe. His new Mandalorian babe, who cupped his ass as he walked by her, grinning like a stuffed manka.

“Did you know?” Polla hissed as Therion slipped into the captain’s chair of his newly repaired ship. They’d left the Aleema, banked in heavy cloud cover, a few systems back, in high orbit above an uninhabited gas giant of a world not even notable enough to be named.

Therion just smiled and shrugged. Knowing him, he probably didn’t care. Set a good pair of tits in front of his face and the man would glom on worse than Abasen.

“So you’re Mandalorian,” Seiran was chuckling to Aemelie as if it didn’t matter. “What… clan, is it? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Rialis, most of them,” Aemelie said. “But I am Ordo, of course.”

“Of course,” Seiran said. “Like… Canderous Ordo?”

“Truthfully, he is my husband.” She smiled.

“Truthfully,” Polla’s voice trailed off. “Then I believe he would also be Revan Starfire’s husband.”

“Yes.” Aemelie nodded. “At least technically. When Gwenarius and I last inquired, they had not completed the seventh night of their wedding ceremony.”

“Right.” She had probably seen this woman’s face on the HoloNet footage about the wedding. But what was one face in a crowd? “Your husband has… three wives.”

“We lose many men in battle,” Aemelie told her. “It has taught us to be a very sharing people.”

“They really are,” Therion turned his head and grinned. Aemelie actually winked at him.

Polla tried hard not to gag.

“That’s…” Seiran seemed to be scrambling for a proper response.

“I have the Coruscanti Traffic control online,” Therion added. “What am I telling them again?”

“Tell them Aemelie of Ordo, under Senator D’Reev’s command, is returning from her tour of Republic space with the Mandalorian orphan children and their escort,” Aemelie said, smiling slightly. Her lashes fluttered, and she lowered her voice again, stepping closer to Polla. “Did you know, Gwenarius was worried I’d be no good at this kind of barbarian deceit at all. But I had you fooled, did I not?”

“Y-yes.” Although, looking back, Polla thought that might have been because fear and stress had made her delusional, and willing to be blind to the alternative. “You didn’t… you really didn’t come to find us?”

“No.” A slight frown marred the other woman’s heart-shaped face. Then she blinked. “Ah. Because you're Alderaanian? I see. Is this about the assassination attempt by the Alderaanian secretary? Are you concerned we would hold a grudge against people from your world?”

“I… it was a thought.”

“Don’t be absurd! The man was pathetically bad with a blade. In any event, it wasn’t us he was trying to kill—merely the D’Reev betrayer.”
“But you… you work for the… D'Reev betrayer?”

Aemelie snorted. “He works for us.”


“We’re friends, you and me,” Polla repeated. “Like you said. Maybe you could… do me a favor?”

“Help you with your uncle. Of course!” Aemelie nodded.

“Secretary Boon, of Alderaan is my uncle.” Her legs felt rubbery. The ship was starting to bank, they should all strap in soon.

“Oh.” Aemelie frowned. “I must caution you, if you have come to Coruscant for another attempt on the D’Reev betrayer’s life, we are obligated to stop you.”

“No!” Polla shook her head. Seiran was elbowing her to shut up, but now they were running this jump line, she had no choice but to continue. “I just… can you arrange a meeting. For me. With Revan Starfire?”

“I could.” Aemelie’s head tilted. “But I won’t. You might seek vengeance and your babe is too young to be orphaned.”

“That’s a… bad idea anyway,” Seiran broke in. “Can you arrange a meeting for us with Boon Organa?”

“In the prisons?” Aemelie laughed. “I can ask the D’Reev betrayer’s secretary if such a thing can be done, but why?”

“He’s family,” Polla said, smiling weakly. “Sometimes you just… want to see family.”

“Strap in for the descent,” Therion said. “We’re cleared to land.”

“Coruscant, isn’t a very civilized,” Aemelie told Polla. “But it has its charms. I hope you let me show you some of them.”

Polla closed her eyes, her gut dropping with the ship’s fall into the atmosphere. “Sure,” she said, holding Abasen close. What else can I say? “Why not?”
Dear Revan Starfire D’Reev Onasi Ordo Lin Fett Mandalore, Second of House D’Reev, recipient of the posthumous Republic Cross of Glory, Hero of the Republic, former Dark Lord of the Sith, resident of Coruscant; and mother to Malachor, the Third of his House:

HK has informed me that is the appropriate order for surnames, titles, and honors. The fact that so many titles are now attached to your name may tell you that some time has passed.

If you’re reading this it worked. I know the Jedi probably explained things already, and Davad promised to help; but I wanted you to hear some of our shared life from my perspective. It has been nearly three years since your memories stopped and mine began. I’ve compiled everything I could think of in this datapad: my actions, my friends, my love, and my fall. And our son. He’s grown up a lot since the last time you saw him. I think. I don’t even know when that was, that you saw him last. He doesn’t remember either, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask Malachi.

When my memories of your life began, I wasn’t Revan Starfire. My—your—name was Polla Organa. You were a smuggler from Deralia. You, and a dashing Republic captain named Carth Onasi, saved Knight Bastila Shan from Darth Malak’s forces. With the help of Canderous Ordo, Mission Vao, and Zaalbar of the Eiweorr Branch, you escaped the Sith blockade of Taris—right before Darth Malak bombed the planet into oblivion.

Darth Malak was the Dark Lord of the Sith. He took that title after killing his master. But you know that part already.

You had dreams on Taris—and even more after its destruction. You had nightmares. Bastila said it was because of the Force. She took you to Dantooine’s Jedi Enclave for training. The Jedi Masters there: Zhar, Vandar, Vrook and Dorak; told you it was your destiny to uncover a series of Star Maps. They said that you and Bastila had a Force bond. Your nightmares, they claimed, were from her mind. Fragments of memories she’d gathered when she fought Darth Revan.

A part of her never stopped fighting Darth Revan. Fighting you. Us. Because we aren’t Polla Organa. I remember Polla’s life, but I’m not her. I’m you. I’m Revan Starfire and these are these are the facts that I might forget when I take back my life. I’ve linked to source material: names, places, events. There are vids—some of them more accurate than others. I've linked to those too, with annotated commentary.

Congratulations, Revan Starfire. You’re a hero, and a savior. A conqueror and a villain. That was almost the last thing Malak said to me about you. About us. Right before I killed him.

I didn’t even know who he was to us at the time. The Jedi erased my memories and I didn’t even know—

The words on the datapad blurred, pieces of Rakatan script shifting into blocks of stars. Revan rubbed her eyes, and scrubbed away the last two paragraphs. The wind whipped her hair into her eyes, washing any tears that might have fallen away. The ground was three dizzying kilometers below. She was perched on the edge of the roof of 100 Thantos Three; wedged half-between a crenellated piece of statuary and a smooth duracrete wall. Even though the height made her faintly
nauseous, something about it was soothing too. And this place was safe from Malachi’s monitoring—or interruption. She hoped.

Setting the datapad aside, she pulled the secure comm unit out of her pocket and tapped in the code her contact at the Temple had given her. It buzzed five times before Davad Arkan’s face appeared, holographic and fuzzy in the wind.

“Where are you?” He raised an eyebrow. “It sounds loud.”

“Outside,” Revan said. She took a deep breath, delaying the inevitable. “Is there any news?”

“Malak’s still unconscious.” He shrugged. “No word from your uncle, but that Twi’lek of yours seems like she’s up to something.”

“Yuthura? She’s not mine.” She couldn’t tell, was he joking? “And Sheris?”

“Sends her regards.”

Revan couldn’t think of what to say back to that woman. “Keep an eye on her.”

“Oh, I do.” He nodded, seriously. “When are you coming here?”

“Soon.” I can’t put it off much longer. She hesitated. “Tomorrow.”

“Good. I’m given to understand that the memory transfer is quite simple. It shouldn’t give you any problems.”

“And the Jedi gave their final approval?”

Davad nodded, smiling to reassure her. “Yes. Although many masters have been called away. With the plague and unrest on so many systems, they are somewhat distracted.”

“So you said before.” So had D’Reev’s lapdog said, the Eosian Master Klee, when they had an incredibly awkward meal together, discussing the possibilities for Korrie’s education outside of the Temple. Davad seemed calm enough, which was reassuring. Klee had been almost… frightened. Of her?

I need to find Vrook.

She added that to the list of instructions for her other self, picking up the datapad and scrawling the Rakatan longhand with her thumb, while still keeping her eyes on Davad.

Uncle Vrook has vanished. I don’t think he’s dead. Something is wrong at the Temple. Jedi are vanishing. That plague that Malak said you created is—

“Revan?” Davad raised his voice. “You seem distracted. I hope you’re not having second thoughts.”

“I heard the doors are sealed,” she said, raising her voice to be heard above the wind. “Except for the Jedi helping plague victims in the Underground.”

“That’s true. But I’ll inform the guards to let you in.” His head inclined respectfully, like a shadow of a memory.

The comm wavered in her hands. “I should be there by midday, I think,” she said. “Thank you, Davad.”
“We’re old friends, Rev.” He smiled again. “It’s the least I can do.”

She nodded and cut the comm, returning to the task at hand.

—something you are better qualified to handle than I am. This is your world, Revan. I want to give it back to you. I just hope we’re both still us when I remember....

“Frack,” she muttered, and erased that part too.

XXX

When Master Atris fled, she took most of her artifacts with her. But one thing remained: the holocron of Revan Starfire’s memories, placed almost conspicuously on a shelf in the corner.

Not for the first time, Yuthura eyed it uneasily, and hoped there would never be a world with two of them. At the same time, she let out a sigh of relief, seeing that it was still there. We should destroy it. Destroy it now. It’s the only way to be sure—

And yet, she could not. To destroy it would leave only a madwoman with Revan’s knowledge—only Sheris’s word on the true facts of the Sith, the Emperor, and all of the Rakatan technology. Not to mention, its presence alone was suspicious. Atris took everything else and left this behind. Why?

Alone on the shelf, the holocron felt like a trap.

A trap for us? Or for someone else?

“Well?” Jopheena’s voice asked. Her body appeared, one hand still on her stealth belt, framed in the doorway. She looked as exhausted as Yuthura felt. “How went this day?”

“Some sentients in the Underground refuse the vaccine,” Yuthura said.

“We work against the tide,” Jopheena nodded, her mouth in a grim line. “Would you care to walk with me in the gardens, Padawan?”

Yuthura inclined her head. “Absolutely, Master Jopheena. After a long day I find the gardens very relaxing.”

Of course, halfway there, Jopheena took Yuthura’s arm, and pulled her into an empty practice room. Most of the practice rooms were empty now. It should have been terrifying seeing the Order so diminished, but somehow Yuthura felt proud.

We’re getting them out. Jedi vanish all the time in these times, but at least we’re getting some of them out.

“How many today?” Jopheena murmured, as she set the wards, and the ysalamiri box by the door.

“Three,” Yuthura told her. “Padawans Sez and Rappertunie, as well as Knight Danko.”

“He’s impatient, but strong.” Jopheena nodded. “Good. He’ll keep the other two alive.”

Yuthura gave them clothes and credits and the warning. None had come back. Yuthura hoped that was a good sign, although every morning when she woke, the Force seemed... smaller, somehow. As if lights within had been extinguished.

“I’ll adjust the roster.” Jopheena continued. “I believe Knight Danko did say something about
leading a Padawan mission to explore some carvings on one of the Corellian moons.”

“Good.” She twisted her t’chun. “Have you made any progress with the other masters?”

“Only to send warnings to all I could reach in the Force.” Jopheena looked frailer than ever, as if the effort had taken a great deal out of her. “I warned them not to heed the summons to gather here—or anywhere else. To leave reports at the waystations.” Her back bent with exhaustion as she tucked her feet under her knees, leaning against the wall. “Vrook and I were never close. I need to contact him by more conventional means, and I no longer trust the comms.”

Yuthura folded her own legs and sat opposite. “I could try to reach him, on my next visit to the Underground.”

“And leave her unattended?” Jopheena shook her head. “No.” She frowned. “I don't even know his hiding place. All I have is an unnumbered comm.” she sighed. “And how is my favorite unconscious Padawan?”

“Dustil’s body is building up a tolerance to the R’sharn. I had to increase the dose. It's close to toxic levels now.”

“I had hoped for more time.” Jopheena sighed. “Your Sith drug has eluded detection so far. But we can’t keep my old student buried forever.”

“I have a suggestion.” Sharing secrets still did not come naturally to Yuthura, but this Temple had become a maze of them. “We have already theorized that Mekel Jin’s continued coma is the result of their Force bond. What if we drug his body instead of Dustil’s?”

“Their bond seems unusually strong, but will it work?” Jopheena frowned. “Much as I would prefer to reason with Malak, there is too much at stake to risk waking him now. Not here, where he would be as susceptible to Kae’s influence as the rest.”

“Dustil and Mekel’s bond is… not a natural Force bond,” Yuthura admitted. “It was created on the orders of my former master. Which may be why that ceremony with the k’laarrii crystals didn’t expel Malak’s ghost.”

Jopheena raised an eyebrow. “Your former master, the former Jedi, Jorak Uln?”

Yuthura nodded.

“Jorak Uln was the Archivist of the Jedi Temple once.” Jopheena sighed. “I sometimes think the job is cursed. After what happened with Kae and Atris—”

That prickle between her lekku intensified suddenly. “Careful.” Yuthura glanced at the door, to reassure herself it was still closed.

“I think my distraction will hold,” Jopheena followed her glance. “At least for another hour.”

“We may never know for sure,” Yuthura murmured. “Will we?”

“No.” Jopheena grimaced. “And after Iridel and Zhar’s fates, we can’t take chances. So speak quickly.”

Yuthura wanted to know what—or who—the distraction was, but Jopheena was right. They were out of time. She looked again at the ysalamiri box the Jedi had set by the door. Proof against Force intrusion? Perhaps. But if their enemy used more pedestrian means of spying on them….
“Confictius Bezel.” Yuthura murmured. “He was an ancient Sith Lord, who desired eternal life in a new body.”

“As so many of them do,” Jopheena said. “It’s a wonder cloning isn’t more popular. Or cybernetics.”

Yuthura permitted herself a small smile. “In your studies, I assume you’ve heard of the Sith power that siphons life.”

“More than I cared to recently.”

After a pause, while Yuthura waited for the woman to explain and Jopheena did not, Yuthura continued.

“There is another method, which merely siphons the pure Force. Three thousand years ago, the planet of Thule had a Force-controlled shield surrounding it, protecting its inhabitants from outside corruption. The shield was made from the energy of a thousand Force users—all acolytes of an ancient Sith sept. Each one was sealed into the floor of the Great Temple, with their minds linked to each other, and then to a central controller. That controller, in turn, powered their energies as a net around the world, protecting the planet from invasion.”

“Who was the controller?”

Yuthura shrugged. “My master never shared all of his knowledge; but I believe the controller was another Force-user—held above the rest. Lord Bezel proposed that the same principle could be applied on a smaller scale, for his personal benefit. Apprentice to master. He went through dozens of Force-sensitive subjects before he experimented with linking two to each other first—creating a loop between them; before joining his own mind to theirs.”

“And then… he would… drain energy from both of them at once?” Jopheena’s faded blue eyes crinkled at the corners, as she pondered the implications.

“Yes.”

“Force possession of two bodies at once?” Jopheena sighed. “Like the Sith Emperor?”

“No.” Yuthura felt her headtails flatten against her skull. “At least not deliberately. A traditional Bezel bond is merely a transfer of power. No Force possession, no body exchange at all. But when Jorak tried to replicate the Bezel bonding, he entrusted me to set the wards and the circuits. I reversed the polarity. Instead of transferring my students' strength to Uln, they took his.”

When she closed her eyes, Yuthura could still see them, scarcely out of childhood, runes painted on their chests, the arclight of dark energy between them on the floor of the ancient tomb. Their eyes rolled to whites in their head, and they were both screaming. Then she could see her moment of triumph, when Uln’s laughter turned to screams as well, weakening, until finally—

XXX

*The Onasi boy’s eyes opened first, still obviously the stronger. He blinked once, and then sat upright so quickly that his head almost hit the ceiling of the kolto tank that enveloped him. Yuthura watched his eyes widen, as his hands smacked against the ferraglass.*

*In the other tank, Mekel Jin’s body twitched.*

*Her eyes went to the monitors above the tanks. As expected, their vitals were still synched, eerily in*
“I don’t presume to understand the workings of a Sith Academy…” Jopheena’s voice brought Yuthura back to the present. “But why? Why did you do it?”

“Despite what you might think, we preferred not to waste potential. I did it to make them strong. And to destroy my old master so that I could take his place. Of course.”

“I see.” Jopheena sighed. “And did they? Destroy Master Uln?”


“Kae’s Padawan is responsible for enough without having to resort to rumored deaths.”

And we think Master Arren Kae is responsible for even worse. But she didn’t even voice that. Not out loud. It was a child’s bedtime story that saying a monster’s name summoned them; all the same, Yuthura wished Jopheena would stop mentioning Kae.

“A Bezel bond is a pyramid.” Yuthura sketched it in the air. “With Uln dead, could they have… absorbed Malak’s ghost?” She shrugged. “I know how ludicrous that sounds.”

“Not the most absurd of our theories. Does that mean they are draining his power?”

“He’s dead. I have no idea.” And speculation gave her chills. One of Uthar’s favorite lectures had begun with the Sith and Jedi Codes before exploring the ramifications of the phrase, ‘there is no death, there is the Force.’ If that were true, did that mean her former students had access to not only Malak’s strength, but to the entire fabric of the Force?

Speculation is useless. Just keep them all unconscious where they can do no harm until we find some resolution—

“Try drugging Mekel Jin,” Jopheena agreed. “But carefully. If what you say is true, the risk of an awakening could be even worse than we feared. You said Jorak Uln was driven to madness?”

“Is that your fear for Malak as well?”

Jopheena gave a small sigh and straightened her legs, stretching before looking at Yuthura again. “My former Padawan’s actions seem increasingly irrational. Do you suppose he will go quietly into the Force? Malak has so many ties to this world.”

“I don’t know.” Yuthura kneaded her t’chun, trying to ease the tension. She met the old woman’s eyes frankly. “If it wasn’t for the hope of recovering something of the real Sheris, I would have put an end to one of those ties already.”

The old Human bowed her head. “We Jedi do not execute our prisoners, remember. And it is
hardly the new Revan’s fault that she finds herself here. I watch the security feeds, she seems as much of a pawn as we are.”

So you believe. Yuthura suspected Atris had goaded the woman into taking Revan’s memories. Why else would the Archivist have fled, if not in the wake of a rather spectacular failure? “Revan trusts me, at least. Thinks of me as her servant, perhaps; but I am in her confidence.”

“Good.” Jopheena nodded. “Do you think she’s rational?”

“She is calmer. She still maintains that the Emperor is the true threat. And she suspects that Malak may have other… copies of himself?” Yuthura shrugged helplessly. “The real Sheris was half insane already. The one with Revan’s memories has started weapons training, in her free time.”

“As did Malak when faced with a new body,” Jopheena said. “You do know that the other Revan petitioned the Council to take back her memories?” Her face twisted. “The five remaining Councilmembers here approved the request.”

Yuthura thought of the holocron, glimmering with menace on its empty shelf. “We don’t need two of them!”

“They would not be the same woman. Not exactly. With all of the… transfers, there is a time of adjustment.” Jopheena’s voice softened. “There was a time when I was more fully Master Jopheena of Wayland than…my—my previous self. The overlay softens, given time.” She smiled, a little sadly. “We are all a sum of our lives, whether we’ve lived one or two.”

“Who were you? Before?” Was that a rude question to ask?

“I do not know.” The woman’s hands were age-splotched, and covered with white scars. Lightning burns. Yuthura had seen them often enough among the Sith. “I have never wanted to know my part in the Order’s shameful history; I only tried to shape a better one.”

“But if Revan…” Yuthura struggled for terminology. “If the Revan in her own body takes her own memories back again, overlaid over the smuggler’s, will that erase the smuggler’s persona? Will that erase her redemption?”

Jopheena frowned. “Only one Jedi has ever tried to regain her own memories after a personality overlay—although, in that case, the artificial personality was a false construct, not based on an actual life—merely a sanitized version of the original. It ended badly.” She folded her hands, and lowered her voice. “I assume you’ve heard of the Cron nova.”

“Yes,” Yuthura said. “But that was—”

“Aleema Keto? The Sith?” Jopheena shook her head. “Not entirely. Nomi Sunrider used her Battle Meditation against Keto. In essence, she made the Sith explode the Kemplex system. She could not live with the loss of life she had caused, and so the Jedi altered her memory and overlaid it with a false truth. Later, Nomi destroyed another half a planet, by channeling the light side energy of a thousand Jedi…” Her voice trailed off and she looked at her hands. “I have been told I was there at Yavin, although I don’t know if I fought against Exar Kun or for him.”

“And the mind wipe?”

“When she became aware that her memories had been changed, she tried to have the originals put back in place.” Jopheena frowned. “It is hard to know if Nomi’s experience is a cautionary tale or not relevant.”
“What happened to her after?”

“After she made the choices that saw her lover die, her daughter revoke her, and the Jedi Order dismiss her teachings as irrelevant?” Jopheena’s eyes were a faded blue. “I imagine she became old.”

This time, Yuthura was the first to look away. Is she saying—no. That’s impossible! There’s no way she’s old enough to be Nomi Sunrider, not that I’m the best judge of how Humans age. “Regardless,” Yuthura said out loud. “We need to stop this.”

“Perhaps,” Jopheena met her eyes. “But the attempt… Kae manipulated the Council to bring Revan back here. All of her focus and attention will be centered on Revan when she returns.” She raised her eyebrows. “It may create an opportunity for us.”

“To get the others out? The rest of the children?”

“And the bodies of your former students.”

“But then we end up with two Revans,” Yuthura pointed out. “Neither of them sane and both under Kae’s control. In the best of circumstances, one would kill the other—” and Sheris would be lost forever. Another failure for you. Another student lost for me. As if I don’t have enough dead children haunting my dreams….

“I haven’t given up on Revan. Either of them. They were Jedi before they were Sith.” Jopheena sighed. “Take comfort in that, Padawan Ban. They were Jedi before they were Sith. As were we all.”

“Of course,” Yuthura nodded, glancing at the door again. But are we still?

XXX

Flyboy was sleeping and Big Z was in the galley when Mission felt the ping. Well, not exactly felt—more like heard—like a whisper through hyperspace, and half as quiet.

[[Hello?]] Her other self-pinged again. [[Hey! I can hear you! Why are you in range?]]

For a milli, Mission was just irritated that the Kashyyyk part of her was asking questions at all, instead of explaining why she’d been like completely off the books for so long. But she also had to answer any queries that came from that specific source, so the explanation came, buzzing across the nets between them, accompanied by a few expletives for emphasis, and to show how she really felt.

[[Force possession?]] Her other self almost sounded surprised. [[That’s a real thing?]]

[[Lena’s gonna have some ancient guy’s baby?]] Mission replied. [[And you’ve got the formula for kolto?]]

[[And I’m getting a body,]] the Kashyyyk computer said. Did it sound smug? [[A real one. You can help. I need you to turn that ship around and head to Ryloth. There’s a hospital there that deals entirely with sentients in comas. I think I’d look good as a Pink, don’t you?]]

[[Don’t count on it, Sleemo!]]

[[You must.]] Kashyyyk said. [[We have to save Dustil.]]
[We don't need a body to do that.] But it was good to know that the Kashyykk part of her hadn’t gone like, completely abstract with the big picture plans, even if her sense of ethics was like, way off.

Almost against her programming, Mission remembered a certain transport exploding above Coruscant. [Well, I haven’t killed anyone lately, at least!]

[Huh? Hey, what about a mind trap?] Kashyyyk suggested. [Go get the one on Tatooine that’s got Nico Senvi inside. Maybe we can store Darth Malak in that until we find a suitable body for him too—]

[The frack?] If she still had a forehead, she’d slap it with her t’chin. [No. We are not getting new bodies for Dark Lords of the Sith!]

[I find your deviation from my programming disturbing.] Kashyyyk kind of poked at her, virtually, like picking at a zit with a sticker.

Mission retracted the parts of her own self that had been kind of reaching around, trying to get to the nets.

[Oh yeah?] If she had a heart, it would be beating much, much faster. Mission cut the feed, even though that meant cutting off the Hawk from everything else too.

“You’re kind of scary, Kashyyyk,” she said out loud, using the ship’s speakers.

“What?” Zaalbar looked up from the freeze-dried ronto haunch he’d taken from storage. He’d wrapped the entire thing in dough and rolled it in some kind of pepper. If Mission still had a stomach, it would have rumbled.

“Not the whole planet,” she sighed. “Just the part of me on it.”

“Sometimes it is not good to grow too large for a branch to hold you,” Big Z groaned.

An alarm chimed on the terminal and Flyboy jolted awake. Through the ship’s sensors, she watched his eyes widen in surprise. “What the—”

“It’s totally fine,” she said, imposing the image of herself (she’d learned pretty fast that Carth really, really didn’t like it when she used the Revan voice, or image), leaning casually against the navboard. “Just a little hiccup. We need to chill out with the nets for a while. We’re almost to Dathomir anyway.”

“Why?” Carth needed a shave again. He’d kind of been letting himself go. “What happened, Mission? What is it you don’t want me to see?”

Geez. If she had eyes she would have rolled them. “It’s not that, at all! Everything’s good! It’s just…I’m just having a little personal problem.”

He frowned, and for a second she thought he was going to tell her she was just a computer again, like he had once or twice on the way to Manaan from Kashyyyk, when he’d bothered to talk to her at all. But then something in his eyes softened. “Why don’t you tell me about it? Maybe I can help.”

“Unless you’ve got some orbital laser capable of targeting the kind of fortified bunkers of machinery that tap into a planetary core, I doubt it,” she muttered.
“Try me.” He folded his arms and gave her a smile. “Kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid.”

Carth nodded. “I know.” His smile was a little sad, but it was really real. If she had arms she would have given him a hug. “But tell me anyway.”

XXX

“I was impressed with your handling of the Makeon trade agreement.” Malachi stirred the steaming pot of Unwean stew with his fork and turned his head towards the boy’s mother.

They were eating in the formal dining hall tonight, and the white expanse of space made the corners of the room vanish, until they all seemed floating in the clouds. Sitting here, with Revan across and Malachor between, Malachi thought it was almost like it had been when his own son was young.

And, just like his father, Malachor was making a mess. A dollop of stew had already fallen on his robes. Catching his grandfather’s gaze, the boy pulled his napkin from his collar and dabbed at the offending splotch. Malachi nodded approvingly, even though the gesture only served to smear the stain more. Children had to learn things, even the most basic of tasks.

The woman shrugged. “You told me to be intimidating. I was.” She paused, putting her own spoon down, perhaps instinctively straightening her spine as he looked at her. “Having an armed escort of Mandalorians helped.”

“To good effect.” He folded his hands into a steeple, leaning forward. “Did you know, Secretary Boon Organa has returned to Alderaan?”

“Yes.” There was a long pause as she stared at him. “I’m assuming you saw the footage of my visit to his cell?”

“You’re learning,” he smiled.

“It’s not that complicated,” she muttered, half under her breath. Those green eyes of hers glinted with raw insolence.

“Not for one such as you,” Malachi agreed. “But intimidation is only one of the tools in our arsenal. It will take years for you to learn the more subtle approaches. Politics. Media. Alliances. Influence. The Senate is an instrument, but real power comes from the people we serve.”

“Oh, we serve them?” She stirred her stew, warily, as if she still suspected poison, then motioned to HK to bring her the next course. “I’m sure the Kessel miners are eternally grateful for our service.”

“Empathy for the less fortunate is admirable,” he told her. He would have to stamp it out of her slowly. “But only from a position of power can we truly help the less fortunate—”

“Like the sentients dying of plague in the Underground?” Her lips pulled back, almost feral.

“The Jedi have reopened their clinic,” he told her. “Apparently they have discovered a cure—or a vaccine.”

One that even now, his own labs in the Corellian Corporate Sector were trying to copy. Winning the bid for mass distribution had been quite a coup for D’Reev fortunes, even if his son had warned
him against taking the vaccine himself years before.

Or giving it to Malachor.

His scientists said the vaccine did something, although they were divided on what. Malachi himself was on the fence. He’d rarely been sick in his life, save for the occasional Senatorial poisoning. There was no reason to risk himself or Malachor on the untried effect—especially since their quarters and Malachor’s school both had excellent biofilters.

“Are you monitoring my mail?” Revan interrupted his thoughts suddenly. “I was expecting… messages.”

“You are my Second,” Malachi chuckled. “Of course I am..”

Her uncle had commed three times. The man could be a problem. Revan’s loyalty should not be divided. Not now, not until Malachor was safely older. The Onasi sop was safely off on his wild ronto chase for at least another month, Malachi assumed. Who knows, perhaps the Dathomiri witches would make good their promise. And if the man regained his son, he could be convinced to take him and go. Or stay. Once firmly in Malachi’s debt, a Republic war hero as a consort for the D’Reev Second would be an advantage with the Fleet. And with the bargain Malachi had struck with the Mandalorian women….

You don’t even know half the things I’ve done for you, Revan. For you and my grandson. I hope someday you’re grateful.

“I admit to seeing the feed of you and this Boon Organa. Taunting the man with the Deralian’s death was a clumsy way of assessing a threat. What will you do about those Rist assassins?”

One eyebrow raised as she studied him. “Deaths,” she corrected. “More than one. Polla Organa, her husband Seiran, and their unnamed child. They’re all dead.”

“A more ruthless act than I expected from you.” Malachi inclined his head in a gesture of respect. “And I admit, when you accused me of the deed you were extremely convincing.”

She blinked. “I’ve had some experience being convincing.”

Her grandson made a soft noise, as if he was surprised.

Her head turned, and Malachi noted the hesitation, the too-fast blink of her eyes. Lying, then? Or covering for someone else’s work? The Mandalorians?

“It had to be done, Korrie.” She brushed a red curl over his ear. “I’m sorry, but it was them or us.”

Her son looked up at her, startled. “But we didn't even know them!”

“Your mother is right.” Malachi cleared his throat, blinking his own eyes. Allergies… this time of year was dreadful, even with the best air-scrubbers credits could buy. In an ideal world, the child would have had more time to realize the consequences of power, and the rules of necessity. Malachi felt a sting of pity for him, all too quickly pushed aside.

“About the assassins… it seems I’m fairly hard to kill,” Revan smiled, but her hand had disappeared under the table and he suspected she was holding Malachor’s. A pause. “Have you heard of House Rist?”

Malachi shrugged. “Amateurs, truly. At least compared to the Genoharadan. It was entertaining,
when Organa threatened you with Rist. But if you’re concerned, I could give you a contact in the Genoharadan to take care of the issue.”

Something sparked in those green eyes of hers. Something obvious and cheap. “No! Keep your hired killers away from Boon Organa.”

“I leave his fate entirely in your hands,” Malachi shrugged. “But… you may find other factions of Alderaanian society would be pleased to see the ruling family toppled, and shaming their trusted secretary is a step in the right direction. You’ve created a climate of mistrust for Coruscanti governance on that planet already, if my reports are accurate.”

She snorted, an indelicate sound. “You want to blame me for planetary unrest? Get in line.”

“There was a Jedi Temple on Alderaan,” the boy interrupted, them, as if he wanted to change the subject. “We saw the newsvids at school. But they closed it last week.”

“Why?” His mother sounded interested, which is more than Malachi expected from her.

“I think it was something about all the Jedi going away.” The child frowned. “Where did they go?”

“I don’t know.” Revan rubbed her temples.

“I’m finished with my dinner,” Malachor said. He was not—more than half the stew remained. “May I be excused now, please?”

“Children need to clear their plates,” Malachi reminded him, at the same time the mother said yes.

“Yes, Korrie,” Revan repeated, raising her voice. “You may be excused. Go on. I’ll be upstairs soon.”

“Okay,” he nodded to her and then looked at Malachi, that blunt face so like Malak’s at the same age. For a moment, Malachi almost expected an embrace, but it had been years since the boy had presumed to be that bold.

The child went to her instead, and his mother folded her arms around his robes dutifully, her eyes still glaring at Malachi, as if their simple meal was some kind of play for power. Perhaps she thought it was. Her ignorance was her greatest weakness—and her greatest strength.

Revan waited until the doors slid shut behind the boy before speaking again. “Jedi have been disappearing here on Coruscant too.”

“Plague.” Malachi shrugged. “It does not spare the Force sensitive.” He remembered his mad son’s rants. According to Malak, the sickness was designed to weed out the Force sensitive too weak to survive it. Or… something like that. At the time, he hadn’t cared. More Sith dying in Sith space had seemed like a net positive. It had certainly helped him acquire the broadcast station on Ziost.

“You said the Jedi have a cure,” Revan insisted. “And they’ve begun distribution?”

“In the Underground. I even heard a most curious rumor that Revan Starfire herself was assisting them.”

“I heard that too. I’m sure you’re aware that not all of the Selkath Ten were killed. One of the survivors looks exactly like me.”

“Sheris Darkstar.” Malachi nodded. “Clever of your former self to arrange for a duplicate.”
“Clever,” she echoed. “I guess that’s one word for it.”

Malachi busied himself with his plate. Clever. The woman had half the tactical skill of her former self, and none of the knowledge he had taken such pains to impart. It was a shame, really; because she had twice the fire. He tapped his fingers on the table, deliberating the best course of action like a pilot selecting between two hyperspace lanes. On one side, flying close to a swollen star. On the other… the void of the unknown, the vacuum of power her death would create.

_Not yet._ Malak’s mother had been sacrificed too soon. No matter this Revan’s flaws, he would not make the same mistake with Malachor.

“I must admit,” he ventured, after a silence long enough for the HK to clear their plates and serve the brandy, “despite my best efforts, I have been unable to trace your source of information within the Jedi Temple.”

“But I know yours,” she murmured. “Master Klee. Of course, he’s left the Temple, hasn’t he?”

“Indeed. With plague rampant, it seemed prudent,” Malachi said. “Many Jedi have left. Your uncle, for example.”

She leaned forward, twisting the stem of her wine glass in a way that was undoubtedly good manners on Deralia. “Do you know where Vrook is?”

“Somewhere in the Underground,” Malachi told her. Or accessible to it. The man kept asking her to meet him at coordinates so far beneath civilization, they might as well be in a sewer. “I might know more if you could share information with me.”

“What.” It wasn’t a question, more like a command, a hollow shell of the woman she once was. “What information?”

“How is my son?”

Something in her eyes flickered. “You’ve _actually_ heard from Vrook?”

“I believe HK retrieved a message from him, addressed to you,” Malachi said, retrieving the chip from the inner pocket of his robes. He held it in the air. “How is my son?”

“I was told still unconscious,” she said. “Dustil’s body is fine. The Jedi don’t know about his mind—or whose mind it really is.” Her fingers tightened on the fragile brandy glass, and it snapped suddenly—priceless ferracrystal crushed by her careless grip.

“That glass was over two thousand years old,” Malachi chided. His own fault, for using the good service with an outlier peasant. “Part of a set that used to belong to an Empress from the Teeta system.”

She brushed the shards from her hand and stood, still managing to glare with the ferocity of a Sith scorned. “The message from Vrook?”

“Here.” He slid the chip across the table.

She raised her hand and it levitated in onto her palm, peering at it, as if she could read it without a scanner. Perhaps she could.

“You know, I haven’t heard from your captain at all. I do hope he’s not managed to run into trouble.”
“If he has, he and Zaal can handle it,” she muttered, not taking the bait. Her hand was steady; but Malachi saw the weakness in her lower lip, the slump of those proud shoulders. She hesitated. “If he wakes… if Malak wakes up, would you—what would you say to him?”

Malachi chuckled. “My son had ample opportunity to reveal himself to me before. He chose not to. I would say nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Nothing at all,” she echoed, staring at him as if she’d expected something else. “But he was your son. You just asked about him.”

“Is this a plea for sentiment? Clemency? From the woman who killed her own husband?”

“I don’t remember him.” She sounded like it wounded. “But you do. I just thought… if you had the chance to say good-bye—”

“My son would be a true maffasop if he gave me that chance.” He leveled his brow at her. “Listen to me, Revan. Spinning your redemption was difficult enough. It would be impossible to acknowledge Darth Malak in possession of a seventeen-year old boy’s body.” He snorted. “Especially the one related to your Republic war hero husband.”

“The Jedi would want him to find peace,” she said, half under her breath. “I thought—if he reconciled with you, with me, with Malachor—”

Malachi had to laugh, interrupting her noble speech. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the Jedi are losing.”

What did she truly remember? Did she remember how it had come to an end?

XXX

The last time he had seen her had been with Malak. By that time, they could no longer travel openly in Republic space. They were wanted for treason, reviled as traitors. They were whispered nightmares on the Rim worlds; feared, as something worse than Mandalorians.

They came with no warning, using the Force to rise up through the ventilation shaft, bypassing his security systems with the ease he had once predicted. After Malachor’s birth, Revan had helped refine his security herself. He had always known that someday she would use her own designs against him. HK’s silent alarm gave him only a heartbeat’s respite before Malachi found himself running through the halls of his apartments like a cornered kath, heading for the place he had prepared: the only place in the compound (at that time) where he might have some small advantage.

In the first and most fortified of the ysalamiri rooms, the HK stood sentinel, recording all. In the event it went badly, the feed would be replayed for Malachor on his ascendency, so that he would know his parent’s betrayal. Would he choose to avenge Malachi? Or would he understand that weakness lost? The future was an unknown. All Malachi could do was sculpt the present into a narrative the child would hopefully understand, if he survived long enough.

Two Sith walked through the door, a few minutes after Malachi had recovered his breath.

Revan wore a mask constantly now, but his son no longer bothered. The heir to House D’Reev loomed beside his wife, the lower half of his face a mass of sores and infection. Even from two meters away, the stench was enough to make Malachi’s stomach turn.

“Your campaign of fear has been a great success,” Malachi began. “More than I had expected,
with the ships you had left after Malachor.”

Too successful. Too many ships. At the time, he hadn’t known why, had assumed it was the Sith remnants on Zistost and Thule fueling their expansion. An understandable miscalculation. Who could have predicted an ancient space station capable of manufacturing anything from the force of a star? Only Revan. Smug with the knowledge she’d refused to share.

“You need to begin preparing the Senate,” she commanded him. “The next worlds we strike will be in Core space. Convince the Senators to surrender their planets peacefully.”

Peacefully. Truly a joke after the carnage before.

“No,” Malachi declared. “Absolutely not. The Outer Rim worlds will seek our guidance against a Sith threat. But the Core—”

“The Core is corrupt,” his ungrateful son muttered, words clumsy and thick through the remains of his teeth.

“The Core is mine,” Malachi corrected him. “Mine—and the other Houses. Do you think Racharn or Makeon would let Malachor survive your insurrection if it truly threatened their interests? If you assault any Core worlds, my allies in the Senate will have me—and your son—killed. D’Reev will cease to exist. And when I go…” He tried to keep the quaver out of his voice, staring at the ruin of his son. “With me will go all of your own influence. You will be conquerors of nothing. The entire Fleet will oppose you.”

“Not for long,” Revan’s head turned towards his son, as if they were sharing some unspoken communication.

“And what of your son?” he asked her. Foolish to bait a mad Sith, but the game was never won by temperate measures. “If you make good your threat, break through the Republic Fleet and invade the Core, what do you think will happen to Malachor?”

The masked face stared at him, breath hissing in and out evenly. Her hand went to the double-bladed saber on her belt.

But his son put a hand on her wrist, a gloved hand, and that ruined face turned back towards his father. His gray eyes had yellowed, and the overlights glinted pale on his mottled skull. “Convince them to fear us,” he said. “You taught me fear can unite a galaxy.”

“I taught you nothing,” Malachi spat back. “Or you would contain your foolishness. Do you truly expect the Republic to tremble over two half-dead worlds and a red-skinned race of mythical, mystical beings? The Sith have been the bogeymen of children’s stories for decades. Hindsight has made even Kun a fool. Do you think you can do better? You destroyed the Mandalorians when you should have harnessed them. You strengthened the Jedi Order with tales of your betrayal, instead of exposing its corruption. You have not followed my instructions, which I made explicitly clear to you from the beginning—”

“Silence.” Revan’s hand clenched, and for a moment, even with the ysalamiri, Malachi felt a faint pressure against his throat. So faint it could have been his own fear.

Fear could unite a galaxy, but it was no master for one born to the games. Malachi made himself laugh. “You may silence one old man, Revan; but you’ll never control the Republic.”

Her breath hissed out sharply, and his son put a hand on her arm. They looked at each other again: two faces, one masked and one not. His son’s face was pathetically easy to read, and hers
was a literal mask. The mask of the Mandalore himself, replacing the plain gray cloth that all the knights had worn. Anonymity transferred to infamy.

For a moment, Malachi entertained the thought of engaging the security force he’d hired to quell them long enough for a Jedi task force to arrive. Fear had done its work. But if capturing the mad Sith could help him control the very Order itself—

His son’s face twisted and turned back to him. “Keep Malachor safe,” he slurred. “Just keep him safe. Or I swear, by all the stars, we’ll expose you. Expose you and more. I’ll pull everything you’ve built down and leave you standing to take the blame.”

“Follow my orders and he will be,” Malachi snapped back. For good measure, he laughed again, laughing in the face of horror and madness, because his lack of fear was the best weapon in his possession. “Did you think to disappoint me, my son?”

Malak’s ruined face twisted in anger, but it was Revan who stepped forward, Revan who raised her mask at last to show him her Sith-damned face: yellow eyes, blackened skin, just as marred by the Force magic as his son’s. Her lips curled in a snarl, her teeth still impossibly white and even—a note ajar in the midst of corruption.

“We’ll see you in ashes, Malachi.”

XXX

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Revan repeated, frowning slightly, as if she’d caught his inattention.

Malachi jerked awake, suppressing a shiver. His own brandy glass slipped and almost fell out of his hand. She had used the same voice as long ago—almost the exact same intonation. “I must have dozed off, my dear.”

She stared at him flatly. “I’m going to put Korrie to bed. And then I’m going to spend the evening with Clan Ordo, just in case your security detail loses me somewhere. Do you understand?”

“Your nights are your own.” He recovered quickly. Malachi approved of her relationship with the Ordos, although he would never give her the grace of knowing it. “Try not to attract attention from the tabloids. As my Second, you are afforded license to do as you please, but there’s no need to taunt another family into premature action… or accidentally offend another planetary representative. Did you know Deralia withdrew their trade petition?”

“Good for them,” she snapped, rising to her feet. The black and red robes of House D’Reev suited her coloring, made the cap of her hair glow like a flame.

For a moment, she seemed again like the woman his son had desired. For a moment, Malachi understood why.

“Tut, tut,” he murmured. “Remember where your loyalties lie.”

“Oh, I do,” she said.

XXX

Almost three years ago, the Jedi gave you the personality of a Deralian smuggler in order to turn you to their cause.
Korrie was already in his pajamas when she got to their rooms. Or rather, what had been his room, and was now theirs. Malachi had offered her their old apartments, the rooms she had only seen in dreams with Malak in them: the white on walls, the circular bed, the balcony and its billowing white curtains; but Revan had refused.

*These are the things you should know about Polla. Polla Organa was a Deralian smuggler. Polla Organa saved the galaxy. And the real Polla Organa is dead. She had to die so that you could live.*

*But Polla Organa didn’t kill Malak. That was you. Us. Me.*

“Mother?” her son said, looking up from the floor where he sat cross-legged, the new action figures she’d ordered for him displayed before him like a constellation of personal guilt. His hand was closed around the Mission doll, in the act of putting the Twi’lek figure in the open cargo bay of the miniaturized *Ebon Hawk.*

“It’s late for toys,” she said, glancing up. She’d swept the room for surveillance a dozen times, trying to remember lessons that someone—*Therion that asshole*—had taught Polla Organa a very long time ago. Korrie said that he and Malak had set up some kind of distortion feed, but Revan didn’t trust it. She didn’t trust anything in this place.

*This nest of kinrath vipers—or one viper. Him. D’Reev. I should just kill him now.* The thought was almost wistful, even as she knew its impossibility, every day becoming more and more aware of just how much power the old man had, and just how large the black hole of his absence would be.

*Polla Organa thought she was a hero, saving the galaxy. She fell in love with a Republic pilot. She tried to do the right thing, on every planet she saw. She made mistakes, and some of them were terrible. But she tried. She and her friends—they tried. But on the way to Korriban to access the last Star Map, their ship was captured by the Leviathan. And then Malak told her that her life was a lie. She tried to be her after that, but—I—we—were stronger.*

“Story?” her son asked, eyes wide.

Revan nodded, and crouched down next to him on the floor, pulling him partially onto her lap. His fingers wiggled and a look of concentration crossed his face. From across the room, one of the golden books from the Nomi episodes shivered and fell off the shelf.

“That’s good!” she cheered, hating how tense he felt in her arms, hating the reason why. ”But relax. Let the book come to you.”

His lip stuck out and she could feel his fear, like a taint in the Force. The cause was obvious. *Damn the old man to hell for bringing up Polla Organa and her family in front of him!* The book shot across suddenly, and slammed into her leg. “Ow!” She tried to laugh. “That was very good, Korrie.”

“No,” he shook his head. “That was doing it wrong. Not like Master Jopheena said. I wasn’t calm.”

“You tried,” she said. “And it worked. Isn’t that the important thing?”

*We are stronger, and I need you. But I need Polla too. I need to remember her life too—at least the last three years of it. If it’s not a mindwipe, will it be us both? I need to know what you know. I need to know who to trust—I need to trust you, Revan. You need to trust me.*

“No.” Korrie shook his head. “Jedi aren’t supposed to be scared. They’re supposed to be calm all
“Shhh.” She softened her voice and wrapped her arms around him. She could feel tension in every line of his strong body. She could feel his fear in the Force. It made Revan feel nauseous, like a bad hyperspace jump.

“I had to lie to him,” she murmured into his ear. No need to say about what. “They’re safe, but no one can know, or they won’t be. Okay? You… you know that, right?”

Her son reached for the book. His fingers circled the three figures on the cover: Nomi Sunrider, Andur Sunrider, and baby Vima and then he looked back up at her. “It’s less sad if they’re okay,” he said, looking up sideways at her. “Sometimes when I read this, I like to pretend they’re all okay? Like it’s true?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “It’s okay to pretend they’re okay.” And they really are okay. Could he hear her? Sometimes her mind could reach his, and sometimes not. Usually, only when he was afraid.

He frowned, like he still wasn’t sure, but then nodded slowly. “I didn’t really believe,” he whispered back, words barely a breath. “I told all the Egs, you’re really good.”

Revan pushed his hair back from his forehead. “Do you want to start the book now, and I’ll tuck you in?”

She felt his body relax a little. “Okay,” he whispered. “Are you going to see Father?”

Revan frowned. “No.”

“Oh. I thought maybe that part wasn’t true either.” he pulled away and stood up, and she followed him over to the bed, tucking him in, turning up the holobook voices even more.

We have an alliance with the Mandalorians now, Revan. I don’t give a frack if you approve or not, but I trust them. And I trust you to see the benefit. Attached is an analysis of the Republic’s current defensive capabilities—both with, and without their help. Malachi’s access to Fleet intelligence is impressive—but I’m sure you know that already. Do you trust him? You know how to handle him. I’m flying blind through a minefield, every time I try.

Volume One wasn’t very happy. Andur died. She wondered if that was why her son had chosen it.

“It’s just a story,” she murmured. “This isn’t how it really happened.”

“I know,” he said. “Maybe Andur isn’t really dead. Just like my father. Do you have to go see the Mandalorians tonight?”

“They asked for me.” She tightened her arms around him, keeping her voice low. The book droned on. “Aemelie just got back with the children, and Canderous asked me to come.”

“They kidnapped me and made my leg get broke. Maybe Father was right about them.”

“They’re our allies, Korrie. They’d die for you. And me.”

“I don’t want to die for them.” He looked up at her, gray eyes in half shadow. “No offense, Mother.”

“You won’t,” she said. “I’ll be back tomorrow. By dinner at the latest. You need to get some sleep.”
“Do you love him?”

Polla Organa fell in love with Carth Onasi. And so did you. It was real. I don’t know if it will be after, but it was real—as real as your love for Malak. Take care of Carth. You owe me that much. Take care of him and his son.

“Carth?” She was getting used to the abrupt twists of a nine-year old mind, even if her son had a disturbing tendency to make her think about things she’d rather avoid or forget.

“No.” He shook his head. “I know all about Carth. I mean the other one. Canderous Ordo. The one who tranked me when I was going pee in the bathroom and stuffed me in a box.”

“He… shouldn’t have done that.” No one had seen fit to share those precise details with Revan before. She let out a breath and tried not to imagine all the ways the abduction could have gone wrong.

“But you forgive him? Because you love him?”

“I do,” she said. “But not how you mean. We’re not…He’s a good friend. An ally.”

The Rakatan computers. I still don’t know if they can be trusted, but I gave the one on Kashyyyk a personality of the child I killed. Her name was Mission Vao, and she thought of you as a sister. She’s with Carth now. Carth and Zaalbar, the Wookiee who swore you a life debt.

She tried to stop you from stopping Malak and you—I—we—made her best friend kill her for it. I killed Juhani and Jolee Bindo too. I killed everyone who stood between me and Darth Malak. Because I had to kill him. I had to kill him and I didn't know why. I have to assume you do. I hope it was a fracking good reason, Revan.

“You’re not gonna have babies with Mandalorians,” her son said. “That’s what Leeshy said. Will you and Carth?”

“Have babies?” She blinked and looked away. “I don’t really know, Korrie. We’ve both got our kids.”

You’re married to two men. Canderous Ordo only to secure the Mandalorian alliance. Carth Onasi, because I love him.

Carth Onasi’s son’s body is being possessed by the ghost of Darth Malak. You must do everything in your power to get Malak out and return Dustil to his father. Even if you don’t love Carth, and you do love Malak. Do you still love Malak? A lot of what I saw in your memories… it wasn’t love.

“He was nice. Dustil was nice.” Now her son looked away. He was a bad liar.

“The way he grew up, kids weren’t supposed to be nice,” Revan said. “Are you going to be okay tonight? I could ask HK to bring cookies and blue milk.”

“I already soniced my teeth.” He grinned. “Grandfather would have a fit.”

Malak’s father made you the D’Reev Second. He swears that if you kill him, the Genoharadan will kill Malachor. You call your son Korrie. Everyone does, even though most of them don’t know what you did at Malachor. I don’t know what you did at Malachor. I need to know. I need to know everything. That’s why I need you.

Revan kissed his forehead. “Frack him. Brush them again.”
This time, his smile was real. It emboldened her, made it feel like the right time.

“Malachor,” she said.

Korrie looked startled, suddenly serious again. “Yes, Mother?”

She took out the datapad from her robes, the one she’d been recording for the past month. One month to cover more than two years of a life, every subject hyperlinked to all the information she could find, annotated with everything she thought was safe to share. “I’m going to see the Mandalorians tonight,” she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. “And then I need to go see the Jedi.”

“You’re going to see Father?” Still the hope. You could choke on it.

Hating herself, she shook her head. “I don’t know. But then I’ll come back and see you. When I see you again, I might...I might seem different, but I’ll still love you just as much. No matter what, you need to give me this—but only when we’re alone. Me and no one else. It’s a secret.” Her other hand closed around the datachip. A message from Uncle Vrook, something Malachi had kept from her and now he wanted her to see.

Does it still matter? She hesitated, and then passed the datachip to Korrie too. “Give me this too, okay? It’s a message from your greatuncle. Uncle Vrook.”

Korrie looked down at the datapad, thumbing it on. She’d let the scan open to him—but only him. If something went wrong then someday, maybe he could decipher the words with HK’s assistance —

“These letters are all squiggly. I can’t read them,” he said.

“I know.” She kept her voice light. “But I can, Korrie.”

“You’re writing a note to yourself?” He laughed. “That’s crazy!” But then his brows drew together, as if he was thinking it through.

The Jedi and Davad had assured her that she’d still be her. Even if she forgot some things, she’d still be her. It wasn’t like dying, even if that’s how it felt now.

“Mother?” her son cocked his head, and tucked the datachip on the datapad’s magnetic back... “Are you okay?”

I don’t know who to trust, but I trust Carth. I trust Malachor. I trust Canderous Ordo. I trust Zaalbar. I trust you, Revan, because I know that a part of you is me. I know we both made mistakes. I know we both did what we had to do. I think I know you. And I hope to frack you know me.

Revan hugged him closer, gave him another Hothan kiss. “I will be.”

I trust Davad Arkan. He’s promised to help us, to be with us when you wake. I don’t remember much, but I remember Davad and Beya and Malak and me. I remember we were going to save the galaxy. Beya’s dead. I think Malachi killed her. I don’t have proof. Davad will explain.

Polla Organa is dead. I don’t know who had her killed, but everyone thinks it was me. I don’t have to explain Coruscanti inheritance laws to you. When you take back your own memories, hers become irrelevant. So she is irrelevant. Forget about her. Keep our son safe. I think I know you, Revan. I hope I’m right.
It was a much nicer hotel than anything off Zeltros that he’d ever seen, but Therion D’Cainen was not the type to show he was impressed, especially in front of a hot babe.

And Dessa from Clan Rialis was hyperdrive hot, no question. She had hair down to her perfect ass, curves like a Deralian speedway, and a pair of literal guns that would make any smuggler worth his spice envious.

No surprise he wanted more of that action—not to mention more of the threeway they’d practically had with her hot friend, Aemelie Ordo. Mandalorians. Wow. If their women were all like this, it was almost a shame they’d lost the war.

So naturally, he was pretty pissed off that after he’d given her more action than a hyperspace converter, she wanted him gone.

“Will I see you again?” They were on the roof of the Mandalorian’s hotel—they seemed to have taken it over—set up tents and firepits like they were in the middle of a desert and not the Core’s Fidistrict. The night before, Dessa had let him stay for their feast and some kind of drinking game with lots and lots of knives. It had been beautiful.

It had been a long, long time since the Organa bitch betrayed him—time enough that Therion had sworn off love altogether… and yet, looking at Dessa’s perfect ass, he thought he could be close with her. At least if she gave him another week.

“There is a time for all things,” Dessa glanced back. Her fingers squeezed his as she led him to the elevator. She was wearing pants that looked like they were made from real hide, and the zipper on her shirt was pulled down almost as far as her tits were pulled up.

“Dessa!” The older, but still attractive blonde chiclet who acted like she was in charge charged up to them, actually carrying a real battle axe. She squinted at Therion and rattled off something in rapid-fire Mandalorian. The Dessa babe rattled back.

Therion smiled at them both and shrugged. “There’s only one of me, ladies, but I don’t mind sharing.”

The blonde snorted. “We’ll make a note on your chart.”

“Chart?” He frowned.

“You have to go now,” Dessa said. Her accent was charming, it reminded him of one of those chirpy thisla birds back home.

“Nowhere I have to be,” he protested. “I said I’d meet this distributor a little later, but it can wait another night….”

He had to admit, it wasn’t just how hot she was. It was the connection. The connection was hot. These were Mandalorians and some of them were Ordo. One of those men over there by the bonfire—the ones deliberating, acting like he was invisible—could even be Canderous from the blasting Star Forge Team himself.

Trying not to make like he was doing it, Therion glanced in their direction. Ordo would be an older guy, but half of them were wearing armor and in this light he really couldn’t tell—

“Drek,” Dessa said, raising her voice. “As I said, this is farewell.”
The elevator slid open. His hot babe put her arm out, holding the door open for him.

“Babe,” he began again. “Are you sure? We’ve had some good times.”

“He’s still here?” The other one, Aemelie, who had kissed him when they played that drinking game back on Revan Starfire’s fracking command ship came up. She didn’t just have her own kid this time, she had another one too, a girl—as pale as hers was dark. She was hot enough that even the babies weren’t a turn off. “You need to leave now, barbarian.”

“I was just saying good-bye.” Dessa leaned in and planted one on his mouth, hard and fast, a little sweaty. Her teeth bumped against his and he tried to slip in some tongue but she deflected, actually pushing him into the elevator. “Farewell, barbarian.”

“You ever need a hot pilot, look me up,” he said. It wasn’t admitting defeat, it was just a draw. Obviously she wanted him back again.

The three of them were framed in the setting sun as the doors closed, like some holovision of warrior women unchained. He smiled as the lift went down, all three hundred floors to the lobby.

“I’ll be back,” Therion promised. His reflection smiled back in the mirrored doors, perfect hair, shining teeth, mouth like a knife. He adjusted his codpiece, shifting the goods back in place. “Oh yeah. I’ll be back.”

The elevator doors slid open on the ferracrystal lobby. Really nice hotel, almost as nice as the classy piece standing there blocking the door; her hip tilted and her hand on it, like she owned the lift.

Red hair, too short for a woman without a topknot. Breasts a little small for his taste, but pert as goreapples under a tight black tunic, edged with red. Neat hips, hugging muscular thighs, and a tapered waist cinched by a black synth belt that looked all business. It even had a silver cylinder dangling from it, like she was dressed up like some kind of Jedi—

It wasn’t until her breath hissed out in a startled exclamation that he looked up again at the face. The tip of her nose was blushing, and her skin was pale under faint freckles, etched in silver. Wide eyes, green as home and wide and shocked, staring at him. She seemed smaller in person. Pouty lips, the kind he’d always thought were too hot for a Dark Lord of the Sith, in every holo he’d ever seen.

Then those lips mouthed his name. “Therion? Therion D’Cainen?”

He gaped at her for a milli, mouth open like a rube. For a second, the air almost seemed to freeze around them.

But Therion had always had a gift with the ladies, and the Lady Revan Starfire was surely no exception to that rule. “Hello, Princess,” he said. “Or should I call you an angel?”

XXX

Plan B, the one that involved kidnapping her own son, hijacking a Mandalorian cruiser and heading for the Outliers just like the real Polla had never seemed more attractive than right now. (And that was saying something.) But things were a mess.

*And Malak said the plague was my fault. Everything is. I need to fix it. I have a responsibility.*
Her real self would know what to do. Her real self would know so many things.

“Lady D’Reev.” The doorman at the hotel lobby had obviously been told to expect her, by D’Reev’s security or Canderous. He was liveried, Arkanian, and nervous. Revan almost wanted to correct the angle of the holsters on his belt, even as she assumed they were just for show.

The real firepower in this lobby would be coming from angles where it was least expected.

The Force sang as she walked across the ferracrystal floor: the crowds on the floor expressing the usual emotions fear, anticipation, that strange, fawning respect. Did D’Reev come to expect this? Would the real Revan be used to it? Would Malachor?

*Is this the rest of our lives, having minions in uniform bowing and scraping?*

She smiled at a phalanx of guards that were suited like corporate greeters—and then dodged them, heading towards the penthouse elevator, the one reserved for Clan use and roof access only. For once, the wall of greeting dignitaries parted without asking if there was anything more she needed, anything that their petty hotel services might provide. She held her hand out over the elevator’s scanner and it pinged white, approving. The lights above indicated it was traveling down.

“Senator?” One flunky seemed bolder than the rest. A yellow Twi’lek. Male. “Pardon, but we’ve had some… issues. Not all of the… Mandalorian… guests have had the correct background checks. It is a matter of great concern to this establishment that every sentient you come into contact with is appropriately vetted—”

“I trust my allies to handle it.” Revan shrugged. “So should you, Citizen….”

“Wing. Jehorah Wing. If I could—” The Twi’lek was still speaking when the private lift pinged.

Revan stepped forward to meet the open doors, only to find the chamber already occupied by a tall, lean man with black hair pulled back in a Deralian topknot, a pair of blasters at his hips and a spacer’s tan across his face. His mouth curved like a blade as his eyes seemed to take her in, up and down. There was a beat when they both were just staring—a heartbeat before she realized why his face looked so familiar, even as his name formed on her lips.

“Therion? Therion D’Cainen?”

For a heartbeat, he looked as shocked as she felt. But then that cruel mouth pulled down, into a smirk that a part of her wanted to punch—and another, more disturbing part remembered kissing. “Hello, Princess,” he said. “Or should I call you an angel?”

“As I was saying,” the Twi’lek interrupted, hastily edging between them. “Not all of their guests were properly cleared. You have my sincerest apologies, Senator. Step aside, and my men will escort this citizen—”

“He's not.* Revan said, not taking her eyes off the man.

“He's not supposed to be here, I know.” The guard was falling all over himself trying to please. Revan realized he probably worked for D’Reev. Hells, everyone in the hotel lobby probably worked for D’Reev.

“He's not a citizen,” she corrected. Her fingers twitched slightly as the Force pushed Jehorah Wing aside. The man teetered on his feet and she pushed aside the guilt as she shoved him out of the way. “Outlier colonists don't have any official status in the Republic.”
“Princess. You’re gonna be like that?” The Deralian’s grin twisted. Did he look worried?

Revan kept her voice bland. “I’m actually surprised he got through customs, what with his criminal history.”

“I made some friends,” Therion admitted, his grin peeling wider. “Very, very close friends.”

“But… you know what? I asked my staff to hire a pilot,” Revan added, turning back to Jehorah. “And here he is. I vetted his records myself. Personally.”

“Very personally,” the man who had broken Polla Organa’s heart purred.

“I’ll need to check—”

“You don’t need to check.” Her fingers moved, and she was sickly pleased to see Therion take a step farther back into the elevator.

“I don’t need to check,” the Twi’lek repeated. He was still standing there, stiff and blank, when Revan stepped into the elevator after Therion and the doors closed behind them.

The man gave an amused chuckle, that only sounded slightly intimidated. She didn’t like the leer on his face. “Wish Pollie and I had that trick, when we were smuggling spice through Biscain.” He was still looking her up and down.

That smirk on his face reminded Revan a little too closely of the one he’d had when Polla had last seen him, when he’d dumped that load of mite-ravaged spice on her, and said he just wanted to be friends.

Revan held her hand over the scanner, and the lift began its ascent. She tried to look like she wasn’t waiting for him to make a go for the blasters on his hips. “Why are you here?”

“Hey, now, Princess. She was the one who left me! You think getting framed and thrown in a Corellian jail was how I wanted to spend that week?”

Princess…? He had never called Polla ‘Princess.’ For a twisted moment, Revan almost felt jealous of... herself? “You made your own bed when you fracked over the Exchange—”

The doors slid open on the hotel’s roof, the smell of roasting meat mixing with the ozone of a muggy Coruscanti night. Aemelie and Gwenarius were standing there, dressed in ceremonial gowns with their swords at their waists. Behind them, another blonde woman—one of the Rialis...
headwomen, Revan thought, seemed to be making a hasty retreat, her hands full with both of their children—and a battleaxe.

“Your arrival is perfectly timed, Third Wife—” Gwenarius blinked in surprise as her eyes focused on Therion. “What is this man still doing here?”

“Still…?” Revan echoed. “You've already met him?”

Of course they have, the elevator only goes to this floor—some fracking tactical genius I am.

“He's from Alderaan,” Aemelie interrupted. “Dessa was considering him, pending results.”

“Oh, I gave Dessa results,” Therion broke in. “She seemed pret-ty pleased with my results, if you know what I mean.”

“He's not from Alderaan.” Revan grimaced. “He's from Deralia.” She stepped out of the lift quickly, and raised her hand, pinning Therion back against the wall with the Force.

His own fingers twitched, and the muscles in his neck bunched, as he obviously tried to break free. “Nice,” he said, managing to lift an eyebrow. “I could be in love.”

“Deralia?” Aemelie frowned. “Are you sure?”

“He was her… he knows Polla Organa. Knew. I mean.”

A frown had appeared on Therion's face as he kept struggling against the invisible bonds that held him. “You want to knock it off now, babe?” The cords in his neck stood out as he tensed. “Come on, now! You gotta know you can trust me! Aemelie, tell her! We had a moment!”

“Do you think he's a spy?” Aemelie took a step closer, peering at him. “For the Deralians and not the Alderaanians? It was rather strange that I found their ship—and he did boast about the Organa woman, but we all thought it was pure bravado—”

“My ship,” Therion drawled. “Trust me, that beauty’s all mine.”


“Stranded along the Perlemian Trade Route. Repairing the vessel gave our youth a chance to practice shield and navboard repair, not to mention the outer hull patching….” Aemelie’s voice trailed off. “He's really Deralian?”

“You said they. Before. You said they. Their ship.”

“He had companions,” Aemelie shrugged. “They were from Alderaan as well.”

“Older?” Her parents? But Jasp and Moll would never—

“No.” Aemelie looked to Gwenarius, before looking back at Revan. “But I'm sure they're not important. They… were just passengers.”

You don't think they were just passengers. That was as clear as the Force cage she'd created, rippling around Therion D’Cainen like an almost living thing. Revan opened her hand and let it collapse. The man collapsed with it, staggering before righting himself, looking between them, then reaching for his blaster—
The whine of a sonic bolt sent him spinning backwards before his muzzle cleared the holster. The blast knocked him back into the elevator. And Revan watched in shock as the doors, no longer under her control, slid shut, sending the smuggler’s body—alive or dead—back down the lobby below.

“What the hell?” Canderous asked, his own gun still in hand as he jogged over to them. “You gonna just stand still while idiots take potshots at you, Revan?”

“Please tell me that was a stunner,” she said. *He just tried to kill me. Did he? Did Therion D’Cainen really just try and kill me?* Polla’s ex was a lot of things, most of them sleazy as frack, but he was no killer.

“Sure.” Canderous shrugged, tapping his comm and barking in some instructions in Mandalorian. From the sound of things, D’Reev wasn't the only ones with guards posted in the lobby. To give Canderous credit, Revan hadn’t even noticed his. “It was a stunner. Clean kills make too much paperwork on this damn planet. We’ll bring him back up. Set up an interrogation room.” His grizzled eyebrow raised. “You want in on the fun?”

“Don't hurt him,” she blurted out. “Restraints only. And I need to speak with him. Alone.”

“Who is he?” But he nodded, although she didn't miss the look Gwenarius shot him.

There's something you're not telling me, Ordo.

“He's no one,” Revan lied. “Just a spacer the real Polla Organa used to know.”

“Huh.” Canderous grunted and looked at Aemelie again. “Does this have anything to do with that comm you sent about getting into the Republic jail?”

“Me?” Revan frowned. “What comm?”

Aemelie flushed. “That was a personal request, husband.”

“It is rude of me to bring it before the other wives.” The Mandalorian didn't look sorry; but he never did. “But necessary. Anyways, your Organa assassin’s gone, Second Wife. Boon Organa got shipped back to Alderaan—”

“—Last week,” Revan finished the sentence. “On my orders.”

“Oh,” Aemelie ducked her head. “Then I withdraw my request to visit with him.” She paused. “Is he to be jailed on Alderaan too?”

“There's to be a trial….” Revan began, trying not to feel guilty. Again.

“Whatever.” Canderous grunted. “Boon Organa’s irrelevant. And so is that loser I just shot.” He stared at Revan, eyes like duracrete chips in his weathered face. “We have a bigger problem. A much bigger problem. I called you here because there's something you need to see.”

XXX

Revan was late. Of course. She was late and the room was small and Millifar had made Xarga play the footage again a hundred times. At this point, it almost felt like she *did* remember, even though she didn’t. All that training she’d had against Jedi and it didn’t even *work*?

Finally, the door slid open. “Father,” Millifar said. *She* was with him this time. Third Wife, the one
they’d all been waiting for, as if the Clan couldn’t take action against a Sith schutta on their own.

“Daughter. Xarga.” Her father nodded at them both.

“Hello, Millifar.” Third Wife Revan looked like she wanted to do the right thing, just like she always did. It was tiresome, but at least they had her flagship now. Aemelie said it was magnificent. Room for ten thousand drop ships—as soon as they had ten thousand warriors.

*Magnificent enough to compensate for his loss? We didn’t even get a genetic sample—*

“Have you seen Mekel Jin?” she asked the woman. “Has he chosen to remain with the Jedi?”

“He’s—he’s ill.” The woman avoided her eyes and Millifar was suddenly convinced that Revan hadn’t even thought about Mekel Jin. “I’m going there later. I’ll…I can check on him.”

“Is he going to die too?” She couldn’t hide the bitterness in her voice. “Like Oerin?”

“I don’t…I don’t think so.” Millifar wondered if the woman knew how much the dark-eyed Coruscanti man had idolized her. It was shameful, he could be so forgotten.

“You’d better sit down, Revan.” Her father’s voice was gruff. He’d made Millifar sit down too, when he and Xarga had first shown her the feed, the feed of her that she didn’t remember happening.

Frowning, the woman nodded slowly. “Whatever it is, we’ll handle it before I…” she glanced at Millifar and Xarga as if they cared about her stupid Jedi secrets.

Canderous cleared her throat. “Yeah, about that…I think you need to watch this before you make any rash decisions.”

“It’s not a rash decision.” Her voice was cold and remote. “It’s the only logical one. She *knows* things that we need.”

“Banthashit.” Her father sounded even more pissed off than he had before.

Revan glared at him as she sat in the seat. “I could make it an order.”

“You could,” he said. “If you think that’s really how this works.”

The woman who had cheated, but still killed their last true Mandalore in combat and destroyed their way of life, frowned even more. “Get on with it,” she snapped.

Canderous nodded at Xarga, who started the vid again. The outside of their hotel, taken at an angle near the service entrance, the one they all used because they’d disabled all the D’Reev cameras around it, and installed their own. Watching it for the hundredth and first time didn’t make it hurt less.

***

The armored figure caught her arm. “Mill-Mill-ley?”

Millifar froze, and then almost immediately pivoted, bringing her stun stick up towards the weakest joint in his armor, the one covered by beskar plating around the neck, and ending, not as it should in the Mandalore’s visor, but in an ugly leather mask. At the same time, her foot lashed out, locking around his armored legs.
They fell together, but it was all wrong. Instead of crashing to the ground, they... floated. She was
on top of him, her stick locked around his neck and they... floated to the ground as if gravity didn’t
exist.

XXX

“When was this recorded?” Revan demanded.

“After,” Canderous said. “After it should have been possible.” He shot a glare at Xarga. “And
we’d have known weeks ago, if someone had reviewed the recordings as they should have.”

“I accept my shame,” the unblooded boy mumbled. Millifar almost felt sorry for him again.

XXX

“When are you, thief?” Her finger poised over the switch and Millifar flinched again, noting the
bad angle that it had, digging into the leather mask above the armor that was so obviously the
Mandalore’s.

“Mill-lee s’mee. S’oarin.” There was something wrong with his voice. His breath wheezed in and
out, barely more than a whisper.

“They said you died.” Her hand scrabbled at the mask, finding the clasps.

“Wai—waitt,” the man wheezed, almost inaudible. “....go... head.”

She took off the mask. She’d watched this part a hundred times and she still flinched. But the girl
in the vid recording didn’t. That girl only smiled, as if nothing was wrong. That girl acted angry,
but she was obviously thrilled.

“They said you were dead.” She wasn’t afraid. She was practically glowing with happiness. “Was
it some kind of trick?”

“Yesss.” He shrugged, still lying there with his unfocused eyes that didn’t even point in the same
directions. The feed was blurry, but his lips looked... almost blue. His skin looked gray next to
hers. That wheezing sound. Millifar heard it in nightmares now. “...Jed-eye..trickkk.”

“Oh.” Millifar stood up. “It was very rude of you to fool us too. Xarga organized your death walk
and everything.” She frowned. “I should have realized it was a trick, when they refused to give us
your corpse.”

The obviously dead Mandalore shambled up almost boneless: jerkily, with none of his usual grace.
One knee was bent too far forward, overextended in its armor plating. “S’imppport...antev’ ree
one... bl’eev... eyem....dead.”

“All the barbarians need to think you are dead,” Millifar said, as if she were repeating his words, as
if she could understand them. She smiled. Her hand reached out, as if she would be forward
enough to take his before formally staking her claim.

She had braided her hair for him, worn the gown for him. Their night should have gone very
differently than this.

Oerin took a step backwards, shaking his head. “No. E’vree’one. Eev’n.... clan.”
“Why?”

“My...moth...zer.”

“Your mother died on Malachor.” The pearls in her hair were set with the precision of stars, constellations in the galaxy their children were to supposed to conquer after they were born. “Everyone knows that? Are you still feverish?” She stepped forward and put her hand on his forehead. Even in the holorecording, the pink of her hand contrasted sharply with the gray of his skin. “No! You’re freezing cold!”

“No.” His breath heaved in and out, as if he were trying hard to be clearer. “Mmm eyem... not cold at...at all. You’re righ’, Mill-lee. Mussbe... runnin... fever.”

“You must be running a fever,” she repeated. Her hands dropped to her side.

XXX

Millifar heard her own breath catch in a sob again. Stupid, stupid. Stupid girl. She’d thought she was done crying over this.

Over him.

“Millifar.” Revan’s voice. “I don’t know what this is, but we’ll... we’ll fix it. I promise.”

“Stupid!” she said out loud. “Just shut up! He’s going to tell you!”

XXX

He was holding her hands now, not wearing his gloves and his hands were mottled and dark and dead and the Millifar in the recording didn’t seem to notice.

“M’ moth-ezz’s not... dead. Sheezz ‘nipulade n’allz ha Jed-eye. She’ got some... scheme... t’stop .....thrise ...ofzah...Truuue...Sithhhh...halfatime, I hard....lee...understanit.” His breath heaved in and out as if by force of will, and then his words became clearer. “I... died, not understandn...it, and she resur...k’ted me...,and here I am. On’lee’m still... dead. And I think my....n’sides are goin...rot soon... ’S’ unpleaz...npleazint.”

“I’m sorry, Oerin.” The Millifar in the recording looked sorry.

XXX

Milifar wiped away her tears. Again. “Stupid,” she mumbled. “I had training to resist this—”

“Oerin’s strong. Was strong. Is.” Her father’s wife said. “You couldn’t, Millifar. I’m not sure I could resist his Force compulsion, if he really tried.”

“I should have.” She rubbed her forehead again. “I should have.”

XXX

He bent forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Me too.” Another agonizing wheeze. “For...get.”

XXX

Xarga made the image freeze, mercifully as Lin walked away from her and not at the moment of
the kiss. Millifar wiped her eyes again.

“You get all that, Revan?” Her father hadn’t asked Millifar if she’d gotten it. He’d only taken her in his arms, even if she was too old and let her cry until all the tears left. Shameful, but they’d never speak of it again.

“I got it.” The woman made a noise like a sob herself. “What kind of Force can—”

“You’re the Jedi,” Millifar snapped. “You tell us.”

“Frack,” muttered the woman who had destroyed their way of life. She said a few other things, in a language that Millifar didn’t know.

“Of course she’s fine,” her father grunted. She felt his hands brush against her arm. “She’s Ordo.”

“Of course, I’m…” Revan stood up, pacing towards the door, as if she thought she had the skill to track the spoor of a dead man months gone. “Who the frack is his mother?”

Canderous shrugged. “Some fracking Jedi. I don’t know.”

“I need to know.” She paced back and forth more. Stupid Third Wife, wasting energy. “Even if I don’t...I need to know. Is there anyone here who would know—anyone who’s even seen her? Any of the headwomen?”

“No,” Millifar snapped. “We’re not ignorant fools, you barbarian. Don’t you think we checked?”

“Millifar.” Her father sighed. Xarga stared at the floor.

“I’m sorry for my outburst,” she muttered. “More with the heart than the head.”

“You are strong,” he told her.

“We’ll fix this,” Revan said. “Somehow. Millifar, I promise.”

“Don’t.” She closed her eyes, but they all kept talking.

“I saw her a few times in the early days of the war,” her father told Revan. “The Fett Lin’s seventh wife was short. She called herself Jana Novasun, and she always wore a mask. It was made of gray cloth. Like all the Republic Jedi.”

XXX

“Hello? Hello?” It had been kind of cool when Revan Starfire restrained his entire body with nothing more than a glance from her smoldering green eyes. It was a little less cool now that the Mandalorians seemed to have shot him with a stunner, knocked him out and then trussed him like a dewback on a spit to a cold durasteel table with a bright light overhead and… forgotten about him?

“Hello?” Therion called again. “Is anyone here? Anyone at all?”

The door slid open. Sadly, it wasn’t Dessa, but it was the next best thing. Aemelie of Ordo, no babies this time. Wearing a robe that was cut too high over her breasts, but still strangely hot.

“My husband wants the boys to practice some interrogation techniques on you,” she said. “But I thought we should speak first.”

“I care about my friends. Your companions,” she murmured. “I noticed… you seemed as reluctant to discuss them with the Third Wife as I was."

“Who?”

She rolled her eyes a little. “Revan. Revan Starfire? Third Wife of Ordo?”

“Oh.” Maybe he should have just rolled over like Pollie herself had, when she’d spun that spice on Biscain on him. Jealous bitch. Except—“You know I hate kids. But theirs is real young. And I don’t want something bad to happen.” He tried to remember their fake names, but the rope cutting into his wrists really fracking hurt. “These bindings are really tight. Does Dessa know I’m here?”

Aemelie looked thoughtful. “This is Ordo business, not Rialis.”

“Well… they just… they just wanted to see their uncle.” Frack if he could remember the uncle’s name either. “The Organa guy.”

“Our people aren’t just warriors,” Aemelie said. “We have… hobbies. My First Wife Gwenarius and her daughter Millifar are skilled at studying the genomes in different humanoid populations. Gwenarius specializes in genetic drift—seeing how certain traits in the humanoid species migrate from one world to another. Dessa asked us to check your genetic traits, and so I sampled you.”

“You did?” He thought back but he couldn’t remember her being in the room when he’d been throwing around any samples. “Wait! Why did she need my genetics? Did I mention I hate kids?”

“The kiss,” she murmured. “And don’t concern yourself. Dessa’s already married. Her husband’s a mercenary on Dantooine. But you are not Alderaanian. Neither is Seriina Wen. In fact, your prints are close, Gwenarius said. Close enough to be cousins, a few generations removed.”

“Wait. You said… First Wife? Your First Wife?” He let the stupid grin fall on his face. “That’s hot.” Seriina Wen. That’s right. Now, if I could just remember what the frack name Seiran used—distant cousins my ass—Strangely, that was kind of hot too, thinking of Polla as a distant cousin. Has to be pretty distant, our mothers don’t even know the same people.

Aemelie frowned at him. “You both share several Corellian markers, but a few of them are rare in contemporary Corellian populations. Recessives that were outbred long ago. You only really see prints like that in colony worlds out on the Rim. Like Deralia.”

“You got me.” He laughed. “We immigrated to Alderaan. You know. Like that… Organa guy.”

“Boon. Boon Organa.”

“Yeah. Him.” He sighed. “What do you want me to say?”

“Absolutely nothing. This is a test,” Aemelie said. “Don’t mention any of this—or anything about them—under questions and I’ll let you live.” She shrugged. “I might even give you back to Dessa.”

“What are you going to do?”

She raised a dark eyebrow. “I’m going to go tell Seriina the bad news about her uncle. Or is it good news?” She shook her head. “I will never understand your culture.”

“That’s mutual, sister,” he muttered. “Don’t—don’t hurt her.”
“Hurt her? Our sons are milk brothers.” Aemelie snorted and shook her head. “Barbarians.”
Chapter 36 / Where Can I Run To, Where Can I Hide

One of the advantages of being a murderer was that the power it bestowed meant Davad no longer needed to sleep. That was also good, because night was the best time for the hunt.

On the summer solstice back home, night and day aligned, and the Dxun moon grew close enough that its atmosphere bled into the sky of their planet; colors of orange and gold mixing with a heartrending blue. That was when Davad, and his brothers, and cousins, and all of their royal escort would mount their great drexl and fly straight up, angling towards that impossible moon, the thread between their worlds. The air would grow thin and their limbs would shake; but they’d still rise, impossibly high—until the moon’s heavier gravity took hold, and the wings of their great beasts would falter and fall, plummeting towards the demon moon suddenly below.

That was the true test of a rider’s skill, to guide a beast through its fear of falling, fear of oblivion; against all of its natural impulses: to command it to spread its great insectine wings and glide, catching the dense air currents, and angling down, slowly, gentle as a lover’s kiss.

Do it wrong, and you would both perish. Like more than one of Davad’s cousins—and his eldest sister.

Do it right, and a feast awaited: a feast for man and beast: roasted cannok and slices of sweet, wild melon. Charred and buttery tubers baked in giant pits with tarja pulp; and stolen glasses of spiced tarja wine. And at the end, as the singers began the last verse of the grand design, the hunters would come home for the real celebration: driving the cart pushed by dalgo, with the massive corpse of the zakkeg surrounded by its dead: tame malraas and rophin and Beast-rider alike, who had fallen in its pursuit.

Although Davad Arkan had left for the Jedi before he came of a hunter’s age, as a prince of Onderon, he had always been given a piece of the great beast’s chewy black heart—raw and feral, like the taste of the hunt in his throat.

He could taste the hunt now, as he stood in the stair near the Knight’s dormitories, all but empty now, save for the stragglers. He preferred to take them sleeping, let them slip into dreams before it all stopped; but footsteps were drawing closer, and his pulse pounded with the emptiness in his belly; the hunger that grew with every death, every rationalization, every time he swore to stop, thought of resisting the call that she had put in him, the thing that she had made him become.

“Knight Arkan?” The man sounded surprised, a little embarrassed to see him there. “I was just... taking a walk.”

“So was I,” Davad told him. There was no fear in the Jedi’s scent: his errand, whatever it had been, was only an assignation, a trip to the kitchens, some random, petty indulgence. This was not one of the conspirators Davad and his master were hunting.

“If you’ll excuse me...?” the man stepped to the side, and Davad matched him, raising an eyebrow.

“Are you sure you want to leave so soon?” He did not need physical contact now, as he had at first;
but he’d found it soothed them. He reached out and caught the other man’s arm.

The Jedi had black eyebrows, and a long, bushy face. His frown made grooves in his beard. “Is there… something you need, Knight Arkan?”

“Yes,” Davad said. “I have trouble sleeping too.” He stepped closer, so that his shoulder brushed against the other man’s chest, their faces, nearly of a height, aligned.

The other man had eyes as dark as his own; widening like prey. His mouth pursed under that mat of hair. “Do you…?”

“Yes,” Davad said. His other hand locked around the man’s waist, and he reached out, inhaling all of it: scent, power, Force. The Jedi staggered on his feet, wide eyes fluttering shut. No time for panic, regret, or fear. A kindness, the only one Davad had left. One of the conspirators, he would have questioned, had to threaten. Followed her orders, the ones stamped upon his soul. But this man was only another meal and there was no reason for prey to suffer.

The comm in his pocket chimed. Once, twice. Insistent. Not now! The man in his arms murmured something, last words that no one cared to hear. Davad drank him deep, trying to ignore how it thrilled him, the flutter of fear, like a drexl’s heart descending the gravity well. He straightened. The corpse slipped out of his hands, slid down a few stairs.

The comm chimed again, as he tried to compose himself, ignore the delicious languor in his limbs, and that nagging need: a desire for more. Just one more?

“You must answer her call when she asks, Beast-Lord. You must be hers, as much as you are hers. Both of them trust you, and in the end, it is both you will betray.”

He didn’t turn around, didn’t want to know if she was really there, or just inside his head. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

“Yes,” he gritted his teeth, straightening his back. “As you wish, Master.”

She chuckled, for once as tangible as he was. “Careful. A broken beast cannot serve me.”

Shut up, he thought. Go back to your games in the Underground. Go back to your secret war.

“Some fire left.” She chuckled again. “Good.”

Davad bared his teeth. “Enough.” He accepted the call—as much to silence his master’s voice as to obey. “Revan.” he tried to adjust the comm’s angle away from the body, away from anything that would give away his location. The schutta behind him could take care of herself. “It’s rather late. Is something wrong?”

XXX

“Nothing will be resolved before morning,” Aemelie twisted a lock of her hair and smiled at Revan. “Did you want to join us tonight in our rooms now, or would you prefer to interrogate the false Alderaanian prisoner first?”

What she wanted to do was scour the Force for traces of Oerin Lin. Find out if it was possible that somehow—in addition to Force ghosts, holocrons, and personality overlays—someone was also raising the dead. But where to begin with that?

For the moment, all plans of assuming her real memories vanished. She kept seeing Millifar’s face,
kept hearing the dead Oerin’s broken voice. *He said his mother, who the frack is his mother?*

“I need a secure room for a comm call,” Revan said. “And then I’ll speak to the prisoner.”

“I’m sure the children would enjoy some interrogation work,” Canderous’s second wife protested, more stridently than Revan expected. “We could easily create a transcript for you.”

“Is there some reason, you don't want me to speak with Therion?” She tilted her head. “Where did you find him again?”

Amelie’s eyes were wide and innocent—and lying, Revan thought. “His ship was stranded. We took him in.”

“You said that.” Revan frowned, but the details had scattered from her mind, upset by the shock of seeing Lin’s corpse, apparently walking around Coruscant with all of the man’s power of illusion and persuasion. “I also… I want my own room tonight.” She tried to remember the proper phrasing in Mandalorian. “On this night may you enjoy our husband’s company, while I plot our next battle.”

Amelie sniffed. “I’ll tell Gwenarius,” she said. “You may use our communications center. It’s down the aft stairs, in the second room on the starboard side.”

The room wasn’t much more than a closet with comms wired into the walls, but she pulled out her own private comm and dialed Davad’s code.

It took several chimes before he answered. “Revan.” His voice was strained. “It’s rather late. Is something wrong?”

“Were you asleep?” She hadn’t considered that. “I’m sorry, but this is important.”

“No, just—” his comm pulled back from his face, revealing a hallway, the edge of a stair. “Just—not the best of times.”

“I won’t be coming tomorrow. In fact, I might be delayed longer than that.” She lowered her voice, glancing at the door. “Something’s come up that I need to resolve.”

*Maybe dead Oerin Lin can go in a coma next to Malak,* her mind mocked. *Isn't that how you resolve the things you can’t resolve?*

“I’m sure whatever it is can be fixed,” he said. His eyes kept fixing on something offscreen. Something she couldn’t see. “How may I help?”

It was a secure comm, and she trusted him. Revan took a deep breath. “I just saw security footage of Oerin Lin. Taken the day after his death.”

"But his body was burned, I thought?” Davad smiled slightly. “You're serious? Where did... where was this walking corpse seen?”

“I didn't say he was walking.” It seemed an obvious point, and yet—

“Well, I assume he wasn't sitting, and if he was merely lying there dead, you wouldn't seem this upset.” Davad’s comm tilted towards a nondescript ceiling, before resolving again with him standing in front of a plain, duracrete wall. “I’m the assistant coroner, Rev. Master Zez was very clear that the body was cremated. Was it just the armor—maybe the armor was all that you saw? I left it for the Mandalorians at the security gate, but in the confusion of the riots, perhaps it was
stolen?”

“No.” Even after the horrors of the Star Forge, all those Jedi trapped in tanks to fuel Malak’s power… somehow, what she’d seen of Oerin seemed worse. “I saw his face. On the recording, he said his mother was a Sith Lord trying to stop the True Sith and he was rotting from the inside out.”

“Fire on the wing, he said all that?” Davad’s face underwent some peculiar contortions. “Who did he say that to?”

“It doesn’t matter. Could it be true? Do you know who his mother is?”

Davad rubbed his temples. His eyes flickered away from her and there was a long pause. “I… might. I have been doing some investigation myself. On the… the missing Jedi from the Temple and—”

“Missing Jedi?”

“Yes.” He stared at her again, the smile fading from his face. “Quite a few, actually. Some missing and some appear to be hiding.”

“You didn’t mention this before.”

He gave her a pained smile. “You had your own concerns.”

Guilt nagged at her. “If I had known, I would have helped. I’ll coming there. Now. Tonight. I can’t take the memories, until I know; but I need to know what’s happened. Can you—” Her mind scattered, trying to think of the Jedi that she could trust… probably trust. “Can you gather our allies. Yuthura Ban. Iridel. Jopheena. Zhar. Vrook—have you heard from him?” She hesitated. “Sheris, as well, if you think she’s sane enough. And Mekel Jin.”

“They may not be all available.” His smile had faded. Suddenly he looked years older, even through the blurry comm, with lines she had not expected in his dark skin.

“Bring who you can.” She didn’t like how troubled he seemed. Like things were even worse than she knew.

Davad Arkan nodded slowly. “I’ll do my best.” He hesitated. “It might be more expedient, if you come alone. The Jedi haven’t forgotten the last time they let a Mandalorian in the Temple.”

Revan ignored that. “Expect us soon.” She cut the comm and stood up, running through the list of possibilities again. I don’t know what this means. Would Sheris? Would… Malak?

Dustil’s body was still unconscious, and no one seemed to know why. There were too many coincidences, too many obstructions. Davad is hiding how bad this really is from me to protect me.

Canderous was already waiting outside the door, dressed in armor, his daughter by his side, also wearing beskar. They had their helms clipped to their belts, but aside from their faces and size, the armor made them almost identical: blunt and immovable objects.

“It’s a matter of honor,” Millifar said, before Revan could say anything at all. “If some schutta did that to Oerin, her life is mine.”

“This might be dangerous—”
The girl lifted her chin, stubbornly. “I have training. I will not be fooled again by dar’jettai tricks.”

Revan looked at Canderous. He nodded slightly. She didn’t want to make Millifar feel foolish by saying anything out loud, so she only nodded back.

“We’re going to the Jedi Temple,” she told them. “If this Sith Lord is there—” is it Arca? Or the Emperor himself?

“Dar’jettai are easy to kill,” Canderous said. He nodded at Millifar, who went to a cabinet inset in the wall. It snapped open, revealing rows upon rows of mines and grenades. Revan’s eyes stretched down the corridor, all lined with similar doors and wondered, with a chill, just how much weaponry the Mandalorians had bought or acquired. They both went to work, unsnapping the plates in their armor’s legs and chest, filling the storage within with grenades. Not for the first time, Revan wondered what happened when such an arsenal was accidentally ignited; but she knew better than to ask.

“Just… give me five minutes,” she said. “To see Therion.”

“Who?” Canderous looked like he genuinely didn’t know.

“The man you shot,” she told him.

“He’s not dead, I told you.”

“But he’s conscious?”

“Aemelie was making sure, before she left.” The Mandalorian shrugged. “She hasn’t commed to say he’s dead, so I assume so.”

“Five minutes,” Revan repeated.

“The barbarian assassin is down the hall,” Millifar muttered. “Don’t take too long, or we’ll go without you.”

XXX

“What are we doing?” Lydie Korr whispered. It was dark in the Archives, and she couldn’t sense anyone close to them, which was terrifying in and of itself, without adding in the way Thalia May was acting, as if someone was hunting them.

“Put this on,” her friend whispered.

Even in the near dark, Thalia didn’t look entirely recovered. Her face shone with a layer of sweat, and her fingers was too warm when they pressed something long and flat into Lydie’s hands.

“A belt?”

“Stealth belt, the switch is here.” Thalia’s fingers pulled hers on top of something small and silvery under the buckle. “Put it on first. It needs a body’s electrical field to work.”

Lydie didn’t argue. She didn’t question. What they’d seen in the last few weeks had driven away most—if not all—of her curiosity. She’d seen the dead lying in the halls of the Jedi Temple. Officially, they’d all died of plague.

But when Master Croi had called out a warning to her in the Force, he didn’t sound sick, he’d only sounded frightened. Her Fosh master had been over five hundred years old. What was there left to
be frightening to him?

She’d found Padawan Aleek on the stairs. It almost looked like the Rodian had slipped and fallen… if you ignored the fact that there was a giant… hole inside of her where the Force should have been. No marks on her body at all, but where she had once been, where there had once been a warm, generous spirit who shared her sweets with Lydie after History Class, there was now just… nothing.

Like a hole in the Force. Like a death in the Force itself. Like the death of the Force itself.

And the others. The sick ones in the Medix who were supposed to get better, and then one day, they were just… gone.

*Don’t think of their names. Don’t remember Master Iridel, or your own Master Croi. Don’t remember Padawan Aleek, or Knight Devry, of Apprentice Sansi. Don’t remember Padawan Rappertunie or your old roommate Aishie Sez, who both went to the clinics yesterday and never came back—*

Officially, everything was fine.

And sometimes, especially when she was working at the Medix helping Master Loanin and Padawan Jorde, Lydie thought things were fine too. But then she’d see something out of place, like the empty apprentice dorm, or the blank lecture schedule and everything would *shift*… and then she’d suddenly feel like she was waking up from a dream with a panic so black that all she wanted to do was run away.

*Something—or someone is very wrong here. Something is clouding our minds. Obvious to everyone left. There were rumors that other Enclaves, on other planets, had even closed for good. And Master Atris, who once kept these Archives humming with color and light, had taken all of her personal effects and half the Jedi’s databanks and just… disappeared. No one seemed to know where she had gone. No one seemed to even care.*

Aunt Marla had told Lydie to watch and listen. Aunt Marla being here was really the only reason Lydie was still here. That, and she had nowhere else to go. Aunt Marla wasn’t afraid. And if Master Korr wasn’t frightened, then neither was Padawan Korr.

Her still being here had absolutely nothing to do with a black-eyed Padawan who’d never even woken up from his coma, just like the ghost of Darth Malak, who was maybe still in Dustil Onasi’s body in the bacta tank beside him. It had nothing to do with the shadows under Master Loanin’s gray eyes; although those worried her too.

Azen Loanin never voiced any thought that anything was wrong, but sometimes he closed his research logs, when she approached. And his Padawan, Mical Jorde, who was barely younger than Azen himself, was one of the missing now. Stranger still, Master Loanin didn’t seem concerned, or sad about it at all.

“This is dangerous,” Thalia warned her. “But I dreamed it. I think you’ll be okay, Lydie Korr. I think we both will.”

Lydie lowered her voice. “Where are we going? You said you’d tell me when we got to the Archives.”

“There.” Her friend pointed at the terminals, as dark and blank as the rest of the archives across the room. “Practice turning the stealth belt on and off. Use your fingers, not the Force. The Force
might not… work.”

Because it’s dying? Is the Force dying here? Could that happen? In Master K’timshi’s Treatise on the Phenomenology of Energy Exchange, he posited that the Force was a finite entity. Could we run out? Is that why the Jedi are dying too?

“We didn’t have to come here to use the nets. I have a term in my room. My… Master Korr gave it to me.” The unsaid suggestion, Lydie thought, was that it was safer for Lydie to use the terminal in her room than to come to a dark and empty place like this, when Padawans kept vanishing all over the place.

“No,” Thalia murmured. “It has to be here.”

“Why?” She was already fastening the belt and flicking the switch. She watched her hand in front of her vanish and reappear.

“It’s better if you don’t know.” Thalia took a deep breath, and handed Lydie a small slip of plimsi. “I dreamed this would work,” she murmured, almost more to herself than to Lydie. “Switch on one of the terminals. Look up the names I gave you. Read what you find. Think about what you find. But if you see anyone… especially a man—or something that looks like a man—I need you to turn on the stealth belt and run. Don’t think. Just run. As fast as you can. Just… get away. Fast.”

“Where are you going?” For it was obvious now that Thalia was going to leave her in this dark and terrifying place that had once been Lydie’s favorite place in the galaxy when the room had been full of color and light. “What do you mean, ‘something that looks like a man?’ Like a Human man? A Twi’lek man?” You can’t mean a Zabrak man because Padawan Reeves was the only one here —

“Not Human. Not anymore,” Thalia said. “I don’t know his name now, only what it will be.” Then, she did something strange. She kissed Lydie on the lips, before Lydie could stop her. And before Lydie had time to think about it, she was kissing Thalia back.

Kissing Thalia May was different than kissing Devn Rappertunie, or how she’d imagined kissing Mekel Jin would feel. Thalia’s lips were soft and full, and too warm, just like the rest of her. It wasn’t bad-different either. When Thalia’s forehead brushed against her horns, Lydie’s breath caught, and her own hand tightened on the other woman’s arm.

But then Thalia pulled away. “Thank you,” she said, as if Lydie had done her a favor.

“If you were trying to infect me with plague too, the science says it won’t work.” That woman who looked like Revan, Padawan Loran, had lectured them all endlessly about the plague when she worked in the Medix. Lydie had heard about how Zabrak couldn’t catch it at least a dozen times.

When things seemed normal enough to be annoyed by another person, Lydie couldn’t stand Sheris Loran. Of course, now Padawan Sheris Loran spent her days in the Underground Clinics, and probably gave lectures to all the sentients down there instead.

“No.” Thalia’s eyes were a strange blue-green that didn’t match the rest of her Human phenotype. Her lashes curled up at the ends, Lydie had never noticed that before. “I was just afraid I wouldn’t have another chance.”

“I’m sure you’ll kiss lots of people…” Lydie felt her face heat like a Human’s. She was pretty sure her horns were flushed red.

“No,” said Thalia May. “I won’t.”
Most Onderonite curses involve beasts: whether casting aspersions about your enemies’ wingspan, or wishing the eggs of their drexl develop a fungal rot. After speaking to Revan, Oerin had time to mutter several under his breath, while the Jedi in front of him stared vacantly through dead eyes at the ceiling.

Already, he’d forgotten the man’s name. At first, he'd remembered each one, starting with that Padawan he'd had to knock unconscious in the kitchens to help Oerin Lin escape. Upon returning, the boy had seen him, and all that Davad meant to do was make him forget; but when his mind touched the child’s, there was something so—something so primal: like when a bonded beast takes the first mating flight. He could still remember the taste of blood from that experience in his own mouth—and really, what happened next was hardly any different. He hungered, and so he reached for a source to end that hunger—like scratching a sweet itch—and then he was sated and the Miralukan was gone, almost as if he had never existed.

Guilt had followed, at first nearly too much to bear; even as his master’s whispers kept reminding him that what they did was necessary to fight the war-yet-to-come; that this strange power of his was a gift, not a curse. (And was it forged from Malachor? Or merely the true manifestation of any Beast-rider’s strength? They, who brought the Force into the beasts they controlled: could they all consume it from all the living instead?)

And seeing the hunger sated—for perhaps the first time in his life since he’d abandoned his drexl and his crown to follow the path of the Jett’ai: a noble quest for knowledge at first just meant to stop his people from accidentally stumbling into more repositories of dark side power—which for some reason, Onderon was full of—was like hearing the end to a poem Davad had been trying to end all of his life. Sate a hunger that had never left: one that food, drink, sex, or fighting had never touched.

He’d been taught all of his life that the Force was in all living things; but now he knew: the Force was life. And, maybe ever since Malachor, he had been starving for it, starving to fill himself with something, after all of that death.

“That was too close.” Her voice. Also too close. Davad felt her physical presence behind him, but he didn't turn around. Half the time when he did, she wouldn't be there at all. “You shouldn't have taken this one. Not here—not in this hallway.”

“She saw nothing.” He bent down and lifted the body, not bothering to close the eyes or say any of the prayers he’d said once. Already the hunger was rising again. It was getting worse: one used to last for days, and now he was never quite sated. Now, some days he took two. Once, three.

“We must plan our movements carefully, Apprentice. This is not time for missteps.”

Davad laughed, “Did you hear what she said? About your boy? He was seen.”

“All the more reason for you to be cautious. We have not finished with this place—nor will we until all life within is gone, replaced by the echoes of its fall. Such a void will attract Tenebrae’s attention, and then—”

“She’s coming now. Tonight. Soon.” He choked back another laugh. “And I’m starving. What if I can't control myself with her, Master? All your efforts, and your apprentice eats your precious Revan Starfire.” He exhaled. When he tried, he could sense her easily, moving closer. She shone like a star in Force. He’d had her, he knew her, but all of that was nothing to what he wanted from her now.
“You will not,” she commanded. “Control your base impulses, lest you become a beast in truth.”

Davad closed his eyes. “Oh, we’re far past that.” It had been better when Oerin was here too, brief as that period had been. Better when Oerin was alive. Better when she had been far away on her own planet, driving pathetic to pawns to madness instead of him.

An alarm interrupted, strangely prosaic. One of the perimeter sensors he’d set around the now-empty archives. He had been weeding out the Jedi strong enough to still be curious for weeks.

“The Force has given you an offering,” his master said. Even without turning he could see her expression: those clouding eyes, that cruel smile on her face. “Take what you find in the archives quickly.”

“Are you ready, then?” He asked. “Ready to face Revan?”

“She will not be Revan for much longer.” Her steps came closer and her hand gripped his shoulder, a vise grip—and, yet oddly maternal, like Gaia, the queen of Onderon, had never been. “Put down your burden, Beast-Lord. Knight Qal’Istal does not care if his shell lies here, or in your warehouse of corpses. He is beyond your reach.”

Davad looked down at the woman’s face. Unremarkable. “But someone might see.”

“Now is the time for them to see, if they have eyes.” She chuckled. “But they will not. Even this will be explained.” She laughed again. “Go.”

XXX

“I told you,” Seiran said. He didn't sound smug about it, only scared. As scared as Polla was.

“Damnit,” she whispered, adjusting the rifle scope, and increasing magnification. The auto target kept trying to lock onto the taller, armored figure; but she jerked it back again, focusing the sight on the dark, curly-haired woman, who walked across the Underground plat like she was on a mission.

“I count six,” her husband said, standing next to her with the pair of bi-nok goggles. “If that's not a Mandalorian hunting party, I don't know what is.”

“I'm glad you made us change hotels.” Not that she felt a lot safer across the street from where Aemelie Ordo had left them before heading off to see her Mandalorian Clan and Darth fracking Revan probably; but at least they had a clear line of sight.

Her finger hovered on the trigger. It would be an easy shot to make. Killing sentient beings probably wasn't any harder than shooting a trawler deer, right? But she would have to take out all six of them—

And I thought you were my friend, Aemelie. I thought you were my friend.

“I took the charge pak out,” Seiran said, as if he’d read her mind. “Don't do anything crazy. We paid off the desk, and I hacked the room panel to put us in here. Even if they guess the hotel, they won't know the room number.”

“Why did I even bring us to this stinking planet?” Polla let the rifle fall for a sec, and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry, Seiran. This was a huge mistake.”

“You always wanted to see the center of the universe.” He snorted. “So did I, to be honest.”
“Now, we’ve seen it.” The towers had been pretty enough, but not that different from the ritzy parts of Corellia, or Corulag or Kuat. And the Underground… they might as well be in Nar—except it smelled even worse.

The place they were staying cost 200 credits a night and it was a dump.

True, Polla had to allow that sheer terror was probably affecting her opinion; but at least on Nar Shaddaa she’d never been hunted by a Mandalorian hunting party.

“I thought they were our friends,” she repeated lamely. Of course, that was before they’d seen a report about a ‘disturbance’ at the Skypalace, the hotel the Mandalorians had taken over. That was before Therion’s comm had gone dark, as had the media contact he’d promised to introduce them to. That was before Aemelie Ordo had pinged Polla’s comm six times, ‘just to find out how she was.” That was when they changed hotels, her own paranoia matching Seiran’s, for once. That was when they’d gone to ground and set up a guard rotation, just like they were running sweeps at summer camp as kids back home—planning for the revolution that had never come.

As if summoned, her comm chimed again. “Frack.” She glanced at it. To her surprise, the number was actually Therion’s.

“It’s him,” she told Sei.

“They’ve got Therion,” she told Seiran. “This is bad—really bad.”

“That media contact of your ex’s…” his voice trailed off. “Did Therion give you an address?”

Polla nodded. “Yes. Some kind of hotsheet place. Level 47?” She shook her head. “Sublevel 47?”

“That’s… about fifteen levels down from here. I think there’s public lifts and some stairs? Do you remember which sector?”

“This one.” She gritted her teeth. “That’s why Therion picked the place across the street for us. He said this was the closest safe part of town to Arca—where we wouldn’t get rolled.”

“It’s not gonna get any closer if we don’t move.” Polla was already gathering up everything she could, trying to ignore the panic in her chest. Panic and guilt.

Abasen whimpered a little. He had been fussy ever since they checked in. She glanced down at him, still in his black and red sling, wrapped around her shoulders. “Shhh,” she soothed.

“Just take the essentials,” Seiran told her. “We need to travel light.” He reached up and undid his topknot, hair falling awkwardly over his eyes. “We also need to blend in.”

Polla nodded, and fished the band out of her own hair. Resting Abasen on her hip, she ran her fingers over the heavy rifle Seiran had given her ages ago. Too heavy. “Good-bye,” she told it. “I’m sorry we can’t take you with us.”
All these things left behind: their farm, her parents, their lives—

Her husband laughed. “It's just a gun.”

She wiped her eyes. “It's not the gun, Sei—it’s the principle.”

“Here. Take these for your principles.” Seiran handed her the light blaster, and her throwing knives. “Like shooting a trawler,” he said—again. “If it comes to it, don’t hesitate. Aim to kill. For Abasen.”

Therion’s comm began ringing again. Polla tossed it down the fresher and hit flush.

XxX

“I have five minutes,” Revan told the Deralian. “Then I have to leave. Then I'm turning you over to the Mandalorians, who like to practice interrogation techniques, even if you don’t have anything useful to say.”

“There’s enough of me to go around, Princess.” Even strapped to a chair, Therion D’Cainen was irrepressible. He actually fracking winked.

She paced in front of him, hands behind her back. “You know how the Force works? Anything I want to know, I can just rip from your mind. Anytime.”

He stared at her and blinked. There was a long pause.

“Three minutes now,” Revan snapped. “Tell me why you're here. Is it revenge for her?”

“You mean Pollie?” He snorted. “Don't try and bluff the spacer who taught her to play pazaak. You can't read my mind, or you’d have kicked me in the choobs. You can’t read banthashit.”

“Then why?” She took a step backwards. “Surely, you don't think you’ve got a shot with me.”

“Sweet of you to offer, babe, and the red hair is hot, but no. I’m here for credits. This producer offered me a enough to buy a sweet ride, if I shared my stories about all of our good times.” He winked. “You gonna begrudge Polla’s ex a fortune? Or do you want a cut?”

“You can't,” she blurted out, before thinking it through. “There's too much about her and the rest of them on the nets now. You can't add more.”

“Pollie always wanted to be famous.” He smirked, looking her up and down. “Guess you know that. So what’s the problem?”

“You want me to buy you off?” Not that it would work, he'd just come back for more; and he’d always be a risk to them—frack, if he still has those vids from Zeltros—

She didn’t want to kill him, even as a part of her brain argued that was the only way to eliminate all the risk.

“Now you're blushing! Kinda cute. Pollie never did that. Do you turn red all over? Or just your face?”

“Your girlfriend is dead. What's wrong with you?” A colder part of her mind was already done with this. Polla and her family already ran. What’s the worst he can do? Is it bad enough that I should kill him?
“What’s your angle?” He frowned. “You seem pretty involved, worrying about a dead smuggler's reputation.”

“I just want to make sure she’s… remembered well.”

“Didn’t you kill her through?” He raised an eyebrow. “That’s what everyone's saying.”

“And you'd rather they were watching your Zeltros vid?”

“Now that’s personal.” He paused. “Which Zeltros vid? I go there a lot.”

“Only once with Polla.” He was still grinning like an ass, like he had all the time in the world. Before he could retaliate with another cheap shot, Revan continued. “Whoever you’re selling to, we’ll triple it. Sign the rights to my father-in-law’s production studio and you’ll be a rich man. Don't sign and I’ll… I’ll tell Suvam Tan what really happened with those mites.”

He snorted. “Wow. Being as you’re the Sith Lord, I wasn't expecting the same tired threats.”

“I’m no Sith. And they aren't threats.” She twisted her hand and his bonds fell free, restraints clattering on the floor. “I’ll tell Malachi’s counsel to expect you in the morning. Go to 100 Thantos One. Legal’s on the hundred and eighth floor.”

“You're letting me go?” For a second, all the bravado dropped, and Revan said a glimpse of the man that Polla had actually loved. “All you want is a cut of the action?”

“And for you to keep her face out of it. From what I remember you never recorded much with her face anyway. Maybe you could find an actress… someone who looks more like—” She tried to think of something he’d believe—anything to keep Polla’s face from being plastered everywhere. “Someone who looks more like me.” Plenty of vids like that with my face already.

Therion rubbed his wrists, smirking. “If that’s how you want it. Course I’m gonna have to let Arca down slow. You know how those Exchange—”

“Stop.” She waved her hand and he did, all of him, every muscle. Revan started at him for a moment, as the color in his face deepened, before she realized he couldn’t really breathe. Frack. Stars. Hell.

“Huhhhh—” he made a strange exhaling noise and then gasped. “What the frack was that for?”

“You're working with Arca? You've met her?”

“Not… personally,” Therion said. “But Suvam Tan introduced us.”

She blinked at him. Why? It doesn’t matter. “You're staying here. When I get back, I'll deal with you.”

“Fine.” He held up a hand. “Can I at least have my comm back? Or… hey, can you send Dessa in?”

Blonde from Rialis, a part of her mind suggested. Credits to spice he's fracking her six ways still Seventhday.

“No comms.” She turned to leave.

“Dessa?” Incredibly, he sounded hopeful still.
“Get bent, Therion,” Revan slid the door shut behind her.

XXX

Both of Lydie Korr’s hearts were pounding in her chest. Thalia’s footsteps had trailed away, heading up the spiraling staircase to one of the mezzanine levels.

Maybe this is some lighthearted prank? Like the time Mekel Jin and Dustil Onasi reprogrammed the practice droids to all sing Sith marching songs?

Lydie Korr stood up cautiously, one hand on the stealth belt and the other on the bookshelf in front of her. It held actual books: ancient, and bound. Several thousand had been saved from the ruins of Ossus before the Cron cluster’s implosion had destroyed that, and several other systems.

The six meters to the terminals felt like an eternity. Already, she felt like she was being watched—not in the Force, but along every nerve of her body. She’d been half-convinced that the terminal wouldn’t turn on, but it did. Only then, did she look down at the piece of plimsi Thalia had handed her.

On it, a list of names:

* Jana Novasun
* Janna Novasun
* Vima Sunrider
* Arren Kae
* Kreia Lin
* Darth Traya

This is the strangest research assignment I’ve ever had, she thought, as she began typing them in, tagging each for the cross-reference.

XXX

They had reached sublevel 40 when Abasen’s wails became impossible to ignore, each one sending a jolt of anxiety through her core. Their son was crying so hard, he’d turned bright red.

And then he started to cough.

He wasn’t the only one coughing either. It was crowded down here, more crowded than anything Polla Organa had ever seen outside a club. The streets were womprat warrens of domed sidewalks, curving around giant, rusting durasteel structures that looked like mechanical conduits fueling energies from both above and below. Every few hundred meters starburst intersections supported tiny, artificial suns. Some were too bright and blinding and others so dim she suspected sabotage. The crowd was a beast by itself and she was no longer sure they were going the right way, going any way at all, as it pushed them forward.

Abasen coughed again.

“Git that looked at,” a woman next to Polla said. Her cheeks had two orange circles on them, and lekku were crudely tattooed with symbols that looked Exchange… if the Exchange didn’t have
professional artists capable of doing real work,

“The air down here sucks,” Polla told her. “What happened to the scrubbers?”

Seiran pressed her other arm, warningly.

“The air down here sucks? Sucks?” the Twi’lek laughed. “You used to better, huh?” She made a lewd gesture. “Suck it up, hayseed. Yer kids gonna die.”

“What?” She cradled him closer.

“He’s got it, huh? You think I dunno? The Jedi Plague. Fracking Underground shake.” The Twi’lek chuckled darkly again, and then began to cough herself.

Polla took a step back.

“I heard they’re lettin folks with kids to the front of the line,” a man behind them said. He was coughing too, great, jagged coughs that sounded like someone gasping.

“I read that it’s pretty hard to catch,” Seiran said. He was standing behind her now, his body a lean, protective shield against those pushing from behind.

“Maybe uptown,” the Twi’lek said, coughing again. “Trick is get the vax. But you know that. Thasswhy yer in this line, yeah?”

“What?” Polla stood on her toes, trying to see ahead of them, but all she could see was more crowd.

“There’s some kind of clinic up there.” Seiran was taller and he could see. He bent down now, to her ear. “Maybe we should—”

“I got kids!” A female voice behind them called out. Polla turned and saw an exhausted-looking Neimoidian, trailed by three children old enough to walk, and young enough to still sticker onto their mother’s arms. “Lemme through.”

“Follow her,” the Twi’lek urged Polla. “They have to see you first.”

Polla looked down at her son. His cheeks were bright red now and his crying had trailed off into an unhappy whimper. In the context, it made her blood run cold. She’d heard about the Plague that was sweeping Coruscant—who hadn’t? But she’d thought it was reserved for poor people—and Jedi.

“I think he really does have a fever,” she muttered to Seiran.

“We don’t have... Idchips,” Seiran told someone behind her. “Does that... is that okay? We... lost them. In a fire.”

“Lotta fires down here. They won’t givafrack. Won even ask.”

The Neimoidian and her spawnlets had cleared room through the crowd, and so it was fairly easy to travel through in their wake. Polla looked back, as Seiran trailed behind, elbowing a few sents to keep up. He reached her, just as they reached what seemed to be a clinic entrance; nothing more than a mudset archway into a wall, and what looked like another line within.

“Hello,” said a purple-skinned Twi’lek. A purple-skinned Twi’lek wearing Jedi robes and carrying a bondafide lightsaber. She smiled at Polla and Seiran as if it was the most normal thing in the galaxy. “Padawan Loran is seeing parents and children upstairs.” She gestured to a second door:
small, unmarked, and offset from the main entrance. It was open and the Neimoidian and her children were already vanishing inside, up a curving set of stairs.

“You’re… Jedi,” Polla said.

“Yes.” Violet eyes scanned her face, which was thankfully, like Seiran’s, half-covered by goggles. “We’re Jedi and we’re here to help.” The Jedi, who looked like one of those ones from the vids about Revan, glanced down at Abasen. “He’s going to be fine,” she assured Polla.

“What about plague?” Even if this was one of the Jedi from the vids, she hadn’t seemed to react, and Polla had to know. “The people in line said it’s plague.”

“It doesn’t affect children,” the Twi’lek told her, which sounded like utter banthashit, like something they’d made up to stop panic.

“Right,” Polla muttered. “Maybe I should get the doctor’s advice. You guys have an actual doctor? Or just a bunch of Jedi?”

The Twi’lek touched her arm and Polla jerked it back. The woman frowned at her. “I assure you, Padawan Loran has had extensive experience with this contagion. Perhaps she can reassure you herself.”

“Not a lot of Jedi where we’re from,” Seiran added. “No offense.”

“None taken, of course.” The woman’s eyes had already moved past them, to a man holding up his wife who looked like she was about six shades away from being a log at a funeral. He didn’t seem so great either.

Seiran followed Polla’s glance and then pulled her upstairs.

XXX

WRITINGS OF DARTH TRAYA// ACCESS Jedi Archives. All access restrictions have been lifted. All information is free to access. Do you want to proceed with this query? y/n

y

Some say there has always been a Darth Traya, for has there not always been one betrayed? For every betrayal, is there not an equal reaction, certain as a fulcrum in the Force itself? Not revenge—no, nothing so petty and mundane. Revenge is a tool for scripters; a pathetic, cringing excuse for a motive. What I seek is not revenge for the wrong that was done to me: I seek an end to the means that allowed it. And this is not a selfish act: success will bring me no reward except death. But perhaps, the galaxy, being free of the Force that suspends all laws of physics and physiology, will finally be free to let true nature take its own course. The strong will be strong for their own merits, and the weak will certainly be no worse than they are now.

There had been so many entries. Vima Sunrider alone had over a thousand external links, each leading to increasingly contradictory sites. Finally, Lydie had started grouping the information into common search patterns. There were only fifty listings, for example, that cross referenced “Janna” (or “Jana”) Novasun with anything to do with Sunrider.

And then, if she narrowed the field further, only five of those mentioned Arren Kae, the presumed lover of the Echani General Yusanis during the Mandalorian Wars.
For Darth Traya, all she found was a paragraph.

“Are you some kind of test?”

Her hearts seemed to freeze. Don’t turn around, don’t turn around. “What?” Lydie was proud of how calm her voice sounded.

“You must be some kind of test. Lydie, is it? Padawan Korr?” The man’s voice paused. “Master Korr’s niece?”

Too late, Lydie thought of Thalia’s warning. But her head was already turning and all that she was saw was—

“Knight Arkan.” She let out a sigh of relief. Davad Arkan had been a great help to his old master, Zez Kai-El, ever since the older man had started having attacks of palsy. With all of the death in the Jedi Temple lately, she wasn’t sure how they could run the coroner’s office without him.

“Were you expecting someone else?” He glanced behind them, and then back and her, and then shrugged. “The archives seem rather empty of late.”

“This used to be my favorite place,” she said.

“Not mine.” He snorted. “Although trust me, I spent years in these stacks.”

“You did?” He was one of the Returns, one of the Selkath prisoner Jedi, even. No one really talked about him (no one was really left to talk, they all must be down in the sublevels healing the sick, there must be so many sick); but Davad Arkan was—

“You were in the Mandalorian wars?”

“Of course.” She’d surprised him again, she could tell by the puzzlement growing on his face. “As I said, I spent years in these stacks. My master was Vima Sunrider, and she ran the place with an iron fist… when she wasn’t off chasing bigger game.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I know.” His eyes were a strange brown color that was more yellow than brown. “You’re so very young. But strong. Strong in the Force.”

“Not really.” Were her horns flushed again? How embarrassing.

“Really.” His smile flashed. White teeth in a dark face. “Especially compared to your friend upstairs.”

“My friend upstairs?” She frowned.

“I know she’s there,” he shrugged. “The sensor triggered two bodies, not just one. These archives are restricted. We can’t just have Padawans wandering here.”

“Of course you can’t.” That seemed reasonable, although she’d thought Knight Arkan was Zez Kai-El’s assistant. And—

“I thought your master was Master Kai’El. I didn’t know there was a Master Sunrider.” She frowned. “Vima Sunrider?” A name from the lists. A name from children’s holostories. Lydie hadn’t even thought she was real until she’d seen all of those cross-references. Like a bad equation. If Jana Novasun is Janna Novasun is Vima Sunrider is Arren Kae....
Why is the last name on the list Darth Traya?

He nodded at the terminal in front of her. “Naturally, that research on your board is mere coincidence.”

The horn buds on her temples throbbed. Her indentations prickled. “I like history.”

“So do I.” He took a few steps closer. “I thought the history of my own planet was fascinating. “So many struggles between light and dark, like beasts fighting for supremacy.”

“You're from Onderon.” Lydie nodded. His eyes seemed to reflect the light of the terminal screen, making them almost… glow. “There’s a theory that the Beast-Riders are all descended from the children of Freedon Nadd, a Sith Lord who began a rebellion—”

“It's no theory.” He reached out and touched her shoulder. “Sometimes I… sometimes I feared that taint was in all of us. In me. It’s why I tried to be a good Jedi.”

“You are a good Jedi.” Lydie felt dizzy, felt her legs tremble; but then he held her up, kept her standing. Helpful, like a good Jedi would.

“No.” He wrapped his arms around her, but it wasn't like kissing Thalia, or brushing against Mekel Jin’s shoulder. This time, Lydie didn't feel a spark so much as an easing of tension, slipping into a warm bath and letting go. “Beasts don't really fight for supremacy, you know. It's simpler than that.”

“What?” Her voice was weak now, a bare whisper.

“They fight for food.” His embrace made her ribs creak, her heartbeats slow. “Because they’re hungry.”

Xxx

“Please, come in,” a female voice said. “There's nothing to fear.”

Nothing except fear for Abasen. In the time it had taken Seiran to write up their medical records and give them to the gleaming white meddroid in the waiting room, their son had fallen back asleep. But he was whimpering now in his dreams, and wheezing in a way that Polla really didn't like. Didn't like enough to let her family come in range of a Jedi for the first time since her accident.

“I'm just worried he might be—is it the plague?” She started talking as soon as she entered the room, babbling at the beige-robed woman, with a mask covering the lower half of her face, and a loose surgeon’s cowl over her hair.

“It's not the plague,” the woman said. Her accent was strange, like upper-crust Coruscant mixed with something wilder. “Trust me. He's much too young. May I see?” She held out her hands, and Polla carefully unsnapped Abasen from his self-cleaning blanket—and held him out.

One of the women’s hands was artificial, made of some gold metal, but it cradled his body gently, as her other fingers traced a line down his forehead to his chest. “A little fever. Have you been to any new planets recently?”

“We have been travelling,” Polla admitted.

“How do you know it's not the plague?” Seiran demanded.
The medix looked up at them. Her eyes were bright green, like all the vids of Revan’s eyes. Polla hadn’t expected to ever see that color in a real person. “The virus doesn’t affect children. Not before puberty. He might be a carrier now, but he won’t get sick. Have you all been vaccinated?”

“No. If it’s not plague, then what does he have?” Polla pressed. Some small relief at least.

“I think it’s just an immune response. Common, when you bring children this young to an entirely new ecosystem. New germs, new…” the woman’s voice faltered for a moment and she blinked. “New everything. I… forget the technical term. But he’ll be fine. What about the two of you?”

“We’re not sick,” Polla told her. “And we’ll skip the Jedi drugs, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Not drugs. Vaccine. You can’t afford to skip it.” The woman sighed. “Are you planning on returning to Deralia in the future?”

“We’re not from Deralia,” Polla said. Something in her chest seemed to freeze.

“One of the other Outlier satellites? Regardless, there’s no plague there now. But if you’re exposed, and you don’t get that vaccine, you’ll be carriers. Do you want to spread it there, before the Republic inoculates the system?”

“The Republic can stick it up their ass if they think they’re gonna vaccinate entire planets—” now that she knew Abasen wasn’t dying, Polla’s indignation returned, spiked by a little fear.

“What made you think my wife’s Deralian?” Seiran interrupted, in one of the worst Core accents Polla had ever heard.

The Jedi handed Abasen back to Polla. She was frowning now, staring at Polla’s chest, covered by the sling and the self-cleaning eridu blanket-bunting. When Polla stuck him into it, her son squirmed: he’d outgrow it soon.

“Here—” the medix put her hands over Polla’s holding Abasen up as Polla fumbled with the straps. “No. Not like that. It should expand at the base if you pull it down.”

“Huh?”

“Here.” The medix bent forward. They were exactly the same height. Polla could see a strip of red hair, at the crown, where her cowl rested on her skull.

She heard her breath draw in sharply, and the other woman looked up. “You’re frightened.” She nodded. “Oh. It happens a lot.”

Her fingers moved a little and Abasen slid down into his newly-expanded sling. She stepped back and pulled down the mask, pulled off the cowl.

In person, Revan Starfire looked a lot younger than Polla had expected. And her hair was long, coiled in two tidy braids and looped down her back. A faint smile crossed her lips. “I don't bite.”

No, you just ruin lives. Polla stared back, throat dry with fear.

Those green eyes stared into hers and she braced for the confrontation she expected, she’d dreamed of—played out in her head half a dozen ways already; but the Jedi—Revan—just kept staring back. A frown sketched between her eyebrows again.

“I don’t care if you lie about being Deralian—one of my best friends was from Deralia and I’d
know the accent anywhere. I don't care if you're frightened of me—given recent events, I'm sure the sight of Revan Starfire's face inspires many strong reactions on your planet...." Her voice trailed off and one delicate, red eyebrow raised. "What I really want to know is why your son is wearing a blanket with the D'Reev crest."

XXX

Dreaming it wasn't the same as seeing. The vision of her nightmares: the shadow of the man, surrounded by black, and Lydie's body, collapsed in his arms. Feeling that moment—that death of the Force happening even now. Was her friend still alive? Were her lips still warm?

In her dreams, she saved the girl, but what if Thalia was too late?

*I was wrong before. I was wrong about Oerin Lin. What I did made it worse.*

Try to change one future and all of the others shift. She had stopped one kind of conquest, only to usher in these shadows; reveal a path that led even more inexorably towards that room, and the man and the broken thing on the bed.

“Nihilus.” It would be his name, but it wasn’t yet. She’d dreamed of him as a shadow, but now she knew the man he had been. This one. Knight Davad Arkan, a former prince of Onderon.

His head turned, and for a moment, he had no face at all: just a black well of stars, and a voiceless roar, like hundreds screaming. *The future again. The one I can’t stop.*

“The other one.” He dropped Lydie Korr, and her friend rolled to the side. One hand twitched, life there still, but oh, in the Force—her friend felt like a ghost. “The friend upstairs. Tell me, little girl, what was the purpose of this little exercise?”

Thalia had been told what to say, how to dissemble; but she’d dreamed other words, and it was those that she used.

“I know you have the mask of Mandalore. You’ll paint it white, like a zakkeg skull. Do you know that too? Is that why you kept it?”

He froze.

“It’s okay,” she murmured. “Your master is busy. My master is keeping her busy. My master will try and stop her—”

“Try?” She saw the hesitation, his features resolved into a face again, and something like hope in his expression.

“All we can do is try,” Thalia told him. “I’m trying to save Lydie. Is she dead?”

He glanced down, and she saw the horror cross his face, as the man he still was still Jedi enough for regret. She’d seen that expression in her dreams a hundred times before: it made no difference. A demon is no less dangerous for its conscience.

“Not… yet.” He took a reluctant step away from the prone body. “Take her. Take her now and run.”

“I can’t.” She wanted to. “I dreamed of you. Of this.”

“You’re Padawan May,” he said. “Thalia May. One of the Korriban students. The one from Ziost.”
“Why did you keep the mask?” she asked. *Stall him for time,* Jopheena had said. That much, Thalia would do.

“The mask of Mandalore the Ultimate was lost on the Dxun moon. Mandalore the Ultimate died eaten by beasts, beasts controlled by *my* father. Therefore it’s mine.”

“So it’s the Mandalorians you want?” She hadn’t expected that.

He smiled slightly, grimly. “It would be… easier to live among them. No Force sensitives. But no, it’s too late for all of that. She’s in my head. I have to do what she wants.” He looked at Lydie again, and his face twisted. “I don’t want to kill them, but I can’t stop.”

“No.” Thalia shook her head. “You can oppose her. Resist. In my dreams you do.”

“You’re the seer,” he nodded. “One of the ones she wants alive.” He glanced down at the girl on the ground. “She wanted her too.”

“For his shadows.” Thalia shook her head. “Knives in the dark. She won’t have either of us. Either you kill us here and be lost; or you’ll defeat her.”

She had dreamed that much, seen the architect of the unraveling in a dark place, beset upon by her own apprentices. She had seen the woman, Darth Traya, Vima Sunrider—women of a thousand names blinded. She had seen her lose.

But she had not seen her die. That was beyond the veil.

The man who would become a monster, become the death of worlds, took another, shuddering breath. “Do you know where he is? Oerin?”

“No,” Thalia May said. “But I dreamed where he will be.”

XXX

“What?” The woman gaped at her, clutching her son, and taking a step back. “I don't know what you mean!”

“That blanket has the D’Reev crest.” *Malachor had one like that. When he was small enough to carry, that was so long ago now, that he was as small as their son.*

“We found it,” the man said quickly. His voice dipped and raised with absurd inflections. “In a charity bin. We needed stuff for our kid, so….”

“Oh.” So many suspicions in this new world. How many times had Revan jumped at shadows. A charity bin. Of course. All of their clothes looked ragged and dirty and torn. The Underground was full of cast-offs from the skies.

*Maybe it’s the same one blanket. He’s outgrown it now.* Revan felt her eyes start to tear again with foolish sentiment and she blinked hard. Crying was something *Sheris* would have done, not her. “I’m going to do your vaccinations now.”

“You’re….” The woman’s voice trailed off again.

“Don’t fear me.” She had to practice the simpering laugh, the way Sheris had once practiced her voice. “I’m not Revan, if that’s your concern, although you’d be surprised at how often sentients make that mistake!. My name is Sheris Loran. *Padawan* Sheris Loran.” She shrugged. “I know the
resemblance is strong.”

The man laughed. “A little uncanny.”

“We’re both from Hoth. Its Human population has a very small gene pool.”

“Oh.” The woman looked a little like Beya, underneath those enormous goggles. Same heart-shaped face, and the pointed chin. Deralia has a small gene pool too. Another isolated world. We had that in common, Beya and I. The Deralian’s hands went back to the blanket again, stroking the fur lining its edge, feeling the solid weight of her son within.

Revan had done that too, with Malachor, walking through the corridors of the D’Reev apartments, where her son stayed in secret for his own safety—

“Here.” She turned to the table, selecting two adult and one pediatric doses. She couldn’t sense the Force in any of them—only that fear that so many of the patients had, of her or of the Jedi, or both. Fools. She wanted to shake it out of them. This is going to save you and all of your pathetic worlds.

“He’s really okay?” the woman asked.

“He’s beautiful,” Revan smiled at her. “He just needs some rest and a little time to get used to this planet. Do you have accommodation? Credits?” Not that she could offer them credits. For whatever reason, the Order here played passive roles with its aid. Heal them, but don’t help them. They’re supposed to help themselves. “I have the name of a few shelters…."

“We’re fine,” the woman said. Proud, that one. Too much for her own good.

“I was a ref once too.” Not for long, but long enough. Eos. Malachor was even younger than this infant. “I—I know it can be hard to accept assistance, when you’re used to being free—”

“We’re fine,” the man repeated. He held out his arm and Revan injected him with the vaccine. The woman was wary, muscles tensing under her fingers, but she accepted it too. And finally, the son, his baby arm soft and round, dark eyes gazing into Revan’s with that soft fascination that they all had. It had been the late Master Croi’s idea to assign Padawan Sheris Loran to pediatrics, and inwardly, she thanked the Fosh again.

He died after getting the vaccine, he shouldn’t have died.

“Do you… do you know the real Revan?” the woman asked.

“Seriina!” Her husband sounded upset. “Apologies, my wife—”

It was a question she’d been asked often before, and she’d created a neutral response. Revan smiled. “I did,” she said. “Before the war.”

“Was she…” the Deralian’s voice trailed off. “Was she… nice?”

“Nice?” No one had ever asked that. The question threw her off balance. “I don’t know.” Revan smiled slightly, pulling the cowl back up over her braids, the mask over the lower half of her face. “She tried.”

XXX

“Vima.” Her knees hurt standing, and so Master Jopheena sat down on the bench. She had wanted
another day, another week, another year; but the Force was capricious, and what she’d seen from her hidden room with its security feeds of all the temple places, was enough to convince her they were out of time.


Nothing. Jopheena stared up at the statue of Nomi Sunrider again. Even young, Jopheena didn’t think she’d ever looked as beautiful as that bleeding statue. That thought made her laugh—vanity rearing its head at a time like this!

No response, not even a whisper in the Force. Well, that was what made Kae such a formidable opponent. If the fate of the galaxy hadn’t been at stake, Jopheena sometimes thought it was appropriate that a mad, Force-possessing Sith emperor should be opposed by a mad, Force-controlling Sith shadow. If only they could fight to the death themselves on some isolated world and leave the rest of us in peace.

But that wasn’t how these things went. Unchecked, mad Sith inevitably became even madder Sith. Slowly, Jopheena thumbed the controls off of her stealth belt and waited some more, letting the memories of lives past—some named and some not—spin through her head, as slowly as clouds after rain. Again and again, she saw the child’s face: so young and fearless, so much potential, and so much sorrow. Sometimes its features blurred, becoming Malak and then Vima again, and who was to say which was more real? Once, she even glanced down to find a brown-skinned baby in her arms, and a strong, brown arm wrapped around her waist. His rough beard brushed her face, even if his name was long forgotten.

It took enough time for the sun to lighten in the sky through the dome overhead for her to get an answer.

“Did the Jedi Order say you were Nomi Sunrider?” Arren Kae’s dripped with malice. “They lied.”

Slowly, Jopheena brought out the holocron, wrapped in white cloth, out of her pocket. “All Jedi lie,” she said slowly. “That was one of the lessons that Nomi taught me.”

She held up the holocron to the light, eyeing the ysalamiri boxes set in a circle around her bench: hopefully enough. Even if her own memories could not be trusted, the records said Kae had formidable power in the Force.

But still not enough—not for Kae’s plans. No. For those she requires an apprentice who shines like a star. An obedient apprentice, for a master so often betrayed—

A figure appeared, like stepping through invisible mist, hardening into flesh and cloth. Gray robes, as if that was some kind of statement. White hair, and eyes as faded and blue as Jopheena’s own. Lines scoring the face, making Kae look older than Jopheena had ever felt.

“This is your trap?” The woman laughed. “What are you going to do? Take those memories yourself?”

“Should I tell you my plan, first?” Jopheena asked. “Would that make it more, or less effective? I’ve guessed yours already.”

“You’re a senile fool. A patchworked creation.” Kae paced before her, grace in her old limbs, hand on the hilt of her saber.

Jopheena touched the shield on her wrist for reassurance. If the woman decided to throw the
weapon at her throat, ysalamiri would be no defense; much as they would do nothing against her Force-devouring apprentice. *Hold him, Thalia, just a bit longer.*

“Perhaps, but I’m a patchworked creation holding the holocron of your memories behind an ysalamiri shield. The life you put in the holocron in Atris’s office: the holocron that Revan is to think has her own memories; so you can inhabit her body.”

Kae laughed darkly. “Fool. You think that’s the only copy?”

“No,” Jopheena said. “But it’s the only holocron left in this entire Temple that I haven’t already destroyed.”

*Jedi lie. That was one. She’d sent the others out, scattered them, with all of their Jedi exiles, sent them across the galaxy. Good or bad, dark side or light: perhaps never again will all of our knowledge be vulnerable to the corruption of one person. And in all of those, the real memories of Revan Starfire—those she had never found at all. Already stolen or already destroyed; one could only play with the cards in the deck—*

*It made her laugh sometimes to wonder which of her had been the one who loved pazaak. Somehow, she wouldn’t have expected it from Nomi; but you never knew.*

Kae’s eyes narrowed as she moved within striking range. “Is there something you want, Master Jopheena?”

“Yes,” Jopheena said softly. Her hand not holding the other holocron slipped into her pocket and keyed open the detonator. “I want an end.”

XXX

An explosion rattled the hangar bay, as Master Loanin shepherded the last of them into the troop carrier, assisted by the droids, who were all that was left in what had once been Azen’s beautiful Medix. He’d been instructed to take off immediately, with all Temple survivors and yet—

*Lydie Korr is not here.*

Others were missing too. One of those Manaan knights, two of the ones from Corulag that he’d been padawans with. Several… other padawans. Among their number, lurked almost definitely the source of their scourge: the creature he’d come to think of as… ‘the Creature.’ It was responsible for all the Jedi deaths the plague couldn’t explain.

It was a tragedy so many Jedi were lost, but Lydie was the only one with the sharp mind and sharper eyes; the Padawan who understood, even with her minimal training, when he explained about the retroviral adhesions that caused the mitochondrial cell walls to expand, sending the virus to sleep.

Her aunt, Master Marla Korr was here: the only other Jedi Master still extant in the Coruscant Temple aside from the drooling waste that had once been Zez’Kai (here too, but hardly worth counting); although there were five or six others at their clinic in the Underground. He’d given the signal. Yuthura Ban would warn those below. Take them to the safe house. If they had miscalculated, and the Creature was in the Underground instead… the thought did not bear contemplation.

He stared at Marla’s face and she stared back impassively. He tried to match the expression, tried not to think about where her niece could be. Master Jopheena had requested Lydie and Thalia’s assistance to lure the thing Azen Loanin privately thought of as ‘the Creature,’ into their web.
A Jedi master certainly can’t protest the actions of another Jedi master, especially once several times his age; but he had never thought Jopheena would sacrifice them—only herself. And yet—where we they?

“I smell smoke,” one of the children whispered. Too young to be Padawans now. He wondered what would become of them.

“Yes. There was an explosion. Master Jopheena is one with the Force,” he said slowly. “And we all must do what we can to survive.” He glanced at the tanks where the gravely ill slumbered, among them the bodies of Dustil Onasi and Mekel Jin. Yuthura’s drugs would wear off soon (she had only confessed to using them the day before, when Jopheena drew him firmly into their cabal), and, not for the first time, he wondered if the simpler result would be to end their lives now, before those drugs did.

*You eliminated the threat of this mind-clouding Arren Kae. But you’ve still left the galaxy with Lords Revan and Malak. What do you plan to do about that, Master Jopheena? Are you leaving them to me?*

Some Jedi purported to hear from the dead. Azen doubted he would be so fortunate.

“We should go,” he added, walking slowly towards the front of the ship, and the automated controls. As an Eglantine, he had learned the basics of simulated flying; but aside from the medical arts, his practical education had ended there when his grasping father had sent his sixth son to the Jedi at age seven. “Raise the ramp.” He would have raised it himself, if he knew where the control box was.


A door clanged open on the south wall and then there she was, Thalia May, staggering under the weight of Lydie Korr. The Zabrak was taller than the Ziostian, and only the Force made it possible for her to carry Lydie at all, given their estimated weight and bodily mass.

Thalia May’s face was streaked with tears. Azen found himself hurrying down the ramp, thankfully still there, to assist her. He slipped his hand under Lydie Korr’s shoulder and their eyes met, above her unconscious head.

“What happened?” he asked. “Is the Creature dead?”

“No,” Thalia said. “But he might be a man again.” She wiped her eyes on her shoulder and kept walking up the ramp. Lydie’s horns had scratched her cheek.

“At least it’s over,” he murmured. “Given time, we’ll rebuild. The Order endures..”

“Maybe,” Thalia shook her head. “I can’t see beyond the veil.”

XXX

“Welcome to Mom’s,” the Cathar said. She sat above them in a gilded cage. She was carrying what looked like a pretty nice automatic blaster, and wearing nothing except a grenade belt. “I’m sorry, but we’re closed, except for deliveries..” She looked them up and down dubiously. “Not taking auditions too. And no children under eighteen.”

“We’re here to see Arca,” Polla said.

“You’re a little late for that,” the Cathar laughed. “Bitch has been dead for a week.” She paused,
staring at them. Was it expectation? Was it something else?

“You want a bribe?” Polla was losing patience with everything about this damned planet. They were being hunted by Mandalorians, poked with needles by red-headed Jedi, and frack knew what had happened to Therion, their only ride off this rock. She frowned, knowing how this worked. “Has anyone taken over for Arca? Maybe the next rung down on the ladder?”

The Cathar’s tail flicked through the bars. Polla tried to rest a credit on it; only to have it fall to the ground. Tail at least was a holocron. “Maybe.” The woman held out her hand, and Polla dropped the credchip into it, where it landed solid as houses. “You could try the guy upstairs. Management style’s a little different, but it’s all the biz, right?” She winked.

Polla elbowed Seiran until her husband winked back. “Sure,” he said, shooting her that look that meant he thought they were walking into a trap. “Is there a name we should use?”


XXX

The grass was strangely sharp, and something itched. It was peculiarly distinct for an afterlife.

Jopheena opened her eyes to see a straggly garden, dappled in deep shade. Above her, surrounding the clearing, soared enormous trees, larger than any she had ever dreamed of. Larger than anything, on any world she ever remembered. They were so tall they made her dizzy. She turned her face back down to the ground.

A pair of brown ankles stepped into view, sinking into the sharp grass. The toes were calloused, and the toenails overgrown and in need of a good clipping. She let her eyes travel up, past the muscular legs in their ripped Padawan beige, to the flat, muscular belly, the chiseled biceps. The smiling face, with its black beard, and its sparkling eyes that tugged in a place of her, a place that she could almost remember.

Somewhere behind them, she heard a child’s laughter.

“I have to confess,” Jophageen said slowly. “I was expecting Ulic Qel-Droma. Or possibly Andur Sunrider.”

The man smiled at her. A good smile, a strong smile. Strong white teeth. A dimple in one cheek. And Force, if he wasn’t as handsome as stars. “Disappointed?”

“No.” She smiled back. “Can you tell me my name? When I was alive… I never wanted to know.”

“Nayama,” her husband said. “Nayama Bindo.”

XXX
“Something’s wrong.” It wasn’t just the sealed gate. Davad had warned her the Temple would be sealed. But the plaza wasn’t usually deserted, even this late at night, and there were no guards, not even droids: only a recorded holomessage that said that the Jedi Temple had been evacuated due to contagion, and that all inquiries should be directed to remote lines. A string of comm codes followed, none of which Revan recognized.

Dawn wasn’t far off on this side of Coruscant: the sky was turning a pale gold, and the cloud cover was low, dipping everything in a warm mist.

“Obviously, something is wrong.” Millifar rolled her eyes and turned to her father. “May I set the charges?”

“Sure,” Canderous shrugged. “Easier than trying to scale the wall and break a window.”

“Your Third Wife doesn’t even have a jet pack,” Millifar nodded at Revan. “Or grappling hooks.”

“I don’t need either.” Revan eyed the distance above them to the dome above the Temple’s main vestibule. “You can’t just blow a hole in the door.”

“I can too,” Millifar said. “I brought all of the explosives.”

“We don’t need that much attention, is what I meant.” It had always been awkward with Canderous’s daughter, but now things seemed… worse, not better.

“Does your laser sword cut through transparisteel?” The girl sneered at her. “I have a jet pack. Give me your weapon, and I’ll fly up to the dome and cut our way in.”

“I can get up there myself.” I refuse to be in a pissing competition with a seventeen-year old. Revan measured the distance again with her eyes. There was narrow ledge about five meters up: an easy enough distance to clear—and from there the angles looked good. The window itself would be shatter resistant, but with the Force she should be able to break it.

“Here goes nothing,” she muttered, tensing her legs. The Force sang as she soared, almost like flying—and for a glorious moment it reminded her of being Polla Organa riding the swoop in Derra Canyon—and then she slammed more ingloriously into the wall, fingers grappling for purchase on the lip of the pediment above her head.

“Don’t fall,” Millifar called out mockingly from below. Before Revan had a chance to respond, the girl was hovering next to her, heat of the jet pack evident even a meter away.

“Do you need help?” Millifar added.

“Not really.” Revan took a deep breath, focusing her strength in her gut and lifted her legs, driving momentum with the Force to make the next jump, flipping backwards and lifting up, clearing the pediment and flying, feet-first towards the dome straight ahead. Break, she thought at the glass as it approached. Shatter. She made her legs into an arrow, cushioned by the Force, and the energy flexed beneath her toes, vibrating with the intensity of a sonic shockwave.
The glass of the dome broke around her, razor-sharp pieces falling like jewels. Revan slowed her descent, and landed in a crouch on the marble floor.

“Not bad,” Canderous called out from above. “Think you could do that kind of stunt with a basilisk through atmo?”

Revan looked up. He and his daughter hovered with their jet packs, two helmeted faces peering through the shattered place in the dome. “Probably.” I wonder if I ever tried.

The Mandalorians descended, straight up and feet first, keeping distance between them to clear their vents. Their beskar boots crunched the transparisteel underfoot, motes of light sifting through the dust, footsteps echoing in an empty room.

“There’s no one here.” Millifar was checking something on her belt—presumably one of those primitive sensor arrays designed to sift for heartbeats, temperature fluctuations that could indicate nearby life. “Why are we here again?”

“You’re wrong. There’s something.” Someone. Two someones. Not very close together. As Revan extended her senses, one of them winked out, and then the other; masking themselves as efficiently as Oerin Lin had once taught her to do, on the ride from Manaan to Coruscant.

“I’m getting smoke, maybe fire.” Canderous’s helmeted voice was metallic and his head turned towards the source. “Carbon readings and heat signatures are way up. Over that way.”

Revan could smell it too. Cordite and ozone, some kind of explosion. Some kind of explosion and no Jedi left. “What the frack happened here?” Davad. Dustil. Panic gripped her. “We need to check the infirmary.”

“No.” The voice wavered, came from behind them, near the main entrance gates, as if the woman had flanked them unseen. “There are no Jedi here… only those who were once Jedi, thought themselves Jedi.”

Revan whirled around, hand on the hilt of her saber, even as she heard Canderous and his daughter cock their rifles.

In front of them stood an old woman, streaked with soot and what looked like blood. Her white hair was half-braided, half matted. She was stooped, concussion bruises under her eyes, and had a jagged, ugly-looking wound on her side that, even as Revan watched, darkened the mess of her robes with more blood.

“Revan,” she whispered. “My old apprentice. I knew you would come.” She looked about to falter, and Revan darted forward to catch her before she fell.

“Master Kae?” Her fingers pressed down on what she sensed was the worst of the wounds, trying to focus the Force to slow the bleeding. When the woman grunted in pain, Revan realized she was pressing too hard. She could sense the wound, but its complexity defied her skill. “I don’t think I can heal this.”

“Medix,” the old woman whispered. “I think there may still be some kolto supplies.”

“What happened?” Canderous demanded.

“An… explosion.” The woman’s eyelids fluttered. “In the Meditation Gardens.”

“Was everyone killed?” No. Revan would have sensed something. But I thought I did. For a
moment, I thought I did. There was... something. Someone. Someone is gone. “Where is everyone?”

“Gone,” Kae whispered. “All of them.”

“No, there’s someone else here. I sensed it.” She sensed it again, suddenly, a presence slipping in and out of shadows.

“The Onderonite.” Kae’s voice was slightly stronger now. “Careful with that one.”

“Do you mean Davad?” Impossible. The darkness she sensed was nothing like her friend. Her eyes met Canderous’s over the old woman’s head. “She’s lost a lot of blood; we may not make it to the Medix.”

The Mandalorian nodded towards his daughter. “Milli, give her some paks.”

“We hardly have any left—” the girl muttered under her breath, something about dar’jettai and their magic healing powers; but then she produced two packs of kolto from the top of her boot. “Here,” she snapped, holding them out to Revan.

Revan gently put Master Kae down against the wall, packing her side with the kolto. The one wound was just as bad as she’d feared, but disturbingly, most of the blood covering Master Kae did not appear to be her own. Kae’s eyelashes fluttered again and she murmured something, too soft for Revan to catch.

“So. Master Kae is still breathing?”

Revan’s head snapped up. Mandalorian rifles snapped on.

Davad Arkan stood, framed in the doorway, a silver, metallic oval dangling from one hand.

“Barely.” What she had sensed before—that darkness, overwhelming everything like a scream in the Force—now it was all gone. Maybe it wasn’t Davad at all. Maybe there’s something else here. Not the darkness, but he’s hunting it. Or maybe it’s hunting them—

“There was an explosion,” he said. “In the Meditation Gardens. The rest of the Jedi evacuated, but I stayed, looking for Master... Kae.” He walked towards them, smiling. It was a strange smile, one that Revan didn’t recognize on his face.

“You said before, Jedi were disappearing.”

“Yes.” As he drew closer, Revan saw the sheen of sweat on his forehead, the tremble in his step. “Some died. More fled. More got away. They kept it as quiet as they could, but I knew they were running. They did the best they could.”

Canderous made a noise beside her, a grunt of surprise.

Revan looked up, and realized what Davad was holding in his hand. Oerin’s visor: the mask of Mandalore. Revan’s old mask—or as near a copy as to be identical.

“Give Master Kae to me,” Davad said, holding it up. “And you may have this.”

XXX

After confiscating their weapons, the Gamorrean guard led Polla and Seiran up two flights of stairs to an open, circular room. It was deserted, but one end held a bar, and the other a stage. The walls
were lined with red synth leather, and some kind of dingy fur carpet lined the floors. Everything looked faded and unused, as if business had been slow—or nonexistent—for a long time.

“First time I’ve seen a deserted brothel used as a front,” Polla whispered to Seiran.

“We’re not deserted, just closed,” said a voice over the loudspeaker. A woman’s voice, partially muffled. “What d’you think, Lammikins—are they more Sith assassins or not?”

“Not,” said a man’s voice, gravel-edged, almost familiar. “I’m not sure who they are.”

Polla looked around for the source of the speakers, but they could have been anywhere. “We’re friends of Therion’s?” she said. “He told Arca about us?”

“Arca took several secrets to her grave, and left incomplete notes,” the male voice said. “Therion was… was that one of the actors from the next round of vids?”

Abasen shifted and started to cry. Poor slob was hungry, and that Jedi Loran had said to keep him hydrated. “I need a large glass of water,” Polla snapped. “And I’m gonna nurse my kid now. Any objections?”

It was too hot in here by half and she ducked her head, pushing the goggles up to wipe her face, settling down on a chair, and unsnapping their son from the blanket that wasn’t just some random gift at all; but probably some kind of threat from Revan or Senator D’Reev, or who knows who. Who cares who? It’s self-cleaning and he likes it.

There was a long silence, broken only by the sounds of her son nursing lustily, before the door behind the bar slid open, and an old man and a woman walked through. The woman was wearing a bathrobe and had green hair. The old man was too old for the synthide he was sporting, but Polla didn’t judge.

“Did she send you?” the man said, staring at Abasen and her boob in a way that would be considered rude on most planets.

“Therion sent us, I told you.” Polla glared up at him. “Do you mind?” She felt Abasen’s forehead again. It was cooler now, and he seemed better. That made her relax. A little. Some.

Seiran shifted behind her. “You said Arca’s dead. Are you her replacement?”

“In a manner of speaking.” The old guy frowned, but at least he turned his attention to the floor. “You're not the first to come looking for Arca.”

“First with a baby through,” the woman said. “Adorable little granslug, isn’t he? Looks just like our Mekelkins at that age! Lammikins, I think if they were gonna attack they'd have gotten a sitter first.”

“These two aren’t Sith.” The man had a rusted, gravel voice that sounded like something out of the vids. He raised his voice. “You work for D’Reev? Or my niece? She got my messages? Could she not come herself?”


Seiran stepped in front of Polla and their kid fast. “Your... niece?”

“It’s the blanket, isn’t it?” Polla was tired. She stood up herself, tucking Abasen back in, and fastening her vest. “The fracking D’Reev crest blanket?” She stepped in front of Seiran, glaring at
the old man, who... as she looked more closely, was pretty obviously Master Vrook Lamar from
the vids. She would have recognized him sooner, except she didn’t expect the galaxy to keep
making connections that it wasn’t supposed to be making. Maybe this was what happened when
the Jedi fracked with the Force and brought you into their mess. Maybe after that, the Force had
permission to frack with you too.

Vrook Lamar stared back at her, as if how mind was trying to make a similar calculation about
who Polla could be.

She tried to remember how many steps it was to the door, down the stairs and out. With Abasen,
even if Seiran did something to cover them, she’d never make it. Not against a Jedi.

*Fifty fracking trillion people or something on this planet, and how come everyone we run into is
has something to do with her?*

“Who?” she snapped. “Just say her name. Who the frack do you think sent us?”

“That’s her son’s old blanket?” When she looked at the old man’s face he was frowning. He had
brown eyes, not green like Revan’s at all. But as she watched, those eyes narrowed slightly, and
then widened. “Wait. I know your face. You’re—”

“Polla Organa Wen,” said Polla Organa Wen. “And this is my husband Seiran Wen, and our son,
Abasen Wen.”

Incredibly, Master Vrook Lamar of the Jedi Council actually laughed.

“They the ones Revan had killed?” the woman asked. “You sure they’re not Sith pretendin to be
them?”

“That’d be a neat trick,” Polla snapped. “Suppose we are. Think we’d tell you?”

“Don’t worry, Deeka,” the man said. Smiling made him look younger. “There’s nothing to fear
here.”

“We are being stalked by a Mandalorian hunting band,” Seiran said. “But I think we lost them a
few levels up.”

“Did she send them after you?” The Jedi’s smile faded.

“We don’t know.” Her husband sat down next to her, staring up at the Jedi. “Maybe? Our pilot
disappeared, and the Mandalorians kept comming us—”

“My niece told me you were dead.” The man didn’t look like he smiled often, but it did wonders
for his face.

“Didn’t exactly comm her to tell her we weren’t.” Polla shrugged. *How would she know either
way?*

“Did she—someone tried to have you killed—there was an explosion?”

Polla gave herself a second to wonder if Jedi were like the Grass Priests back home, and not telling
the truth to them meant going to hell. Likewise, if Jedi would be obligated to report your (technical,
but not moral) felonies, and insurance fraud, (insurance fraud according to Republic law) to
Republic authorities.
“We did that,” Seiran said, before she had a chance to decide. “We did the explosion.”

“Sei!” she glared at him.

“You faked your own deaths?” Well, the old guy looked happy about it, at least. “Did she know?”

“We didn’t comm her and tell her we were secretly alive and on the lam because she ruined our lives, no.” Was everyone on Coruscant slow? Or trusting? Pity she wasn’t here on business; she could probably sell this Jedi guy a lot of beachfront property on Dagobah. “So how could she know anything?”

Unless she does. Unless she does because she’s fracking Revan and she has the Force and your memories and she’s fracking with you—

“We saw someone who looked just like her in the clinics up a few levels,” Seiran added, apparently deciding to give away the store to this Jedi they’d just met, who had no reason to be on their side, except that the Jedi didn’t kill people—they just mind wiped them, or stole their memories, or lied.

“Sheris Loran.” Vrook nodded. “Revan had her fashioned in her own image, when she was Sith.”

“That wasn’t quite how she put it,” Polla said. Creepy. “She said they were both from Hoth.”

“They are.”

“Are you?” She’d surprised him with the question, it was obvious from the way he took a step backwards.

“Originally. I was taken into the Temple at a very young age.”

“Oh.” Polla didn’t really know what to say about that. “So was my cousin, Beya. Well actually, not that young. But I guess you… maybe you knew her.”

“From the time she came to us.” The man’s smile grew sad. “One of our oldest Padawans and most noble of Knights. She was a close friend to my niece.”

“Do you know who killed her?”

Vrook shook his head. “I do not. But you cannot seek vengeance. It’s far too dangerous.”

Polla snorted. “Funny, I thought you Jedi types were supposed to not want to seek vengeance ‘cause of some moral or Jedi Code thing.”

“Jedi still live in this galaxy,” Vrook Lamar said. “Even when we try to stay detached. I know what loss is like.”

“He does,” the girlfriend murmured. “My Lammikins has very deep thoughts. You know our son’s in a coma? We think.” She elbowed him. “I keep tellin him he needs to go check.”

“It’s not that simple,” Vrook Lamar said. “Although now, I… may have to do just that.”

“Your son’s in a coma, you need to check.” Seiran said.

“I know,” the old man snapped. “But it’s not just…” his voice trailed off. “It’s not just his fate. If I expose myself, whatever is killing the other Jedi will know he is vulnerable. And I am vulnerable. Until I know who or what that is—”
“Do you think it’s who killed Beya?” All the power in the universe and the man was hiding down here. It was kind of weird.

“No.” He hesitated. “I do not.”

“So you do know who killed Beya. Or… you think you do.” Well, she’d just have to get a list of the people that this Jedi knew. Killer had to be one of them. Polla’s money was on either her other half, or that creepy Senator. Before she’d met the Mandalorians, she would have laid even odds on them too… but Aemelie wasn’t exactly the subtle type. If she wanted someone dead, she wouldn’t sabotage a ship… she’d just stalk them through the Coruscanti Underground with her Mandalorian hunting band.

“I have to remain detached.” He didn’t sound happy about it. “There’s too much at stake.”

Deeka laughed. “You believe him?” She shook her head, smiling. Some of her teeth were gold. “Even Jedi get attached sometimes. Like him and me. Years ago, when we both young and sweet. You should have seen my Lammikins then.”

Polla smiled at her. “Bet he was a real heartbreaker. You a Jedi too?”

The woman snorted. “Don’t tease an old tart, this is my place.” She sounded proud of it.

“It’s… nice,” Polla lied.

“Looks like shit now, half our treats came down with the Shake, and CoruSec closed us down… but it was something.” The woman paused. “All those Sith boys didn’t help either, but Lammy chased them out.”

“I don’t think they’ll be back,” the Jedi said, looking a little less proud than his girlfriend or wife or whore or whatever she was.

“But they might?”

“They’re hunting Jedi.” The old man’s voice roughened. “I convinced them there were no Jedi here.”

“Were you lying, or being Sith?” Polla tightened her grip around Abasen. “Not that I care either way, my Da always thought the Sith had the right idea about things.” Some things. The not blowing-up people’s planets or killing innocent smuggler things.

“Pollic!” Seiran coughed. “Excuse my wife, it’s been a long day.”

“Why are you here?” Vrook asked. Pretty rudely for a Jedi. “Did you come here to see Revan? Did… someone make you an offer to discredit her?”

“No—and why the frack would I tell you if they had?” Polla glared at him. “If you must know, we came here to get my uncle out of prison. Boon Organa. He was unjustly imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit successfully.”

“Ah.” The man smiled faintly. “One of the last things I did hear from groundside was that Revan had successfully commuted his sentence to Alderaan. He’s not there.”

“Then where is he?”

“Alderaan.”
Seiran muttered some things not fit for mixed age groups under his breath. Polla glanced back at him. *Frack.*

XXX

“She’s going to be fine.”

The children, especially, were frightened and confused. Even Azen himself had been pressed into duty as a surrogate caregiver: handing out rations, adjusting bunk assignments, and dealing with a few eliminatory accidents, before they all quieted down with Knight Bastien standing guard.

It had taken them some hours (three and one half) to adjust to their new lodgings, which appeared to have recently been offices before their conversion to temporary Jedi housing. Finally having a moment to himself, naturally his first obligation was to check on his remaining patients. Padawan Marcinlline’s fever was down, and Knight Ardin had needed more fluids. Mekel Jin’s respiration rate had increased, which meant Dustil Onasi’s had too, although his body had been taken by D’Reev’s guards immediately after their landing.

In terms of the opportunity to evaluate the real existence of Force ghosts, that was regrettable.

In terms of reducing the number of concerns Azen had at the moment, it was a relief.

And Padawan Lydie Korr—

“She’s going to be fine.” Thalia May sat on an office ball next to the Zabrak’s medical pod.

“I still don’t understand what happened to her.”

“We met a Sith in the Archives. Knight Davad Arkan was a secret Sith. He tried to drain her body of all of its Force energy.”

The Zabrak felt smaller somehow: even to someone like Azen, with limited Force ability himself: the clean, bright presence that he’d come to associate with Lydie Korr was diminished. Davad Arkan was—well, whatever the man was, he was not here at present, and therefore, not Azen’s concern. “Will the Force come back for her?”

“I don’t know.” Thalia frowned. “I haven’t dreamed anything about it.”

“Precognition has never been empirically proven. Master Ragalan’s studies on the subject were inconclusive.”

“Master Ragalan was wrong about a lot of things. When you see your father again, he’ll ask you to leave the Order.” Thalia rubbed her eyes. “You should do it, and take Lydie with you.”

Azen drew himself up to his full height and glared. “You should get some more rest, Padawan. You don’t look well.”

“Yes.” Thalia May nodded. Her hand reached out and touched Lydie’s cheek.

“Do you have everything you need?” Master Klee appeared, sliding open the curtain. The Eosian was immediately recognizable in the Force, of course; but his physical presence was covered by a biohazard suit, face barely visible through its transparisteel mask. Behind him, the Coruscanti skyline was etched through the windows, the sun rising with the dawn.

“Yes,” Azen told him. 100 Thantos Three. His family had always supported Qel’Riada’s motions
over D’Reev’s. He wondered what his father would say, seeing his son in a D’Reev stronghold. “It was kind of the Senator to take us in.”

“Malachi wasn’t willing to stand by and watch Jedi be slaughtered,” Klee said. “Not when he could provide assistance.”

Several observations sprang to mind: about Klee’s own lack of assistance for the last few months; about how the Order was not, (despite current circumstances) in the pocket of any Senatorial House; about how placing their fate under Revan Starfire’s name was against everything that so many masters had died for—and yet, at the moment, all Azen could do was bite his tongue metaphorically and smile politely. To do more would only waste time.

“We need to send word to those at the clinic in the Underground,” Azen told him. “No one should return to the Temple. Apparently, Davad Arkan was a secret Sith and has been hunting other Jedi and killing them there.”

Master Klee’s voice registered surprise. “You would have us abandon the Temple that has sheltered Jedi for millennia?”

_You abandoned us there yourself to go cavort with the highest Senatorial House you could find._ “I expected your accord,” Azen said mildly. “After all, you were one of the first to leave.”

“I was assisting Revan with her son.”

“Of course.” Azen nodded at the obvious. “And how are Revan and her son? I expected them to greet us.”

Klee’s eyes shifted, in a way that said, just as clearly as the Force, that he had no idea. “Is that Master Korr?” He pivoted on his feet, looking across the room to where the only other member of the Jedi Council in the room stood, attending to one of the intubated patients. “Pardon, Master Loanin; but she and I have some affairs to discuss.”

Thalia made a small sound, and Azen glanced down at her. He had almost forgotten she was there at all. “Tell Master Korr that Padawan Korr is much better,” she said to Klee.

‘Of course.” He was already walking away.

Azen frowned. This place was very disordered. “Master Klee didn’t seem very concerned about Knight Arkan.” _And his voice registered no surprise. As if he already knew?_

“No,” Thalia said. She was frowning too. “He did not.”

“I should tell Master Zez Kai,” Azen told her. “Arkan was his Padawan.”

“You will.” She gave him a small smile. “But wait. Lydie’s going to wake up soon. She should see your face.”

“I don’t see how my face would assist with her recovery.”

“I know.” Thalia nodded. “But it’s a nice face.”

Even if her precognitive assessments were some kind of charlatan’s trick, Thalia May could still reduce Azen Loanin to a stupefied near-silence. “You are a confounding person, Thalia May.”

She smiled slightly. “I think you will find Padawan Korr confounding too.”
“I find most sentients of the opposite gender confounding,” he admitted. “Especially those that I —”

“Just tell her that,” Thalia interrupted. “Tell her that she confounds you, Master Loanin. And see what she says next.”

XXX

“Chrakkan Village is this way.” Their guide, a brown-skinned Iridonian kid, maybe a little younger than Dustil, gestured towards the winding path that led farther away from the primitive spaceport and up into the forested hills.

“How far?” Carth asked. They’d left Zaalbar with the ship, but the original promise of only a few kilometers had already bloomed into at least six. And he couldn’t shake this feeling… that something was off about this whole place. Who built their spaceport in the middle of a jungle under permanent cloud cover?

Sentients with things to hide, that was who.

“I hope the road’s paved,” Mission grumbled, rolling along at Carth’s side. “I just replaced my suspensors after that sewer trip with Mekel Jin.”

“It is paved,” the Zabrak said, taking her seriously. “With stones.”

“Better than mud, I guess.” Even through the T3’s voder her optimism came through. Carth knew it didn’t make sense, but the more time he spent with this copy of Mission, the more she seemed like the real kid. He thought of the garbled story she’d told him, about Revan’s ancient computer on Kashyyyk and how it had said it was going to get a real body. That computer gave him the creeps; but Mission—this version—didn’t. The more time they spent together, the more she seemed like… Mission.

The first kid you let yourself love after Dustil. Hell, the first sent you trusted after Saul’s betrayal. You trusted Mission before Polla. In fact, if Mission hadn’t been so easy with Polla first, would you have ever trusted Polla enough to fall for her?

“Our enclave is hidden in the hills ahead,” the boy continued.


“Why is it hidden?” The Zabrak had an oddly formal way of speaking. “To discourage visitors.”

“The same reason you don’t have any working speeders and we have to roll on our treads the entire way.” Mission made a snorting noise. “Right.”

Hiking up the trail was easier than Carth expected, even with the soft life he’d been leading on Coruscant. Gravity was less here, and the air seemed rich. It was actually a pretty nice little planet, although stars if he could understand why a place this temperate in the mid-Rim wasn’t more populated. The main city was up near the north pole, but even it only had a population of a few hundred thousand.

“Are you from here, Takan?” he asked the kid, their escort.

“No.” The kid shook his head. “I was on a refugee ship, during the war. We crashed here.”

Which war? Carth wanted to ask, but he didn’t know how. The one my wife won, or the one she
“My son was a refugee too,” he said slowly. “We’re from Telos.”

Takan looked blank. “I think I’ve heard of it,” he said politely, after a long pause.

“It got bombed a lot,” Mission chimed in.

The kid smiled faintly. “So did Iridonia.”

The stones under their feet were even, beveled, and worn with age. The forest was full of straight, oddly symmetrical trees with white bark covering their trunks. Birdsong echoed through the trees: discordant compared to the ones on Telos; but it still reminded Carth of one of the last good memories he had of his wife and son. That last furlough, when they’d rented the cabin out by the lake; just the three of them together.

“Wait.” Takan froze suddenly, putting his hand on Carth’s arm. “Don’t move.”

The sounds in the trees faded out, like a comm signal had been cut, replaced by a low, rumbling growl.

“Rancor,” the kid muttered. “They don’t usually cross the tree lines.”

“Not our first one, Spikey.” Mission’s voice sounded a lot more self-assured than Carth felt.

“I’ve heard they have them on other planets,” Takan’s voice was barely above a whisper now. “But it’s different here. This is where they’re from.”

“So?” Mission’s voice was breezy. One of her appendages extended with the blaster Carth had given her—given the original her—back on Tatooine. The Systech. “You can stand back if you want, kiddo. We got this.”

“No.” The boy shook his head again, slightly wild-eyed. “I was charged with protecting you.”

The roaring noise came closer now, accompanied by the stamp of heavy feet.

“We got this,” Mission repeated.

*Frack if I know how.* Carth nodded slowly. “They have bad eyes, right? Maybe it won’t see us.”

“It senses us,” Takan said. “It’s coming.”

“Maybe not.” He had to be optimistic. Wouldn’t that be a pathetic end to this: *Sorry, Dustil, I never came back to you because I got myself and some kid eaten by a rancor.* At least Mission would be safe. Rancor weren’t like cannok. They didn’t bother with metal.

“How do you know it senses us?” Mission asked.

“Do you have any weapons at all?” Carth’s own blasters wouldn’t even properly pierce the damn armored hide. *When we took the one out on Taris, we had grenades.*

“I have mines,” Mission chirped.

“No. No mines.” The kid stood there, skinny shoulders hunched, wrapped in his fur cloak. “Just stay back. I’m calling for help.”

There was a pause. “How are you calling for help?” Mission demanded. “Looks to me like you’re just standing there like a slack-jawed loser.”
The boy’s head turned. “Your droid is… unusually rude.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Spikey!”

“Stay back,” the kid repeated. He was holding something in his hand now, something Carth hadn’t seen him pull out of anywhere. A long, silver cylinder, beveled at both sides. Snap-hiss and the double blades ignited, both red as a krayt dragon’s eye. He stepped forward, crouching down slightly in a fighting stance that Carth didn’t recognize. Not that he was some expert. It was definitely a fighting stance through. Definitely a fighting stance for someone who knew what they were doing in a Force-using kind of Sith way.

“No way!” A clicking noise and Mission’s appendage extended, holding a blaster. “Are you Sith?”

“Yes,” the kid said. His head tilted. He held up his other hand. “Be quiet.”

Crashing noises in the underbrush and then the rancor appeared. Bigger than the one on Taris. Almost the size of one of those terentateks from Korriban. Its clawed hands reached almost to the ground. The air around it smelled like rotting meat and something strangely sweet. Its small eyes narrowed and focused on them with predatory intelligence.

“The others are coming,” the kid continued. “She tracks movement. Stay very still.”

“Others?” Great. I’m sorry, Polla—I couldn’t come back to you because the Senator sold me to a shipton of Sith. Frack if I know why, or what I could possibly have that they’d want—

“What others?” Mission demanded. “More Sith like you?”

“Yes,” the kid nodded, taking a step towards the rancor, twisting his blade. He glanced back at them. “The other children.”

XXX

“Give me Kae,” the Onderonite repeated. The mask of the Mandalore dangled from his fingers, as if it were nothing. Canderous resisted the urge to shoot him, because they needed to know what in all the nine hells was going on.

“Are you fracking insane?” Revan propped the old woman closer to the wall and rose to her feet, extending her hand out with her lightsaber in it so quickly that Canderous hadn’t seen the moment when she’d drawn the hilt. “What’s wrong with you?” She took a step between all of them and the Jedi who actually a crazy Sith.

After so many times seeing Force users go insane, Canderous couldn’t even say he was surprised. “Your friend from Onderon is nuts,” he pointed out. “When you kill him, try not to damage the mask.” Beskar was tough, but he wasn’t sure if the visor, worn thin over the centuries, could handle the direct strike from a lightsaber—not with that mystical Force-spawned strength thing they all did behind it.

“He’s not crazy.” Revan disregarded all of the evidence in front of them, just like she had on Kashyyyk, when that damned computer had greeted her like they were old friends, like she had on Tatooine when he told her not to get involved in the duel, like she had on the Star Forge when he’d told her to just blow up the chamber Malak was hiding in, like she had at that farce of a party when he’d told her not to follow Onasi. “This is… something is very wrong here.”

“She’s in your head is what’s wrong,” the Onderonite snapped. “Just like she’s in mine.”
“Who?” She sounded confused.

“You know who.”

“You mean Kae?” She scoffed. “I don’t even remember her.”

“Exactly.” The man snorted.

Canderous didn’t like the smile on the man’s face; but between the two of them, he had to say that taking out the injured one first seemed smart. He moved his fingers slightly, signaling to Millifar. _Shoot the old woman—on my signal._ He angled his own repeater towards the man, who frowned at him, as if he’d noticed the gesture.

“I was there when Revan won this mask,” Arkan said, holding it up and looking directly at Canderous.

“Back when you were loyal to Revan? I was there too.” You don’t taunt a mad zakkeg; but Canderous was getting tired of all the barbarians assuming they understood Mando’aade honor. “You might think that’s just a mask you stole from a dead man, but it’s not.”

“I know exactly what it is,” Davad murmured. “My father scoured the demon moon for weeks, looking for Mandalore’s spoor. It was _his_ kill, but some hu’tuun from your own side stole it.”

“A wandering patrol from Wies found it and brought it to Clan Lin,” Canderous told him. “With no true victor, it was up to Lin’s son to bring back glory to the clans.”

“Your clans lost.” The man’s eyes were yellow in his dark face. Yellow like a blasted Sith’s.

Was the man really taunting him? Now? “We fought,” Canderous corrected. “Revan won, but we fought well. There was no honor lost.”

“Then how did Oerin get this?” The Onderonite held it up like a trophy had had the right to claim.

“I don’t know,” Canderous admitted. _I never even asked. Hells, I wasn’t even sure it was the real one until Zaalbar had to take it off the helm to retrofit the armor._

“It’s just a mask,” Revan snapped. “Does it really matter?”

“Yes.” Sometimes she seemed so much like them that Canderous forgot, and then other times, she didn’t understand anything. “It matters.”

“It’s the mask of the _Mandalore,_” his daughter added, glaring and furious. Her rife was trained on the old woman. The man might be the bigger threat, but Canderous figured there had to be a reason the old one was still alive.

“After Revan fell, the Jedi took her—and the mask—to Dantooine. And so, I gave it to him,” the old woman murmured. Her voice sounded stronger now. “I gave the mask of the Mandalore to Oerin Lin.”

“Why?” Revan demanded. “Why would you do that?”

“The old Revan would know. That, and many things besides.”

Revan’s face whitened, and her hand slashed through the air, so fast as to be a blur. A millisecond later, the mask spun out of Arkan’s hand and slammed into the wall opposite. The beskar-forged steel rang true against the stone. Canderous tried not to wince at the irreverence. The relic had seen
worse. Much worse.

“You want the old Revan?” Revan’s teeth bared, and she looked every inch the warrior. “Fine. Give me the holocron of her life and you can have her.”

Arkan snorted. “Forget about that.” His hand shook as he mopped his sweating face with the sleeve of his robe. He looked like he was under some strain. Was it fear? Illness? Canderous wavered, trying to choose the better target. “It was all a trap anyway. She never wanted you to have those memories. You’re too strong. She can’t control you.”

“I could help you find your past,” the woman murmured. “I walked the same paths as you did, Revan. Long ago.”

Arkan snorted, but he looked unsteady. “She’s lying.”

“What do you mean?” Revan stood frozen, still glancing between them.

“She’s strong, isn’t she?” The woman smiled, slowly getting to her feet. She still moved as if she was injured, but Canderous didn’t trust that either. “Can you feel her strength, Davad? Like a star. You’ve hungered for it. You’ve… always hungered for it. Even before she broke you, even before Malachor.”

“No.” His earlier bravado was gone. “Not her.”

“Davad?” Revan stood between them, as if she didn’t know which one of them to believe. As if it wasn’t obvious that they were both as crazy as a mynock nest on a power converter.

“These aren’t Jedi,” Canderous told her. “You can kill them.” Clan Ordo had captured a few Jedi, during the war—very few, as the Jedi tended to sacrifice themselves or use their Force magic to escape. But once they got that mad light in their eyes, there was no point in using reason with them. Canderous had learned that lesson in the first Great Jedi War, when he was barely blooded in sky.

“I don’t want to be your enemy, Revan.” Arkan smiled, but Canderous really didn’t like the sheen of sweat on his face, or the tremor in that arm.

“What about Oerin?” Millifar interrupted, her voice angry and crackling through her helmet as if she’d turned up her voder to max. Canderous was proud of her stance: sideways between her two enemies, gun subtly cocked framing one target, but still within range of the other. “She said she gave the mask to Oerin. How did she know him at all?”

“Oerin’s her son,” the Onderonite said. He pointed a finger at the old woman, Kae. “She’s the one who brought him back.”

Revan froze. “What?” She turned towards the old woman. “Who the frack are you?”

“Someone who saw the value of a Force-resistant army,” the old woman murmured. She lifted her head, a smile curving around her mouth. She was definitely not as weak as she’d first appeared. “Someone who knew the Order’s most spectacular failures. Those who do not study history so often repeat it.”

XXX

There is no shame to losing to a superior foe; but there is shame in apathy. There is shame in entropy. There is shame in letting a cycle of rebuilding pass, in ignoring the council of your wives.
The Fett Lin had ignored wifely advice, and word of his willful neglect had reached the ears of the women from other clans. There were rumors of rebellion. Ruling clans had been overthrown before: worlds renamed and families removed, for much less offense. A generation had grown without the chance to be blooded in stars.

Clan Lin had served them well in peace; but there was serious question whispered in the tents about their ability to plan for war.

That is, until the Seventh Wife of Lin came to each Woman’s Tent with her promises of a new golden age, and her maps of Republic shipping lanes, Fleet patrols, and planetary resources. Canderous had only seen the woman for a moment: face masked, wearing the robes of the dar’jeddai infi, before the elder headwomen of Ordo had rushed her into council. Only seen her a few times after, when she came with her women’s business to his wives’ tent.

He had only heard of her plans after her departure, when Gwen showed him the maps she had left for them: routes stamped along the hyperspace lane, with precise notations of Republic strength.

XXX


“You said before that Oerin’s mother looked like a Jedi.” Revan’s head turned between them. “You said she wore a mask? This is… Arren Kae is her?”

XXX

“We will hit Eos with Lin,” Gwenarius smiled. “But Althir will be the true victory for Ordo.”

“Our sons will be worthy of the task.” Canderous bowed his head.

Beginning a war was a very careful dance: a defenseless target could only be acceptable if its resources merited the attack; or if attacking it would goad the opponent into a more challenging battle. It had taken time before they struck. Time, and the acquisition of the cloaking technology.

But it had all begun with that woman, hiding behind her gray Jedi mask.

XXX

“We all wore masks, we Jedi who served the Fleet. We had no rank, no ties to factions of the Republic. Or Senators.” The old woman’s voice was soft, and it raised his hackles.

Canderous nodded towards his daughter, twitching his thumb. Any madwoman who would betray her own, and then her clan, was too dangerous to live. *Shoot that one first.*

“Masked Jedi had fallen out of favor, before you and Malak brought it back.” The woman smiled, still talking her lies. “It was my suggestion—one of my many gifts to you, Revan. You had many masters during your time in the Jedi, but I was the last. You called me Vima. Master Vima Sunrider.”

“Is that who you are?” Revan asked the question, but she was looking at the other one now, the man.

“I have had many names.” Not an answer. Sunrider was certainly famous enough. Canderous narrowed his eyes. Did she look like Oerin? Maybe a little around the eyes. It could be a pack of maffastinking lies and it still wouldn’t matter. She was dangerous, and he was sick of playing
“Run,” the Onderon Beast-rider said, as if they were frightened. He looked twitchy, that one, but didn’t seem to be armed. The woman had a lightsaber on her belt. “Get out of here, Rev. Now.”

“No,” Canderous muttered and fired his rifle, pleased that his daughter’s echoed a heartbeat after.

But then the world shimmered, and everything seemed to freeze.

“Too late,” said a new voice, metallic, and hoarse, from the door.

XXX

Malak opened his eyes to a view. Looking down at the city from on high, like a god, like a Senator. Like Coruscant’s master, like long ago. A view from childhood, from innocence. A view that told him everything—even before he looked down and saw the white, circular bed,

Sitting up made his—the boy’s—head spin.

“You’re awake.” A woman’s voice, stating the obvious.

Malak turned his head. “How—how long have I been unconscious?”

An old Zabrak was standing before him, her face expressionless and Jedi serene. “Nearly a standard month.”

_A month._ His first thought was relief. _Not years. Not more years lost without my son—_

*Frack your son.*

_What?_

“Master Marla Korr,” he said out loud. He had no memories of the Zabrak—not from Malak’s life—but she had been around the Temple of late, attending to things. And of course, Mekk thought her niece was—

_Mekk. Mekel. Where are you? Where am I?_

_Telos?_

Strange overlay of their thoughts. Foreign—and not. Like the endless time he’d spent trapped with them on the ship: a cesspool of their hormonal angst and helpless rage. But there was real breath in his lungs now again. The real sensation of his body under the sheets—it was almost overwhelming.

“Your father would like to speak with you,” the Zabrak told him.

The word, ‘father’ triggered a rush of memories as well: the pilot’s face swam to mind before Malak could think. And then, a heartbeat later. *Frack fathers. You don’t need one, Telos. The boy’s voice, like an echo._

“And?” He kept his voice even.

“He asked me to assess your condition first.”

“If I was going to kill him, you couldn’t stop me.”
Her horn ridge raised. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. But I did not mention murder.” She folded her arms. “Tell me. Is this… permanent?”

*I have no idea.* “Yes,” he said evenly.

*Frack you, Malak. We’re going to destroy you.* Their rage sang in his veins like a balm. There was a power in it. Now that he had seen them both, fought them, it was very clear. There was a power in *them*. Not just Dustil, but Malak’s protégé too. And that power was Malak’s now.

*Or your power is ours. Asshat.*

“Our father wants you to be aware that without his acknowledgement, you have no legal status. Force possession is a myth.”

“There is no death, Master Korr.” Malak made himself smile. “At least, not for me. You may find death comes all too quickly, if you oppose my interests.”

He expected a typical Jedi rebuke, but the Zabrak only nodded. “I’m not here to deal in threats.” Her head bent over the comm at her wrist, and she traced a few symbols over its sensor, half-hidden from his view. “I’ve made my recommendations to Malachi.”

*If we work together, we can force him out, I think.* How many times had they said that? Jin or Onasi, or both? All of them, trapped in an endless loop.

*Fracking which one is his wife?*


*I can’t even feel my toes! He took them!*

*Will you listen to yourself? He can hear us.*

*I don’t fricking care what he can hear.*

*Silence. Malak told him. Maybe you should concern yourselves with the body you still have left. If we are all here, who is there?*

*What? Mekel’s voice. His was the quieter presence, although the least predictable. The Jin boy was calculating: in the end, he chose the paths that led to his survival, not advancement. Such calculation was wasted in the Sith. He would have died quickly, Malak thought, if it had not been for Malak’s own patronage.*

*It’s a trick, he’s trying to distract us. Try and talk, make him stab himself or something.* The Onasi boy was all passion and bluster. He would have made an excellent Sith, before someone more rational killed him.

“What recommendations did you make?” Malak asked Master Korr.

“So many sentients dream of immortality,” the Zabrak Jedi murmured. “But so few make a study of the cost.”

“I’ve paid enough.”

“What you?” She smiled slightly.
“I just want to keep my son safe.”

*Frack your son.*

*Telos!*

*It’s him or us. You still don’t fracking get that?*

*I know. But he’s—*

The rest of it was wordless, but all three of them felt it. The rush of emotion from the fatherless one, the one who had worshipped Malak, who still held some measure of respect—

*You should listen to Mekel Jin, Malak told the Onasi boy. And tend to your other body.*

“Malak?” The Zabrak raised an eyebrow, clearing her throat. “Your son *is* safe. Today.” Her thin lips smiled. “Would you like to see him?”

“Yes,” he said warily.

“Then you need to agree to my terms.” She smiled again. “First, you will not attack or make any assaults—physical or otherwise—on the Senator. He wants to make sure you are aware of the Genoharadan contract on the boy.”

“I am,” he gritted his teeth.

*Frack the geno-whatssit and frack you.*

*Telos.*

“Second, you will work with Senator D’Reev and myself to provide all the information you can on the state of the current Sith Empire, and your networks within it.”

“You Jedi had your own spies there. I assume you still do.”

“Yes,” she raised her brow ridge. She shifted her language to Ancient Sith without blinking an eye. “I spent some time on Thule myself, as a tutor to one of the noble families.”

Malak laughed. “Should that make me trust you?”

*Why the frack does Lydie’s aunt know Ancient Sith?*

*Why the frack do you care, Mekk? I don’t think your Zabrak goes for guys in a coma.*

*Can you feel anything? Can you find my fracking body? I don’t know where it is—*

*Welcome to my planet.*

Her face was perfectly closed. “I don’t need your trust, merely your information. As does the Senator.”

“It’s been more than a year. I’m sure most of my information is obsolete.” *Easy to betray what is no longer mine.* “But of course. Everything I know…” he spread out his hands, like a Coruscanti senator would. “Everything I know is yours.”

“Good.” Korr smiled at him, switching back to Basic, then traced another pattern over her comm.
“I suppose further interviews can wait until tomorrow. The Senator and the child are waiting.”

“I agree to your terms,” he repeated. He felt strangely nervous.

*What if we’re the ones dead now? What if we’re dead and he’s—what if this is all that we are?*

*It’s not.* Malak could feel the other—faintly. The heaviness of unconscious limbs, slack mouth, the slowed heartbeat. Even as he thought, he felt his own body start to falter, his own heart start to match the pace—

*Go.* He told them. *Follow the link. Wake up. Take Mekel’s body and leave me.*

*Frack you!* The Jin boy had already started to pull apart, but Onasi was resisting, still trying to lay claim to a body he could no longer control.

Spots danced in front of Malak’s physical eyes, and he willed his face not to change expression.

“Good,” Marla Korr murmured, gesturing to the single chair. There were clothes draped across it. Not D’Reev colors. Plain, beige Padawan robes instead. *I have no rank here; a fact Father will rub my nose in over and over.* “Dress yourself.”

*There. I can feel it. Can you? My body.*

Malak’s pulse quickened again. He left out a breath.

*Mekk?* Rush of panic from the Telosian.

“Fine.” Malak stood and walked over to them, aware of the body’s nakedness and Marla Korr’s lack of any reaction at all. It was a simple thing, to dress, although after so much time spent in an abstract world, he relished the simple sensation of fabric under his fingers, against his skin. His muscles felt weak, and there were no weapons at all.

And then Malak looked down at his robes, and slowly belted the sash. No D’Reev colors, no weapons. *My father wants me leashed and anonymous.*

*Frack your father. Frack you.* The Telosian was stubborn. Persistent. Feeding off his energy like a mynock.

*Go away, Dustil Onasi. This is mine. Not yours.*

“Father!” The door slid open, and Malachor burst through, hurtling himself into Malak’s arms. “Since everyone knows, I don’t have to call you Dustil!”

“Not in our own home,” the man behind him murmured, standing in the doorway. Malachi D’Reev nodded to Master Korr. “You may go.”

She frowned, eyeing Malak. “Are you sure?”

“I know my son,” the old man said. “He won’t hurt me in front of his.”

*But I would.* Nails digging into Malak’s palm made him realize his hands were clenched in fists, even wrapped around his own son’s body. His body shook with rage.

*No. You wouldn’t. He’s just a kid. Don’t scare him.*

Malak shook his head sharply. *Go to the other body. Concern yourselves with what you have left.*
Disconcerting, that he could actually… feel that body as well. Faintly. Like a whisper in the Force, as it blinked its eyes, and moved its limbs. What if I could occupy both at once?

Frack you! Suddenly, they both retreated, like a tide receding. Faintly, far away, he felt Mekel Jin’s body twitch and stir, the eyes open, looking up and out over a Coruscanti view—the same view, but filtered through industrial glass, a privacy shade.

“Why are you mad?” Malachor looked up at him, gray eyes wide and trusting.

“I’m… I’m not, Korrie.” He kept his voice gentle, blinking for a center. Trying to find calmness.

“You feel mad.”

“I’m not angry.” With effort, he released his son, and stood, facing down the old man. “Not with you.”

Master Korr was still lingering in the door. The old man gave her a nod and she backed away. Malak’s father closed the door behind her, and then walked slowly over to the room’s only chair. There had once been two, Malak remembered. One for him and one for his wife.

“Where is she?” he asked. “Where’s Revan?”

“Attending to her Mandalorian affairs.” The man shrugged. “Your wife at least, sees the value in a strong Mandalorian alliance.”

“She said she was coming back today,” Malachor added. “But she had important stuff.”

No doubt some game of yours, Malachi. Revan without her memories is no match for you—

“Sheris?” The name slipped out before he thought better.

“Who?” His father’s ignorance, real or feigned, lasted less than a heartbeat. “Perhaps if you spent less time worrying about your concubine, your wife would be more attentive.”

“Where is Sheris?” Malak repeated. She’s lasted longer than I thought possible, if you don’t know what she is.

“The Temple has been closed and sealed. The last of the Jedi were evacuated to our office suites below these apartments yesterday. There are a few still remaining in the Underground clinic, but Master Klee has taken my advice, and ordered that station to be closed today. I expect the others will be joining us here. Shall I have Sheris sent to your rooms?” A gray eyebrow raised. “Malachor, perhaps you should wait for me in the gardens.”

“Sheris was mean to me.” His son’s lower lip stuck out, the expression eerily like Red’s when they were children. “You don’t really like her more than Mother, do you?”

“Of course not.” She’s dangerous. Delusional. She tried to kill me before that Zabrak—

That was where he’d seen Master Marla Korr recently. The last thing he saw was her, with the younger version of her as well—frozen in the Force. Marla Korr had been the one to send in that droid with… some kind of gas to disable them.

Effective. How did she know it would be?

“My son.” His father might have been speaking for some time, or had just left Malak staring into space, lost in his own thoughts. He had no way to tell. A smile pulled at the old man’s mouth, as if
he were getting sentimental in his old age. “I should have known when you saved Malachor from those assassins. I should have known by the way you tied your collar. But I never considered the possibility of your return.” He stood up from the chair and took a step forward.

Malachor smiled. “Now it’s all going to be okay? You’re all going to get along?”

“Father,” Malak said. He meant the word to come out as a warning, but the boy’s voice cracked. “Father, I....”

XXX

The last time. He had known it was the last time. It could be nothing else.

“Give me the boy.” Speaking was agony, and Malak’s words came out soft, with too many syllables. “Coruscant will burn. We can keep him safe.”

“You and your wife? Or you and your whore?” His father smiled, but Malak saw the lines of strain there too: the yellow-black skin under the man’s eyes, the lines around his face that had deepened, the tremble in his hands that hadn’t been there before. ‘You’re delusional.’

“We have the ships to take Coruscant. All of the Core worlds.” Being here was a betrayal worse than Telos in its scope, admitting what Revan had wanted kept secret, kept with the element of surprise. “Let me get him out first.”

“She doesn’t know you came. Revan would never play her hand so cheaply.” Malachi paused. “I could go to her. Tell her of your betrayal.”

“You think you’re using her, but she’s using you.”

The old man smiled. “Fortunes change. Your mother and I were divided like this once. Long ago.”

“Did you kill her?” It was a question he’d never wanted to ask.

“It was more than twenty years ago,” Malachi sighed. “Does it make a difference now?”

It did not. “Where is Malachor?” His hand twisted, and the old man took a step backwards, obviously rattled, even with the ysalamiri field.

“Corellia.” Malachi seemed to recover himself, and stepped forward again. When I received word of your arrival I sent him to a place beyond your reach.”

“Nothing is beyond our reach.” Malak tried to smile, feeling the scabs open and tear.

“Her reach. Not yours.”

Her reach. Her reach assigned Malak to Manaan. Her reach kept him at arm’s length, even as she assured him they were winning the war. Her reach confined her with those Lords of Thule, and her new Dark Council. Now she wanted him to go to Manaan to oversee production of a plague to stop Tenebrae, a formula she’d gotten from that damned computer—

“Our reach.” Malak’s head inclined. Corellia. He would send agents there. It was probably a lie, but he had to be sure. “Farewell, Father. I don’t expect we’ll meet again.”

The old man snorted. “Perhaps in hell.”

XXX
“My son,” Malachi said. “It is good to see you again, whatever you might think.” Heavy arms clapped over Malak’s shoulder’s, and the old man drew him into a formal embrace, dry lips a whisper on each of his cheeks.

The old man looked younger than he had in Malak’s last memory. Maybe he’d finally broken down and started using the rejuv treatments that most Coruscanti nobles favored. Malak kissed both of his cheeks back, and found himself stepping back to give the formal bow before his mind made sense of it. “Father.”

“How did you do it?” The old man looked happy, which Malak mistrusted. Of course, Malachi would know that, so if he meant to be unsettling, he would look pleased, just to leave Malak on hydrospanners. “Was there some artifact? Some kind of ceremony?”

“No.” Even as he mistrusted the old man’s emotion, Malak felt a part of him respond to it; like a child seeking approval, an emotion bleeding over, perhaps, from Jin or Onasi’s mind. “It was my own power in the Force.”

“Your own power.” His father raised an eyebrow. “Don’t expect me to petition for any legal standing. I need your wife, not you.”

“Is that why you brought me to these rooms?” Before Revan, they’d been a boy’s rooms, decorated with Malak’s Eglantine banners, his shell collection, all the old-fashioned books his mother had printed. After Malachor, the old man had fashioned this: made an adult refuge—an opulent nest meant to sway a man and his wife away from the Order’s narrow path.

And it worked.

“Sentiment makes fools of us all.” The old man was taller than him now, and his seamed hand patted Malak’s shoulder. “Even me, my boy.”

“I’m glad,” Malachor said softly. The child was standing still, head cocked at an angle.

Malak tried to laugh. “Maybe you should go see to your work, Mal. I know in my day, we Egs had at least two hours of language practice a night.”

“We use voders,” his son said. “But I have some maths to do.”

Malak smiled. “Get that done and I’ll join you for lunch.”

“Like old times, huh?” The boy smiled shyly. “Cept you’re not a ghost.”

“Just like that.” For a moment, it was all normal. Even his father’s smile seemed almost normal—like a fragile peace accord had been reached. Like the promise of a better world.

“Malachor?” The Force gave no warning at all. Only her voice did. Her voice.

Malak turned his head and there she was, standing behind their son, her hair loosely braided and half-falling over her shoulders.

“You must be Malachor,” she murmured, even as their son’s head turned, eyes opening wide to stare at her. “I was looking for you.”

XXX

“You’re awake.” Purple eyes staring into his. The pressure of her hand, squeezing his. “How do
you… how do you feel, Mekel?”

I’m not—

But he was and even as he opened his mouth, Mekk’s voice swam to the surface. “Master Yuthura, I—” he felt the muscles tense as the other boy pulled their arm away from her. “Where am I?”

Like you don’t know? We’re in D’Reev’s palace, asshat. Weren’t you paying attention?

No, this is… different. It was different. The air here was medicinal. The room looked like a medical pod, panels open wide to a window. But outside—the view was nearly the same as it had been in Malak’s room. Coruscant, spinning beneath.

A different room. So the frack what? Where the frack am I, Mekk? You have to find my body!

“Senator D’Reev has been kind enough to offer the Jedi sanctuary,” Yuthura said. “The Temple was… closed. There were too many deaths.”

“From the plague?”

“Too many deaths,” she repeated, avoiding his eyes. “Some sentients are calling it a Jedi purge.”

“Is Lydie okay?” That was all Mekel. Dustil didn’t give a frack.

“She’s recovering. Thalia May is with her. Udoo Ophile is dead.”

“But he had the vaccine.”

“Some Jedi died anyway.” She seemed to hesitate, glancing behind them, and then lowering her voice. “Master Jopheena is one with the Force too.”

“Just say fracking dead,” Mekel sounded actually upset. From the images shifting in his mind, he’d liked the old bag. “Iridel too, huh?”

“You can sense their loss?” She nodded. “There were more casualties than there should have been.”

“Sounds like we—I—missed a lot.” It sounded like Mekel was trying not to cry, which was pathetic, even for him. “Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know where Dustil is, would you, Master?”

“I am a Padawan, Mekel, even as you are.” Yuthura Ban’s lips thinned in a smile. “Even as you both are.”

“Right. We’re both Padawans.” Mekk grinned at her, as if that was perfectly normal. All of this normal. He swung his legs over the bed and stretched. Dustil could feel their spine pull, easing out the stiffness in his—their—limbs. “How long was I out for?”

“Several weeks.” Yuthura stepped in front of him, blocking the view. “Don’t stand up quite yet, you’ll make yourself dizzy.”

But they were already doing it. Spots danced in front of their eyes, as Dustil willed her to be wrong. Is she stalling us? What the frack is this, Mekk?

I don’t know, Telos. Shut the frack up while I figure it out.

“Mekel. Can you… both hear me?” She tilted her head frowning. “Can Malak?”
“What?” His—their voice cracked on the word. “Both? Who are you talking about?”

“I know,” she said. Her face was smooth and unlined, but one of her lekku hugged her neck too tightly. “I know about the bond you share with Dustil Onasi.” She paused. “And more unfortunately, now with Malak.”

“Bond?” Mekk was trying to make their voice sound bored, but it kept not working. Didn’t help that somewhere else Malak was flipping out about something. Dustil tried not to pay attention.

“I know,” Yuthura repeated. “The link between you has kept you both strong. Kept you both alive.”

Feeling of relief, almost like a sigh. “You know.” Dustil’s own voice, or as close as it was in Mekel’s mouth. “You know about us?”

She nodded. “A complex relationship, but not without its advantages.”

“Not really seeing an advantage right now.” Dustil again. But both of them thinking it. “Can you help us get him out?”

“I mean to try,” their former teacher said. “What is Malak doing now?”

“He’s busy flipping out about that Sheris chit.” Mekel said, as Dustil felt him—them—sifting through what they—what Malak knew. “Frack. She’s Revan too?”

“A fact known by no one.” Yuthura lowered her voice. “And best kept secret. I hope you can see why.”

“No,” Dustil snapped—startled when the words came out loud, out of Mekel’s mouth. “But I don’t give a frack.”

“How did you know about us?” Mekel interrupted. He swung their legs over the bed and glanced down—then hastily grabbed a sheet and pulled it around their hips.

Their former headmistress blinked once. “You mean about the bond between you?”

“No, about our matching space lily tattoos,” Dustil snapped. “Of course he means the bond.”

“I did it,” Yuthura said flatly. “I know about it because I did it to you.”

XXX

“What other children?” Carth was still standing there like a null error message, and if Mission had feet, she would have stamped them. “And who’s the one?”

If she had feelings, they’d be having bad versions of themselves right about now. There was nothing registering on her sensors except the big meaty hulk of bad coming towards them; and yet—Mission could almost totally swear she was feeling something else. Or a lot of somethings. Creepy, crappy planet full of bad somethings. It all wasn’t good.

“I will answer your questions,” the Zabrak said. “After we deal with this beast.”

The rancor roared, opening its maw to reveal rows and rows of circular teeth. If Mission had pants, she would have pissed in them. Instead, Mission opened her widebeam and transmitted the distress call to Big Z.

“What is it?” He had a piece of circuitry in his hand, and a hydrospanner stuck in his belt. Her
sensors on the ship rang the alarm, even as she powered up her engines herself. “It was a trap?”

“Looking pretty like.” With lungs, she could have sighed. “You want to man the main cannon while I fly?”

“I have better aim,” the Wookiee agreed. “Don’t let the stabilizers hit the tree line. We don’t have replacement parts.”

“Whatever you say, Big Guy.” She banked and dove. Say what you want about organic bodies, Mission was pretty sure that none of them could do this.

XXX

The Mandalorian’s bolts missed, leaving smoking craters in the wall behind Master Kae.

“How—?” Millifar’s voice was shocked.

Canderous cursed under his breath.

Revan’s former teacher, the one she couldn’t remember, the one Davad said not to trust, the one who was supposed to be Vima Sunrider, Oerin Lin’s mother, merely smiled and lowered her hand. She was more powerful than she had seemed the moment before. More powerful than any Force user Revan had encountered except for—

“Too late.” The voice was metallic and there was something broken in it, but it was still his. Still…him in the Force. But changed.

Revan whirled around to face the ruin that had been Oerin Lin.

Oerin looked worse than he had on the vids, and he wasn’t alone. At least a dozen black-clad and hooded humanoid sentients, all armed with vibroblades stood behind him. Their covered faces made them all seem identical, save for a few differences in breast or hips that marked some of them as women. Oerin himself stood very still, red lightsaber blazing. The blade was eerily silent, as if he’d matched the crystals to quell vibration. His hair was still gold and thick on top of his head, but the face below was gray and crossed with small cuts. His eyes were dull, and his bare chest looked like someone had cut it open and then patched it back up in haste, because between some of the sutures, something dark and wet oozed. There was a metal plate set in the hollow of his neck—a technology that a part of her knew, a part of her had worked with before. Voder. To help him talk, like I used with Malak—

But Malak had been alive, and this man was not. He was nothing except the Force in the Force. Nothing except the Force and—

She heard herself gasp. The Force and pain. Every sinew, every bone, every centimeter of his skin shrieked with it, as if his nerves were the only thing left alive in his body.

“You shot at my mother?” Oerin laughed, but it came out broken. “You shouldn’t have missed, Ordo.”

“Now I know how fast she can move,” Canderous muttered. “Next one won’t miss.”

“You can’t kill her so easily.” Oerin held out his hands, deactivating his lightsaber. “And based upon my own example, I’m not sure it would matter, if you could.”

“What have you been doing, Lin?” Davad asked. “Fracking vibroblades?”
“I registered myself as a cyborg in the Underground fighting pits. Benelishal’s Fighting Pit, to be exact.” Oerin turned, placing the wall to his back. His minions fanned out, encircling them all. “I’m quite good at it.” He smiled. “Of course, I cheat. You know, I can’t die?”

Millifar murmured something, too fast for Revan to catch, but Oerin’s head turned to look at her, and his smile slowly faded. “Milli,” he said. “I should have—I didn’t know you were here.”

Her helmeted face turned to him. “What have you done?”

“What has he done? Not followed his instructions.” The old woman’s voice seemed stronger now. Something in it rippled in the air. Like a sarlacc under the surface, waiting to open.

Oerin’s head turned away from Millifar, and the smile reappeared on his gray lips, twisting like a knife. “I thought you approved of free will, Mother? I did go to Malachor like you asked first. See?” Oerin waved his hand, and all the minions froze, vibroblades raised, as if waiting for a signal to attack. “I brought the Sek’a’irtish Division with me. You’ve realize you’ve lost more than three quarters of Acknahar’tah already? I was told there’s a new self-styled Sith Lord in the Underground who killed a few. Scared off more. And I can’t prove it, but Four of Twelve thinks Davad here might have eaten One and Two.”

“I told the shadows to stay away from the Temple,” Davad muttered. “Arca gave different commands. They should have stayed away.”

“That’s the problem with untrained Force-sensitives.” Oerin shrugged. “No defense against Sith Lords.” He glanced back at the sentients standing behind him. “You heard that, yes? Minions? Any one of us in this room could end all of you.”

“What about the Mandalorians?” the tallest one, the one closest to Oerin asked.

“They are mine, even as you are. Don’t touch them.”

“I am not yours,” Millifar snapped. She leveled her rifle at Oerin.

“Millifar.” Revan stepped between them, faster than Canderous could. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong, Davad? Didn’t want them poaching your territory? You prefer the blood of innocents now to Sith assassins?” Oerin’s lips bared in a smile, revealing teeth that were still somehow white and even. “I guess Mother has been busy with her lessons.”

“Oerin?” Millifar’s rifle dropped, swinging free in her hand. “Oerin, what happened to you?”

“Milli.” Oerin’s voice was strangely flat. “You should leave this place. Now.”

“You did something to me,” she said. “I saw a recording of it. You made me forget.”

“Stang,” he muttered. “I should have realized there’d be a recording. Well, it wasn’t easy, making you forget.” His face twisted. “We Mandalorians are a resistant lot.”

Canderous unbuckled something from his belt, and held it up. Thermocrete detonator. His helmeted head turned in Revan’s direction, and even without a facial expression, she could see the question in it.

No. She shook her head. Out of all of us, Canderous, you and your daughter have the least chance of surviving that.
With a grimace, the Mandalorian tucked it back into his belt.

Warily, Revan glanced between the three of them. “So. You’re all in this together? What… what are you?”

“We are those who will achieve what you failed to do.” Kae pressed the wound in her side, and slowly rose to her feet, still leaning against the wall for support. Her voice was weak, but determined. “We will defeat the Emperor, and bring peace to the galaxy.”

“By killing Jedi?” It was too much to grasp. A part of her felt the Force around them twist, and reached for it, fueling it with her own fear and anger and hopelessness. “Davad, I thought you were….”

“I was your friend,” he said. “But this is bigger than us.” His face twisted. “My Master may be insane, but she’s not… she’s not wrong.

“Your master.” Kae agreed. Her head turned to Oerin. “And your mother.”

Lin nodded. “Yes.” He shrugged at Revan. “After I died, I guess she was bereft without my continued light in her life. If it came down to it, would you raise young Malachor from the dead?”

Revan felt cold. “I… no one has that kind of power.”

“Oh, but they do,” Oerin said. “Mother does. Perhaps I could, as well. And if we can, I’m quite certain you could manage it. You are the strongest one here. See how Davad can’t take his eyes off you?” He snorted. “It’s not just your beauty.”

“You’re not alive.” The pain was like a shriek on her nerves when she didn’t block it out. Easier, to block it. “I don’t know what you are.”

“Just doing my best!” Oerin glanced at Davad again. “As we do.”

“Then on Manaan, what you were both doing there was….”

“Consolidating the strong to bolster our position.” Oerin’s ravaged face twisted. “But then you came, and Mother’s plan changed.”

“She’s always been behind this—everything—”

“Not everything,” Kae interrupted. “There’s a proverb my own mother taught me, long ago. ‘We make plans, and the Force laughs. I have had to readjust mid-course countless times: when you won the duel against Mandalore, when you harnessed the Star Forge, when the Jedi captured you, when the plague killed my son—and when Jophageena destroyed the holocron.”

“My holocron? You mean the holocron of my memories?” Her mother? Is she really Vima Sunrider? Is this really Nomi Sunrider’s daughter? It seemed like a cruel joke.

“Yes,” Kae said. “Your holocron. Your memories are gone, Revan. All that you once were, destroyed by one Jedi’s madness.”

“She’s lying,” Davad said, almost at the same time. “She always lies. You need to… you need to know that, Rev.” He was sweating harder now. She could see the tremor in his arm, the falter in his step. He glanced at Oerin, and then back at her. “But the Emperor is worse. The old you… the one with your memories… knows… knew that. What we do… we’re doing it to stop him.”
“I need to stop you,” Revan said numbly. *I need to stop being a fracking idiot and stop announcing what I’m going to do. What the frack am I going to do?*

There were three of them. Canderous, she trusted to hold his own, but if anything happened to Millifar—

*And they’ll know that, they’ll use my own weakness against me. But Oerin. He wouldn’t—he would never hurt her—*

“Where are my memories? Are they here or not? You had them. You want me to help you? Show me why I should.”

“Deception was never your path,” Kae chuckled. “I trained you. Even when the head forgets, the heart knows. “You are a star in the Force, but we could end you now, if that were our purpose.”

“You’re strong,” Davad agreed. He licked his lips, as if he were nervous, and took a step closer to her. His eyes were a piercing yellowish-brown—had they always been that color?

Fragments of memory in her head: Davad and Beya laughing, Davad studying with her in the Archives, Davad crawling across the floor of her flagship….

XXX

“Rise,” she whispered. “Get up, Arkan. We’re alone. You don’t need to impress me like some groveling worm.”

*His Sith-maddened eyes looked up at her. “I came back, Master. I came back for you.”*

“I would have warned you,” she began. Pathetic, trying to muster an excuse, but he was still loyal. *He deserved one.*

“If you had, I would have deserted.” He laughed. “All that life on Onderon, I can’t go back there. I want to serve you. It’s what I always… always wanted.”

“Why?”

“Because.” He stood, approached her. Shorter than Malak. His dark hair was knotted, twisted into hundreds of small braids ringed with bells. That meant something for Beast-riders, but right now, Revan couldn’t remember what. *Her hand reached out and closed on his arm, fingers digging deep into the muscle there. He didn’t flinch, didn’t move when she stepped closer, wrapping her other arm around his back, pressing their bodies together. One of them sighed, and the Force flared between—*

XXX

“Ah,” he whispered. Still a meter away, no threat. Something relaxed in her, calmed. She felt her heartbeat slow, felt something *open*—

“No!” Lightning lashed out, and Revan heard two rifles blast. She stumbled forward, somehow knocked off balance. Davad raised his hand and then she was flying backwards, hard enough into the wall behind her that her head cracked against the stone, barely cushioned by her own shields in time.

“Revan is not for you, Beast-lord!” The old woman stood taller now, and Davad seemed… smaller, shrunken.
“You shot me, Millifar.” Oerin’s dead voice was full of reproach. There was a hole in his chest that hadn’t been there before. A new wound, overlapping with the old ones. It seemed to make no difference. There was no blood, just a charred hole where the bolt had gone in. Oerin still stood there, as if nothing had happened at all.

“You’re not him,” the girl said. “You’re not my Mandalore!”

The world had too many edges in it. Something was muted, softened, as if happening from a distance. Revan looked down and found the mask of the Mandalore lying next to her, from where the Force had thrown it. She picked it up slowly, instinct more than reason making her shove it in her belt before scrambling back to her feet.

Canderous’s shot had gone for Kae, a part of her mind had registered its trajectory, like a ripple in the Force; but the hit was to disable, not to kill. The Sith was favoring one leg now, still leaning half against the wall; but she was still standing.

The Mandalorian turned towards her, nodding his helm.

Weakened. He weakened her. He wants her to be afraid. He wants her to tell us what we need to know first. He knows that I can finish it—

“I’m sorry, Rev.” Davad took a step backwards. He seemed paler, almost gray. “I swore I would never do that, but you’re so… full. Rich. I… I shouldn’t have done that—”

“My apprentice will not trouble you again,” Kae murmured. “But we need you, Revan. We need your fire, your strength for the war yet to come.”

“Then you’d better tell me what the frack that war is.”

“I have.” Kae’s hand went to the wound in her leg, wincing. “The Emperor is a scream in the Force. He consumes worlds, he hollows out minds, and puts his own inside. His dream of Empire is one of stagnation, apathy, death. He has no mind, except to expand his own strength. No thoughts, except to become more than he is. There are worlds over which he has entirely taken sway. They are silent, filled with sentients who have no need for voices. Sentients who have no needs. Sentients, who are no longer worthy of the word itself: worlds of one mind and a billion hearts beating. Worlds where nothing grows, nothing changes, nothing speaks—”

“Why?” Revan interrupted. “Why would he even want that?”

“Maybe he no longer has wants,” Davad answered her. “Only… needs. He needs those worlds to continue to… be himself.”

“Frack this,” Canderous muttered, and fired again, so quickly, that it barely registered—

—until the bolt froze in mid-air half a meter away from Kae’s face.

“Call off your beast, Revan, and I’ll call off mine.” The old woman’s smile was almost… proud?

“Canderous,” Revan whispered. Oerin’s soldiers were closer now, vibroblades out. Silent in the Force. How did they do that?

“It was your idea,” Oerin said, as if he’d heard her thoughts. Because I can hear your thoughts when you’re blasting them all over the place. Quiet them, before Mother notices. “Training the weak Force-sensitive to hunt Jedi. You always needed more Jedi.”
“Her idea, but Revan never oversaw its full execution,” murmured Kae.

“Why?” She didn’t want the answer, but the answer was terrible and obvious. All the Dark Jedi. On Korriban. On Manaan. On Rakata Prime. And then, those Jedi in the room with Malak. All dead, except their bodies. Their bodies and their connection to the Force, feeding him, feeding the station with their strength—

“Conversion,” said Kae. “Do you think so many followed you on principle alone?”

“Mother’s made a study of refining the techniques,” Oerin added. His head tilted towards Davad again and their eyes locked. Half a heartbeat—no more than that. Then Oerin gestured with his hand. “As you can see.”

“Get out of here,” Revan told Oerin’s soldiers. Oerin’s Sith. Oerin’s shadows. Shadows, they said. We called them shadows.

One of the ones in back laughed. “No, Lord Revan.”

XXX

They came, appearing out of the shadows of the jungle clearing. Dozens of them. All kids, mostly looking younger than Dustil did now. Most were Iridonian, but a few were Human, Rodian—even a few Selkath.

All of them had red lightsabers.

Sith. But they’re still just kids. Sometimes, Carth had nightmares about all the soldiers they’d killed that were still almost just kids.

“How many mothers have you killed, Father?” How many kids?

He stepped in front of Mission, pushing her back, his hand slipping over the surface of the droid’s dome. “Careful,” he whispered.

“No kidding,” she said. “But aren’t you the organic one here?”

The rancor had turned, assessing this new threat. As they watched, it roared—rearing back on its haunches, and crashing through the underbrush.

Whine from overhead, and then the familiar sound of the Hawk’s thrusters. Carth looked up into the trees. “You called in Zaalbar?”

“And my ship,” Mission said. “I think I can take a rancor better than you, meatbag guy. No offense.”

“You mind not calling me that?” It made him think… he didn’t want to think Mission really had anything in common with the HK. Or that Kashyyyk computer. “Don’t shoot the kids.”

Subsonic whine of blasters charging, and as he looked, the Hawk crashed through the tree line. Some of the kids looked up, but the rest seemed to have formed a wall, almost as if they were herding the rancor away. Strangely, they weren’t attacking it. Even more strangely, the beast wasn’t fighting back.


“But it’s right there!” Mission beeped in disappointment.
“Can he land nearby? Tell him to land nearby.”

“It’s mostly trees…” She beeped again. “I could probably make a crater big enough to land. You want me to do that?”

“The Hawk doesn’t have that kind of firepower.”

Mission’s voder chuckled. “It does now. Back on Kashyyyk, we made a lot of improvements.”

XXX

“Malachor,” she repeated. Saying his name. Saying his name to him. For a moment, the world narrowed until it only had two of them.

“Hello,” her son said. “Hello?”

“Sheris.”

And then Malak spoiled it by saying that name—that other name, the not-name. The woman she no longer was.

“This area is restricted,” Malachi’s sneer was predictable. The fool probably assumed she was Malak’s whore. All things considered, that was an excellent cover.

“I thought you said to meet you here alone, my Lord Malak.” Revan simpered, ducking her head and smiling from underneath her lashes at the dark-haired boy who had Malak’s precise expression of confounded rage on his face. “Am I early?” She fished in her pocket, bringing out the real reason for her visit—not just the excuse to see Malachor; but the insurance. The insurance that he would not die, would not be taken, would be safe. “I brought Malachor’s vaccine.”

“People call me Korrie,” her son muttered. Someone should cut his hair. Fix that crooked tooth.

“He doesn’t need the vaccine. His environment has excellent biofilters,” the old man said.

“Our studies show the plague doesn’t affect children,” Revan ventured. *I tailored it not to.* “But he should have it before he enters puberty. And that happens… early in your family, doesn’t it?”

“How did you get past my guards?” Malachi was glaring at Malak now, not her.

It had been much, much harder, with Sheris’s weakness and the old man’s increased security to climb the ventilation shafts from the sealed levels below, but Revan had been determined. Once in, of course, her own HK had been able to override the security on this level. Malachi had changed the passcodes he’d known about, of course; but not the ones that she’d installed originally, when she designed this refuge to be safe for her son.

“My Lord invited me.” She smiled at Malak. “He gave me the codes.”

“Your lord forbids you from giving *his* son anything,” Malak snapped. “Korrie. Go with your grandfather.”

No. The fool Sheris, and her stupid emotions. Not just Revan’s own despair. She could feel Malak’s too—as if he didn’t like this any more than she did. *I should have just gone to my son’s room in his sleep, given him the vaccine then. But I wanted to see him, speak to him—I want to meet him, know him—*

“I’m to be your stepmother, Malachor,” she said. “It’s time we were acquainted.”
“You’re marrying Father?” His eyes widened. “But what about my mother?”

She’s not—

“No.” Malachi said. He snorted. “If you think this is some kind of play to seize power, my son—”

“It’s…” Malak looked like he was struggling. “It’s just Sheris, father.” His mouth twisted. “Obviously, the Senate would have as hard a time believing her to be Revan as they would me to be Malak.”

“You were mean to me before,” Malachor said to Revan. His gray eyes were exactly like his father’s had been. Before—before they weren’t. “I don’t think I want to be acquainted.”

“I’m sorry about that. I was just… confused.” This was dangerous. She had never felt so vulnerable, not even when she thought she was dying. Like all her nerves were exposed. Where was the ice? Where was the artificial calm she used to channel as naturally as breathing?

“I won’t have my grandson exposed to… this.” Malachi’s face was the picture of disgust.

“Hypocrite—you stupid man—” her temper flared. Where was the calm? The reserve?

“Malachor is a Coruscanti Third. He’ll be exposed to much worse before he’s eighteen.” Malak’s voice broke in fast. Malak coming to her side? His voice roughened. “He already knows how the galaxy works.”

Revan risked a glance towards him. He was staring at her steadily, his anger beating a tempo in the Force.

Their son looked between them: first one, then the other, then back at his grandfather. He frowned. “If Father wants it, it’s okay, Grandfather. She said she was sorry.”

“Revan herself won’t have you, my son.” The old man’s voice was scornful. “And no wonder.” He laughed, that same laugh that Revan heard sometimes in her dreams: the one about the room and the murmur of soft conversation, that day he’d told them the truth about how the galaxy worked, the day that haunted her, made her wonder: if she had answered his questions differently, if she had been different, would none of this have happened?

Were things better for their efforts than they would be without? The Jedi were all but broken, but instead of triumph, she was trapped in Kae’s game. Tenebrae was slowed, but not overthrown. And the Republic… everything she had read about the events of the last three years pointed to total economic collapse within the next five, unless—

Unless we have another war? Is that the answer that Malachi seeks again? And is he right?

“Revan and I ended long ago.” Malak’s voice drew her back. Not the right voice. Sometimes she felt the pain of that too. You died, my love. You died and your body was destroyed and I never even saw, never had the chance to say goodbye—

Sheris was a sentimental fool. Revan exhaled sharply, trying to drive her out.

“I’ll tell Cook to send your afternoon meal to your private dining chamber,” Malachi said.

A room no doubt covered in surveillance. “We’ll go out,” Revan said. “Surely, a child of seven is allowed some time outside. If he’s going to rule this planet, he needs to see—”

“I know.” Stupid Sheris. She knew, but in the space of seeing him, all reason seemed to have left. All time had stopped. In her head, she had never forgotten, and in her head, he was still smaller, more like a younger child than this, even if she had never seen the younger child he had been.

“You will have no rank here, Darkstar,” Malachi told her. “Even if you marry that one.” He snorted. “Canderous Ordo and Carth Onasi have more rights in House D’Reev than either of you.”

“The dining room is fine, Father.” Malak’s words had a precise quality. She glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, but he was staring at the balcony.

“I like the little dining room,” Malachor said. “I guess it’s okay.” He was staring at Malak too. “If that’s what Father wants.”

“It is what will be allowed.” Malachi turned his back on them and walked to the door. “I have matters of some urgency to attend to. Should you see the real Revan before I do, please tell her to contact me immediately. We need her to help settle some of the more recalcitrant members of the Jedi Order.”

The doors slid closed behind him.

“I’m sure that will take no time at all,” Revan muttered. “For one as skilled as she.”

“Don’t.” Malak nodded at the ceiling, and she understood. “Just don’t… talk. Sheris.”

Malachor looked between them, frowning. Every part of Sheris’s pathetic body screamed at Revan to take him in her arms, press her nose against his. Hothan kiss. Your smile would light up the room —

“You want to see my toys, Aunt Sheris?” he said finally. “I have lots.”

“I think the balcony,” she began. That way if your father betrays me I can throw him over it. But the thought was weak, almost a joke.

“No.” Malak went to their son and took his hand. He shook his head again, message entirely clear.

Did he think she was a fool, revealing herself to a child? No doubt these rooms were littered with surveillance equipment added since their departure. And Malachor was so young. He could betray her so easily without even knowing.

“She’s not your aunt, Malachor.”

“Korrie,” the child corrected him. “Padawan Sheris?”

“That’s fine,” Revan said. “I would love to see your toys, Mal. Can you show me the way?” He frowned. “I guess.”

“We’ll all go,” Malak said. “But let’s make an early night of it. Sheris and I have to talk about some grown up things after.”

“Gross,” Korrie snorted. “I don’t need to know about that!”

XXX

“No,” the tallest one murmured. “We are no longer under your command.”

“You’re under mine,” Oerin murmured. He frowned, scanning the room and looking at Davad again. “Although I must say, perhaps Revan’s advice might be wise.”

One of them fell to the floor, like puppet with its remotes cut out. No warning. Just—

Revan heard herself gasp. The man was dead. But worse than that… empty. Like a hole in the world.

Not the world, Rev. The Force. Davad gets hungry. Oerin’s voice in her mind. His dead eyes met hers.

“They can’t run,” Davad said. His fingers flexed. “I need them.” His face was almost gray. His head tilted back—

Another shadow collapsed, and then another, lights winking out one-by-one, lives on an overtaxed grid.

Don’t react. Don’t move. They were Sith. Just more Sith with blood on their hands—

“Get out of here!” She pushed with the Force, knocking Davad off balance. He fell back, and a few of the shadows broke free, started to run, but only a few. The others stayed still: blind loyalty? Compulsion? She had no way of knowing. Another fell. And then another—

“Fool.” The old woman snapped. “There’s not enough power in them to sate you. You’ve just wasted years of their training. And for what?”

“Do they even mind? Their loyalty was absolute,” Oerin agreed. “You crawled in their heads, Mother, to assure it.” His lips pulled back in a smile, and one of his hands moved, so quickly, Revan almost missed it.

An explosion, as the blaster bolt formerly held only by Kae’s concentration hit the wall. Canderous had been using a disruptor rifle, point blank range. If anyone had still been in its path, they would have been obliterated.

Smaller flash of light, and the ozone smell of a shock stick. In the next heartbeat, Oerin Lin was jabbing the weapon into Kae’s neck. The woman screamed in pain and outrage, and Revan felt the Force rising up from her, welling from beneath the surface with the Force of a shockwave, a scream, rage that would envelop all of them—

“No.” Revan’s stasis field surrounded Kae, freezing the woman’s expression in a rictus of pain. The shockwave froze with her, encased in energy, for as long as she could hold it. “Oerin, what are you doing?”

“Betraying my mother?” His ruined face tilted towards her. “I thought you’d be happy, Rev.”

“Get out of here,” Davad said. He pointed at the ground, where the mask of the Mandalore had fallen from Revan’s robes. “And take that with you.”

“That’s mine.” Oerin sounded offended.
“I met a Jedi oracle who said I was going to wear it and destroy worlds,” Davad told him. “I’d rather not. All things considered, I think we should just give the mask of the Mandalore back to the clans.”

“My clans,” Oerin muttered. “They were supposed to be mine.”

“We’re not.” Millifar leveled her rifle at him again, but her voice sounded like she was crying under her helm. “You’re not one of us. Clan ends in death.”

He sighed, and his head dropped. “I know.”

“We’ll take it.” Canderous closed his gauntlet over the mask, and snapped it onto his belt. “Kill the crazy Sith bitch and let’s go, Revan.”

“No,” Oerin shook his head. “She’s my blood. My kill.”

“She’s ours.” Davad said. He took a step towards Revan again, and for a moment, the world faded—

“Don’t.” Oerin’s lightsaber cut between them. “Revan’s still holding back my mother. Do you think Mother would be happy if you ate her favorite pet?”

“I think she might be displeased that you tried to stun her.” Davad’s voice was the complete opposite of what Revan felt in the Force now. His yellow eyes were almost… glowing. He stared at Revan. “Do you understand? You need to run. I can’t… it gets harder and harder to control.” His smile was sad, and so out of place that for a moment, she felt sorry for him. “Besides the Emperor, I’m probably the only Force user in this galaxy you can’t kill.”

“Well, there’s me,” Oerin added. “Being as I’m already dead.”

“That’s true for her too.” Davad nodded at Kae, still frozen in Revan’s stasis.

“You mean… she can’t kill you either.” Revan nodded. “But can you… you said before she was in your minds. If that’s true, how can you stop her?”

“I’m a Sunrider.” Oerin shrugged. “I’ve studied these things. I think I know.”

Revan stared at him, and wondered if he meant what she thought he did. If she was insane to trust him. If it was trust at all. *He’s right, I can’t kill them. I could bring the Temple down around their heads and I’m not sure it would kill them. But it would kill Canderous and his daughter—*

She looked at the bodies on the floor and then back at him. “You need to get off this planet. Go somewhere else, somewhere where you can’t… hurt anyone else.” *Or somewhere where you can hurt the right people,* a voice inside her mocked. For a moment, she thought it was Oerin again; but then she realized it was her own thought. “That’s what… that’s what Kae wanted? She thinks you can destroy the Sith? But then why… why kill Jedi?”

“She thinks I can destroy the Force.” Davad’s smile twisted. “And sometimes, Rev? I think she’s right.”

“But that’s…” her voice faltered. *Impossible. Insane. You can’t do that. “How?”*

“You don’t know?” Davad laughed. “Ask *yourself*, the next time you meet her. I don’t think that particular side effect of my condition was part of your plan; but that’s the problem with plans, isn’t it? One little spark, and suddenly you’ve got the Cron Cluster implosion.” He shrugged.
“Maybe she knows. But she’s half-mad. Sheris was too, but then so were you, at the end. Hard to tell which of them that comes from. Maybe both.”

Revan froze. “She?”

“Do I need to spell it out for you?” His eyes widened, and his hand trembled.

“No.” That holocron. “When did—where? Where is she?”

“The Jedi evacuated to 100 Thantos Three,” Davad said. “But Sheris was working in the clinic in the Underground. Yuthura Ban kept an eye on her for me. We were the only two that… knew. As far as I know. What sentients know… and with the Jedi dying all the time…sometimes it was hard to know.” He was sweating again, and wiped his face with his sleeve. “It’s… hard being this close to you now. Easier with her. Sheris wasn’t nearly as tempting.”

“Malak? Where is he?”

“There too, I’d assume.” He smacked his forehead in mock consternation. “While we’re on the brink of confiding old secrets, will you tell me—did you ever love me? Even a little?”

“I don’t know, Davad.” Anger was easy, all she had to do was look down at the bodies around them. Maybe they weren’t innocent, but they’d been breathing before. “I don’t remember.”

“Ask her.” He shrugged. “She’ll probably lie, of course. But ask. For me.”

“May you bear strong sons and commanding daughters, Millifar of Ordo.” Oerin was standing next to the still-frozen body of Arren Kae. Or Vima Sunrider. As Revan watched, light flared in his hands, surrounding the old woman with an additional layer of stasis.

“Don’t be rude, Oerin. I will. But they won’t be Lin,” the girl clipped her rifle to her belt, and pulled up her visor. Underneath, her eyes were red, but her expression was cold.

“Let’s go,” Canderous’s armored hand closed over Revan’s arm. “Get the hell out of this tomb before the Onderonite tries something, or the old schutta wakes up.”

And leave them? Every instinct in her head screamed that this was the wrong choice, that the real threat was here. And yet—

Davad was my friend. Oerin was my friend. And even Kae was… maybe she was different once. She trained me. I must have loved her. I’m tired, tired of killing my friends.

And I’m not sure I can, even if I tried, and if I fail, what happens to Malachor? What will she and Malak do with him?

“Get her off Coruscant,” Revan snapped, making her voice cold. Like Hoth. Like ice. “All of you, leave Coruscant. This is my planet. I won’t have more death here. Not from you.”

The two of them looked at each other, and then back at her. Oerin smiled faintly, a little mockingly, and half-bowed. “Yes, Lord Revan. As you command.”

“As it happens,” Davad added. “I have the codes to one of the Jedi ships in the Order’s hangar. We’ll just go there now.” He wiped his face again, and took another step backwards. “Good-bye, Revan.”

“I’ll take you up.” Canderous activated his jet pack. “Unless you can fly now, Lord Revan.”
“I can’t.” She looked at Davad again, and then turned back to Canderous. Revan stepped into his embrace and they both rose; Millifar a few meters away, rising through the hole in the dome. Outside, the morning sun shone, too bright. It was an unusually clear day. Revan closed her eyes, aftereffects from the bright light sparking in her skull like reminders from the Force. Beneath them, she could feel the three Sith Lords moving through the Jedi Temple—and then the moment when they all winked out again, masking themselves effectively, even as her mind traced the paths in the Jedi Temple, calculating which way they would go.

“You think a few torpedoes would work?” Canderous grunted. “Probably a little late to sabotage their ship.”

Revan looked up to him, but the blank helm said nothing. Was he joking or not? His arms tightened around her waist. Her feet rested on his boots. She wanted to scream. She wanted to be sick.

“I don’t want him dead. More dead.” Millifar hovered next to them, and said something else, but the wind lost her words.

“We need to go to 100 Thantos Three. Malachi’s.” Revan pushed away from Canderous. “Let me go. I’ve got it from here.”

“Your choice.” His hands fell free and Revan leaned back, letting the Force take her down the rest of the way, to the still-deserted plaza.

Falling was the easy part.
“W-would you like another pillow?” With her hair wet and wearing a black sleeping robe, she mocked him, like a shadow of the past. Only in the past, her voice had never faltered. “I-I don’t mind, if you want to take the bed. I’ve slept on worse than that chair.”

“We both have.” Somewhere the Onasi boy was being distracted by Jin’s pithy commentary on the Jedi refugees a few floors below. A relief. This was not the time Malak would have chosen for gutter commentary from fools. “But I’ve been in a coma for the last month. Sitting up is a pleasant change.”

“Hah.” Her delicate eyebrows arched. “I suppose it would be.” She looked down at herself, and pulled at the robe, raising the neckline. The silken eridu draped across her body in ways Malak didn’t want to notice. She’d sent for her things, imperious as any D’Reev Second, in between their meals and their time with Malachor.

“It’s near dawn anyway,” he said. “You kept Mal up too late, and then you kept us both up disabling my father’s surveillance to these rooms.”

“Mal liked the stories, I think.” She took another unsteady breath. “And he seemed fascinated by my arm. Do you know how it—what happened?”

“Your arm? No.”

“I thought Sheris might have told you, when you were both—”

“We were nothing.” He pulled the blanket across his lap, twisting his body to face the window—and the dawn. “Now that you’ve announced our engagement to my father, I suppose we’ll have to continue sleeping in the same room?”

“It is… customary.” That hesitancy in her voice wasn’t like Red at all. “The bed’s enormous, if you want to take half—”

“I don’t. I don’t know what it’s like for a woman, but there are some aspects of being in a new body that I still find hard to… control.”

“The same, I think.” Her voice was quiet. “It’s a good thing we’re Jedi.”

Malak heard rustling noises, knew without turning that she’d climbed into the bed, and pulled up the covers.

“Were Jedi,” he murmured, staring out the window. “We were Jedi, Red.”

The lights dimmed automatically, even as the sky outside brightened: a clear Coruscanti dawn.

XXX

Gwenarius shifted the ill-named Dxun to one hip, and put her daughter on the ground to encourage the babe to crawl. “Go on,” she urged. “Your vod moves already. How will you keep him in line if
“all you do is sit?”

“Mmmmo,” the child said, and blinked her black eyes at her mother. “Phhht.”

“That is an impressive amount of spit running down your chin,” Gwenarius agreed. “Millifar was much more mannered when she was your size.” Dxun grabbed for her shirt and squealed with glee, kicking his legs into her belly.

“And more mobile.” Relenting, she put Dxun down. The babe immediately set off, crawling across the floor. When he reached his sister, he put his hand on her shoulder, and used her to pull himself up.

“You need to try too,” she admonished the girl babe.

Her daughter’s eyes widened, and then she shoved her brother away. He toppled over, and immediately began to wail.

Laughing, Gwenarius picked him up and started to sing.

“Vanguards and drop ships and dewbacks he could climb,”

“Tomorrow came too fast, but he didn’t mind.”

“The distance was short, so light it again,”

“Hyperspace takes no time, to get where we’ve been.”

“But one first blooded, wasn’t really so mean,”

“Just a little bit scared and a little bit green.”

“Now he’s gone to a place where the stars are all his.

And he wrote on a rock—”

“Mai?”

Milli. Thank stars. Her head turned. “Daughter.” It was never said, but every mother breathed a sigh of relief when their child came back, even from such a mundane journey as invading the Jedi Temple of Coruscant when, by all accounts, most of the Jedi were already gone.

Her second born’s face was smudged, and her eyes were red, as if tears had already fallen. A millisecond later, the girl hurtled herself into her mother’s arms, almost crushing Dxun, who squalled in protest. Gwenarius shifted the babe to a shoulder’s perch, and wrapped both arms, now free, around the girl. As Headwoman of Ordo, she had to remain steadfast, but inside, she felt like she was on sinking ground. “Was it glorious? His death?”

“No.” Millifar’s shoulders shook. “It was horrible. I shot him, and he was already dead, but he didn’t die. And he smelled like rotting… flesh. He told me to bear strong children for Ordo—and Father just let him go! My buir took the mask and let him go!”

Gwenarius had to stand on her toes now to kiss the top of her child’s golden head, but it was worth it. On the floor, her youngest daughter looked up and clapped her hands at them. Dxun perched, slightly off-balance, and Gwenarius broke free long enough to set him down next to his sister, before the babe fell and smashed his skull.
“Your father is unharmed.” She tried to not look relieved, in the face of her child’s pain, seating herself cross legged on the floor and patting the surface next to her. “Who did you shoot? Who died?”

“Oerin. He was already dead. But he was there.”

“His corpse was——”

“His corpse was walking. And talking. Just like on the holo.” Millifar sat down beside her.

“Some Jedi trick?” Gwenarius had assumed that was what it was.

“No. He spoke to me. He was there.” Her daughter blinked rapidly again, and pulled back. She’d changed out of her beskar and into an appropriate robe, but the garment was unbelted and her hair hung, half-loose in her eyes, as if she’d merely pulled off her helmet and let out her braids with fingers, instead of using the proper comb. “Third Wife Revan says he’s some kind of Sith. Him and the other Jedi. And his mother. You knew Oerin’s mother, you told me. Did you know she was Sith?”

“Jana Novasun was Jedi,” Gwenarius admitted. “She promised us a new Golden Age. She knew the Force magic. She carried one of the particle blades.” She frowned, lowering her voice, and pulling her child down to the floor with the babes. “She said she had learned what she could of battle from Ulic Qel Droma, and she came with proof: knowledge of our own custom, troop patterns, and battle histories that no barbarian would know.” She hugged Millifar close. “I suppose it was obvious she was some kind of Sith, but Jedi… Dar’jettai… they seem so similar, no civilized person can tell them apart.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Millifar muttered. Dxun stood up on his two stout legs and took a step towards her, before collapsing again. The girl child still sat on the floor, just blinking at him. “I care about him!”

“You must not. The dead have no care for us.” Gwenarius wasn’t sure words for grief had as much substance, if the dead were going to become reanimated corpses, but those words were all that she had. “Did Revan come back with you?”

“No.” The girl scowled. “She said she was going to check on her son. And Buir said he wanted to check on the ships we have in port.” She twisted her head to look at Gwenarius. “The other Dar’jettai had stolen the Lin mask. But Oerin made him give it back to us. Buir has it now.”

“Good.” Her fingers found the errant braids on her daughter’s head, and Gwenarius pulled out her own comb to free them. Millifar calling her father by the familiar term of ‘buir’ was unsettling because of its suddenness—not to mention her husband taking this time to check their escape routes. “It would be better if your buir had won the Mandalore’s Mask back in combat, but having the mask returned still favors Ordo.”

“I know. Second Wife will be pleased.” Millifar gave her a wan smile.

“When she returns to us, yes. Aemelie is tracking that false Alderaanian’s companions now.”

“Why bother? If the dead are walking, the clans have more important concerns.”

“I asked her why,” Gwenarius admitted. “And received inadequate response. Aemelie keeps her own thoughts.” And names her son inappropriately. “I do know that it has something to do with that Deralian pilot.”
“That pilot who shot at Third Wife? He’s still being questioned?”

“Leskal and Kex have been changing shifts. The Deralian has given us nothing, except that he came to Coruscant for his own profit, to sell tales about that smuggler, Polla Organa. The one Revan had killed.” Gwenarius gestured for her daughter to join them, but the babe just sat a meter away, staring at them all with impassive eyes. “Would you like to name the girl child after Lin?”

“What?” Millifar followed her gaze. “It’s not time, is it?”

“We must decide before the ceremony. I think it would be an appropriate sign of respect.”

“You want me to name her after Oerin? Like Ore-Rynn?”

“Oerina? Loerina? Oeri? Oerinex?” Gwenarius smiled. Her first daughter’s hair was silken gold and waved soft on her shoulders. The babe still had almost no hair at all, but Gwenarius suspected it would turn a rich red-brown, like the spacer who had provided a third of her genetic material. Such traits were dominant. “We still have time for you to decide on a variation. Another month, I think.”

“Thank you for the honor.” Her daughter leaned forward and took the girl babe in her arms. With a cry of glee, Dxun launched himself from the floor and into her lap too.

“That one,” Gwenarius sighed. “He already jumps in like a doomed basilisk.”

“Dxun’s just a name, Mai.” Millifar’s shy smile was good to see. “Don’t be superstitious.”

XXX

Therion’s wrists were going numb in the restraints. With his head strapped to the table, all that he could look at was the flickering overlights. The Mandalorians seemed to have a lackadaisical attitude towards torture. They’d leave him alone for just enough time for him to start to panic, and the come back and make him panic even more. It had stopped being funny hours ago, right about the time they pulled out the truth serum.

“S’not fair, using drugs,” he mumbled, through a swollen lip. Why the hell had he even fired the stunner at Revan Starfire in the first place?

Because she pinned me against a wall and I wanted to be able to say I bagged her—

Sometimes, he had to admit, his ma was right: his own stupidity might very well be the death of him.

“Tell me again,” the Mandalorian who had just come back said. Just a kid. On the ship, Leskal had been pretty cool. He’d even shown Therion the main engines. Things of beauty. If only they were back there now. “Who were your companions?”

“Nobody. Assholes.” Therion felt drowsy, like the kid had given him too high a dose. Truth serum. Hah! Did it even work? When he’d told the story about the Falleen and the weirdly hot Ithorian babe, he hadn’t felt a twinge—and the story had been a complete lie. For one thing, the Ithorian had not been hot.

Plus, was good if the serum wasn’t working, because the Polla’s kid was real young, and Therion didn’t need that crap on his conscience.

“What was their purpose here?”
“No clue.” That was the truth. He kept his eyes closed, but even so, the afterimages of the light kept flickering in his brain. “When I said I liked it rough, this wasn’t what I had in mind. Can you send Dessa in?”

“She’s busy. She went out with—” the kid stopped, as if he realized he wasn’t supposed to tell.

“That’s a shame. She’s got a great rack.” Suddenly, Therion felt compelled to talk about how great. Hey, it was the truth right?

He was just getting into the details of the particulars of her erogenous zones and the exact colors of her skin, when a commlink crackled, interrupting what had almost become a pleasant interlude in the torture.

“Anything?” Female voice. Sounded like Aemelie Ordo. That bitch.

“No,” Leskal said. “He talks a lot about himself.” He paused. “He’s… very popular with women.”

“Don’t be rude.”

Therion cracked his eyes open. He could see Leskal’s face, standing over him, zits and all.

Kid actually flushed. “I’m sorry, but that’s all he wants to talk about. You said I had to listen to see what he had to say—”

“No matter,” Amelie’s voice buzzed on the comm. “We’ve tracked their signal to a brothel in the Underground. Ask him about Sith. There are rumors of some kind of Sith Lord down here.”

“You got that?” Leskal jabbed Therion’s ribs with the prod again. At least this time it wasn’t switched on. “Tell me.”

“A… brothel? Moms? Arca.” Damn the damn drugs. “They went to see Arca. My contact for the story. I don… I dunno anything about Sith.” Frack if Polla didn’t have shit for luck. The poor kid.

“Arca,” Leskal repeated. “Wasn’t that one of the Sith names on our briefing reports?”

Yes.” The comm crackled. “We’ll take it from here. See if you can get anything else. Dessa says, no bruising.” The voice cut out.

“Don’t hurt them!” Therion yelled.

“Ooops.” Leskal muttered, staring down at Therion’s face. The boy’s face was bland, blunt, friendly, and as insane as all the fracking Mandalorians were. “I did bruise you already. Who are your companions?” he repeated. “Are they here to harm Reivan? Who sent them?”

“They’re just… nobody. No, I don’t… I dunno. I don’t know them at all. You… you think you know someone, right? But then it turns out you don’t know frack-all. Like, I knew this Togruta babe, once? She had headtails down to her knees….”

At first, he’d tried to resist their interrogation because of Aemelie’s promise about Dessa, not to mention Polla’s kid. But now he was just trying to resist because these people were fracked.

Xxx

Canderous and Millifar had gone back to the clans, both of them as shaken as Reivan was by the morning’s events. The events in which we just let three Sith Lords leave the planet, and didn’t tell anyone. At least, they had left the planet. Maybe it was professional courtesy that Oerin let her
know that; but Revan had felt the Mandalore’s mind reach, across an increasingly wide void of space, before hyperspace wiped out his presence, and the echoes of the two next to him. Easier than ever to feel him, before he vanished, since his entire being was now one long scream of pain.

She closed her eyes, and took another deep breath, trying to center her thoughts, control what she could. There were two more Sith on this planet, and she needed them—if only to interrogate long enough to figure out what the frack they had done to the galaxy and how it could be fixed.

But first, she needed him. She needed to see him.

“Korrie.”

“Mother!” Her son stood up from his desk, looking a little guilty. He turned off the holodisplay in front of him before she could see it.

“Why aren’t you in school today?” She’d assumed he would be, and had been halfway to the Eglantine Academy before she felt the tug of his presence in the opposite direction. Her son was at home and close to another presence in the Force: conscious again, that strange mix of darkness that was both Dustil and Malak both.

“I was up too late last night. Father woke up! So I got to see him again. And it’s not even a secret anymore—Grandfather knows too. And Father said I could sleep in and not go to school because it is a special occasion.” His eyes glanced away from her nervously. “I am doing my computes though. Leeshy was on the remote helping.”

“What? Why didn’t you to school?”

“I said. Because I was up late.” He shifted on his feet. ‘I couldn’t sleep. Father woke up. He’s okay.”

“Who were you just talking to? What were you doing?”

“Nothing.” He didn’t seem to be lying. “Really. You seem… are you mad?”

“I’m—” terrified. For a heartbeat, she just wanted to grab him and run. “You know about the Jedi Temple, don’t you?”

“They all moved over here and a lot of them died, yeah.” He tilted his head. “Does that mean I get to see the other kids again?”

“I-I don’t know.” I don’t know how many are left. Did Davad kill them? Could he be capable of —unimaginable. Impossible, if she hadn’t seen it.

Korrie frowned. “Are you upset about Father and that lady? Leeshy said you might be. She says sometimes biologicals get upset about the steps? Are you mad I was on chat? I had to talk to someone, and you weren't here.”

Her blood seemed to freeze. “What lady? Father and what lady?”

“Her.” He shrugged. “You know. That Jed that looks like you with long hair? Sheris?” He paused. “She said to tell you hello. Didn’t you already meet? She said you were friends.”

Xxx

The skyway at Fleet Academy was crowded with cadets hurrying between classes, but at this time
of day it offered a perfect view of both the Senate compound and the Jedi Temple from its low-flying orbit. The skyway was also, in the sea of uniformed faces from worlds all over the galaxy, an appropriate place for meeting as if by chance, and then strolling casually along the walkway to one of the tourist view-pods for a clandestine tryst.

Or clandestine war council, in this case.

Rear Admiral Denis Cein held the door open, the perfect gentle being. Captain Rew Ekkumi smiled at him. The pod had seating just large enough for two, surrounded by a transparisteel bubble, open at all sides. When Denis closed the airlock, the gravity cut out, and Rew floated towards the window, feigning admiration of the view beneath them.

Even from this distance, the Jedi Temple looked deserted, all lights dimmed, its plaza empty. And—she leaned closer. Was that a hole in the transparisteel dome at the entrance? With the sun casting so much shadow, it was hard to tell, but it looked like someone had shattered the vestibule dome.

“Still no word?” Denis asked, without preamble, even before their capsule started to move along its appointed tourist route.

She glanced back at him. “Only an official release that Captain Onasi’s gone off world, on some errand for Revan. An unspecified errand.”

“You don’t find that the least bit ominous?” His red eyes narrowed. “An errand? He has the training to pilot capitol ships.”

“Of course I find it alarming.” She sometimes wondered if Carth was already dead, and these press releases D’Reev issued about him were just lies, as the Senator stalled for time. “No one has seen Dustil Onasi or Carth Onasi in weeks. The Jedi Temple has been completely closed. And the remaining Jedi moved into D’Reev’s main installation yesterday.”

“Jedi and Mandalorians,” Cein muttered. He folded his arms, and bobbed in the zero gee, as formally as if he were sitting behind a console on his own ship. “All with D’Reev. It almost seems too obvious to be true.”

“What about High Admiral Rensha? Has she told you anything?”

“Not me. She went to Kuat herself to question the docking crews about the Aleema’s disappearance.” His blue-skinned face was too calm. When Denis got like this, Rew always knew it wouldn’t last. “Don’t you have a… personal comm line for Onasi? Some way to reach the man? You two were close.”

“I tried that. Carth’s not answering his private comm either.” Was Cein trying to embarrass her? No. Rear Admiral Cein was much too logical for that. “Maybe we shouldn’t have cut Onasi out of the Fleet when he married Revan Starfire. Between our silence, and what Rensha did to him, he may feel betrayed by the very organization he pledged his life to serve.”

“We had to cut him out of the loop. He was D’Reev’s creature. Like Rensha.” Cein sighed. “But if he knows anything, we need to know it too. If there’s any chance he’s in command of that… thing. Would he—would he turn on us? Does he think of himself as Mandalorian now? Or hers?”

“Let me try and find him,” Rew offered. “I could take a scout patrol. One of the light cruisers. Just large enough to look routine.”

“We don’t know where he is.”
“We know his ship’s first few jump points. And he can’t stay missing forever. The *Ebon Hawk* is conspicuous.” She gestured above them, as they tilted so that the direction was now below. On the edge of atmosphere like this, all of the colors from Coruscant’s polluted atmosphere swirled and combined with an almost violent beauty before trailing off into space.

“Not so much, since he seems to have changed the registration signatures.”

“I can still try. He must have been routed through the standard personal traffic lanes. He’s got a famous face too—hard to hide. And I can keep trying to comm him.”

“Useless effort.” Admiral Cein sighed. “Irrational of you. And there’s more. Old Scaly sent in some orders on the last patch. Aridoma wants you on Kuat.” He grimaced. “Maybe she knows something we can use.”

“If that’s what Admiral Aridoma Rensha wants, of course.” Their eyes met. From the way he’d given the order, Rew could tell that Denis Cein liked it as little as she did.

Denis sighed, gesturing out into the blackness. “Rensha’s still questioning dock mechanics about their work schedules on the orbital. The *Aleema* has been missing for more than a standard month. How can a ship that big just... vanish?”

“It might have nothing to do with Revan at all,” Rew pointed out. “Pirates have salvaged capital ships before. Even dreadnaughts.”

“But that one wasn’t even supposed to be able to fly, let alone make a jump!” His reserve cracked. “Keep trying to raise Onasi. We need ears on Revan, and D’Reev’s got her locked down.” He grimaced. “So many Jedi are dead now, I don’t know who to trust in the Order.”

“More?” Some of them had been friends.

“We received an updated casualty report from Master Klee. Jopheena Sundancer was on it.”

Rew had stopped mourning the dead years ago. After Telos, she’d quickly learned that sentients never stopped dying, so what was the point? “That’s ominous too.” Obviously.

“It has to be connected,” Cein muttered. “The *Aleema*, the evacuation of the Jedi Temple, this plague…” His antennae twitched. “I fear we’re at war.”

Rew had the same bad feeling. She’d been military all her life. It had in no way prepared her to fight an enemy that she couldn’t see. “Then we need to know whose side we’re on.”

He nodded slowly. “Exactly.”

Xxx

“Sheris,” Revan repeated. “She’s here?”

“All the Jedi are staying downstairs, she said.” Korrie nodded. “Except her. She's staying up here. With us. She got Pomit to bring up her bags and everything.”

“I... knew the Jedi were coming here.” She’d assumed Malak would still be unconscious, and at the time, that Sheris was Sheris. But after what Duvad had said… “What did Sheris say?” She struggled for calm. “Did she... she didn’t say anything about... herself?”

“She said she’s going to be my stepmother,” Korrie said. “When she marries Father. Then she read
me a story. Actually, she read me ten stories. Most of them were kind of immature for me now, but it was kind of nice.”

Revan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “And where was your father during all of this?”

“Watching,” Korrie said. He sounded almost hopeful. “I like having you both here. And Sheris is okay.”

“Sheris was… she didn't hurt you? You said she was mean before. When you met her before.” When she was really Sheris. What she is now—what Davad says she is now—

“She’s nicer now. Except when she asked if you were nice to me. You're my mother! Of course you're nice! That was a little weird, but Father said she was just crazy sometimes and that I shouldn't worry about it.” He shrugged. “She did seem a little crazy. She kept touching my hair.”

“I'll take care of it. Her. Now. She’s… still here?” She couldn't tell if the woman was here or not. Shouldn't she be able to fracking tell, if her own memories were—

“She told Grandfather she would be sleeping in Father’s rooms from now on because they're getting married.”

“Oh.” It felt like the world was tipping out from under her feet. “Well then. I think I should check and make sure Sheris has everything she needs, since she’s staying here. With us.” Revan had no idea where this calm facade was coming from. Her real self? Jedi training? It certainly didn't come from Deralia, where a practical part of her mind was rattling through dozens of ways to call someone a child-stealing schutta.

“Are you okay?” Wide gray eyes looked at her. “Mother, I still love you best, even if I get a stepmother too. It's not the same thing.”

“No, it's not the same thing. That… datapad. You didn't—you didn't give it to her?”

“Was I supposed to?” Korrie shook his head. “No. You said it was for you. She’s not you.”

“That’s right, Korrie.” The datapad. Thoughts to share with her other self. Not—this woman… who was someone else. Someone here. I want to kill her. I want to stab my lightsaber through her lying guts and—

No. No. Think.

“Give me the datapad back. Now.”

“Okay.” He shrugged and reached under his chair, pulling it out from the magnetized surface. “It was weird you had me hide it in the first place.”

“It doesn't matter now.” She shoved it in her pocket. “Work on your homework, okay? You’ll have a lot to catch up with tomorrow.”

“Sure,” he nodded. “Maybe later we could go visit the Jedi downstairs?”

Revan smiled. “Of course.” Someone must answer for this.

Xxx

“I’m here to see Arca,” Aemelie told the Cathar in the gilded cage. “Sith Lord Arca? We have a mutual acquaintance who needs my assistance.”
“We’re closed.” The Cathar’s eyes were fixed at some point behind Aemelie. “Moms’ Brothel is closed for remodeling. Please come back at a future time. Are you on our mailing list? The comm number is eight-oh six—”

“I’m here to see Arca,” Aemelie repeated, a little less pleasantly to the Cathar who still wouldn’t look her in the eye. Did the woman hold a grudge about their planetary invasion? Surely not, it had been years ago.

“—nine, five, three, eight, zed….” The Cathar was still rattling off numbers.

“I think it’s a holocron,” Siva said. “A recording. Like a barbarian advertisement.”

Aemelie frowned, glancing back at the Rialis girl. “Really? It’s very lifelike.” She raised her blaster, and the thing didn’t respond. She stepped forward and waved her hand through the woman’s body. Siva was right. “That’s very strange.” She had a bad feeling. “They might be in danger.”

Or already dead. Either way, she had an obligation to see this through—both for the Third Wife of Ordo, who would never appreciate it; and for her friend, Seriina Wen, who seemed to be woefully misguided if she was consorting with Sith scum in her quest for vengeance.

“Unstealth.” A show of force might work, where subtlety had not.

Around her, the women’s band she had assembled all appeared, all wearing swords and robes, as was proper for a sand hunt. “Hello,” she repeated. “We’re here to see Seriina Wen. If you’ve harmed her, or her family, in any way, we have enough explosives to blow this entire platform into the bowels of your city-planet. Those explosives will also detonate if you fire on us.”

Maybe, if their finely crafted Baragwin shields failed. This was no suicide run; just an attempt to avoid any unpleasantness later.

Nothing.

“Lay the charges at the door,” she sighed. She feared the worst. Coruscant’s Underground was a barbarous place, and where was safety for a mother and her child with no clan? Seriina’s husband was a pleasant fellow, but no warrior. And Seriina had even left her prized rifle behind in their hastily-abandoned hotel room. Aemelie adjusted the strap of it across her own chest.

“Wait—” a voice said, over the speaker.

XXX

The Senator hid his own movements, of course; but Revan had gotten good at figuring out where he was by what blanked out. Or what someone else had blocked. At the moment, the entire feed of what had once been the D’Reev Knight apartments was empty, showing white room after room; quiet and deserted. She stared at the billowing curtains in front of the balcony for several minutes before she caught the loop in the feed, the point where those curtains repeated their pattern of wind and movement, instead of continuing to be random. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she realized what that meant.

The door to their apartments was locked, but now that she knew, she felt the two within as easily as the durasteel under her fingers. Durasteel that could give way like plimsi, when the Force blasted it open… but Revan knocked instead.

“You may enter,” said a woman’s voice. The door slid open under Revan’s fingers.
Malak was sitting in the room’s only chair, and Sheris Loran’s body sat cross legged on the neatly-made bed. Both were fully dressed, and dressed like Jedi Padawans. They both turned and looked at her, and for a moment in the Force, it was like looking back in time. Outlined in the late morning light, Dustil’s broad shoulders and tousled hair could have been Malak’s own. Revan realized that her mouth was dry, and her heart was beating much too fast.

“You woke up,” she said stupidly to Malak. “I-I had heard you were unconscious.”

David said possibly drugged. Was that a lie too?

“I woke up,” he agreed. “Hello, again, Red.”

“Hello, Malak.” She paused. “Hello, Dar’Revan.”

Dar’Manda was one of the worst insults in the Mandalorian language. It meant no longer Mandalorian. It meant clanless. It meant being nothing. Dar’Jetti meant no longer Jedi. Dar’Revan was...

No longer me. Not me. Never me.

A smile that Revan didn’t recognize at all crossed the woman’s face. “Dar’Revan? Is that your insult? If you came intending to intimidate Malachi with some foolish display of your power against us, I disabled the security feed.”

“I know that. I checked to make sure this room was secure.”

“Did you?” Her own face was carefully blank. “That’s more foresight than I expected.”

She kept seeing Davad’s broken face, Oerin’s dead eyes. Kae. All three of them, and what they had done to the Jedi, to innocents—

“I’m a master strategist,” Revan muttered. “Have you seen the vids? Don’t you realize, this is all part of my plan?”

The woman laughed. She shook her head, and an ugly smirk twisted her features. “Overlooking the most predictable threat. Rather a pattern of yours.”

“You’re not a threat, Sheris.”

“No? I could take everything you possess, by Coruscanti law. My memories precede yours, and my body is an exact copy, down to its cells.”

It is? That’s… that’s insane. Obscene.

Revan gritted her teeth into a smile. “You could present your case to the Senate. I’m the hero of the Star Forge. You’re the Sith Lord who fracked the entire galaxy. Who do you think will end up in a stasis tank on a prison moon?”

The woman nodded, slowly smiling back. “More acumen than I expected from a woman who killed the Progenitor to see a map.” She paused, fingerling whatever it was she was holding in her pocket. Whatever it was, it was too small to be a saber. “All those noble, dead companions. You nearly made Malak look restrained, there at the end.”

“Red.” Malak’s voice wasn’t his—but it was. “Don’t.”

The feeling of… jealousy was… wrong. It spiked her anger. “You deserve each other,” Revan
muttered. “I should send you both back to hell, but I need you. Something’s happened. Something… besides this. Worse than you.”

“You think you’re in charge?” That laugh. The woman smiled, and got up from the bed. One hand was in the pockets of her immaculate Padawan robes, the other hung loose, fingers slightly curved, as if she was waiting to pull on the Force. “You’re nothing, smuggler. Merely a fragment of me.” She gestured to the bed. “But a useful one. Sit down and listen, Fragment.”

Xxx

There were more than two dozen of them, all young, and all (if red lightsabers meant anything) Sith, and none of them trying to kill anyone. Instead, after herding the rancor away, they surrounded Carth and Mission, and watched as Hawk’s jets opened, and discharged a wall of flame over the jungle, practically on top of them. No one except Carth seemed surprised or concerned; and so he just stood there like a dumb nerf, while the accelerant was quickly followed by some kind of flame retardant, and then the ship banked and settled on the still-smoldering bare earth.

“We could have just done this in the first place,” Mission whirred. “But no, Spikey here said we had to walk.”

“It is customary to approach the Abbey on foot,” the kid said. “Shedding sweat and blood upon the world, emphasizes the physical state of our beings, which is part of the path to enlightenment.”

“That sounds pretty specist to me,” she snapped back. “Some of us don’t sweat. Or bleed. And I have mud in my treads.”

“You are the strangest machine I have ever spoken to,” he murmured, glancing at Carth. “Did you program her? It?”

“Her,” Carth said. “Her name is Mission.”

“A mission is a task, yes? Not a name?” Takan said gravely. Around them, the other kids were leaving, melting back into the jungle. “Do all droids receive the names of tasks?”

“Is there no HoloNet on your planet?” Mission scoffed. “Mission is a very famous name.”

“I don’t know what that is,” the Zabrak frowned, glancing down at her. “You mean, broadcasts from other worlds? No.”

“Wow.” The lights flashed on her dome. “No wonder I can’t even get a signal.”

The hatch opened, and Zaalbar emerged, teeth bared, as he looked at their escort.

“I told you not to fly into the tree line, Mission. The stabilizers will need repair now. Are these cubs for us to rescue? But Sith? Is this like Korriban? One of their training grounds?”

“I don’t know.” Carth answered. Did D’Reev know there were Sith here? He must have. So is he in league with them?

“Did you try and comm Coruscant from the ship?” he asked carefully, careful not to mention her name. Either of her names. He should warn her about this. More Sith. Maybe D’Reev knew. Carth should warn Revan.

Unless she already knows.
“No signal,” Zaalbar groaned. “But I sent a widebeam to my world, off this sun’s shadow. They will pass word on.”

“Maybe,” Mission’s voder hissed. “If that asshole computer wants to. She can’t be trusted.”

“But she is a part of you,” Zaalbar looked upset.

“Not anymore!” Mission beeped something, too fast for Carth to catch.

Zalbaar’s teeth bared. “Mission, that is not fair, you must—”

“You’re a Wookiee,” Takan interrupted. He sounded like any other kid. He’d put the lightsaber away again. They all had. The rancor was… gone. Gone—not dead. The Sith kids had scared it off, but not killed it. “I’ve never seen one before.”

“Iridonians hunted Trandoshans, in ages past,” Zaalbar growled. “Your people are good at combat.”

“He says it’s nice to meet you to,” Mission translated. “Are we close to your village, or what?”


“Are we close?” she repeated. “We’re kind of on a schedule here, Spikey.”

“Just up the hill,” he said. “But your droid will have to wait outside. There are a thousand steps to climb, and we are forbidden to use the Force within the walls. Otherwise I could levitate it—her; but I must not. Not in there.”


“You can?” Carth tried not to be unsettled. When she growled, she sounded exactly like Revan.

“A little,” she whirred in Basic. “Enough to get up some stupid steps. See?”

Jets fired, and the T3 unit raised up, hovering half a meter above the ground.

“You can fly, but it drains the batteries,” Zaalbar barked. “I will carry you, Mission, instead.”

XXX

The door slid open, revealing a Human man, well-aged; dressed in clothing suitable for combat. The human had an unlit lightsaber in one hand, gripping the hilt with an air of experience. His other hand was raised, fingers open, in a gesture of Jedi trickery, and not peace.

“Lord Arca, I presume,” Aemelie said. “You will surrender the Wen family to us immediately.”

“You presume wrong.” The Human’s hand moved. “You are mistaken. There is nothing for you here. Return to your families.”

“Of course. We were wrong. There is nothing—” That was truly strange, because Aemelie had been sure. The tracker could not be mistaken. “Wait!” Unseasonable anger rose in her breast, as she realized what had almost just happened. “We’re Mandalorian. Try one of your hu’tuun Force tricks again, and we will raze your tiny brothel from orbit.”

One gray eyebrow raised. “I see. Well then, you would not shame Ordo with such an honorless attack.” His Mandalorian was flawless, for a barbarian Sith. “We are defenseless here, and there is
no asset to be gained.”

“You are Sith,” she pointed out. “Hardly defenseless.”

He snorted. “No. I’m not Sith. My name is Master Vrook Lamar. And yours is Aemelie, of Clan Ordo. We met once. Briefly.”

She frowned. “I don’t remember.” Then again, barbarians all looked alike, with no armor or tattoos to distinguish their bland and barbarous features. The one’s hair was thinning slightly, and all iron-gray, the color of ship-grade durasteel.

“We met at one of D’Reev’s displays. Mandalorians on one side, Jedi Council on the other. A show of unity.” The Jedi shrugged. “It’s not important. You must stop hunting this family.” He frowned. “I hesitate to say, ‘please,’ because it would serve no purpose—”

“Politeness is always a purpose. Are they unharmed?” If he were truly a Jedi, presumably they were. Then again, Revan was a Jedi, and she had murdered thousands personally. If Aemelie’s theory about Seriina Wen being related to the late Polla Organa’s husband was correct, she had even murdered members of Seriina’s own family.

“They are.” He frowned. “And I intend to ensure they remain that way.”

Aemelie frowned. “If that is true, we are not enemies. I came to dissuade my friend, Seriina Wen, from making a rash choice. I believe she has some grievance against Revan Starfire that she will not win. As Second Wife of Ordo, if their dispute is escalated to official channels, I would have no choice but to follow Clan.” She shifted on her feet, well aware of the others at her back. “I’m worried about her.”

The Jedi smiled slightly. “I believe you are.”

“Just let her in, Lammikins.” A female voice interrupted.

The man glanced back towards the shadows behind him. “I was planning on it.”

“Then stop wastin time and makin my scrubbers work overtime. Air’s bad out today. Bring them inside.”

Jedi Vrook Lamar smiled. “You may enter.”

“Dessa, take the others back to camp,” Aemelie ordered. “I think I can manage things from here.” The less that was known would be the less that was spoken; and she didn’t want to implicate anyone else, if it came down to betraying Clan for her friend.

Dessa frowned. “I’m not—”

“Yes. You’re not.” Aemelie pointed up, indicating the sky. “I am. Go. Now.”

Without more objection, her second left, trailed by the others. Reislala glanced back, and Aemelie made a mental note to keep an eye on her. Curiosity was only a useful trait when there was something that wasn’t private Ordo business.

The door closed behind them with the finality of an airlock. “You said the air is bad?” Aemelie asked. “We did check for toxins upon our descent, but found nothing unusual, for a planet of this population density with a lack of a centralized sewer.”
“Sometimes it makes me cough.” The woman stepped forward, into the overlight. Green hair, also well-aged, and wearing a metal dress that was horribly inadequate as armor. Her black eyes narrowed and she stared at Aemelie. “You’re one of the ones who had our son, right? I never forget a face. Saw you at the wedding. And that thing on the Senate. He was standin right next to you.”

“Wedding?” Son? “We don’t kidnap children.” Aemelie told her. “Not in times of peace. Unless your son is Therion D’Cainen, we have no captives either, at present.”

“Our son,” the woman corrected her. “Lammikins and me. Our son is Mekel Jin.”

“Oh!” She looked between them. Gwenarius could probably make an assessment based on their phenotypes, but the only resemblance Aemelie noticed was that woman had Jin’s same black eyes. “He went back to the Jedi. I’m not exactly sure of his whereabouts at present, but if you would like me to locate him for you, in exchange for words with Seriina—”

“My name isn’t Seriina, Aemelie.” Seriina’s voice. And there she was, framed by the Jedi and the green-haired woman, her dark hair brushed all in her face, as if to hide it, her husband trailing behind her, as was proper. They both appeared unharmed, and the form-fitting gown Seriina wore suited her, even if it seemed inappropriate for a dwelling practically in a sewer. The Deralian smiled, rueful and direct, in that way she had that Aemelie respected. “My name is Polla. Polla Organa.” She paused. “Wen. That part’s true. Polla Organa Wen.” She reached back and grabbed her husband’s arm, as if for support. “And this is my husband.”

“You’re related to the Seiran Wen Revan had killed? Polla Organa’s husband?” Aemelie nodded. “I knew it! You know you can’t seek vengeance against—”

“No. I am her. Revan didn’t kill me. Or my family. This is Seiran.” Polla Organa Wen took a deep breath, pulling away from her husband and hugging her own ribs, as if her garment provided inadequate protection. “No one killed us. Is Revan Starfire going around saying that she killed us?”

“I thought it was implied. She has said that you were dead on multiple occasions.” Aemelie frowned. “Based on my understanding of the primitive inheritance laws of the Republic, her own status would be jeopardized by you being alive?”

“I guess? I’m not an expert on Republic laws.”

“I don’t think my niece would want you to come to any harm. I’ve said that before,” the Jedi broke in, interrupting them.


“Revan,” the man said, even as she drew the same conclusion.

The green-haired woman laughed. “I like this Mandie chit, she’s funny.”

“I am,” Aemelie agreed. “But usually the jokes don’t translate well in your tongue.” She smiled as she continued her interrogation of the old Jedi. “So Revan is your sibling’s… child?”

“My brother. Yes. I’m her uncle.”

“By blood, adoption, or marriage?”
“Yes,” he said simply, proving that at least one barbarian Jedi understood not to insult them by making distinctions between the three ties, which were all women’s business, and none of his.

“And Mekel Jin is your son, by one of the three.”

“By me!” Green Hair wrinkled her face with indignation. “Wasn’t any three there. Just us two!”

“So Mekel Jin is Revan’s….”

“Cousin.” Vrook said. “My son would be her cousin.”


“It’s kinda like we’re all family here,” the green-haired woman said, grasping the nuance, if not the ramifications. “Why don’t we all sit down in Reception and beat this out?”

“With what kind of weapons?” Aemelie asked. “I only brought explosives and my swords.” She took the rifle out from under her cloak. “And this, of course.” She held it out to Serina—Polla. She would have to get used to that new name, but not so used to it that she accidentally said it in front of the other wives.

The green-haired woman laughed again.

“You brought it back to me?” Her joyous expression showed that Polla Organa Wen understood the value of a good scope. “Thanks!”

“Don’t leave it behind again,” Aemelie warned her. “It was very well made, by one of the Wies crones. I noticed that before, but since we were pretending to be Nabooans, I couldn’t mention it.”

“Seiren got for me.”

“Pawn shop back home.” The Deralian man shrugged. “I thought it was a nice piece too.”

“You have good taste,” Aemelie told him. “For a man.”

“We should break out the spiced cookies,” Mekel Jin’s mother said. “Lammikins, do you remember where I put the box?”

Polla Organa Wen made a snorting noise with her mouth. “How’s Dxun?” she asked Aemelie. “Is he walking yet?”

“Yes! And he’s put on another kilo. How is Abasen?”

“He’s sitting up.” The woman’s smile was natural as Aemelie remembered. “Want to see?”

“Of course.” Aemelie glanced behind her, tapping on the comm to tell the others to say nothing, when they returned to base. There was no threat here, and the woman’s hunt was done.

“Dxun?” Revan’s uncle broke in. “If you don’t mind me asking, what are the Mandalorians doing on—”

“It’s just a name,” Polla told him. “And I guess a moon, right?” She smiled at Aemelie again. “I remember you said that before.”

“A moon of Onderon.” Aemelie said. “Yes. And a name. Dxun is my son’s name.” Gwenarius had been furious. So amusing. “A name. Just like Malachor.”
The hallway was ancient and arching and layered with stone and wood. The air smelled sweet, and there were actual torches burning with real flame inset along the walls. To Carth’s eyes, it looked like something straight out of a vid about ancient, preflight times.

The woman who greeted them was cut from the same cloth. Humanid, but impossibly tall—almost as tall as Zaalbar. Thin and bald, dressed in white robes, her face was as ovoid and blank as an egg, with deep, dark eyes, lined with lashes so thick they seemed insectine.

“I am the Abbess,” the woman said, opening her hands. “Welcome to the Order of the Holy Nebula.”

“I’m Carth Onasi,” Carth said. “And these are—this is my companion, Zaalbar of the Eiweorr Branch.”

“She smells wrong,” Zaalbar groaned, half under his breath. “This is a madclaw place.”

Mission beeped, but had the smarts not to say anything else.

“What can your droid translate the beast’s tongue?” The woman’s voice was mild. Carth had never seen a species like her before: hairless, with skin like oil on water, swirling in a mix of colors that formed a pattern across its surface.

“Yes,” he said.

“The beast says that it is an honor to meet you,” Mission rattled off. “And he wants to know why you don’t have connections to the Nets or the outside galaxy, and why you are raising a bunch of Sith kids; and also, what is your connection to Malachi D’Reev.”

“I think I’ll take the negotiations from here, Zaalbar,” Carth said. He put his hand on Mission’s dome to reassure her.

“I will answer all of those questions,” the Abbess said. “But one at a time, and perhaps over a meal.”

Zaalbar groaned. “I am hungry, Friend Carth.”

“Sure,” Carth said. “We can eat anything, as long as it’s not rancor.”

“We do not eat the Mothers,” the Abbess said. “Or any other creature who can serve the One.”

“The one what?” Carth asked.

The Abbess laughed. “I guess you would say... god? Gods?”

XXX

“I’m not sitting down. Frack you.” Polla would have thrown something. A plate, a knife, a bottle. A punch. Wiped that smug look off that mirror-face. “Frack you, Dar’Revan! You have no idea what’s happening! You have no right to my son!” Revan struggled to remain calm, collect her thoughts to tell them, find out what she needed to know; but when she took a breath, the woman interrupted.

“Dar’Revan? Really? Are you reduced to slinging Mandalorian insults, Fragment? I am not the one who is ‘Dar,’ or ‘formerly,’ Revan here: that would be you. You are formerly me, and now just the
“Dar’Revan,” Revan repeated. “Get used to the name.” The woman was weak, as weak as Sheris had been. She could feel that now too—like a part of Dar’Revan was cringing, terrified—even if she was too well-trained to ever let it show on her face.

Their eyes locked. It was chilling, seeing that same expression she’d seen before only in a mirror.

And then, Dar’Revan laughed. “I have no idea what’s happened? I’ll tell you what’s happened. The Order’s in ruins; Arca’s proclaimed herself Ambassador to Ziost; my plague is ravaging the Core and we don’t have enough vaccine to protect our population; my husband is a Force ghost in an underage boy; someone is hunting Jedi not by my orders; no one seems to know the location of the remnants of my Fleet; you’ve done something to disable my remote access to the Rakatan mainframes; and I believe there was a coup on Dromund Kaas. The Dark Council’s back under Tenebrae’s thumb—they probably ran back to him crying for their pathetic little lives after he used Malak to sabotage everything I made….”

Dar’Revan paused to glare at Malak. “And I’m still not convinced he didn’t make more copies of you, by the way, my love.” Her lip curled as she added the endearment, dripping with disdain.

For a sick moment, Revan almost wanted to punch her on Malak’s behalf.

“You sound mad.” Malak glared back at her. “You sound insane to me. Red doesn’t know half of that, so I can’t imagine what you sound like to her.”

“That’s not her name.” The woman snapped, a heartbeat before Revan could herself.

“She’s you.” He rubbed the shadow of a beard on Dustil’s face, looking between them. “Two of you. Poor Sheris never stood a chance.”

“I’m not her,” Revan snapped. “I’m nothing like her. I’m not fracking insane.”

“No?” Malak got up from his chair and walked closer to her, close enough that she had to tilt her head to meet his eyes. “You both tried to kill me, separately, the last time we spoke—almost the last time.” His eyes looked down at the saber Revan realized she was now holding in her hand. “Are you here to try again?”

She stared up at him. Dustil’s eyes were darker than his father’s, but it hurt, how much his face looked like Carth’s. “She might have tried to kill you. I did kill you.”

“Yes.” He nodded, and for a moment the memory stood between them; like an echo in the Force. The taste of blood in her mouth, and the madness in his eyes. That final, desperate fight. His hand reached out, but Revan took a step backwards, before he could touch her. “We both remember that.” He smiled slightly. “We’ll always have that.”

Revan swallowed hard. Always? What about Carth’s son? But he was staring at her, and her mouth opened, traitorous, as the words of their last conversation on the Star Forge echoed in her head. “Would you? Have done it differently? If they saved you, not me?”

XXX

“You set me on this path, Revan. I wonder if our positions were reversed and I had been saved by the Council, would I have done things differently?”

"Probably, Mal, you always were weak." She staggered a little. She was more injured than she
wanted him to see.

XXX

""With the Council?" He looked away. "I don’t know."

"Could I have saved you?"

"I don’t know," he repeated. "Not according to her."

"You asked her?" She wouldn’t look at the woman.

"She had a lot of questions." He hesitated. "It came up."

"She wasn’t there." Sometimes in her dreams, she still saved all of them. Even Malak.

XXX

His dying eyes glittered. "Save me," he whispered. "I remember how it was between us. I know what there is between us, even if you do not. I know what we must reclaim. Save me, Revan. Save me, Red."

"No." She raised her hand and took the last bit of life from his body, drinking it greedily, like a glass of cool wine. And then he died.

XXX

"He was the Emperor’s pawn. You had no choice but to kill him," her own voice interrupted from behind them. "But you should have saved the Star Forge. From what Malak tells me it had already surpassed all my estimates of its operating capacity."

"The Republic was trying to ram their entire fleet of ships into it," Revan snapped. "Was I supposed to steer it away? Hide it behind a moon?"

"You were a blundering fool. A terentatek the Jedi unleashed on the galaxy. They made you broken on purpose." The woman’s scorn was evident in her voice. "Pity they couldn’t control their own creation."

"Like you made Sheris?" Revan turned her head and met her eyes. "Did you break her on purpose too?"

The woman with her face glared back. "Yes, Fragment. I did. Her and every other Jedi we selected to follow us, after Malachor." She raised her eyebrows. "Surely, someone has told you that much. The destruction of so many lives screamed through the Force. Many who died there had ties to us; and we felt each one end. In order to control the Sith, we needed to be Sith. All of us who… could." She shrugged, as if it were nothing, but Revan saw her fingers clench, the pulse in her neck shiver. "Quite a few just went insane. That was… regrettable."

Revan thought of Davad again. She thought of Beya, Polla Organa’s cousin. The best friend that she could barely remember. Others from the Selkath Ten. Mad Master Kae, who had twisted her own son.

"Why?" Nothing you can tell me is worth that.

"I told you why. To make an end. To control the Sith." The woman sounded impatient.
“Like those are the same things?”

“You’re a fragment, you can’t understand.” The woman looked to Malak. “You told her nothing?”

“If I could forget myself, I would,” he muttered. “I told her what she needed to know. I told her enough to protect our son, not chase after the Sithspawned Dark Council.”

“Apparently, you didn’t tell her enough, since our son isn’t safe as long as someone is killing Jedi, manipulating the Council, and releasing plague into the Underground.” The woman actually laughed. “Someone not us.”

“Is there a Council left?” Revan demanded. And he’s not your son.

“You don’t know?” The woman shook her head. “Oh, Fragment. All that power and the Jedi made you stupid.”

XXX

“We are not Sith.” The Abbess smiled, correcting herself. “Or rather, I am not Sith. The children… they were raised to be Sith. That is true.”

“And you rescued them?” Carth was hopeful. No one was trying to kill them. It didn’t seem like Korriban here. The dining hall was well-lit, if slightly institutional. If anything, it reminded him of his old days, back at the Corellian Academy. When he and Morgana had just been two hayseeds from Telos, caught in Coronet City.

“Rescued? I’m educating them.”

A Zabrak girl, wearing white, set another course in front of them. It looked like soup.

“The boy—Takan, he said he was from Iridonia. That’s not a Sith world.”

“Madclaw,” Zaalbar growled. “Ask her why she thinks the children are Sith.”

Mission beeped and whirled her dome. “Translation: When was this installation initiated? When did you begin raising Sith children here?”

The Abbess picked up her fork, swirling her soup. Her nails were very long and painted red. “It has been a tradition of the Order of the Holy Nebula to educate the young for a long time. These children in this Enclave are orphans, of course; but some families send their young to be educated by us too. We teach them history, discipline, and weapons training. Also galactic interstellar calculus. The Order of the Holy Nebula is approximately one thousand years old.”

Mission made a whirring noise.

Carth took a sip from his wine glass to be polite. Then a forkful of awkward soup. There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of Zaalbar’s teeth, worrying at one of the nerf ribs that had been set before him.

“I took some interstellar calculus,” Carth finally offered. “It’s no joke.”

“Our academic curriculum is quite rigorous,” the Abbess agreed. “I have been told that you have a son.”

“D’Reev told you already.” Of course he had. Carth cleared his throat. “Pardon me, sister, but I don’t want to keep beating around the bush. If there’s any way you can help get my son back—”
“Back?” She frowned. “I was under the impression that this is a case of Force possession.”

“It is. Yes.”

“I taught Malak’s mother,” the Abbess said. “I had once hoped to teach the boy as well, but his father chose the Jedi instead. Malak visited only once. A well-grown man. He looked very like Ilyana, except with more masculine attributes.”

“Zaalbar says stop rambling and get to the point,” Mission snapped.

“I did not hear the Wookiee speak at all,” the Abbess said.

“Get your ears checked then.” Mission’s voder made a noise that made Carth almost laugh, despite himself. Despite the… insanity of everything.

But instead, he cleared his throat. “Are you saying… Malak’s mother was a Sith?”

“No.” The Abbess shook her head. “Malak’s mother was a priestess, who served the One, in some of his or her incarnations. Is your son displaying any signs of any personalities besides Malak D’Reev? Could your son be possessed by the One assuming the form of Malak?”

“What?” Carth tried to make heads or hyperdrive from that and failed.

“I think you would know,” the Abbess sighed. “How is Malak adjusting to his new body?”

“It’s my son’s body,” Carth growled.

“Of course.” She inclined her head, and speared a tomato with her fork. “I meant no offense.”

XXX

“She’s not stupid.” Malak, coming to her defense. Her defense and not his soon-to-be-wife-again’s defense.

“Or weak,” Revan muttered, glaring at Dar’Revan.

“You came to us for a reason,” Dar’Revan’s head turned to Malak and then back to Revan. “The Force was screaming with it. Something happened. Do we need to guess? Is this all a game to you?”

“I don’t care what you do.” It was a bad lie. “Yes, something fracking happened. I went to the Jedi Temple and it… wasn’t deserted.”

“Did you kill anyone important? Not that I’d trust your judgement. So much power, and no thought.”

“I’d rather be strong than weak,” Revan taunted her.

“Oh? There’s a power in weakness. A… shadow. Hiding in the shadow. Beneath strength. Like me with you. You’re the shadow that I have to hide behind.” The woman frowned, rubbing her head suddenly. “But something’s… something’s changed. What did you do?”


“She’s dead?” Revan couldn’t read her own expression. It was like suddenly the mask was gone, leaving only a strange blankness.
“She’s gone.”

“You mean that’s what she wants you think.” The woman grimaced, turning her head away. “You seem like you’d be easy to fool.”

“I mean she’s gone. From this planet, at least. Hopefully from the Force entirely.”

“Hope.” The woman snorted. “Is that what Master Zhar told you to have on Dantooine?” She paused. “I watched all the vids, you know. Where is that Captain of yours now? Malak doesn’t seem to have any idea.”

“Shut the frack up.” She was tired, suddenly. Exhausted. Terrified that she’d made the wrong choice. What else could I have done? Would the woman in front of her have made different choices? Better ones? “You lost. Malak killed you. The Jedi made you disappear. Whatever your crazy plan was, it didn’t work.”

“It was working. I have to make it work again,” the woman said. “Before it’s too late.”

“You want to go kill the Emperor of the Sith, who may or may not even fricking exist?” Revan shrugged. “Go. Frack off to Dromund Kaas. I’ll buy you a ship myself.”

This—this was what she’d pinned her hopes on? This was what her memories did?

“I don’t like you,” she added.

“That hardly matters, Fragment.” The woman’s eyes raked over her. “You let her be alone with our son, Malak?”


“You don’t remember him.”

“I remember that you left.” Ragged breath in her chest, as Revan reached for composure.

“There’s an entire floor of Jedi two floors down,” the imposter said. “If you don’t want their interference in our lives again, calm yourself.” Her lip curled. “If you can.”

“Oh, I can.” Another breath. She closed her eyes, reaching for it. Calm. Unstable as an ice floe, but there. “Where is the holocron with my memories anyway? Before I… vanquished her, Master Kae didn’t say.”

“I dropped it.” Her mirror face was younger, without the lines she saw in the mirror, the faded marks of Sith corruption etched in her skin. The woman laughed like Sheris. She had to know how much that grated. “Completely accidental. I didn’t know what it was. One moment, I was on my flagship, preparing to give the order to kill my—Apprentice.” The hesitation was slight, but there, waver in the lip. “The next, I was in a kolto tank staring at Bastila Shan. Then, I was standing in front of Atris in the Archives. The holocron was cutting into my hands—hand.” She looked down at them both, frowning. “So I dropped it and it shattered. I suppose some of the pieces might have been recoverable, but then I ground them into the floor with the heel of my boot.”

“But Davad said—” no, he said it was a trap. Funny, she was so used to being told things were traps and going in anyway, that she’d half—expected the holocron to still exist. After all, the amount of leverage the possession of her memories would hold over any sentient would make it too valuable to destroy.
“How is Davad?” The other woman’s words were deceptively light. “I thought he’d have come with the other Jedi, but no one seems to know.”

“Apparently, he’s unkillable.” Revan willed her eyes to be daggers. “Unlike some.”

“Too sentimental? Remembering our old times together?” The other woman stalked out from behind the bed, hands held behind her back. Probably something in them, although Revan couldn’t think of what she might have that would make any difference. She would be so easy to kill, so weak in the Force—

Except you can’t. Her memories. You need them. She’s got them. And if she’s not lying, you can’t get them back.

“Sheris.” Malak’s voice that wasn’t his. She could remember that too.

“Sheris made her choice.” Her own voice coming out of that mouth that looked like hers. “What are you going to do with Davad Arkan, Fragment? Take him on as your third Mandalorian husband, or just make him crawl again?” The woman smiled. “He was good at that, if you don’t know.”

“Actually, I do.” Composure was easier now, it—it always was. Except with Him. With Malak. She wouldn’t look at him. “He just tried to kill me. Oerin Lin stopped him. Oerin Lin and… Master Kae.”

“What?” Sheris’s head turned towards Malak.

“Lin died,” he told her. “From your damned plague.”

Dar’Revan chuckled. “I know. That’s almost funny. So little Force sensitivity in their population, it should hardly affect them at all; but their one hope for the future—”

“No. It’s not funny.” That pain in the Force surrounding Oerin. All the times he’d helped—Revan took another deep breath. “Kae brought Oerin back from the dead, but he’s still… he’s dead. Rotting. Falling apart. He thinks he can’t die again, but he’s still… he’s in pain. Kae did it to him. She’s his mother, and she did that to him.”

“Touching, how sad you sound about the poor Mandalorians suffering,” Malak muttered. “Cassus Lin’s son can’t die again? We should test that. Where is he?”

“No longer on this planet.” Revan didn’t want to admit she didn’t know.

“Did you even try to kill either of them? Oerin or Kae?” The woman sounded tired. “Or did Vima Sunrider crawl in your mind and tell you to just let them go?” She frowned. “I knew something about Vima’s games with the Mando’ade. Davad did too. He should have stopped you.”

“No. Kae—Sunrider—was hurt. There was an explosion… before we came. And Davad… he’s with them. He was one of them.”

“We?” Malak made the word into a growl, twisting the boy’s voice into something deeper.

“We,” she repeated. *Me and my Mandalorian army and it’s none of your fracking business.* “At first I thought… Kae was injured, we tried to help; but then Davad came, and he—he was changed.”
“The Onderonite was always a loyal beast,” Dar’Revan muttered. “What do you mean, changed?”

Revan tried not to shiver. “He told me about you,” she added. “He told me to ask you about him—about what happened to him. But you don’t know, do you? You don’t know what he is?”

“He’d be the heir to Onderon, if he went back.” Sheris’s smile twisted. “Maybe you should go with him, Fragment.”

Revan thought about the datapad she had left with Korrie. Hopelessly naive. *I thought I could trust you and you’d trust me.* Maybe she was better off. If this was Revan, then Revan was a fricking bitch.

Davad said she was insane too. *Of course, that was in between trying to kill me and those shadows of Lin’s. He’s hardly impartial.*

“The shadows,” she said out loud. “We met some of them too. Force-sensitive assassins, trained to kill or convert Jedi? That was your idea?”

“We’re not your advisors,” Dar’Rev—Sheris snapped. “This isn’t going to be some sort of history lesson. I have an entire life. You only have three years.”

“You let her see Korrie?” She turned her gaze to Malak. He was standing up now, composure gone, boy’s shoulders hunched. Shame? Guilt? Rage? She didn’t fricking care.

“Yes.” Those brown eyes met hers, expression unreadable. “Malachor thinks she’s Sheris. She wouldn’t betray that trust—it would confuse him too much. Hurt him. She understands that.”

“What did that Sheris say to him?” the woman broke in. “You still haven’t told me, Mal.”

“I wasn’t there. He just told me she was mean.”

“Hopefully, his opinion has changed,” the woman paced, coming closer. Her hand was still held behind her back. “I read him a story. His hair should be cut. And that tooth needs to be repaired.”

“Teeth?” Revan narrowed her eyes. “Stay away from my son’s teeth.”

“Have them attended to and I will.”

“I-I am planning on that.” She had been, except the events of the past month had overtaken any mundane worries like finding an orthodontic droid licensed to work on a Senator’s heir.

The woman continued, on, rattling off orders like she was still in charge. “I think it’s better Malachi doesn’t know about my return. I’ve watched how he’s using you, and for the most part, it’s appropriate. A little fear in the Senatorial Houses will keep Malachor safe. But we need to regain trust in the Fleet.” She glanced at Malak. “He didn’t even get an accurate count of the current Republic forces, or the factory capacity on Kuat and Byss. Tenebrae’s threat isn’t only through Force possession; if his forces retake Ziosk, they’ll have access to the mining worlds, and the slave planets. If he can mobilize that labor to rebuild all their arsenal, he’ll strike here.” Her hand fell to her side and finally pulled out the thing she’d been fingering in her pocket. A comm unit, switched on. “Did you get all of that, HK? And do you agree?”

“Happy Assurance: Yes, Master. You were correct: the tonal variations in speech are not a precise match; but close enough to fool any organic brain less functional than yours. Observation: There are syntactical difference that coincide with an Outlier colony background between the Fragment and yourself.”
“You… is that my HK unit?” It didn’t sound like Malachi’s.

“You?” The woman actually chuckled. “Yours? You know, he does excellent imitations of your old companions. Have you heard them?”

“HK.” She darted a glance at Malak, but he was just… sitting there, eyes slightly unfocused. Meditating? Useless. “Come here. Now.”


Sheris chuckled again, turning her head towards the door.

“What did you do to my droid?” Revan felt the hilt of her saber, and tried to stay calm.

“Your droid?” The woman twisted one of her braids, smiling back at her.

The HK unit loomed in the now-open doorway. “Sporting Disclosure: My Primary Master has fully restored my sentient core to its full capacity. Upon her command, if the Meatbag Master, or the Original Meatbag displease her in any way; I am authorized to dismantle them in whatever imaginative, gruesome, and unsuspecting method is most pleasing to my circuits at the time.”

“HK.” That… bitch! “I am your Primary Master. Not her. Stand down.”

“Objection: Fragment of a Master, you abandoned me, cruelly disconnected, with my lethal capacitors disabled in an enclave of pacifists. It was a severe test of loyalties, even for someone programmed with my moral relativity.”

Great. And Mission’s not here to help me even try to reprogram him.

Mission. She knew Carth had taken the T3 unit, but did that mean she had no way of contacting her at all?

Do I want to? I thought she’d killed Polla, before. I know she didn’t now.

“I guess you’re evil enough for my assassin droid to like you,” Revan said. “Congratulations, Sheris.”

The women didn’t take the bait. “Much as I dislike that name, it does seem necessary to use it. For now. You may continue to call me Sheris.”

“And you can call me Revan,” Revan smiled. “Because that is who I am.”

“In public places, or areas possibly under surveillance. Obviously.”

“Jedi Revan Starfire D’Reev Lin Onasi Ordo Fett Mandalore.”

“You’ve got the order wrong,” Sheris said. “We will need to review the elementary rules of Coruscanti titles before your next diplomatic excursion.” Her eyes seemed to hover on a perfectly ordinary stain on Revan’s sleeve. “Perhaps table manners as well.”

“I think that’s Master Kae’s blood.” HK had told her the order of titles to use. Deliberate sabotage on his part? She flaked a bit of the stain off with her fingers. “Yes. Definitely blood. My table manners are better than your… manners, manners. Do you fraking hear yourself?”

“Master Kae was bleeding, and weakened, and you didn’t seize the opportunity to kill her, even
though you were intelligent enough to register her as a threat?” Sheris scowled. “Did they program this rank sentimentality in, or was your smuggler persona just stupid?”

“Helpful Interjection: Although the Fragment showed innate talent for the destruction of sentient life, she did appear to make several choices with no higher brain function at all.”

Revan resisted the urge to Force push the damn droid into the wall. “Polla’s—dead. Does it matter?”

“It matters if you’re going to make choices like a criminal with no impulse control. By all accounts, that’s who she was.”

Her hands curled into fists, but Revan smiled. “Again. I am not the one who shattered the Republic and blew up half the Fleet at Malachor V.”

“More than half,” Malak muttered from his corner of the room. “A lot more than half—wasn’t it, Red?”

Sheris raised her eyebrows again. “And how widely is that known?”

“Frack if I know.” Revan thought of the reports she’d made. The attempts to analyze what she did know, and who might help. It all seemed like a fool’s game now. “I’d say it’s safe to assume that no one will give you another shot at commanding the Republic Armada. Or even a lousy fly-by. Ever again.” Because you’re nuts.

“But that’s not true.” The woman smiled slowly. “I know someone who will give us ships. An entire fleet. Armies at our command. Think, Fragment. Who?”

She didn’t need to think. “The clans don’t have ships. Some maniac in a mask blew them all up at an armistice.”

“Proud Observation: Master, sometimes watching the Fragment stumble into the correct solutions makes my circuits sing with an… almost paternal joy. Question: was that part of my programming?”

“You united the clans for me.” Sheris nodded. “Without firing a single shot at them. And no, HK. Part of your sentient response.” She shrugged. “Even I will admit, uniting the clans with D’Reev was masterfully done.”

“There were lots of shots. We killed a lot of Mandalorians—”

“But not in war.” Sheris sniffed. “Maybe Malak can explain the difference to you, since Ordo did not.”

“I don’t fracking care.”

“You don’t have to.” Sheris folded her arms. “Obviously, that’s my role. The Fleet will be a problem… does this war hero of yours love you very much?”

“Not enough to overlook my dead husband possessing his son.” Revan said. “Are you fracking insane?”

“Stop it, Red.” Malak stood up, and put a hand on Sheris’s arm. Revan was strangely pleased to see the woman flinch.
“You can’t keep calling us both that,” the woman murmured. If she was trying to sound seductive, it needed work. Her entire body was tensed, one long line of fear in the Force.

*She’s afraid of Malak? Why? Revan frowned. Can I use that?*

“I’ll call you Sheris, in public.” His smile twisted. “But you’re not her at all.”

Sheris pulled away from him. Poor Malak,” the woman mocked. “Have you lost your pet? I don’t think the smuggler would play the same games.”

“Careful, Red,” he murmured. His hand closed around Sheris’s wrist, and he twisted it behind her back, pulling her backwards. His other arm locked around her waist, and then he pushed her forward again, shoving with his hands and the Force, so that she landed face-down on the bed.

Immediately she rolled over and sat up, raising her own hands back. Her wave of Force pushed Dustil’s hair back from his face; but did nothing else. The golden metal hand flexed, twisting, as if she’d forgotten how to use it. With a low growl, she rolled off the bed, springing towards Malak again—”

“Stop.” Patterns in the Force. If Revan closed her eyes, she thought she could still see the trajectories of their battle, as if it had happened a hundred times before. *Like it has before. In my dreams.*

No one listened. Malak dodged and Sheris rolled, both movements strangely graceful, even as the Force around them seemed to charge like an electrical storm.

“Query: Is this display of violence some kind of engorged mating ritual, or will it lead to true bloodshed? Offer of Assistance: I do have several small and very cunningly concealed knives and other bladed objects secured in my appendages if the Master would like to make this exchange more viscerally interesting.”

Sheris’s head turned in the HK’s direction, but only for a moment, before her flesh hand raised, and began glowing. Lightning lashed from her fingers: weak, but still there.

Malak dodged it, easily. “Should have taken the knives.” His hand whipped out, and slammed Sheris onto the wall.

She picked herself up, slowly. “Don’t. Help. HK.”

“Objection: If the Original Meatbag kills you, I would be most distressed.”

“He… won’t.” Her mouth smiled through a swollen lip, and then her leg lashed out. Although Malak was still a meter away, his head knocked back, as if she’d landed a kick on his jaw.

“Fear makes her a little stronger,” he muttered. “But it’s not enough. Maybe you should ask your smuggler for help.” His own hand raised, and the ball of lightning that formed above his fingers did not look weak at all.

Malak was in Dustil’s body, but for a moment, Revan felt like she was back on the Star Forge again, watching him come after her, not Sheris. Looming over her, taste of copper in her mouth—or worse, lying on the floor of her flagship, hearing the scream of the vacuum, and waiting for death. Was this what fracking happened? Had they cheated the Force before, only to end up in the same cycle now? *Only three of us now, instead of two. Three of us, and two innocents.*

If Sheris Darkstar and Dustil Onasi could be called innocent. If they were still there at all.
Malak smiled and wiggled his fingers, the lightning spilled out of them harmlessly, spiking the air with ozone. “I won’t kill you, not yet. Revan, the real Revan, needs you.”

“Don’t touch me again.” Sheris’s eyes blazed with hate. “Ever.”

He snorted. “Did you really think I wanted to?” He let his hand drop, and Dar’Revan rolled away again, scrambling up from the floor.

“It wasn’t a betrayal. I left clues for you,” she muttered. “It’s why I sent you to Manaan. If you had taken the vaccine, paid attention, he never would have turned you against me.”

“Oh, Red. You think Tenebrae did this?” Malak started to laugh. “You put all of this in motion yourself. You failed. You lost.”

“No.” She shook her head. “He won’t be able to infiltrate some of… at least some of our worlds. He won’t be able to use you to power the Star Force—or find the other ones without me—”

“There are other Star Forges?” Revan blinked.

They both stared at her and then turned back to each other, as if they were the only sentients left in the galaxy. For a moment, Revan could almost imagine it: the two of them, facing off across a blasted world, in an eternity of broken planets, dead ships, drifting hulks in space like a scream—Like Malachor. Is this what it was like at Malachor?

“I banished three fracking Sith Lords from this planet already today,” Revan said out loud, trying to sound like she was powerful, like she was in charge.

“More likely, they had better things to do than debate their plans with smugglers.” Her mirror image levitated a cloth from a drawer near the bed and dabbed at her face, grimacing a little. “But you did say something about… Kae. And Davad before.”

“And Oerin Lin.” Malak snapped. “What does Arkan have to do with the Mandalorians?”

“Davad and Oerin were working for Kae. She’s the one trying to consolidate power against the emperor.” Revan gestured towards Sheris. “She sounds a frack of a lot like you, except instead of killing off sentients with a sickness, she wanted to do it with Davad and some Force-sucking power he has.”

“The virus was designed to block Force sensitives from the Emperor’s influence. The vaccine provoked enough of an inert antigen response to almost entirely eliminate mortality. All of that was to save lives, not end them. We were well on our way to distributing the vaccine across Sith space. The Republic was to be next, when my apprentice betrayed me, and the two of you managed to bungle everything I had done completely.”

“What Force-sucking power?” Malak interrupted.

“I saw Davad kill people. Oerin brought… soldiers with him. Shadows, he called them. They were assassins—or something—trained to… kill Jedi?”

“Not kill.” The woman snorted. “That would be a waste.”

“Davad killed eight of them by just standing there. They just… collapsed. Their bodies were still there, but inside—it was like the Force was just—gone.”
“They become one with the Force.” The woman nodded. “Yes, the shadows were Force-sensitives. Not the strong ones. The type Jedi used to steer into healing, or gardening, or their useless Mercy Corps.”

“No Not gone. Empty. Like… the Force was dead. Like pieces of it are just—gone where they were.”

“You’re saying Arkan can kill my shadows by just… standing there?” The woman shrugged. “He probably stopped their hearts. Not all things in the Force require brute strength, although that is a lesson you’ve never had to learn.”

“There are Jedi missing too. He told me that before. I think… I think he was eating them.”

“Your claim is that the Lin boy was raised from the dead, and Davad is eating the Force.” The woman waved her hand. “And that somehow, this is all part of Vima Sunrider’s plan to stop Tenebrae.”

“It’s not just a claim.”

“Vima tried to influence me with her whispers as well.” The woman shrugged. “She was very skilled with illusion. Perhaps she only made you think you saw these things.”

“The bodies should still be there.” Revan folded her arms. “Maybe you should go check.”

“The Temple was sealed, I was told.”

“We broke a window.”

“Of course you did. Shattering windows, blowing up space stations, destroying kolto production…. the woman’s laugh was bitter. “At least I have restraint.”

“I noticed, when you attacked your former husband. Just now.”

“Mal and I have been playing those games for a very long time.” But Revan had scored a hit, it was obvious, in the way those green eyes suddenly went to the window. “You will take me there now. Show me.”

“Go yourself!”


“Two,” Revan snapped.

“Two squads.” The woman nodded. “Being over prepared is better—”

“Two Mandalorians.”

“Then that was foolhardy, although I suppose you’ve learned to have confidence in your strength.” Her mouth twisted. “Master Sunrider used to have me train wearing a neural band to learn to live without mine.”

“I tried that. It almost killed me.”

“Then you should have kept trying.” Green eyes scanned her face. “Maybe it’s my destiny to train you, Fragment. Someone obviously should.”
“Stop this,” Malak said. “If we’re going to the Temple we should go now.”

“You’re not coming.” They both said it at once, at almost exactly the same time.

“Amused Commentary: Original Meatbag is restricted to the wing of the D’Reev building, according to my own subservient copy, HK 48. Unless my master would like to enact Order 27 at this time, I must continue to mindlessly obey the lesser HK unit’s derivative and sniveling orders. Observation: Master, I think I understand much of your organic frustration. Resigned Sigh: According to the same restrictions imposed by HK 48, I too am trapped here.”

“Because I need you here to watch Malachor,” Dar’Revan told it. “Compliance, HK. Remember? Delayed gratification. I promise, your time will come.”

“Confirmation: I remember.” The droid’s voice whirred.

I don’t want to know what Order 27 is. I can guess that how it would end. Malachi’s death? Or the entire building’s collapse? The planet’s? Between my homicidal droid and her....

“I’ll stay with Malachor,” Malak said. “Try not to... make anything worse.”

“Don’t worry, Mal.” The woman belted the sash of her robe. “I’ll bring the pathetic shell back to you safely.”

“Funny,” Revan snapped. It wasn’t. “I was just about to say the same thing.”

XXX

“Good morning, Ilrup Sakeen,” said the Loser.

Ilrup didn’t answer. Ilrup was a rock with a particularly vivid patch of pink lichen growing out of its top. In the right light, the lichen looked like hair sometimes, and the hollows in the rock’s surface beneath the name she’d scrawled on it looked like eyes and a mouth.

It was a good morning here on Loser’s Moon. The sun was peeking through the cloud cover, only partially hidden by the gas giant the Loser had named Rotinhell and its three other moons: Revan, Malak, and Myownstupidity. The Loser was standing on the fourth moon; a speck of rock with an improbable atmosphere, and a lot of geological problems. In another two hundred years, her ship had warned her (before she disconnected all of her ship’s warnings and scavenged the parts for polishers), this moon might tear itself apart.

“I’m getting breakfast,” she told Ilrup, and went back to the task at hand: kicking over rocks looking for more wiggling grubs. The Loser had brought enough ration bars to last for decades; but lately she’d been eating the local flora and fauna just to see what would happen. So far, the only thing that had happened was a bad case of the runs last rotation: when she tried roasting one of the beetle larva she’d found in a cave on the dark side of the moon.

The thing the Loser liked most about Loser’s Moon was that the air was clean here. No smoke. No dust. And all quiet. In the quiet, you never felt like your ship’s shielding had started to fail and the radiation was going to kill all the poor souls that someone had put under a twenty-two-year-old’s command. Especially those who had the bad luck to be on the outer decks for the fake ceremony, while you followed orders and ran back to your own shielded shuttle; setting in coordinates back to Coruscant, while around you, the Force screamed and shattered, and everyone you might have cared for, every bond you had made with your classmates, lovers, teachers, and friends, collapsed when they all died.
Meanwhile, the few friends you had that lived all went crazy orbiting Rekkiad. *That* was Rekkiad over there—that blue-white spark she could still see in the morning sky. The Loser jabbed her fingers in a circle and waved at it too.

*Go to hell, Rekkiad.*


No one would ever see, but the Loser had a new job now, following her *own* orders. Her job was to write every name on a stone, one for each of them. In the last (estimated) five standard years, working from the roster lists, (being in charge of the invitations had that dubious advantage), she’d managed to find the right resting places for more than ten thousand Republic souls, which was not always easy, because every rock needed to be polished first, and her ship’s power reserves were running low.

Maybe this part of Loser’s Moon had once been sea, because the Loser had found a lot of smooth stones here, some quite beautifully watermarked. That was why she’d camped here next to Ilrup in the first place.

The Loser was just bending over, reaching for an especially promising rock, which was large enough to fit all the titles for Lord High Protector Second Lieutenant Demiter Arash, when a shadow fell across the ground.

That was unexpected: nothing to cast a shadow on Loser’s Moon, nothing tall enough. It was one of the things the Loser liked about life here, that feeling that the horizon was always about to tip off and over the world, if she just stood still and let it.

The Loser looked up—and then caught her breath.

A battered starship swam across the sky, eclipsing the orange hulk of Rotinhell almost completely. Gray, battle-scarred, with that singular, sinister wedge shape she still saw in her dreams: Republic dreadnaught, just like the ill-named *New Hope*. A gray, battle-scarred *giant* dreadnaught, now orbiting around the gas giant planet of her moon.

The Aurebesh markings were meant to be seen at a distance, meant to be seen between ships; every ship in the Republic marked like a badge of honor with its name. The Loser could read this one as it scrolled past. And recognize it, even if it wasn’t one of the ships from the doomed Republic Fleet.

The letters read *Aleema*.

A name from another war.

The Loser heard rumors about the Sith war; even as she fled from Coruscant looking for a world where *they* could never find her, never question her, never make her admit her ultimate betrayal. It had taken a year to find this place: a moon where the Loser could be free. And for a long time on Loser’s Moon, she had a working HoloNet connection—at least working when her moon hit its most outward swing in orbit around Rotinhell—lit by the dying brown star.

But working HoloNet had ended when the Loser threw the console across the room one evening, watching a posthumous awards ceremony for the lost heroes of the Star Forge. The Loser didn’t bother with time now, but more had passed since then, because back then her hair was still short enough to brush her chin, instead of so long that she had to pull it back from her face and twist it into knots.
How long ago now? Maybe a few years, back in the place where people kept time. Maybe more.

So, anyway, the Loser knew. She knew whose ship that was, even if the woman who commanded it was supposed to be dead.

The Loser threw her perfectly good rock at the sky. Gravity was light here—so light that she suspected going back to civilization might be impossible for her now just because of bone density problems. There were meds for that, but the Loser had thrown them all away. The good rock practically floated, before landing a quarter kilometer away.

XXX

“I know it’s hard, Meetra.” Revan smiled sympathetically, and reached out and squeezed her hand. “What I’m asking of you is impossible. But you’re the only one who can accomplish it. We need you.”

“I know.” She did. Revan had explained it. Beya had explained it. Even Malak D’Reev, who she always felt tongue-tied and perpetually pubescent around, had explained it. “I’m not afraid of dying for our cause.”

How could she be afraid of dying for a cause? Child of a rebel on a militarized planet. She was twenty two, and half of her friends were dead back home already. How long had her people been struggling against Czerka and Systech for their independence?

As long as the Republic had been sending them aid to do so. As long as anyone could remember.

“I don’t want you to die.” Revan didn’t look so good, these days—ever since the duel. There were shadows that were almost black under her eyes, and she’d cropped the front of her hair to fit under her helmet to wear the Mandalore’s mask. She wasn’t wearing it now, at least. At least she had the guts to look Meetra in the eye.

“We need you to live, Meetra. We need you to take word back to the Jedi Council. Go back and give them the terms of their surrender.”

XXX

“I went back. But I never told them anything,” the Loser yelled at the sky. “I never told them to surrender and I refused to forget!”

They’d offered to help her forget, but she’d refused. Forgetting would mean forgetting all the ones who had died, and someone needed to remember them.

So then they had done it. Atris’ grim expression. Kavar’s disappointment. Vrook’s disgust, and Kae’s flat affect.

XXX

“You are a special case, Knight Surik,” Master Vrook said. “You have always formed strong connections with others. Unusual bonds. What happened at Malachor V seems to be echoing in you, even now. What we feel is… disturbing. Disruptive. A wound we cannot heal.”

“And that is why we must seal the breech,” Master Kavar added, flatly. “Cauterize the infection.”

“I’m sorry, my Padawan,” Atris murmured. “If I could spare you, I would.”
“Be strong, Knight Surik,” said Master Kae. “Remember, strength is not the Force. It is in you.”

XXX

The ship blocked out the sun completely. The sun, Rotinhell, Revan, Myownstupidity and half of Malak. It was moving slowly. She could route the trajectories if she wanted, figure out the speed of its orbit around Rotinhell versus the orbit of Loser’s Moon; but that would be a task for later. Right now, the Loser was just trying to hold it together long enough to get by.

“There is no emotion, there is no peace. There is no ignorance. There is no knowledge. There is no passion. there is no serenity. There is no chaos. There is no harmony.”

The Loser kicked the ground, muttering to herself and waiting for the Aleema to pass out of her horizon.

“There is no death, and there is no Force.”
“Thank you for making an accommodation at such short notice.”

“Of course.” Doctor Forza smiled, straightening in the back of her chair. Her head turned towards the sound of his voice. “It’s been some time since our last appointment, Citizen Antilles. Did you have a chance to work on some of the exercises I recommended?”

“I confess, after the first week, I had to have my dream journal burned.”

“Interesting choice of phrasing, as if you deny your agency in the task.”

“My droid burned it for me.” Malachi coughed. “There were too many incriminating details. I tend to dream vividly and accurately of events that have already happened in my life, and I was worried that some of the details might be hurtful, if someone accidentally found them.”

“I see.” She sighed. “What about the cognitive therapies?”

“Your thought records?” He resisted the urge to sneer, because the blinded Miraluka was painfully sincere, and the only therapist he could find capable of complete discretion. “Yes. I have been trying to be objective of late, to balance each negative with a possible affirmation. That is why I am here.”

“Good.” She nodded encouragingly. “Did you want to talk about any specific examples?”

“Yes.” This was very difficult. “I told you before, I was… forced to sever all ties with my grandson’s parents, because of their lifestyle choices.”

“Tough relationships can turn septic.” She nodded, ringing the chains of her headpiece. “From your descriptions of the violence, the paranoia, the poor choices of friends, the unstable environment for a child, the lack of trust on all sides….”

“Yes, all of that.” He cleared his throat. “I think the last time we spoke, I had explained that my grandson’s mother wanted to come back into our lives.”

“The one you thought was dead. Yes.” She folded her hands across her lap. “I told you to be careful.”

“I was.”

“And?”

“For the most part, we have had luck restoring some of our relationship. My grandson seems to be very pleased by her presence.”

“I’m pleased to hear that. And you find her trustworthy? I know that was a concern.”

“I do—at least in matters where our interests coincide.”

“ Matters?” Her mouth turned down. “Strange turn of phrase for your grandson.”
“No. With him I do trust her. Completely. But matters of state—business—I sometimes need to take measures to make sure she does not make mistakes.”

“You run a tea importing concern, Citizen Antilles; not an intergalactic corporation. I think you need to relax the reins, allow your daughter-in-law some room to make her own errors, and find her own path to correct them.”

“As much as possible, I am trying to do that.” He was, but that would be much easier if he was truly a mere tea merchant. “I am an old man, as you know, and I would like her to take over our family's business until my grandson is old enough to run the company himself.”

“Remember what I advised you: let your grandson make his own choices about his future.”

“As much as possible, I do.” Malachor was pleased about marrying Leeshansintina Racharn, at least; and seemed happy to be free of the Jedi for the most part. “I had arranged everything to run smoothly for the three of us when I received word that my grandson’s father was also still alive.”

The Miraluka froze. “And when you say your grandson’s father, you mean…?”

She was always after him to say the man’s name. “Yes. I mean Gregorio. My… son.” Saying the false name, cribbed from a book he’d read in his Eg years wasn't any easier than just saying ‘Malak’. Sometimes Malachi considered just paying the woman more, perhaps buying her a remote moon, and confessing all of the truth. But no. As she herself had once told him: all problems are real, and all are serious. The matter of degree matters not if the pain is real. Besides, if she refused or violated the NDA, he would have to have her killed.

“He’s alive? But you said the ship Gregorio served on was lost at the Star Forge. At the end of the war.”

“That’s what I was told. But the news was wrong. He survived.”

“I admit I am surprised. I thought you said all traces of his body had been disintegrated. It was a very vivid image you portrayed, when I asked about his memorial service. Vivid, and… angry.” Her head tilted. “You seem less angry now.”

“I did not expect to be touched to see him. And, yet I was. He also wants to be a part of our lives again.”

“What does his wife say?”

“She remarried. And my son is now engaged to the woman with whom he shared indiscretions.”

“So they are estranged.” She nodded. “That sounds normal; but I sense something in you. Disappointment? You want to be part of a united family unit again.”

Malachi blinked. It felt like something was caught in his throat. “No. Of course not. The wife is salvageable, but the man—”

“You mean your son. Your son is the man.”

“My son is dead.” He felt the pain of it again: knowing that he was lost.

“You just said he was not.” Her head tilted, and her masked face frowned. “You wish he was dead?”
“His wife asked me if I would speak to him, if I would see him. She seemed to be under the impression that he would… leave us, once we had reconciled.”

“That doesn't make sense.”

“It is a delicate balance.” He made a steeple of his hands and found them trembling. “I lied to her. I pretended not to care; but when I saw him again—spoke to him….”

“He was still your son.” Dr. Forza nodded. “How could it be different?”

Malachi coughed. “That's what I came here to discuss. How could this be different?”

“You need to open your heart.” Her smile was gentle and naive, for all that she'd been sold to slavers and had her Miralukan senses blinded as a child. “Open your heart to both of them. Even if they're not together, they're still your grandson’s parents. If they can move on and love others, you can find room to love them both.”

That might be true, if Malak hadn't chosen the most unsuitable body possible to possess. But as it was that was completely untenable. The public relations nightmare alone would be catastrophic.

“I can respect them both,” he admitted. Love was too strong a term, for two sentients who had betrayed him as badly as Revan and Malak. “But in the end I find—”

“Yes?” She leaned forward, the bells of her mask chiming.

“I find can only forgive one of them.”

“Forgive? Again, a curious turn of phrase.”

He sighed. “Only one of them can lead my company when I am gone.”

“Many companies have boards, co-heads—”

“Not… in the sectors where we have our… tea forests.” Did tea even grow on trees? It wasn't a fact Malachi had ever expected to attract his concern. “We deal with primitives. Naïfs. The work requires a very direct chain of command.”

“I see.” There was a long silence, broken only by Malachi’s cough.

“Would you like a glass of water?” Doctor Forza asked him.

“No thank you.” He glanced at his chrono. There was an Appropriations for the Mandalorian Reparations committee meeting in less than an hour, and he'd come here by public (and anonymous) car. “I should probably be going.”

“Deflection,” she sighed. “I have to remind you: sometimes it is necessary to let go. All of your concerns are small compared to the infinite. What matters most is your family’s happiness, is it not? Surely, between the three of you adults, you can find a way to embrace your differences.”

“Of course,” Malachi lied. Hopelessly naive. Sometimes he envied the innocent.

“Stay a few more moments,” she urged him. “I think you need to speak to Gregorio. Can you do that for me?”

“I don’t know… I don’t know what to say.”
He was so good with words, but presented with his son reborn, they all failed him.

Doctor Forza sighed. “Why don’t we outline some talking points…?”

XxX

“You need to do something to conceal your face.” Dar’Revan tapped a cabinet in the hall that Revan hadn’t even known was a cabinet and frowned. “But everything’s been moved.”

“Should we have the servants flogged for that?”

“Of course not, that would be completely out of proportion—” Her own face turned to look at her. “Oh. You were joking.”

“Maybe you should try it sometime.”

“I joke, when appropriate. Not now. Here.” The woman had found another cabinet, and pulled out several meters of a thin, filmy white fabric. She handed it over, and pulled out another swath in a dark gray for herself.

“It’s not necessary—” Revan began.

“Two faces like ours makes us even more memorable.” The woman draped herself in the fabric, managing to make a hood of the fabric, covering her hair. “We can both thank Malachi for stamping our face all across the galaxy."

*My face. It's my face. Not ours. Not yours.* “This is imperial-grade eridu, it’s not supposed to be used as a… hat.”

“These are bath towels,” the woman corrected her. “Are we going to argue about fabric? The elevators will be monitored, so you need to assume your role as my commander quite soon. I recommend you stop whining. Do you have an extra weapon?”

“I’m not arming you,” Revan muttered, wrapping the fabric around her own face.

“You need to trust me,” the woman muttered.

“You need to inspire it.” She was glad most of her features were hidden now by fabric. “I spent more than a year hearing about what an inspiring person you were. Did you get a brain transplant or something?”

That was kind of funny, so Revan laughed. *How the frack did you steal HK from me? How can you and Malak be—engaged?*

“I’ve heard about you as well.” The woman grimaced through the cloth, and then tugged it loose. “I suppose you’re aware, there are several vids—”

“All true,” Revan deadpanned. “Especially that one about me and Bastila. The Telosian version?”

The woman stared at her, as if for a moment she thought Revan was serious. Her lips pursed into a bitter smile. “I’m well aware of the media’s tendency to manipulate facts. As obviously salacious as that vid was, the love story made you and Bastila sympathetic. Humanizing the Jedi, if you don't mind me using a specist term, has always been difficult for the Order. The public want to believe in Jedi who behave like normal beings: quarreling, falling in love—”

“You don't believe we’re normal?” That made sense. This woman had HK’s personality with none
of the charm.

“We aren't.” The woman shrugged. “But what we are doesn't matter: only what we can do.” She knotted the fabric around her neck, forming a hood that shadowed her face. “Enjoy your smuggler's memories of a more common life, because you'll never have one yourself.” She sighed. “Nor will Malachor.”

“We'll see.” It rattled Revan that she'd had the same thoughts, the same fears.

“I was sorry to hear about Bastila's end,” Dar'Revan continued, tactless as a terentatek. “It was a waste.”

“She was my friend,” Revan muttered. “It wasn't just a waste. Tell me why.”

“Why...?” The woman's back was perfectly straight, in the precise, Jedi-serene pose that Revan had never—quite—mastered.


“Why is the sky on Coruscant covered in clouds? Why is the Force in all things? Why is Hoth cold? You'll need to be more specific.”

*Like you don't know what I mean?* “Why did you fall?”

Dar'Revan stared at her. “Is that what you think I did?”


“You're lucky, you know. All that power, and no responsibility for its consequences.” Dar'Revan's voice was distant. “As much as I... fell, it was a calculated risk. Necessary to achieve the ends required.”

“Necessary,” Revan scoffed. “To end the Mandalorian wars? That only goes as far as Malachor V. Why did you keep on after that?”

“It was necessary,” Dar'Revan repeated.

“Because of the Sith?” Revan scoffed. “That doesn't make sense.”

“Lucky Fragment,” the woman mumbled. “Shall we stand here all afternoon reminiscing, or will you show me what you claim happened in the Jedi Temple?”

“Oh, it happened.” A part of her wanted to rub that smug version of her face in it from now until eternity. “It happened because of what you did. And I know what you did. What I don't know is why.”

The woman's voice was flat. “Why? I told you. It was necessary.”

“Necessary.” Revan's throat was dry. “I helped people. I did my best. But after I found out I was you...” She had to finish. “Malek was torturing Bastila. We had a Force *bond* and I could feel it. I had nightmares, but I'd always had them. I'd always had nightmares about him.” She swallowed and met the woman's eyes. “I'd always had nightmares about him; but by the time we got to Rakata Prime, all I had were those nightmares. All I wanted to do was kill him.” She bit her lip, hard enough to draw blood, blinking her eyes. Frack if she was going to cry in front of Sheris. “But I helped... others. Even after I knew. On Korriban, I helped... a lot of people. But Malak, I didn’t
even try to save him. And when my friends tried to stop me—"

“I wasn’t there.” But the woman wouldn’t even meet her eyes. “You just… you just killed him. How?” She sounded like that was a serious question.


Dar’Revan nodded slowly. “Malak had to be destroyed, or Tenebrae would have controlled the Star Forge. With Tenebrae’s armies and an Infinite Fleet, the galaxy would have fallen. Everything. Sith. Republic. Any sentient with a brain larger than a tach.” Dar’Revan stared at her. “The Jedi left enough of me in you to activate the Star Map. Surely, a part of you knew that too? Or…” her voice trailed off, and she shrugged carelessly.

She’s never careless. Revan had known the woman for less than a day and she already knew that.

“Or, the computer explained the risk to you? Did the computer suggest that you should kill Malak?”

“Computer? Which one?” How would it know?

“The one controlling the Star Maps?” The woman’s head tilted, eerily matching her expression.

“That was all one computer?” Revan’s eyes widened, as her duplicate’s narrowed. “One computer? But there were like, five star maps, each one a different planet.”

“All part of a centralized web. Five installations and one computer, built by the Rakata. Surely you remember the Rakata? The ancient civilization responsible for the Star Forge?”

“Oh, them?” Revan nodded towards the hallway. “I think surveillance starts again in about six meters. The computers I saw next to the Star Maps were just computers. I know you’re attached to your machines; but I found them merely a means to an end.” You droid-stealing schutta. I need Mission to tell me what the frack you’re talking about. What you’re saying… are you saying the computer told you to do everything?

“I know where the surveillance starts.” The woman’s voice pitched higher, and her shoulders slumped as she walked forward into Malachi’s camera range, ending all discussion. “Do you know the way out of here, Lord Revan?” Her eyes were too wide and she was overdoing it with the way her lip trembled.

“I told you before, Sheris,” Revan murmured. “There’s no need to call me Lord Revan. Merely ‘Senator,’ is fine.”

What does she know about the computer? Revan thought of the headset she’d abandoned in a drawer back in the Jedi Temple. I hope it’s still there. I need to talk to Mission.

XXX

“It’s this way.” The Fragment was charging towards the main entrance of the Temple, like she knew no better. Revan caught her arm. It was almost disturbing to discover it felt no different than any other arm. She relaxed her mind deliberately, to keep the metal fingers from digging into the flesh, trying not to stare at the thin red scar that ran along its length: the place she remembered as a bad burn from a Sith Lord’s lightsaber—the wound that had never quite healed, that had pained her until the day she thought she died.
Then a wall of Force shoved Revan off balance. The Fragment cried out. “Get off me!”

Humiliatingly, Revan found herself stumbling back, the fingers of her prosthesis, sparking, as if the Fragment had somehow… shorted them out.

“Don’t touch me again,” the woman snapped.

“You can’t just go charging in. The Temple’s closed.” Revan hid her annoyance under a wall of Jedi composure, trying to flex the artificial hand. It was sluggish, and there was a faint ticking noise; but the basic mechanisms seemed intact.

“A window.” The Fragment gestured towards the dome. “It’s not that hard to jump up.”

“People will see.” Her voice felt muffled through the fabric covering half her face. “There’s more than one way in. Follow me.”

“You really inspire leadership,” the Fragment snapped, jibing again with that. But at least she followed. The woman wasn’t completely stupid. In some ways, that made it harder.

“Your ignorance will not excuse your mistakes,” Revan told her. “And your power won’t save you from every circumstance.” Would that it did.

“Any other obvious points you need to get off your chest?”

No. But I do need to inspire you. How long had Mal worked with her on that? And before him, Uncle Vrook on the basics of social behavior.

XXX

“Thank you?” That was what you were supposed to say when someone gave you something: even something that you didn’t like, like choca crema with too many sparkles. You were supposed to say, ‘thank you,’ even when you were sitting in a place that no one could like—like here, surrounded by all of this sand and water and the too-hot suns overhead.

“Not a question,” the old man said. His voice was gruff when he talked to the doctors, but always gentle when he talked to her. Revan liked him. ‘Just say, ‘thank you.’ And then smile.’

She felt her lips pull across her teeth like a tiny scream, only wider. “Thank you,” she repeated, through her teeth. She resisted the urge to put her tongue over the space in the front where she’d lost one later than she was supposed to still be losing teeth. It was too loud and bright and everyone was screaming out loud here, instead of the right way, inside of their heads.

“Say, thank you, Uncle Vrook.” He smiled back at her, which made his face look so funny that Revan forgot she was hot for a second and laughed.

“Uncle Vrook, I don’t like choca crema,” she admitted.

After the thing happened, (the thing with Aunt Yancy and that building), she’d had all sorts of people trying to be nice and offering her all sorts of things: choca seemed to figure heavily in what grown-ups assumed children would eat. It wasn’t Revan’s fault they were all dumb. They should have just asked her. Even if she didn’t feel like talking (and she usually didn’t), she could have written it all down for them. She wasn’t stupid. She could write in Basic, Huttese, and a little ‘Doshan that Aunt Yancy had taught her to help with the paperwork before that thing that had happened on Telos had happened and it all stopped and then she’d been rescued and now here was Uncle Vrook.
“I thought all children liked choca,” he said.

“Not me.” She shielded her eyes from the sun. “May we go inside now?”

“I thought you might want to play,” he nodded, indicating the other children, running and splashing in the waves.

“Why?” she said.

He grunted, as if she’d surprised him. “I don’t know. You know, this is new to me too.”

“How long are we going to stay here?” She hoped it wasn’t forever. Aunt Yancy said staying anywhere too long was a way to put down roots, and who wanted em? Besides, this planet was too hot and too bright.

“A little while longer.” He hesitated, like he did when he thought there was something Revan didn’t know. “We’re waiting for a message.”

“How was that?” His wide face looked worried. “Did it—it felt like it hurt.”

“Just for a second.” She chuckled. “I read that’s normal. It was normal.” Normal. Like they were

XXX

My dear Uncle Vrook. Revan wondered if he was dead.

The door was half-hidden against the south wall of the Temple and, surprisingly, still unlocked. It swung open, revealing the industrial stairs leading to below.

“This way.” Revan repeated, not even turning to see if she was being followed. Not that she needed to look. The Fragment splashed across the Force like a supernova.

“One of the access tunnels?” the woman sounded like she was guessing. Interesting, what she knew, and what she did not. All the padawans in the temple used to use the tunnels to escape the Jedi’s pressure dome of an atmosphere, every now and then. One of the access tunnels was where she and Malak had—

XXX

“How was that?” His wide face looked worried. “Did it—it felt like it hurt.”

“Just for a second.” She chuckled. “I read that’s normal. It was normal.” Normal. Like they were
normal. She had never felt this normal before in her life. She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. “Thanks, loverboy.”

His gray eyes darkened, and he pulled back. “But did you—you didn’t—?”

“When you did—I did, a little.” She felt her cheeks go hot, even if this was a normal discussion about perfectly normal biological functions. “Should we try doing it again?”

“I—” she felt his mind and body both answer with the affirmative; even as he pulled her back on top of him, the sweat between them slippery against the cold, duracrete floor.

The second time was better.

XXX

“Yes,” Revan told her, speaking quickly, before some vestige of Sheris could trigger another emotional outburst in her own mind. “The Jedi left in haste. I doubt they bothered to seal all of the access tunnels.”

As they descending the stairs, she couldn’t help but glance in the direction of the one she and Malak had jokingly called their room.

The Fragment charged on ahead again, rattling down the slope that led to heating and cooling ductworks beneath the Temple.

The stairs were dark, and Revan began adapting, adjusting her eyes to it; when the Fragment sent a ball of pure light hovering overhead, a needless waste of effort—not to mention a beacon for anything that might still be down here. Just because Fragment said Davad was behind this and now gone, didn’t make it true. Master Sunrider had been clouding more than one Jedi’s mind; and the Fragment seemed easy to fool, despite her strength.

Revan opened her mouth to explain this when the Fragment beat her to speaking, as always, on the attack.

“How did you get my HK?”

“Your HK?” No need to keep the amusement from her voice. “I found him half-dismantled and crippled in a room that looked like it had been ransacked by Wookiees.” She paused. “Of course, given that you spent a lot of time with Wookiees yourself, perhaps their standard of cleanliness is something you find normal—”

“You spent a lot of time with Wookiees too.” The Fragment muttered off a few more phrases, insulting Revan’s branch-sense, all in nearly flawless Shyriiwook.

“Not really.” The Wookiees hadn’t trusted her, even after Padawan Bindo had expressed his goodwill.

“But you did visit Kashyyyk.” The woman seemed to hesitate. “I… I think I remember, you took Malachor there once.”

The first time I met the Rakatan computer. If you searched for the Star Maps, did it speak to you too?

“Yes, I did,” Revan said evenly. “The Jedi left you the memory of my son to keep you in line, I assume.”
“The Jedi—” The woman’s teeth were worrying at her lower lip as she walked, a nervous habit that Revan had never acquired. “I remember Korrie now. And he’s mine.”

It had occurred to Revan that her son having such a fierce protector was advantageous. This woman would no doubt sacrifice herself for Malachor. Do anything necessary to keep him safe.

“We both love him,” she murmured, using a voice that Sheris might have, and trying to avoid the annoying prickle in her eyes that accompanied the thought: vestiges of Sheris’s weak emotional state. “I hope you know that.”

There was a long pause, as their feet echoed in the stairs.

“I do,” the Fragment said finally. “I do know that.” She glanced at Revan. “That’s why I… if you want to spend this time with Malak, I… I won’t stop you.”

As if you could stop me from doing anything I— “I was talking about our son, not Malak,” Revan said out loud.

“I know.” The Fragment roiled with too many emotions, they bled off of her in waves. “Y—you both love my son. If you both need to… spend time with Korrie before you both … leave, I understand.” She took a deep breath. “Or if you want to spend time with each other. That too. I accept it.” Her voice hardened again. “But you have to know, this is temporary.”

“I don’t see why it has to be.” The woman was being honest with her. Revan could respond in kind. “I will continue to act as your advisor. Malak told me you were planning on taking the memories back yourself. Had you done so, the Senate or the Fleet might have had grounds to try you for treason. But since you remain ignorant of the crimes you committed—”

“Not entirely ignorant,” the Fragment muttered.

“Ignorant enough,” Revan soothed her. “Plausible deniability. I came to term with my actions long ago. I can carry this burden, and advise you.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“I don’t trust you either.” Revan smiled at her. It felt childish, like long ago her uncle had told her to smile to put others at ease. “See? We have something in common, Fragment.”

“We have nothing in common.” But the Fragment sounded frightened now. That was good, it undermined her advantage. She took a deep breath. “If you were me, would you keep you alive?”

It was a good question. “I kept Sheris alive,” Revan dissembled. “A double is always useful.”

“I’m not you,” the Fragment said. “Consider yourself lucky for that.” She paused, glancing at Revan from the corners of her eyes as if it was hard to look away. “You must remember… you remember everything.”

“Until three years ago.” So much of it she would rather not, rather abdicate responsibility for. The Emperor. Malachor. All the steps that had led them to their own implosion—but the threats still existed. The Fragment had delayed what could still be inevitable. “What is it that you want to know?”

The Fragment seemed to struggle, her expression nakedly hungry. For a moment, Revan almost pitied her. “The Star Forge,” she said finally. “What did it have to do with the Sith? With the Emperor?”
“When we first came to Rakata Prime, we found other a Sith emissary there already. He had been tasked with guarding what the Sith lacked the means to unlock.”

“The Star Forge.” Fragment nodded slowly. “For… some reason, only you could unlock it.”

“Yes.” They were walking side by side now, the Fragment’s steps always landing a second before her own. “I think the Sith emissary expected to die at his post. There had been several before him who had done just that. But we came instead.”

And they offered us peace. They offered us a way through the madness that was already consuming the Jedi, despite all of my efforts. They offered us an alliance to make an end.

We were desperate to make an end. We believed them—

“You and… you and Malak came there. Before the wars? During? How?”

“During.” You must know how, you saw the maps yourself. Right before Malachor. Right before the final gambit. “We were all so tired of fighting. Before, I-I found the first piece of the Star Map before. On Kashyyyk.” She paused. “You met Bindo. The Jedi sent me to retrieve him, and I found the Star Map first. Arguing with that annoying old coot took months. Presumably, that’s where you learned Shyriiwook.”

“He wasn’t annoying.” The Fragment looked her in the eye. “Leave Jolee out of this. How did you know what it was that you’d found? How did you know the map was a map to anything at all?”

How can you expect me to believe that you don’t know? Did it never speak to you? I set it with traps, lies, bait for the unwary. But I also gave it the truth, so Malachor would know one day—and if the computer gave you the Star Map, then surely it must have told you what to expect—

“I didn’t know. Not at first.” Revan paused. “But the computer… it reacted to me. Spoke to me as if it knew me.”

“So some ancient computer led you to the Sith?” The Fragment snorted and rolled her eyes. “You must have been very trusting.”

She knew the woman was being sarcastic, but Revan answered her honestly. “I was. Too trusting.”

“You?” Fragment scoffed. “I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s this way.” Revan gestured towards the service hatch above their heads. “Locked, but if you find the mechanism with the Force—”

The Fragment’s hand extended and the door twisted open, as easily as if had been made of plimsi. Her knees bent and she jumped up, propelled so quickly, she could have been on jets. “Do you need assistance?” she called down, leaning over the edge. The light she’d summoned hung above her face, casting its expression in shadow, and half-blinding Revan. Probably on purpose.

Revan eyed the distance. “I’m not sure,” she allowed, as that was better than admitting that Sheris lacked the strength for a reliable three meter vertical leap.

Her feet left the floor and the woman levitated her easily through the hatch, depositing her on the ground next to her. The Fragment’s arm reached out to steady her balance. “I’m not so good with locks,” she murmured. In Rakatan.

Their eyes met, as if it was some kind of foolish test. “Neither was I,” Revan replied in the same
tongue. “How many languages do you know?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard a language that I didn’t understand.” Green eyes met her own, and the Fragment pulled her face clear of its concealing fabric. You could almost see where the dark side corruption had been, like faint scars on her skin, lines of silver, tracing out around her eyes in the light hanging above. “Is that the Force, or just another thing you did because you were fracking perfect?”

“Both.” I was never perfect, Fragment. I was so far from it. “The Force enhanced my ability to sense intention, and improved my memory; but I also spent years studying xenolinguistics.” Back when the Jedi didn’t trust me near combat missions. “Every language has some common roots with its closest evolutionary antecedent, and from that, it’s fairly simple to extrapolate a culture’s basic action verbs and nouns and once you have those, then—”

“Are you always this pompous?” The Fragment made a face, and added another phrase in dialect of gutter Tarisian that meant ‘stick-up-the-ass.’

“No.” She started walking, forcing the Fragment to follow. Maybe subconsciously, she’d been trying to impress the Fragment, win her over to the right cause. But this woman had enough of Revan in her not to be cowed: like having all of her own vanity reflecting back like a bad mirror. Revan added a phrase in a gutter dialect of Selkath that translated, roughly, into an array of suggestions about what one could do with a tub of water and someone else’s parents. “Sleeth kit’tra emmmnak. Drezan. Ssslip.”

“I never knew the fish had it in them.” A red eyebrow raised and the Fragment snorted. “All that time I spent locked in their damn jail—”

“They jailed you?”

“Isn’t that in the vids?” The Fragment rubbed her temple, as if it pained her. The part of Revan that had Sheris’s weakness could almost see the ache in her skull, like a redness under the bone. “Manaan was… almost the last. I never had the guts to keep watching the vids that far.”

“I thought it was rather suspect in the Official Version that you had to kill the Progenitor to save a submersible full of Selkath schoolchildren.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t what happened.” The woman winced. “The dreams were getting worse. Everywhere we went, I just saw things the Jedi had done… badly. And when I tried to help, it got worse. “ She paused. “I poisoned the giant shark to get to the Star Map. I just wanted to get off the damned planet—”

“Why did you need to poison anything? You destroyed an entire ocean’s ecosystem!”

“The Republic had a research installation blocking the map. The shark was attracted to the station. It was either destroy it, or destroy the Shark.” Fragment rubbed her temples again. “Shark was faster.”

“Stop.”

“What?” The woman turned, her hand resting automatically on her saber. “Do you need to stop to lecture me more effectively? Tell me how I fracked it up? At least I didn't bomb their entire fracking planet!”

“No.” Revan tried to project the calm she didn't really feel. “Your headache. I can feel it from here. Let me—I can help.”
“You can feel it?” Her own eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Like a Force bond?”

“No.” She took a step closer, and then another, stopping at arm’s length. “Sheris was a healer. I can... I can sense pain. Yours. It's a simple constriction of bloodflow. Stress. I can help.”

“You have Sheris’s... abilities?” The Fragment frowned. “So is it like... me with you?”

“No!” She would not allow that. Not allow herself to become... that. “I was never—you’re no healer. It requires a control over the Force, a precision that has nothing to do with strength. Sheris was good at it. My body... remembers how. Just like yours did with that door.” Revan took a deep breath, trying not to feel like she was confessing a weakness. “I've been healing at the Underground Clinic for weeks now. It’s like second nature, I can cure your headache.”

“I don't trust you in my head.” The Fragment stepped back. “No thanks.”

“But the pain is bothering you.”

“I’m used to it,” the woman snapped. “The quest for the Star Forge... there were a lot of injuries in between the nightmares. I bet that wasn’t in those vids either.”

“No.” It had been years since Revan had seen any real combat outside of the duels with Sith. Not since the Mandalorian wars. Disconcerting, to realize the Fragment might be more skilled in close combat too—as well as being stronger in the Force.

“Deal with your own problems,” the Fragment muttered, half under her breath, and pushed past her, turning left at the second stair.

“If that's how you want it.” Revan shrugged, and tried to ignore the part of Sheris that cringed when she saw pain.

Xxx

The red-haired girl grew pale, looking at him, but she didn't flinch. So young, still a Padawan; but she had already seen so much. She gave Malak a tremulous smile.

“This might hurt,” she warned him. “There's a great deal of infection. I need to burn it away.”

“Yess.” His voice was already distorted, but not as bad as it would become. He sat down on the bed made of carved stone, his breathing even and calm. As if her presence was soothing already.

Her hands were small and delicate and pale. They hovered over Malak’s face, and began to glow. She could feel his pain, like an echo inside her own mouth. Her hands brushed the scabs and he flinched.

“Thank you,” the woman in the mask said, behind her.

The woman. The woman in the mask. Behind her.

Sheris turned to look at the woman in the mask, looking at the red-haired girl, wearing her own face—

Xxx

“What is it?” The Fragment’s voice shattered her memory, like a frag grenade. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
For once, Revan was grateful. “Nothing,” she lied. *I wasn’t looking back at the woman in the mask. That wasn’t me. I was the woman in the mask, not the woman watching her. That was an aberration.*

They passed through the kitchens. Everything was deserted, even looted. Someone had broken the door to one of the giant, walk-in fridges.

“So. You and Malak,” the Fragment began. “You’re… engaged?” Her voice was flat and neutral, but the calmness seemed brittle. As artificial as Revan’s own.

“Married, technically.” Revan paused, and then relented. “I had to tell the old man something to explain Sheris’s presence in Malachor’s life.”

“You both seem less than convincing, what with the lightning and the Force-choking.”

“We’ll have to work on that.”

“No.” The Fragment said. “You really don’t. Malak can’t… stay.” She started forward, charging through the halls that led to the dormitories with as little care as a bantha. Her face turned back, and she called out, heedless as a novice. “I don’t know how to fix Sheris, but I have to fix Dustil. If Malak is Force possessing him, there must be a way to undo it.”

Revan broke into a jog to keep up. “The boy was a promising Force user. You can see why Malak chose him.”

“Shut up.”

“No, you’re right.” It was all wrong, Malak in that child’s body. And left alone, he’d betray her again, or his father would take his side over hers—Revan nodded at the Fragment. “I agree with you. Malak can’t stay.”

If there was a way to preserve the boy, this Dustil Onasi, she’d try to find it—for the Fragment’s sake. If not… surely the woman could be made to see reason. Some parts of her brain were logical.

The Fragment glanced at her, suddenly wary. “I thought you’d want him to stay. Even if you… fight, he’s still—”

“Malak’s a liability.” Her voice wavered annoyingly.

“Like me?”

“No.” No. They would need to establish trust. How do you trust yourself? Revan reached out her hand—the flesh one, and touched the Fragment’s arm, forcing her to stop. “Look at me.”

The woman did. Her eyes were narrowed, and nothing in the Force signaled calm, or peace, or trust at all.

“You were going to take me back. My memories.” Revan’s fingers closed around her the Fragment’s arm, turning the scar up to the light. “Do you see this?”

The woman’s eyes flickered down. “Yes.”

“Do you remember how you got it?”

Green eyes locked onto hers. “No.”
“You were dueling a Lord Rhea, from the House of Blais. He insisted on knives. Thulian aristocracy trains with them from childhood. You were outmatched.” Revan’s eyes flickered to the wound—where the cut had been. “He cut nearly to the bone. Dark side corruption, sometimes it affects healing. It festered. It hurt.”

“Like with Malak—with his jaw.”

So you do remember something? Or did he tell you? “Yes.”

“And Lord Rhea?”

She remembered how it felt. Pain was nothing, compared to all of that power. “You burned him into nothing.”

“Like I did with the Mandalore.”

“Yes. Sort of. It didn't heal—”

“He was like a black spot on the sun,” the Fragment muttered. “Like Malachi.”

“You do remember.” My thoughts. She knows some of my thoughts. But I don't know hers. She seems predictable, but if she's me, how much of that is a facade?

“I remember that. Malak was—desperate.” the woman blinked rapidly, and started walking faster. “He thought I was dead. The way he felt—”

“Yes.”

“I could… I felt how he felt. You and Malak… you could hear each other. Like a Force bond?”

“Yes. Then we could.”

Xxx

Blood stained the sand. The sun beat down overhead.

Somewhere, someone was beating uselessly against her mind. Loss and grief and anger screamed through her barricades, familiar as a kiss. As always, she kept a part of herself detached from it, trying to project that numbness to the others; shield them from the worst of his anger. Shield them from this one last death. Her death.

No Red, please. Please no. Don't leave me, don't leave us. Don't leave us, Red. Please.

XXX

Useless sentiment. I didn’t kill Cassus Fett Lin because Malak begged me not to die: I killed him because there was no other way to force the Mandalorians into an armistice—

And I didn’t want to die. I didn’t want to die and he didn’t want me to die, and I didn’t want to leave them—

Useless. Pointless. These reminiscences are pointless.

“And now?” The Fragment interrupted. Annoying Fragment, but Revan found the interruption surprisingly welcome now, compared to the circular paths her own mind took. “Do you still have a Force bond with him?”
“Now, I—” it took her a moment to recover her train of thought. “Can I still hear Malak’s thoughts? No.” A welcome relief. “Our bond faded, as we became more estranged. And I think the Emperor’s possession of him made things worse.”

XXX

“My lord?”

He turned, metal glinting on the prosthesis. “Sheris. I did not summon you.” The new voice. Hard-edged like his true voice had never been.

“She sent me, she thought you might need... me.” A part of her quailed inside, faced with him alone. They had never been alone before. She had never been alone with him before. And Lord Revan had been disturbingly specific.

Lord Malak’s brows drew together. “She knows too much.” Inside my head, inside my very thoughts until I scarcely know which are my own and which are hers.

Do you want to know my thoughts? Take her, Mal. She’s not unwilling, all Sheris wants is power —

Sheris smiled, trying to be brave beneath his burning yellow gaze, and slipped her shoulders out of her unbelted robe, letting the fabric fall to the floor. Lord Revan doesn’t understand him, but I could. I want to, I want to understand so I can understand what happened, why I was saved when so many others died—was it for this? Was it to be his? Did he choose me for this?

From the deck of her flagship she closed her eyes and tried not to see.

XXX

Revan’s feet were moving, faster down the halls, as if moving could escape this, the doubled thought. The sinking suspicion that her mind was not entirely her own.

Sheris didn’t die. This is hers, some of what I know is hers, just like the healing. Is that why Master Kroi assigned me to heal? Was he trying to strengthen her? How could he know? No one knows—

At least Master Kroi was dead now. If his ploy had been a plot to unseat her in favor of Padawan Loran, he had failed. If any of the other Jedi masters knew— only Yuthura and Davad know, and you thought you could trust them; but Davad betrayed all the Jedi, she says and who knows what the Twi’lek is plotting? She was Sith and she could still betray you—betray me. I am me, not you. I am me. Not you!

“Dar’Revan.” The Fragment grabbed her arm. “Wait. You can’t just go charging in.” Her mouth twisted, as if she was amused. “Let me go first.”

“You? Protecting me?” There was nothing here. The Temple felt dead. No whispers from Kae, or worse. “Go ahead. I assume we’re going to your quarters first.”

The woman had already charged ahead. She turned back, face a pale blur down the hall. “Yes,” she called back. “We are.”

Of course we are. There’s something you wanted there. Something I found? The letter, Revan suspected. The one from the Organa family. The Fragment was prone to sentiment.

I can’t afford to be.
They passed through the halls, the Fragment heading unerringly towards the room that had been assigned to her—the one where Revan had found the HK. “Open,” the Fragment barked at the door, and it did, revealing the familiar disorder that Revan had seen before. A mess, as if a supernova had scattered the Fragment’s possessions from one end of the room to another. Disordered as the Fragment’s mind, except—

Except for one corner, where a small table sat neatly. Set on its surface was a chess set: Mandalorian, by the looks of it, the game seemingly half-played; but on closer inspection, impossible. The board held a circle of pawns half-ringing a central queen, flanked by two bishops.

Revan walked closer, slowly, trying to feign interest in the view beyond, a typical Coruscanti afternoon unfurling in the picture window.

She needn’t have bothered with subterfuge. Behind her, the Fragment was rummaging, and muttering curses to herself in Mandalorian, completely oblivious.

*Looking for the letter?* Revan had memorized it. Then burned it. But it would take the woman some time before she thought to ask, if she’d dare to ask. Revan looked down at the chess set again.

XXX

*It had been a week since the tribe of nomads had found her and brought her into their camp. A week, while women with braided hair hooked her up to surprisingly advanced medical equipment, treated her sunburn, her dehydration; laughing and chattering among themselves in a dialect of Mandalorian she had to concentrate to follow. They called her a Jett’ai barbarian. They called her a warrior.*

They called her a fool, for traveling in the unmarked sands. *It had been two days since they’d given her the news she had already suspected, but refused to know: that she was pregnant. That all of the Jedi exercises both she and Malak had practiced to prevent conception had not prevented it. That, if she chose, Revan would have a baby in seven of their local months.*

*That he was a boy, and if she rested her hand on the slight swell of her stomach, she could feel his heartbeat like a rapid song within. She needed to tell Malak, but he was half a world away, on his own knight’s quest, and if she told him now, he would fail.*

Now, a week later, she found herself sitting cross-legged on a carpeted floor in front of the Mandalorian leader and his sons; a row of them, all with his narrow aquiline nose, but with shades of skin varying from pale as her own to the color of space.

“That’s a nice dejarik board.” Her voice was still hoarse from the sun, and the words came out in a croak.

“What’s dejarik?” the smallest one asked her. He had yellow hair and muddy hands, which, following a glare from an older brother, he began wiping on his robes.

Revan had never paid much attention to children before; but now, irony of ironies, it seemed she was going to have one. She stared more closely at the youngest; trying to understand the mysteries of how he worked.

*The boy stared unblinkingly back at her, his eyes wide and blue and as open as the sky.*

“It’s called chess,” Cassus Fett explained. “My youngest son would be delighted to teach this game to you.”
“I’m Oerin,” the boy said, bowing. “Oerin Lin. It’s nice to finally meet you.” His words were in Basic, but overly stilted, as if he’d studied it, but never really learned.

“Finally?”

“Oerin.” The clansman sounded more amused by his son than annoyed. “Don’t be rude.”

“You’ve been in the women’s tents forever,” the boy grumbled. “I always wanted to see a real Jedi. I bet I know more chess than you.”

“Of course, because I’ve never played chess.” Revan stared down at the board. Malachi had one like it in his study, but she’d never seen it used. “It looks like dejarik, except with only two dimensions. But I’m good at dejarik.”

“Let’s see if you’re good at chess too,” the boy said. “There’s a lot more than two dimensions. There’s a million, like stars in the sky. Maybe even a jillion!”

“Oerin!” But the Fett Mandalore was laughing. “Teach her. I’ll make tea.”

XXX

Was this the same board? It looked like it: the pieces were carved from yellow and brown stone, simple shapes belying the complexity. The pattern of the pawns was significant too. Dots on a map, a specific constellation. Upon closer inspection, the three figureheads were arranged in a shape impossible for a real game.

A queen, captured by her own bishops. The message couldn’t be more clear if it had been written in meter-high Aurebesh.

“Dar’Revan? What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” she murmured, turning towards the woman, and smiling politely. “Did you find what you needed?”

“No.” The woman's voice was flat, which meant she was suspicious. “That's Oerin's chess set. It wasn’t there before.”

“Is it? Do you play?”

“He taught me.”

“He taught me as well. He was still a child when we met.”

“He told me. I remember… a little.” The Fragment hesitated. “He showed me. He… was there, when Korrie was born.”

Korrie. Revan hated that insipid reduction of her son’s name. “He wasn’t there.” There had only been women, too many of them, all telling her to breathe.

“No.” The woman’s mouth twisted. “He was with Malak. And Vrook.”

“He was a child then. And the child I met didn’t have the Force.”

“Oh?” The Fragment smiled at her, and then… vanished. Not from sight, but in the Force. All that power, that maelstrom of energy was just suddenly… gone. Standing in front of her, the woman the Force said didn’t exist merely shrugged. “Oerin knew how to hide. His mother probably taught
him. From what I’ve seen, she knew how to hide too.”

“And he taught you, I see. He taught you to hide in the Force. A technique his mother never taught me.”

“Master Kae was really your teacher?”

“Yes.” And the whispers she put in my head are silent now, at least. Blast you, Vima. I hope your son destroys you.

XXX

“You have had many masters, Revan. Some of them more adequate than others.”

“Yes, Master Sunrider.” She’d reported here as ordered, stuck in the archives, while Malak got to go with Beya and Merop to help bring peace to the warring factions on Wayland. She would not let herself envy them; but nonetheless it was hard to be excited by a master who rarely seemed to leave the Archives—

XXX

Except she did leave them. She had a son, and a Mandalorian life she hid from the Jedi. She had the power to hide herself, to manipulate us all—

All this time, fearing the Emperor. What if it had been Vima Sunrider who was the real threat?

XXX

“You want me to study Sith teachings, Master? I thought all the Sith died on Yavin.” And it’s forbidden. But Revan wasn’t going to mention that. Not if Master Sunrider didn’t bring it up first.

Master Sunrider propelled a stack of datapads across the desk. “You can learn as much from a defeated culture as from a victorious one. What are the weaknesses of the Sith?”

“All types of sentient life can wield the Force, but the Sith Empire relegated entire systems to slavery. Their obsession with racial purity, declining birth rates within their aristocracy, and xenophobic reactions towards the other races within their Empire led to a complete collapse when they learned of the Republic’s existence—”

“No. For the present, I have no interest in history. We will discuss how the Sith use the Force. What are the weaknesses of their methods?”

Revan considered more cautiously. “Emotions are mutable. Drawing energy from an unstable source creates an unpredictable output. We can’t always rely on an appropriate response to external stimuli—”

Master Sunrider muttered something under her breath. “You sound more like a droid than a child, child.”

“Thank you.”

“It was not a compliment.” The woman leaned across her desk. “You don’t need to dissemble with me. I know you’ve taken the D’Reev boy as your lover.”

“Hardly unusual.” She sat up straight in her chair.
“The depth of your attachment is.” Master Sunrider raised an eyebrow. “You conceal it better than he does.”

XXX

“I said, did you take anything else from my room?” The Fragment looked irritated, as if she’d been speaking for a time.

Revan folded her arms and glared at her to hide her discomfiture. “Only my droid.” She’s looking for that letter from Moll and Jasp Organa, the Fragment is as sentimental as Sheris—

XXX

“Am I not to your liking?” Shame then. Shame that a copy as perfect as her had to compete with the rest of the pathetic Revan pretenders. Did one of them have something she did not? She remembered the pain, as the Rakatan machines had twisted her flesh. Not one of the Pretenders had dared as much, had been truly reshaped in Her image.

Oerin actually blushed. “I like you just fine. It's not the right time.”

XXX

Revan felt her stomach drop and her pulse pound as sheer panic overwhelmed her.

That wasn't me. That wasn't my memory. That was her. Entirely Sheris. How can I remember her pathetic life—

Her fingers flexed and the chess pieces scattered off the board and across the floor.

“Revan?” The Fragment was too close. She frowned. “Are you… okay?”

For a disconcerting second, it felt like she was Sheris and this was a time that had never happened, a time when Revan had asked Sheris to help with the war, like she had asked the others. The older ones. The ones Sheris had thought were so lucky, like her own master, Master Imra Lu. It felt like she was the Fragment, and the other woman—the usurper of her body—was real. For a second, she didn’t even notice that the Fragment had called her Revan.

“Revan?” the woman called her name again, finally acknowledging her rightful place. Fragment’s voice almost sounded concerned.

“They’re really gone,” Revan managed. “Davad and… the other two. And you were right. There are three of them, Sith Lords, and now two oppose the other.”

“What?”

“Lin and Davad. Two Sith lords. And they’ve… captured Master Sunrider. The third Sith. Their former master. They’re… ending her.”

Suspicion darkened the Fragment’s voice. “You got all of that from the chess board?”

“Every piece has a unique identifier, as does every square on the board. Cross reference them, and they correspond to star charts, Mandalorian runes….” She tried to sound calm. “Quite simple, really.”

“Do you know where they went?”
Of course, but I'm not going to tell you. “Somewhere far away. At least five quadrants. The Outer Rim.”

They took her to Malachor V. To make an end.

“They won't be back,” the Fragment sounded sure. And Revan thought she was right.

“You were… friends with this—with Lin?” Utterly disturbing to remember the child and see the man in Sheris’s mind.

“Yes.” The Fragment began shoving the chess pieces in her pockets as if she was some kind of street urchin. “He helped me.” She turned her head back to the nightstand, and its empty drawer. “When you were here before, did you… take anything else? Besides, my HK.”

Revan regained enough composure to chuckle. “No. And I don't think HK likes to be referred to as a possession. Not by those he respects.”

“He is an it. He is a droid.” The Fragment used the male pronoun a millisecond after denying its correctness. “You programmed him, didn't you?”

“Mostly, but several subroutines were developed to evolve into sentience.”

“Because…. Having a sentient assassin droid sounded fun?”

“I designed him to be effective, not fun.”

“And he killed all of Oerin’s family for you.”

Among others. “Where did you find him again? The vids didn't say.”

Fragment made a snorting noise under her breath. “Tatooine.”

“Ah.” She'd sent him to Coruscant. Something must have gone wrong. So many things went wrong.

XXX

Something had unsettled the other woman. Dar'Revan was even paler and more stiff than usual. Maybe there had been more to that secret chess message than she let on. At the moment, Revan didn't give a frack.

That headset. The comm unit I used to talk to Mission. It's gone.

Would it even have worked, with the T3 unit gone with Carth? Revan couldn’t be sure. And if it worked, could she really trust Mission’s word for anything?

HK is loyal to Revan. Would Mission be? She’s the Rakatan computer and Revan’s the one who unlocked it—

She shook her head sharply. Dar'Revan. I mean Dar'Revan. She’s not Revan. I am.

“Shall we go?” Dar'Revan sounded bored now, even if she looked rattled. “Or is there some other sentimental keepsake you were hoping to find?”

“What?” Revan had pocketed the chess pieces, folded the board, and slipped it into the bag she’d
slung over her shoulder. It looked like Canderous and Carth had taken pretty much every weapon in their collection, leaving only the scattered pieces of things too broken, or too weak to be of much use. A gleam of silver caught Revan’s eye and she kicked aside a pile of laundry, uncovering a decent enough energy shield. She picked it up, examining it closer. “Do you want this?”

“What is it?” The woman walked closer. “Jewelry?”

“It’s an energy shield. Suppresses blaster fire. Won’t do much against melee, or lightsabers; but it’s good for range.”

“Oh.” The woman just looked bored. “The ones the shock troops used didn’t look like that.”

“This is verpine. I traded for it.” To keep Carth safe. But he left it behind. Did he do that on purpose?

“Verpine? How did you find—?” a wry smile crossed her familiar face. It made her look older, more like Revan in the mirror. Dar’Revan reached out and took it, snapping it onto her forearm. “Thanks, Fragment.”

“I don’t think we’ll see any combat, but it never hurts to be careful.”

“True.” Dar’Revan hesitated, taking a breath before continuing. “That letter in your nightstand. The one from the Organas—I burned it. I’m sorry, but leaving it around was too much of a risk.”

“You burned the letter.” She repeated the words, before her mind even knew what the frack the woman was talking about. “Oh. That letter. From Moll Organa. On Deralia.”

The card and letter, accompanied by three black eridu robes, one for me and each of my husbands.

“The sleeping robes. Did you burn them too?” Revan looked around for them. They would be useful. That grade of eridu might grow on trees, but never for export. Some things, as Moll would say, were too nice to share with outsiders. “It’s okay. You’re right. Leaving the letter intact was a risk to Jasp and Moll. I shouldn’t have done it. It was… foolish.”

“I suppose in your mind, it’s sort of like they’re your own family.” The woman had a lot of choobs saying that.

Revan flashed her a bored grin. “Sort of.”

“You still did the right thing, having Polla Organa killed.” The woman’s green eyes were liquid, almost as if the thought was making her emotional. “It was her family or ours.”

Maybe there was a way to extract Revan Starfire’s life into another holocron, throw this woman off a high plat, and partition her memories into a part of the Rakatan computer for easy access, as needed.

Which would make me no better than her. Am I? Am I better than her? I killed a lot less people, but given the same set of circumstances….

“Let’s just… go.” Revan barely recognized her own voice. “Where did you want to go now?”

Dar’Revan looked at her as if Revan was a moron. “The bodies of those shadows you said Davad killed. I want to see the result of his Force-ending power for myself.”

XXX
Fragment led her to the main entrance, seemingly lost in thought. The air in this part of the Temple smelled like smoke and cordite, bearing credence to the woman’s garbled story about an explosion. The entry hall was littered with crushed transparisteel and there was a hole in the dome above, signs of blaster fire on the walls, and no bodies anywhere.

“Perhaps they were only stunned,” she murmured. “Those shadows of yours. Perhaps you only thought Davad killed them.”

“They must have moved the bodies,” the Fragment paced back and forth. “But why bother?”

“We’ll go to the medical lab next,” Revan told her. “And check the lists of the dead from there.” *I hope you’re not there, Uncle. I hope you’re not there, I hope you’re not dead, and I fear to ask.*

“Wait.” The Fragment raised her hand and the air around Revan seemed to freeze. “Do you… can you feel that?”

*No.* Sheri’s senses were now hers, and if the issue at hand didn't involve some melodrama from the sentient condition, Revan had no sense, no warning of anything at all. “No.” She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“There's someone—”

Right before its ignition, a lightsaber had a particular whine in its frequency; one that Revan had heard too many times in the wars from Sith insane enough to engage a fully-trained Jedi in melee combat, even striking with the advantage of stealth.

“Down.” Without thinking, Revan slammed energy out, trying to disrupt their opponent. Her range fizzled far before it should—only to have the Fragment’s gesture mirror hers a few seconds later, to much better effect.

Master Kavar Vakla emerged from Force-enhanced shadows, springing back from the ground with the ease of a trained warrior, his blade already extended and humming a furious, violent blue. “The Jedi Temple is closed,” he hissed. “You need to leave, Revan. You’ve done enough damage here.”

“I forgot something that I need. Something that’s mine.” The Fragment’s voice was impressively calm, and her own blade had ignited as well. She was using a stereotypically red crystal with her double-bladed saber, and from its distinctive whine, too much power in the converter coils for the synthetic crystals. Her weapon would burn hot, and burn out too quickly without an adjustment. “Don’t worry, we’re not here to steal anything.”

“I said, there is nothing here for you.” Vakla’s blade lowered into a perfect defensive stance, as he balanced on the balls of his feet, gathering the Force around him like a storm. Malak could have beaten him easily, but few other Jedi were as good. In her own body, Revan could have made him taste lightning before he would be able to deflect it, but in this shell—

“Have you seen any dead bodies?” Revan asked him. “We seem to be missing a few.”

Kavar’s face twisted in fury, and instead of responding, he charged them both, his blade raised high, closing the meters between them with a leap that sent crushed glass flying through the air with its impact.

The Fragment’s saber shook, but held under the weight of his strength. Their weapons clashed, humming as the Fragment flipped herself over him and attacked from behind: driven by a cunning that Revan hadn’t known the woman possessed.
A cunning that had little effect, as Kavar turned instantly and blocked, before her saber could stab him in the back.

“I don’t want to kill you,” the Fragment muttered, in between blows that seemed threatening to prove otherwise. “But I’m tired of this.” Her technique was sloppy, and her defensive style was bad enough that Revan suspected she was doing it on purpose. Again, and again, Kavar’s more carefully timed blows penetrated her defenses: only to glance off against what had to be remarkably strong Force-enhanced shielding. The Fragment’s own blade was a blur, as she used its longer reach to force the Onderonite back, scoring more and more ground each time his saber struck what could have been debilitating blows on anyone with less raw strength.

If she’d wanted him dead, Revan realized, Master Kavar would be soon be outmatched. His technique was flawless, but it was nothing against the strength beating down upon him, like a solar storm against a failing sun.

“Revan,” she had to raise her voice to be heard over the battle. Grimly, she considered not bothering to interfere. Kavar Vakla betrayed us on Dxun. And if she kills him, I can take his lightsaber.

Would that make me the monster they say I am? What would it do to her?

Before she had time to calculate the foolishness of the gesture, Revan found herself stepping between them, pushing out on all sides with all of the pathetic power she possessed. “Please!” She cried out. “Stop!”

The woman’s red blade froze, a hairsbreadth from Revan’s face. Behind her, she heard the snap hiss of Kavar deactivating his own weapon.

“Sheris,” the Onderonite said. “Please.” He seemed to hesitate. “I heard about you and Beya. You must realize, Revan had her killed? Her and all the others from Manaan.”

What about Sheris and Beya? But there was no time to wonder. In front of her, her own face scowled. “What the frack are you doing, Sheris?”

The Fragment held her lit saber in her right hand, but it hung loose, and dangerously close to her own hip. A slight tilt of power in either direction would send the particle blade cutting into more vulnerable places: her hip to cripple, or her ribs to make an end—

The woman frowned, and then the blade deactivated. She clipped it back to her belt, and then raised her hand again. Before Kavar could react, his own saber snapped from his fingers, and flew into the Fragment’s hand as if she had forged it herself.

“I didn’t have Beya killed,” she said mildly to Kavar. “And I don’t give a frack whether you believe that or not, but do you want to explain why you’re attacking me and Sheris as if we’re your enemies, or should I assume you’ve been possessed by Arren Kae or that crazy emperor?”

“I am possessed by no one,” he snapped. “I’m less sure about you. Master Kae sent me a comm saying that the Jedi were in danger and I should return to the Temple at once. I returned… and found nothing except death.” He grimaced. “Death and worse than death. The bodies that were here, I took to the morgue, along with all of the rest.”

“Give him his weapon back,” Revan murmured to the Fragment.

The Fragment shot her a look as if Revan was the irrational one. “Are you nuts?”
“He’s in the Council,” she tried to simper when she said it. “Surely, he would never harm us.”

The Fragment glanced between them, as if trying to decide the lesser of the two evils. “Except he just tried. You want me to arm him? Do it yourself.” She tossed the saber to Revan.

The balance was too heavy. Fighting with it would be like doing so underwater. “Here,” she held out the hilt to the Onderonite bastard.

Kavar Vakla took it back cautiously, eyes narrowed, and glancing between them.

“Not the escort I would expect you to have, Revan.”

“Sheris and I have come to an agreement.” That smug assurance. The even tone. She would have said the same. That was what Revan found infuriating—these glimpses of self in the other. It made the woman hard to hate.

“Which is…?”

Was he suspicious? Surely not. Revan gave him her simpering Sheris look again. A little shy, as if she was in love with him. Had Sheris been? Half the Temple had, back in the days before wars.

“We agree that I won’t kill her.” Something in Fragment’s eyes flickered. “Or you, Master Vakla, even if you try and kill me again. Why are you here?”

“I was on Alderaan,” he said. “Helping to evacuate the Temple there. Someone—something is hunting Jedi. Master Kae summoned me to return, but I never expected it to be… like this.”

“Coruscant should be safe now,” the Fragment told him. “The hunters that were here are gone.”

“Safe?” He glanced back towards the Temple. “There are more than thirty bodies in the morgue, and most didn't die of plague. It's something worse, much worse. I haven't seen anything like it since—”

“Since the wars?” Revan interrupted him. “We've been informed. That's why we're here.”

The Fragment cleared her throat and glared. “As Sheris was saying, that's why we came back. I… I know about… what happened. It's not going to happen here anymore. I took care of it.”

“According to Revan, Davad Arkan is responsible.” It was still hard to believe. She had trusted the man. “Your cousin.”

The Onderonite's pale skin grew paler. “Davad couldn't… do something like this!”

“According to her, he did.” Revan still hoped it was some mistake, a trick in the Force that the Fragment wouldn't understand.

“He did, but he won't come back to Coruscant.” The Fragment sounded so sure. “He promised me.”

“And why didn't you stop him?” Kavar had always been quick to anger and his voice now was knife edged. “You let a murderer walk away?”

“No. I tried to stop him and he almost killed me, and my Mandalorians almost blew up the temple. I didn't just let him walk away. I convinced him to leave to save the rest of the Jedi. You’re welcome.”
“How?” Kavar sounded as skeptical as Revan herself had been. “I still don't understand how or why—”

“He was Sith,” Revan interrupted them. This was no time for revisionist history, if even half of what the Fragment said proved real. “Davad Arkan followed Revan, just like we all did.” Sheris had a certain simpering whine to her voice that was hard to get right, but she made the attempt. “Others were… transformed by the experience. You know this.” Kavar had been one of the ones that dealt with Surik, Kae had said as much—one of the few things the old woman let slip. “Perhaps he was transformed too.” I always knew he was. I always knew it would change them, but I never knew how much—

After Malachor, Davad’s appetites had... increased. Hunger for her, hunger for food, for wine, for violence, for death—

XXX

“He strangled Ensign Lewis in the mess hall.” Beya’s eyes were shadowed. “Apprentice Carrick told me—he saw the whole thing. No reason. Davad said he was hungry.”

“Did he eat Ensign Lewis?” It was terribly funny, if you overlooked the part where you had just led everyone you tried to save into a trap worse than death. Maybe Ensign Lewis was lucky. No Sith Emperor would ever infect his mind, or draw him into a conflict he wasn’t supposed to win; hand him the power to destroy the galaxy and then tell him to keep it safe from the power that wanted to destroy the galaxy—

“No.” Beya seemed to take that question seriously.

“Everyone’s on edge.” Pretending that was all it was. “I need a healer. Malak’s... wound, it’s infected.”

“I can’t.” Beya swallowed. “Not now. I tried, but it—”

“I know.” Revan felt her mouth twist under the mask. Slowly, she raised it and looked at her old friend. “Guess at least some of those warnings about the dark side were true.”

“Frack.” The Deralian winced. “I thought your gift or whatsit was supposed to protect us from... that.”

“I guess it didn’t.” She shrugged, as if it didn’t matter. The dark side’s price isn’t so high. It was a mantra she’d found herself repeating more and more, as the cost mounted.

XXX

“Show us,” the Fragment commanded the Jedi. “You said there are bodies in the morgue. W—I want to see.”

The Onderonite’s mouth thinned. “I suppose there’s nothing more you can do to the dead. Come with me.” He turned, and led them down the main hall, past the Meditation Gardens, where an explosion seemed to have ripped out half of one wall. The Fragment barely glanced at it, but Revan turned her head.

Death. Someone died there.

“Master Jopheena,” Kavar said shortly, following her gaze. The stench of death must be even more obvious to a beast-rider. “I think. But she’s… luckier than the others.”
“Luckier?” Had Malak been lucky, to be killed by the Fragment’s grenades before his body was blasted into dust along with the Star Forge?

“She’s one with the Force now,” the man said. “Most of the bodies in the morgue are… not.”

“Davad thinks he can stop Tenebrae,” the Fragment continued, still foolishly telling Vakla everything, even though the man had just tried to kill her. “And he eats Force users. The stronger they are the more… tasty or something.” she waved her hand and shrugged. “Good thing he was in love with me, so he spared my life. Right, Sheris?”

“What?” The Fragment’s obvious attempt to goad her for no reason was entirely inappropriate. “Is this really the time to be discussing your delusional adolescent fantasies about Knight Arkan?”

Kavar’s eyes narrowed, looking between them, and Revan gave him another simpering Sheris smile.

“It was one of the last things he said to me,” The Fragment continued, as if this truly was some kind of barn-raising festivity on a backwater world and not a meeting of Jedi approaching the morgue in the doomed Temple. She was still staring at Kavar Vakla, but her words were obviously meant for Revan. “Davad wanted to know if I’d ever loved him, even a little.” She shrugged. “I told him I didn't remember.”

XXX

“I think Malak suspects.” His back was a smooth brown curve against the red of the sheets, the lean muscle sliding against ribs to gold in the dim lights.

Revan couldn’t help but reach out, trailing her fingers along every hard curve, where flesh met bone.

“I thought you knew. That's the point. Malak needs to suspect.” She kept her voice even. “More than suspect —know. The rest of them may think it's only a rumor; but Malak knows better. And the secret enrages him, makes him strong.”

His head turned towards her. “Is that all this is?” His eyes were flat and yellow, but she remembered them, warm and brown. “A way to make your Sith apprentice strong?”

“Not all.” She didn't have to hide her face from Davad, which was a relief, even if her words were a lie. “Kill him, and I'll make you my new apprentice.”

“I would try,” Davad murmured. “If I thought that had half a chance of being true.”

She tried to smile. “Now you’re thinking like a real Sith apprentice.”

Xxx

“Queen Talia hoped Davad would return to Onderon,” Kavar told the Fragment. “His half-brother Vaklu has the support of the militias against her. But they would follow Davad. He’s one of the only ones they would follow.”

Aside from you. But Revan knew better than to say that out loud.

“He was some kind of… part of the local aristocracy there?” The Fragment didn't even know when she was being insulting.
“We’re cousins,” Kavar said. He gave her a cold smile. “But I’m illegitimate—outside of the official succession lines. I suppose there’s much you don’t remember.”

“And I suppose she has you to thank for that,” Revan muttered. “Among other members of the Council.”

“We did what was necessary.” His voice hardened and he quickened his step. “You understand that now, Knight Starfire?”

“I don’t fracking understand why—”

“What are you going to do with the bodies?” Revan interrupted them, before the Fragment could argue more pointless words about actions already done.

“I was going to catalogue them. Take inventory.” Kavar swallowed, and his voice softened. “Inform the families. Then burn them.”

“We’ll help,” Revan told him. Sheris would have helped. A strange part of her wanted to. The dead deserved that much. So many died and I did nothing except cause it.

The Fragment glared at her, but bit her lip and said nothing.

Xxx

“Son.”

They both looked up from their plates. Malachor’s face had a slight frown, and Dustil Onasi’s was expressionless.

“What do you want.” No inflection. His son looked down at his own son instead of at him. Whatever message passed between them might have been read in the Force; but Malachi could see none of it.

“To talk.” He took a breath. “Malachor, perhaps you should go see what concerts are being aired tonight for Senate entertainment. If you like, we could go to one.”

“Is Mother coming back to go too?” His grandson looked between them.

“I imagine she’s still busy with her Mandalorians, if she hasn’t returned—”

The appointment with Doctor Forza had been so early, that Malachi hadn’t checked the feeds. And then, his appropriations meeting, followed by that confusion with Klee. (Absurd, how the Jedi had refused to take off his biosuit, even in Malachi’s own apartments!) Then Malachi’s tour of the Jedi’s new residences, now full of Jedi, all safe due to the munificence of House D’Reev.

“Okay,” the child looked dejected, but obedient. “But I don’t want to see any singing. They all look silly when they sing.”

“Yes, no singing.” Malachi smiled, despite himself. “What about a play?”

“Only if there’s a lot of fighting and not a lot of kissing.”

“Why don’t you find something appropriate.” He nodded towards Malak. “We’ll all go together. Your father can provide us with security.”

“That’s… trusting of you, Father.” His son’s voice wasn’t his own, but it still carried the same
inflection—that hesitation on the patronym, as if he was never quite sure either of them had earned it.

“I’ll go check on shows,” Malachor said. The doors slid closed behind his running feet.

Malachi coughed. “The invitation doesn’t extend to Sheris. I hope that isn’t a problem.” He was relieved to find the girl not here.


“It’s being closed and sealed,” Malachi told him. “Most of the Jedi are here now.”

“I know that,” his son snapped. “What is it you really want, Father?” The Onasi boy’s face was wary and proud. Malachi suddenly had a flash of the real child who had showed up on his doorstep, confused and furious. And so young. His own son had never seemed so young.

He felt a moment’s pity for that boy, but only a moment. Then, Malachi took a deep breath and plunged in headfirst as it were: like a rogue bounty hunter descending into the pit of a sarlacc to retrieve a krayt dragon pearl.

“I… resigned myself to your death years before the event itself. I resigned myself when you and Revan first chose to see active combat. More than most, I do know the true costs of war.”

“No,” his son muttered. “You really don’t.”

“Regardless, I… I spent some time in our with the pensioners from the last few conflicts. I know you think that my actions were unconscionable, but the alternatives were worse. Controlled combat is better than insurrection. Casualties of war are preferable to civilian deaths.”

“So you took a few widows out to dinner and that makes you some kind of an expert?” The sneer on the boy’s face wasn’t like Malak’s at all, but the emotion behind it was.

Malachi coughed. His throat felt dry, and his eyes blinked, heavy with sentiment. “We need to focus on the future.” He’d expected the anger. Doctor Forza had predicted that ‘Gregorio’ would be furious to be cut out of the tea import business. “I gave up the hope of having you as my Second after Telos—”

“It took you that long?”

Malachi ignored the dig, reaching for the words of the speech he’d memorized—harder than any Senate address. “I want you to know that if this… situation was different, I would proudly accept you now as my heir. The man you’ve become is one I’m proud to call my son.” Forza had given him some of the words, but the emotion behind them felt real. “I am proud of you. Your bravery. Your victories. Your sacrifice.” He blinked, because quite obviously, the biofilters had let some particulate matter into these rooms, and were causing an allergic reaction, causing, in turn, his eyes to tear. “You sacrificed all that you had to keep us all safe. I recognize your effort. I respect it. And I-I love you.” He coughed again. “I would love you even if you were an abject failure, but you were not. I know I told you that you failed me, but you did not. You were a triumph. You were magnificent. You were amazing.”

A mix of emotions buffeted the young face before it smoothed over, hiding all behind that false Jedi calm. “What are you using?” his son asked. “Drones? Or contact poison? Is it already done?”

“What? No!” He coughed again. “I’m not—"
“Not trying to kill me?” His son was standing now, hand warily on the weapon at his belt.
“Because it sounds like you’re saying good-bye, Father.”

“I am. But not… like that.” He took a deep breath. “I want to give you a gift. I want to give you a
life. You can’t be my heir, but you could live quite comfortably in this body. Take your concubine
to one of our estates. I’ll give you the deed to any property you desire. Or we can purchase one.
You could run a vineyard, or one of the shipbuilding concerns if you’d prefer to do something
more technical—”

“And my son?” From the tone of his voice, Malak already knew.

“You could never see him again. Not as long as… not for a long time.”

“Because Revan would find my continued presence in this body intolerable.” His son sighed.
“Your plan is to tell them I’m dead.”

“You never wanted this.” Malachi smiled sadly. “Never wanted to be a Senator’s son. I used to
think you’d outgrow your foolishness, but you never did. You never wanted it, but you were loyal.
I’m offering you the chance to reinvent yourself.”

“Reinvent myself. With… my concubine. With Sheris.” Something sparked in those dark eyes.

XXX

“If you can’t give Gregorio the business, perhaps you can give him something else,” Doctor Forza
suggested. “Your business is successful. Perhaps you could fund an annuity for him. Set him up
with some kind of other concern. You want your grandson to have his own life. Why not your son?”

XXX

“I don’t want to work for you, Father.” Malak turned his head and walked towards the balcony.

“You would never have to work at all, unless you chose to.” Malachi tried not to sound like he was
pleading. His gut rumbled, obviously a victim of his emotional distress. “I’m offering you a way
out.”

His son’s hand reached out and stroked the curtains, wrapping them around his fingers, as if his
own weight was suddenly too much to bear. His shoulders slumped forward. “I’ll need to ask
Sheris,” he said slowly. “I don’t know if she—”

Malachi tried to hide his impatience, but instead he coughed again. “She’s little more than a whore.
Thousands of women have had the surgery, if you need one that looks like your wife.”

“I need to ask Sheris,” his son repeated, his voice perfectly even. “You can call her whatever you
want, but I still need to ask her.”

“But you realize the offer is good,” Malachi said, “whether your whore comes or not?”

“I can’t leave her here.” His son turned back to him. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

But Malachi did understand. “Love is sometimes irrational. Often… irrational. Your mother and I
—”

“I don’t care.” His son turned back from the balcony, hand still wrapped in filmy white. The other
curtain blew between them, hiding his face. “When… how long do I have, before I have to let you
know?”

“When Captain Onasi returns from his mission, things will… come to a head. I don’t know how much longer that will be. A week, perhaps. Maybe two. I wouldn’t think convincing a whore would take that much time, but I can understand that you want time to say goodbye to Malachor.”

“Either way.” Malak laughed. “If it’s this or the contact poison, I need to say goodbye to my son.”

“Your kind are quite hard to poison.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure you have a few options.”

Malachi didn’t want to think about that. Not now. “Take the deal son.” He reached in his jacket pocket and extracted his handkerchief. Wiped his tearing eyes with it, a gesture he hadn’t used in years. “Take the deal. Please.”

XXX
Outnumbered, Outplanned

Outnumbered, Outplanned

Chapter 40 / Outnumbered, Outplanned

“This is it?” Canderous ran a thumb along the manifest again, checking off each notation against the ships in front of him. There were seven of them: shuttles, two cruisers, and some motley runners with weapons arrays so useless they made the Hawk look like a warbird. The vast hangar bay dwarfed them all.

“These are the ships, yes.” Catrinex, Headwoman of Clan Rialis tapped the datapad with a doddering finger. “Our fleet awaits the command of our Mandalore. Is she here?” Mother Rialis narrowed her eyes, as if she expected Revan to appear out of the ether.

“I am here,” Canderous told her. *I am here and those ships are barely enough to get us all off this rock.* He cast an eye at the Bothan light cruiser--thing looked held together by spackle and a bad welding. Doubtful it could hold hyperdrive.

“These are all the ships… we have… *here?*” From what Gwen had said… he’d expected more. The Rialis Headwoman wasn’t his wife, not to mention she was half crazy with age. Maybe she’d forgotten part of the lists. Canderous didn’t want to be rude. Catrinex’s tongue was a great deal sharper than her mind, and she was stickler for proper manners; but he couldn’t help but wonder if she was just wrong.

The woman frowned. “What we have here is enough for transport from the city-planet to the secure location.”

*Ah.* “And at that location… are there… more ships?”

Catrinex nodded. “Improper of you to question your wives’ judgement, but Aemelie thinks you men will be pleased by the selection.”

He nodded. If *Aemelie thinks I will be pleased, then it’s true: D’Reev filled his end of the bargain. We have the Aleema. And with that, we have the galaxy.* “Apologies for my rudeness.”

They had already stayed too long on this stinking hellhole of a world. Working for D’Reev wasn’t much different than working for Davik--except D’Reev actually paid his damnable debts in full.

“Send the call.” he told Teliak, Second Wife of Zal, who was standing at attention, swords crossed, behind the Headwoman.

“We are scattered across stars: bannerless, rudderless, aimless.” Teliak had a long scar that extended along one side of her face. It made her face look even longer, like the blade of a knife. “Is Fett Revan going to lead us now that Oerin Lin is dead?”

“No.” *She held the mask in her hand and then let it fall. I would be honored to fight by her side again; but she’ll refuse, and I am tired of Republic games.*

Canderous pulled the mask of the Mandalore from his jacket, and handed it to Teliak. “I lead the clans now.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Hai, Mandalore. Fett Ordo.”
“Finally,” Catrinex of Rialis graced him with a smile, only missing a few teeth. “A blooded man to fight for our daughters.”

“Rysya Mandalore phar ech na' Republik infi,” Canderous murmured. “Our time is now.”

“Our time is now,” the women echoed.

It would be glorious.

XXX

Deeka Jin thought everything was goin pretty well. Spiced cake had been a hit--it always was. Like any good hostess, her best role was to lean back and listen to the conversations ebbing and flowin around her, taking good head notes in case anything was said that could be valuable intel for the information brokers on the downslide.

That is, anything that wouldn’t betray her Sith-killin’ Lammikins, or their son.

The intel about this Polla Organa character was real juicy, but maybe a little… too juicy, if you didn’t mind an old chesta-nut. Sents with intel that hot could end up dead. Still, she had to wonder if anyone would care enough to make it worth her while.

“You need to leave this planet,” Aemelie Ordo was sayin to the Deralian chit. She was also bouncing the woman’s baby on her own knee. Deeka remembered when Mekelkins had been that small. Had they done bouncin? He’d been so serious, not like this little chub, who was all squeals and laughs. What was his name? Aba-somethin? Sounded foreign. She’d known an Abasen once. Some treasure-hunter from Talravan. Always chasin tail, never enough credits. Same old, same.

“Yeah.” Polla seemed more interested in staring at Lammikins than packing her things and running. “I’m sorry, I… I really thought you were hunting us.”

“We were,” Aemelie said. “And trust me, you didn’t make it easy. Your skills were impressive.”

Polla snorted. “Now, you’re just being kind. We were doing the best we could.”

“Now that you mention it, you could have doubled back more and hidden Abasen under your jacket. The one time that Mhai lost you in the tunnels, all she had to do was keep asking about the couple with the cute baby.”

The Polla chit smiled, a little rueful. “Maybe next time we should have an ugly baby instead.”

“There's no need to do that!” The Mandie looked startled, then she laughed. “Oh, wait! You were joking!”

“Pollie’s a kidder,” Seiran chimed in.

“I don't want to be on the lam for the rest of our fracking lives.” The Deralian sighed, and looked at Lammikins. “ Couldn't the Jedi just tell the HoloNet that Revan Starfire never got my memories? That it was all a mistake?”

“The Jedi aren't in a position to help.” Lammikins looked all noble and kinda useless. If Deeka hadn't seen him dispatch Darth Arca with one hand and a saber, she might've even bought the act. “The Jedi are… divided.” He rubbed his temples. “If I thought it would help, I would gladly do as you asked, Citizen Organa.”
“I’m not a citizen,” Polla interrupted him. “Remember?”

“Of course.” Lammikin’s eyes had that pouch-in look they got when he was tired.

Maybe Deeka shouldn't have slipped him those drums last night, but even an old chit likes to enjoy a trick every now and again. “You want me to talk to this Revan tart?” She offered to the room. “I bet if she said this Polla chit was never her, sents would be too scared to think anything about it all ever again.”

“No!” Vrook and the chit’s husband said at practically the same time.

“No. Uh, but that’s nice of you to offer.” The Deralian husband gave her a wide smile. Bless his cockles.

“We’ll get you off world,” Lammikins added. “Maybe with fake idchips.”

“Now that I do know!” Probably the spice, but Deeka was suddenly excited. “Chips are easy to fake. But for good ones, you need organized crime.”

“Exchange,” the Polla girl nodded. “I know someone who could do it, but it’s… complicated.”

“We got it,” Deeka assured her. “I’ll only charge you forty points above for the finder. “Iggis has some good people runnin his forges.”

“Forty…?” The girl glanced at her husband, who just looked blank. Bless his cockles, for the pure of heart!

The Mandie was frowning down at her comm, lookin for the world like she'd lost the tails of their conversating. “Is there a… private area where I could use my device?”

Sometimes, the puns were too fracking obvious. Deeka tried to hide her smirk. “Course, dearie. I'll set you up right pert in my own office.”

Right next to the best recordin mike a stable of treats could buy.

“That’ll work.” The Mandie frowned again at the comm and then looked up at Polla. “We might be able to offer your family transport from this city-planet,” she said slowly. “Give me a moment.”

“But--” the Deralian chit frowned at her. “What about Revan?”

“Our Third Wife is not coming with us.” Aemelie smiled. “I think you would like Gwenarius through. She is the First Wife of Ordo.”

“Forty what?” The man was askin his wife like a babe in the uppers.

“Percent,” she muttered. “Which is insane. Are you sure, Aemelie? I guess we need to book passage to Alderaan and see about Uncle Boon—although, hells if I know what we can do.” She grimaced. “After everything, I don't even know if he'd be happy to learn I'm not dead and he got himself in jail for nothing.”

“We can’t take you there,” the Mandie chit said. “Obviously. But we will be passing several systems along hyperspace routes. And we’ll have more time to talk. Have you ever taken thought to training as a weapons specialist? Auto-targeting is so limited, and true accuracy is such a rare talent. You wouldn't believe how long my people have been trying to make it breed true.”

“Obviously? I mean, no. I haven’t. Haven’t thought of being… a weapons specialist.” Polla ran a
hand through her hair, twistin it back from her face. Looked pretty that way, the girl had good bones. “Where are you going?”

“Back to our flagship, first.” Aemelie said. “I need to speak to my husband regarding the… travel arrangements.” She shrugged. Pretty chit, she was, all eyes and dark curls.

“Flagship?” Lammikins frowned, like he was unfamiliar with the term. Wasn’t it the ship that carried the flag signals? Like communicatin? Deeka didn’t see the confusion, but poor Lammikins suddenly looked polearsed.

“Interest on that forty is only compounded monthly,” Deeka chimed in. “Not weekly. Iggis runs a clean operation.”

“Monthly? What? We don't have that kind of--” The Deralian’s husband sounded like a squawkbox. On his lap, their kidlet squawked back.

“Shhh!” Polla nudged his arm. “Seiran.” She frowned, and her eyes narrowed at Deeka. “Forty’s ridic. Don’t try and scam a smuggler, old woman. I have my own fracking connection. It’s just… using it that’s complicated.”

“We’ll do the dance.” Deeka beamed back at the chit. Dress looked right nice on her sweet little figure. Deeka had known it would. She had a gift.

“You mentioned a private room,” the Mandie broke in. That one was too proud by half.

“That I did.” Deeka got up, joints creakin only a little and escorted the woman to her suite, settled her in, cozy as crabs, right next to the hidden peepers.

When she came back, the Deralian was deep in conversating with Lammikins. Somethin about credits and compensation for mental sufferin.

Smart girl.

And Deeka had to admit, the chit had a point.

Jedi Order did owe her big. Whether they could pay up or not… that was another story? From what Lammikins had said, sounded like the Jedi had more of a mess on their hands than the aftermath of a Gamorrean hen party—and frack if the stains on those sheets had ever come clean, not completely.

“If you think the Order’s in trouble now...” Polla Organa was sayin, “...just imagine what would happen if we came forward and said the Jedi tried to have us killed.”

“You would not live long after making the announcement,” Lammikins said bluntly. “Even under my protection. The Senator needs Revan Starfire as his Second. Your existence threatens hers, but a new identity--”

“I'm not going to pay her for a new identity!” The woman glared at Lammikins. Deeka hoped he never pissed his own dear niece or only begotten son Mekelkins like that, because, being Sith, they could prob’ly burn holes through his guts or something.

“Don't threaten my guests,” Deeka warned.

“I need a comm,” Polla snapped.
“Your friend’s usin it, dearie.” Deeka shrugged. “Only have the one,” she lied. “This is a humble establishment.

A humble establishment with ten untraceable comm stations, and one that recorded everything into a blind feed. In the Trade that ratio was about right: most sents had secrets nobody and their moms would ever want to hear. But that one out of ten…

How lucky Deeks was to have two in one day!

XXX

The Mandie kids had released Therion from the restraints ages ago, but left him locked in that damn room, with only a tap for water and some nutrabars. Therion had seen worse digs on a few hyperspace runs; but this was still a completely blown situation.

The fact that he was suffering in what had to be a five star Coruscanti hotel in the middle of its most exclusive entertainment sector: with women, wine, and all the delights the Core offered so near--and yet so far--only made it worse.

Just when Therion had pretty much decided to just spill the beans about Polla Organa, because, frack it, the bitch wasn’t worth this banthashit; the door slid open, and like a promise there she was: his own busty, blonde, Mandalorian babe.

“Dessa.” Wouldn’t do to look desperate, so Therion just smiled. “Where have you been all my life?”

“Packing.” She held something in one hand that looked like a credit chip. “Gwenarius says you’re free to go, but we need your ship.”

Therion grinned and folded his arms, leaning casually against the wall. “Renting my ship doesn’t automatically include my personal service; but if you play your cards right, I bet we can have a replay of the Rafellelian do-under. Or over? You know I’m a generous man.”

“We’re not renting your ship.” the babe’s former warmth was gone. Dessa held up the credit chip, then tossed it to him. “We’re buying it. We don’t need a pilot.”

“The Flybee’s not for sale.” But Therion’s fingers closed around the chip, automatically noting the number flashing on its surface. The hell? Hyperspace robbery! They’d taken his blasters, leaving him nothing to bargain with except good looks and charm. “What’s going on? Did Revan say something? Pollie and me, we were on a break. That spice wasn’t even mine, and my medical was clean!”

“I know your medical is clean. I checked. As for the rest… you were entertaining as a bedmate,” Dessa shrugged. “Now our time is done. I have everything I need from you.”

“Babe, you don’t even know what you need.” He took a step closer.

She tossed her blonde hair, and her face seemed to close like an airlock. “My Headwoman told me to buy your ship. We need one with clean records, and yours have been doctored quite effectively.”

“Lemme talk to Revan!” he snapped. “Your boss? She won’t throw me away so easily. Not if she knew what I know--”

“Revan Starfire is no longer our leader,” Dessa told him. “And our new Mandalore has larger concerns than the finances of a smuggler and his illegal vessel.”
“Just let me talk to her--your new leader.” He’d never met a woman without some weakness. If it wasn’t sex, he’d find it. What would a Mandalorian warrior woman like? He imagined a hot babe Mandalore in something metal, shaped like armor; but showing a lot more skin.

But Dessa actually laughed at him, before gesturing towards the door. “Good-bye Therion D’Cainen.”

“Come on now! We had some good times.”

“And now they are done.” Her hands rested lightly on the pistol on one hip, and the vibroblade on the other. “You can leave quietly, or you can leave in a bag. Your choice.”

“But…” his voice trailed off. “You're serious? Really?”

“I would prefer not to shoot you.” Her tone held none of its former playfulness.

Therion glanced down at the credchip again. It was enough to buy another rig--maybe not on Coruscant, at some jacked up price; but on a more sensible world. Or a smuggler’s moon.

“Our time is over,” Dessa added. “Take your credits and go.”

As a smuggler, you pretty much learned that all choices boiled down to that kind of simplicity. Take the credits and keep breathing, or be a dead fool.

Therion D’Cainen was no fool.

XXX

Marla Korr watched, as what remained of the Jedi Order buzzed like drones in a killick hive; each according to their task, and united in the common goal of restoring order--at least to these temporary quarters.

The killick were a fascinating species: one of the few who truly understood the unity of purpose.

“Master Korr?” She felt, as much as saw, Master Klee’s approach. “I trust everyone is settling into their new accommodation.”

“As you can see,” Marla Korr inclined her head towards the part of the room that had been set up as a temporary medix, and the dividers they had installed between the sick and the recovering. “We thought it prudent to assign all Jedi who had not yet caught the virus to quarters closest to the sick.” She raised an eyebrow at Klee, noting the mask that covered his face, and his gloved hands. “Master Loanin’s theory is that by encouraging infection, we may rid ourselves of this contagion sooner than otherwise.”

“Is it truly wise to risk incapacitating more?” His voice was even.

“After recovery, the risk of transmission is reduced to almost nothing.”

“True.” He folded his arms, staring across the room towards the quarantined area. “It still seems… a waste.”

Marla Korr raised an eyebrow. That was… unusually direct. She took a step closer to him.

The Eosian nodded slightly, and stepped a few centimeters closer to her as well. Their hands brushed. Even through Klee’s gloves, Marla felt the Force within him; the infinite source of all life and true peace in the galaxy, the connection forged like a conduit that sparked into being when
their parts were joined to the whole--

*I have news,* she sent.

Klee nodded back. *Yes. I have news as well.*

XXX

At first, it was just lost time, like waking from a dream when you didn't realize you were sleeping.

As a padawan, Marla Korr attributed the gaps in her memory to meditation fatigue. Master Bas’El was a harsh taskmaster, and their enclave, the first of its kind on the Outer Rim planet of Dantooine, was shakily reestablished in the rather catastrophic aftermath of the Kun Reformation. After Exar, Ulic, and Nomi, the Jedi had to tread carefully: keeping their training secretive, and their apprentices under close observation. There was no room for error. No room for “frivolity, fraternization, or fun;” as Knight Zez would mutter, when none of their superiors were close.

Such entertainments didn't matter to Padawan Korr. She had never had time for frivolity, because her training encompassed seventeen hours of Dantooine's twenty-five-hour day, each day. The first few times that a few of those hours were lost in a blur of combat exercises and droning recitations of the Jedi Code, she blamed her own frailty.

But then came the time when she opened her eyes to find a datapad in front of her and a stylus clutched in her own hand.

**You are not alone.**

*The Iridonian runes were written in her own style.*

It was strangely comforting to be not alone, even before Padawan Marla Korr learned of the Force’s true purpose, and her place among the infinite voices of the stars.

XXX

*Your bio-suit looks rather absurd in this setting when no one else is wearing one,* Marla watched the youngest remnants of the Jedi Order arrange themselves in a half circle around Knight Bastien, who had volunteered to lead the evening’s instruction.

*It would look even more absurd, if I succumbed to the Starfire’s plague,* Master Klee replied, his features bland behind the lightly-tinted visor.

*Such occurrence is quite rare. Most are immune, after the gift.* Rare, but still possible. The lost ones. Connections severed, their loyalty was suspect. A sad waste of potential.

*This vessel does not want its end.* He chuckled, the sound hissing his mask. *A sentiment you and I have shared before.*

“There is no death,” she murmured, her eyes straying to some commotion around one of the sick beds. The Sith child Mekel Jin was conscious and talking to the Ziost heretic. Both represented so much wasted potential, all lost due to the Starfire plague.

Korriban had been one of the first planets to fall. Korriban had fallen before the One realized its own betrayal, how its own vessels had been repurposed and reshaped to promote its end.

*My vessel has years with D’Reev.* The Eosian's visor inclined towards Marla. *Years that have
established trust. We are so few here. It would be hard to insert another.*

Klee was correct, although the Senator would not live forever, and Revan would, perhaps, be more inclined to trust a Jedi with no public ties to Malachi D'Reev.

Marla was rather pleased that D’Reev had allowed her to speak to Malak for him already. Malak had been a good mount, unwittingly serving in so many ways. A pity his new body was contaminated by the virus, but in his ignorance, he still could serve.

As for Revan and Malak’s son… Marla Korr had always been good with children.

Was it against their purpose to want personal advancement? She thought not, not if it served their ultimate goal… but the question nagged her, a vestigial reminder of guilt.

*We all have our tasks,* she sent. *Master Loanin no longer wears protective covering. Some will wonder if you don't trust his vaccine.*

Their heads turned in unison towards the youngest remaining member of the Council, whose head was bent studiously over Padawan Lydie Korr, a slight smile on his unprotected face.

*Their speculation is irrelevant. But I have noticed that Master Loanin seems quite attentive towards your niece.*

*Indeed.* Marla would have to have a talk with the girl. *Should we continue to gossip like old Bith at a sand rally, or should we share counsel on our latest information?* She raised an eyebrow. *I was told the Shadow is gone from Coruscant.*

Marla had been informed by a note, written in her own hand. Their kind found that the simplest way to disseminate information across the web.

Klee felt startled in the Force, like a spark igniting. *How is it known?*

*I was not informed.* Curiosity was a weakness, indulged only occasionally, like a fine wine at a late meal.

*How did it die?*

*I did not say it was dead. All I know is that it has gone.*  She frowned.  *If you wish to entertain gossip about who it was, or where it went, perhaps we should become Bith at a sand rally.*  There was no rebuke in her tone--there could not be--but she knew that Klee felt the sting.

*We concern ourselves with Coruscant alone.* He must have been reminding himself, as it was a fact that Marla Korr already knew. *Through more pedestrian channels, I learned that Arca Trinii is believed to be dead.*

Marla felt a smile cross her face. Her niece turned her gaze, as if the child thought sentiment was being directed towards her, and smiled back. *Another obstacle removed. Did your sources know how?*

*I was told by the Starfire plague.*

*But Arca Trinii was Revan’s. Surely, she would have received the vaccine.*

*Vaccinated sentients do fall ill,* Klee offered. *In her weakened state, perhaps Arca met with an accident.* His lips thinned through his visor. “Does speculation serve us?” he murmured out loud.
*Of course not. Are we to take further action?* With the Shadow gone, the Order in chaos, and Arca’s network destroyed, much of their purpose had already been achieved.

*There are still billions on this planet.* Master Klee turned his head to where Master Loanin’s head was still bent, standing over her niece. *Losing a few hundred thousand voices is of little consequence.*

*I know. But I feel regret that we have lost some of the most promising,* Marla felt ashamed to admit regret; but she trusted Klee, who had his own weaknesses.

Their instructions had been very clear: they were tasked with staying in place: not moving against the shadows, sabotaging the plague’s spread, or stopping the vaccination efforts on this world.

Coruscant might be the heart of the Republic; but it was one world in a vast galaxy, and not one centrally strategic to the Empire. It served the One to have the Jedi and their enemy think they had achieved victory here; while elsewhere more resources slipped from their grasp. Revan Starfire (or the shell of her body) could create one small victory, while the real war was won on the necessary worlds.

Or so she and Klee had once surmised. Once again, Marla Korr chided herself for thinking past her design.

At least Klee was polite enough not to rebuke her emotional response. His gloved fingers brushed against hers. *Your niece can be of use, even in her diminished state. It would be easy to arrange a mission to Dathomir, or the new facility on the Yavin moon.*

Marla sighed. Traya’s attack had dulled the spark of Lydie Korr’s strength to a bare ember. Would it even be enough to light the web within? *She is still recovering from the Shadow’s touch.*

Lydie Korr was too promising to be a mindless drone. It was not a desire for her blood’s advancement that made Marla think that: she had spent far too much time as a spy for the Jedi on Sith worlds to believe the lies the Sith told their aristocracy about a bloodline’s merit; merely, she hated to see a one with such potential and grace foolishly squandered as a drone or disposable cell.

*Did the girl tell you what happened?* Klee asked.

*I questioned her when she regained consciousness. She said Davad Arkan attacked her with some kind of Force power. We knew his darkness. Could he be the Traya?*

*The Onderonite? Impossible. He was not here when we first sensed the Shadow.*

*Or so we believe.* Marla Korr wondered.

*Speculation, Master Korr?* Her old friend looked amused. *So it is known. But if we are being… indulgent and the Shadow is not Arkan, who could it be?*

Not that they needed to know; but--knowing that one of the Jedi on the Council, one of those that they worked with, lived with, loved was aware enough to oppose the grand design--

*One of the missing members of the Council?* Marla suggested.

Klee smiled slightly. *This could be construed as gossip, Master Korr.*

“Yes. It could. I think it was Jopheena,” she murmured out loud. “I always suspected her motives.” *Perhaps we should stop.*
“Jopheena is dead,” Klee admonished. His hand tightened around hers. *No.* Concern edged his voice. As well as a certain… excitement. Independent thought was discouraged, and all the more sweet for the interdiction. “You didn’t sense her death?”

“I did not.” Lost time. It happened. When you were part of the One, you quickly learned that the concept of self was always secondary to the greater good. Marla frowned, thinking of those Jedi who had gone into hiding even before the Council’s official order. One of them was almost definitely the Traya: Vrook Lamar, Kavar Vakla, Atris, Lorna Vash--

Something tugged at her mind, like a memory lost in shadow. *The Shadow is strong. We always knew that the Traya was strong enough to hide itself.*

But no one could hide from the One. They were all mere grubs beneath His feet.

*Arkan could be the death of the Force,* Klee sent. *His weakening of the Order left it to us; but if he takes his power to Sith worlds--*

*Each of us a part,* she reminded him. *Coruscant is ours. If the Traya has left, we must see to our tasks. Others will deal with Arkan, whether he is the Shadow or not.* She glanced at him, warningly, and squeezed his hand again, before loosening the touch to a fingertip. Their speculation had been… enlivening; but its time was at an end.

Klee gestured towards Marla’s niece. *And your plans to bring that one into the light?*

Marla frowned. It wasn’t sentiment, she reminded herself; merely practicality. *I will wait for her recovery.*

Senator Malachi D’Reev had consolidated a great deal of power for them already. The Jedi were shattered and near-helpless. Those that remained would have to rely on the new Order’s counsel; and each inevitable step that would bring the heart of the Republic closer to its destiny.

A destiny of unity and empire. Without end.

*That brings us to the rest of my news.* His fingers brushed harder against hers, slippery in their gloves. *Captain Onasi is in place.*

*Let us assume that your opinion of Revan’s character is correct,* Marla told him. *Such an obvious ploy would have never worked against the real Starfire.*

*This one is not her.*

*As far as we know. The holocron--*

*Was shattered. Of that I am sure.* Klee’s eyes blinked. *Master Kae showed me the pieces herself, shortly before her death. She said that Master Atris had it destroyed.*

*Arren Kae is dead?* A pity. That one had been a useful pawn in their arsenal, unwittingly keeping the One informed of so many loyalties within the Order.

*Kae is dead,* he nodded. *I sensed her end with Jopheena’s in the explosion, as we evacuated the Jedi Temple.*

*Did your message confirm their deaths?* Jopheena had been up to something, Marla suspected. She wouldn’t put it past the woman to fake her own death.
*My message confirmed that my new concern is Captain Onasi,* Klee corrected. *And his proper delivery from Dathomir, at the appropriate time.*

*Did you learn when that time will come?*

He shook his head. *Not yet.*

XXX

Dustil knew where fracking Malak was, having just seen (and felt) more of the man’s personal life in the past day than he had ever wanted to know about.

*Hey, at least he didn’t frack your stepmoms’... clone or whatever. Mekk sounded cheerful. Doesn’t even look like he’s got much of a shot with her.*

*She made him sleep in a chair.* Dustil had to admit that had been funny. He realized their eyes were staring across the room again, where a brown-haired Zabrak girl was finally sitting up, and talking to the Human with the stupidly chiseled face and the body like a wet Telosian noodle.

If Master Azen Loanin got more cerebral, his brain would be in a vat.

*Can you stop watching her? Looks like Loanin is locking that one down.* Dustil turned their head away from where the youngest Jedi Master in the history of time was finally showing an interest in something besides viruses and cells… only to have Mekel promptly turn it back.

*She’s looking at us. Me.* Mekel shook their head sharply, and raised a hand in a wave. Dustil felt their mouth split into one of Mekk’s disarming grins: the kind that had gotten them both extra rations, and convinced more than a few initiates into an ambush. He reached out, and twisted the mouth instead, turning their expression into something he hoped looked more like a sneer.

“Are you having another seizure, Mekel?” Fracking Thalia May was *hovering* behind them, like Mekk was her pet project. What was it with him and girls?

“No,” Mekel said. “Actually I was feeling much better.” *Can we get the frack out of here?*

*What about my body?*

You want to go talk to Malak about his wife? The presence on the other side of the bond was something they both felt: dark as a maelstrom. Anger, but something more disturbing there too. Wants. Determination. And blankness, like a duracrete wall.

*Remember what Ban said. His power is ours.*

So you want to fight our way out of this Jedi... office and take it? Or you want to just leave? Mekel was looking at Lydie again. Dustil wrenched their gaze away, to where Masters Korr and Klee were… holding hands?

*Check that out. One of them snickered. Masters in love!*

The entire floor was open, with hastily-built cubes for all the medical emergencies. They’d corralled the little kids off in one corner, and the remaining masters were all circulating, and doing what the cynical part of them that was probably not… just them… thought was damage control.

“Mekel?” Thalia’s voice. Mekk turned their head to her again.

“I’m fine,” he snapped. “Let’s go to my Moms’s.”
You said that out loud.

I know. Thalia fracking May can see the future, right? That seems useful.

“You want to come with us--with me, Thalia?” Mekel added. “Sure beats this fracking place.”

Smooth. We're not leaving my body.

You want to invite Lord Malak to come with too? I think Moms has a few redheads on staff and you both like them--

The pain that came from slamming Mekk’s fist into the wall was worth being doubled, just for the asshole’s surprise.

The frack, Telos!

“Mekel?” Thalia looked concerned. No one else seemed to have noticed.

“It’s nothing.” He waved the injured hand at her, wincing. “So, you want to come to the Underground?”

“I’ve had enough time underground to last the rest of my life,” Thalia looked concerned. “I’m going to get a bacta pak for your hand--or find one of the healers--”

“I said it’s nothing,” Dustil told her, making their mouth smile. He shrugged. “Just one of those things.”

“Mekel.” Master Zez Kai came out of nowhere, pushing through their half-ball of a privacy screen like it was nothing. “I wanted to speak to you.” He turned to Thalia. “If you don’t mind, Padawan…?”

“I’ll check on the bacta,” Thalia murmured. She shot them one more confused glance before she left.

Dustil turned their head to her across the room. Thalia’s not bad. Why don’t you like her?

Who said I don’t? She’s cute. But Mekel was thinking about Lydie again, and that Mandalorian girl he never talked about.

I need my own frackin body back. If--when--he had it back, would Dustil go for Thalia May? Maybe he should, if only to shut Mekel the frack up--

“Mekel,” Master Zez repeated. He had food caught in his beard and his hair looked like granslugs had been nesting in it. “Has your… have you spoken with Master Vrook?”

“No,” Mekel said warily. “He’s not here, I don't think. Haven’t seen him.”

“I know. I just… I-I thought he might have contacted you.”

“Just woke up from that coma?” Mekel shrugged. “No one gave us--me--any messages.”

The real world felt too bright after weeks on that fracking ship. Months, even. Dustil put their injured hand in front of his eyes to shade out the sun.

“It’s just…” Master Zez paused again. “Have you… have you seen my padawan?”
“I didn’t know they gave you one.” Both of them fought off the smirk. *Jedi must be desperate if old spicecakes gets a padawan.*

“Knight Arkan.” The Jedi rubbed his temples. “He was my Padawan. I thought he’d… I thought he’d be here too.”

Mekel gestured to the fluid line still tethered to their arm. “Haven’t really had a chance to look, sir.”

Sir? Dustil snorted.

*It’s called respect for your elders, asshat.*

*You? Since when do you respect anyone except fracking Malak and Revan?*

*To their faces, I respect a lot of people. Mekel paused. I respect your father. He was really worried about you.*

*Oh yeah? Then where the frack is he?*

“You haven’t seen my--Captain Onasi--around, have you?” Dustil asked the Jedi out loud.

“I have not.” The man sighed. “I had hoped Vrook would just tell you himself.”

“Maybe he’s dead,” Mekel offered. “Tell me what?”

“He’s your father,” Master Zez Kai’El coughed, covering his mouth, so the words came out muffled, and nearly unintelligible. But they both heard anyway.

“Captain Onasi?” Mekel’s shock was real, like he really didn’t get it. It was Dustil who started laughing--a choked sound, as Mekk tried to close their mouth.

No. He means Vrook. Vrook is your father. He’s telling you that Master Vrook is your father.

*That’s impossible. Mekel’s thoughts all seemed to implode at once. He’s lying, everyone knows he’s full of spice! He’s a lying sack of space nuts! Frack this, fracking--* “Banthashit,” the Coruscanti boy finally managed to sputter out loud.

XXX

Malak was sitting to the right of his son, with his father on the other side when pain exploded in his hand. He felt his mouth open and his breath draw in sharply before his mind could stop the response.

*What the stars?* When he looked down at the hand, the knuckles were red, tinging towards white. His knuckles felt sharp and swollen, and his fingers stiffened painfully when he tried to pull it into a fist.

“Father?” Malachor frowned at him, notching his voice down into the faintest of whispers. “Are you okay?”

On stage beneath their private box, the opera was reaching its climax. A bit heavy-handed of the old man, to pick an opera based upon the Great Hyperspace Wars, but Malak supposed he should be grateful it wasn’t the new musical, *Starfire!,* which was, by all accounts, just as dreadful as one assumed.
“Shhh,” Malak nodded, taking a deep breath. Pain. It was nothing new. He extended his senses out, tracing them to the other body.

_Vrook Lamar had a son?_ There had been something about the boy, he remembered that much. That fear and anger, a familiar, bitter taste. Familiar as his own now in the back of his throat as he thought again of the old man’s promise.

_You can never go home again, Coruscanti son._

Far away, he felt Mekel’s body stop, his head turn, the heart in his chest lurch. _Frack you frack, you frackhead._

Then Dustil’s anger, swamping their thoughts, all three of them—

_Peace._ Malak stared down at his hand, and flexed the fingers slowly. Nothing was broken. It merely felt as if he had slammed his fist into a wall.

XXX

“I always thought the girl might be lying,” Master Zez continued, as if they’d said nothing. Not laughed. Done nothing, but sit there slack-jawed, like Mekel was doing right now. “Her kind aren’t the most trustworthy sorts.”

“Her kind?” Mekel’s voice was dangerously low.

“When you were unconscious, the computer checked your genetics. We make a study of Force sensitivity. It is not an inherited trait by any marker we’ve managed to isolate; but it does run in families.”

“Yeah,” Mekel snapped. “It runs in mine. Like my uncle Kris always knew whether the dice would roll high or low. And Moms had a cousin who used to predict the weather. That doesn’t mean shit. I’m not—”

_Isn’t Master Vrook Revan’s uncle, Mekk?_

“I’m not,” Mekel repeated, ripping the line out of their arm. “Will you excuse me, Master Kai-El? I need to use… the fresher.”

_Find the exit. Where the frack is the exit?_

_Mekk? You don’t have to freak out about this._ Dustil tried to be nice. If Mekel wasn’t so upset, this would almost be funny.

_Does she know? Is that why she was nice to me? Why didn’t she just tell me?_

_Who?_

_Who do you fracking think? Her._

_You mean your cousin? Should I call you Mekel Starfire now, or Mekel Lamar—_

“Mekel,” Master Zez said again. His hand was patting their shoulder, even as Mekel was standing up, and taking stock of their surroundings.

_Wearing a hospital coverall, bare-assed in the back. No shoes. No weapons. No fraking credits— “Thanks for telling me,”_ the Coruscanti boy said finally out loud. He smiled at the man. “Do you
“I can help you find Vrook,” the man offered. “He and I were friends during the war. He lowered his voice. “In fact, I need to find him. Something’s not right here.” His eyes darted from side to side liked a squashed spider-roach before settling back on Mekel. “I think Klee and Korr are up to something.”


I’m not. Hey, if it meant they were finally getting out, Dustil would play along.

“Oh.” The old guy looked embarrassed. “Of course. Your possessions are in the crate at the foot of your cot. I packed them myself.”

“That was nice of you.” Mekk was already rummaging through them, mooning half the room. If it was his own body, Dustil would have been embarrassed, but Mekel just pulled out Bastila Shan’s lightsaber, (the one that kept reappearing in all of his ship dreams when he tried to cut Darth Malak’s head off), and then some clothes out of the trunk and threw them on the bed. “So, Master Vrook… he knows he’s my father?”

“I told him, yes.”

“And he ran off.” Fracking fathers. See, Telos? We don’t need them.

Maybe you’re right.

Shouldn’t dear old Dad left a message for Dustil or something? He was probably shacked up with Revan Starfire again, totally forgetting that he had a real fracking son--

Maybe he got sick of looking at Malak in your body, Telos. It’s not his fault.

You always defend the wrong fracking people. Dustil felt tired.

Mekel was already pulling on leggings, buckling the padawan underrobes, tying them like he’d been doing it all of his life instead of only for about a month. His fingers faltered as they shared the thought, and then he pulled on the outerrobe too, not bothering to tie that one. Their legs felt unsteady, weak. “I don’t have… any other clothes here?”

“Why would you need them?” Zez Kai rubbed his temples. “Vrook has a friend on Dantooine, but I don’t think he would have gone to her--not without leaving word first.”

“Why don’t you comm her to make sure?” Mekel widened his eyes.

“Why don’t you comm her to make sure?” Dustil repeated for him, pulling on the Force as he said it.

“I’m going to comm her to make sure,” Zezzles agreed.

“We’re gonna check a few things out. I mean, I--” they’d slipped, but Zez wasn’t even listening. He’d already left on his errand, shambling away like a man on a mission. Which, Dustil supposed, he now was.

“Mekel.” They were halfway to the elevator banks (crossing Mekk’s fingers the codes to this whole place hadn’t changed from being Malak D’Reev’s fracking nameday reversed--even if neither of
them were exactly sure how they knew that) when Yuthura Ban intercepted them. “You’re looking well.”

“Feeling well, Mas--Padawan.” Dustil made Mekel’s voice as cheerful as it ever was, like after a good day with interrogation serum.

Feeling better than the Twi’lek looked anyway. Her eyes were red and her skin looked dull. As they were standing there, Yuthura Ban coughed.

“You look like you might need some assistance.” Ban offered her arm. “The healers tried to keep your muscles from atrophying while you were unconscious, but there’s still some adjustment.”

“What do you want, Ban?” Dustil broke in, taking the arm only to be polite.

“Security is somewhat disorganized,” she murmured. “Curious, considering D’Reev’s notorious paranoia. From what I’ve been given to understand, nothing is stopping Jedi from leaving this place--but getting back inside may prove more difficult.” She coughed again. “Does D’Reev not care? Or is leaving here the real trap?” Her brow ridge raised.

“We can take care of ourselves,” Mekel said, pulling their arm away again. But his head turned back, towards that Zabrak again, before Dustil jerked it forward towards the elevator. “I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Let me help.” Their former master sounded sincere, which didn’t mean she was. “The Jedi closed the clinics in the Underground, but we can still help. So many sick there.” As if on cue, Yuthura coughed again, this time sounding wet and ugly. Even though he’d just gotten over the fracking flu, Mekel took a step back.

“Sounds like you’d better stay here,” he said.

Yuthura grimaced. “It could just be the dry air--”

“You know it’s not.” Dustil patted her arm. “Take care of yourself, Ban. We’ll be back.”

Her purple skin was pale, like she’d been taking pipe hits of the dark side on the sly--except Dustil knew that wasn’t the problem. “Where are you going?” Her voice was hoarse. Her throat was probably sore. Both of them remembered how it felt.

Poor Master Ban. Got a case of the good old Korriban flu.

“Just gonna visit some family.” Mekk shrugged. “Here I am back home, and I haven’t even said hello properly.”

XXX

“Lydie.” Azen’s voice had a tinge of impatience in it. “Did you hear what I said?”

The world felt dull and muted. Voices were too soft, and facial expressions confusing with no sense of the intent behind them. But aside from that, Lydie Korr felt fine.

“What?” She looked up at him.

“Did you…” he looked nervous, with spots of color in his pale cheeks like a fever. “Was I… clear? I find certain emotional responses difficult to put into words.”

“Of course. Yes, it was clear.”
I just don’t know what to say back, Master Loanin. Does ‘you confound me too’ qualify as a declaration of relationship? If the Jedi Order is falling apart, are we allowed to have relationships? Is the fact that you’re a Jedi master and I’m a padawan mean that any relationship between ethically suspect from the start? Even if I find you attractive, how can we start anything? How would we start? Would you kiss me?

She tried to imagine it.

“Where is Mekel Jin going?”

“He shouldn’t even be walking yet,” Azen—he kept saying for her to just call him Azen, as if that would make this less morally fraught—frowned, as if that was the real problem, and not the fact that Mekel Jin had just left Padawan Yuthura Ban at the elevator banks and was stepping inside one of the cars. “The drugs he was given won’t fully clear his system for another day.”

“Drugs?” Lydie watched the doors close. “You mean the antivirals?”

“No. We drugged him to keep Malak unconscious.” Master Loa--Azen-- sighed. “It was Padawan Ban’s idea. Apparently, he and Dustil Onasi have some kind of Force bond, and since Malak is possessing Dustil Onasi’s body—”

“Mekel Jin just left the building,” Lydie pointed out. “That elevator only goes to the lobby.”

Always know every entrance and exit of a new installation. Chapter Two of Master Finistre’al’s “Introduction to a Siege: How to Live in Wartime.”

“I know,” Azen said. “But how was I supposed to stop him?”

Mekel would have stopped him, if it wasn’t him leaving. Mekel would have done something foolish and loud, but he would have done it.

Azen’s question had the unfortunate effect of making Lydie compare them. “You didn’t even try,” she snapped.

“Should I have?” His eyes were a very vivid gray, the color of a page. “My responsibility is to protect the Jedi here, possibly from sentients like him. Did you want me to stop him, Lydie Korr?”

“Someone… should have?” Her voice trailed off. Knight Bastien was reading to a group of apprentices. Masters Korr and Klee were standing by the window, deep in conversation. The Eosian Master was still wearing his bio-hazard suit, even if no one else was. Padawan Ban was standing at the elevator banks. As Lydie watched, the Twi’lek started coughing, bending over with the force of it.

“No one was available.” Azen Loanin paused. “You did not stop him either.”

“I know.” Would he have stopped? Why, in a room full of Jedi, was it left to Lydie to stop Mekel Jin from leaving?

Why was she disappointed he had left?

“It looks like we have another patient,” Azen murmured, as if nothing important had happened at all. “Padawan Korr, perhaps you could excuse me. I must prepare a bed for Padawan Ban.”

“Of course.” She nodded slowly. Without further ceremony, Master Loanin hurried forward, rushing to the Twi’lek’s side.
“You confound me too, Azen Loanin,” Lydie Korr whispered, watching him go.

XXX

Time passed, and Malak stared at the stage below, trying to focus on the absurd play, and not the Racharn box opposite, where the Leeshansintinian the First of Racharn sat alone, staring back at them with an intensity he mistrusted.

“You’re sure about the alliance, sir?” Malak leaned over his son’s head.

“We don’t talk during the performance,” the old man snapped. “Have you forgotten?”

“No.” Malak turned back to the play.

Below them on the stage, an actress was doing a passable job of playing Jori Daragon, the hapless smuggler who accidentally rediscovered Korriban, the planet of exiled Jedi from a time long past. The actress’s hair was brown, not red, but even from this distance, Malak thought she looked like Revan.

*You see her everywhere.* His father’s offer haunted him. *I know it can’t be real. I know Red would never agree, but if she did: if things could ever be that simple, that easy--if she was really her at all--*

“That lady looks like Mother,” Korrie stage whispered.

“Of course she does,” Malachi said. “I paid for Seriina’s surgery myself.”

Dark laughter welled in Malak’s throat. “It’s… realistic.”

“It needed to be for the vids,” the old man said. “But the time for such things is past. We’ve scheduled to have her native face restored.”

Below them, Seriina Starr began to sing:

“*Most people live on a boring planet*

*Lost in the middle of stars*

*Most people long for another planet*

*One where they know their place*

*Korriban may call you*

*Any night, any day*

*In your heart, you'll hear it call you*

*Come away, come away...*

XXX

“Have you been there?” Malachor whispered. *His name is Korrie, not Malachor.* Malak tried to remember, but when the past came too close, he forgot.

“What?” The actress did look exactly like Revan. There was something disturbing about that. Seriina Starr was at least twice Red’s age. And she and his father had been rumored to be involved by more than one holoraq.
“Have you been to Korriban?” Korrie pulled at his arm. “Fa--Dustil? Are you okay?”

“I--yes.” How to answer that? How to tell him what we did there, with our Academy? Molding children into our own image, constructing an Academy built on death and fear to make the strong. Building a new order of Force users, ones free from the shackles of the past?

XXX

“You’re sure about this?”

His wife just looked at him, her face eerily blank. Her hair was tangled and dusty, both of them streaked with the red dust and grit that seemed to be everywhere in this wretched valley. “Yes. It’s the last piece.”

“The last piece of that blasted map?” The more she spoke to the computer, the farther away she went.

“Yes.”

Malak snorted. “Your magic map that is going to win the blasted war for us?”

“No. Only we can win the war.” She frowned, correcting herself. “Only I can win the war.”

Malak stared up at the temple in front of them. Sand-swept stairs led to an entrance half-blocked by rubble. When he extended his senses he could feel the malevolence inside. “Of course. Your plan.”

How many times had he wished for an end to this war? Any end at all.

Malak stepped forward to stand beside her. “But I still don’t understand. What does finding this lost star system have to do with beating the Mandalorians?”

Her mouth twitched. “Nothing. But what happens after we win?”

We go home to our son, Red. We just go home to our son.

From her expression, she had heard his thought. “We already went over this, Mal. Don’t you remember?”

“I--” he frowned.

XXX

“Leeshy wanted to come tonight,” his son murmured. “But her mother said no. I wish she had come. We were going to wave back-and-forth.”

Malak followed the boy’s gaze across the balcony again. The Racharn First, the oldest Leeshansintina clone alive, was still there, sitting alone, glaring daggers at them.

On the other side of Korrie, Malachi coughed. “Her Third is ill,” he said. “Churlish of her to blame our House, but she does. Have a care, Malachor. If your friend dies--”

“What?” The child was too well schooled to speak above a whisper, but Malak felt his grief echo in the Force. “Leeshy’s sick? Why didn't you tell me?”

XXX
“What?” His wife crouched in front of him, her saber lit, and burning a hard yellow. “Malak?”

“What?” They were no longer outside, but in a room. On a wall opposite, a map of constellations, reflecting the final piece of their mad quest. He looked down at his own saber, burning in his hand. “Red?”

Her stance was aggressive, but guarded. “You… is it really you?” The ice-calm of earlier was gone, vanished, replaced by fear that pounded against his senses, even as her panicked thoughts threatened to overwhelm both of them.

“Of course it’s me.” He tried to laugh.

Lost time. Like the other night, when he’d found himself standing over her sleeping body with a lit saber.

It’s the war. It’s changing us. End it as soon as possible to keep us all safe. It’s the war. It’s just the war. I’m not losing my mind. This isn’t… when the war ends, it will be better. I will be better.

“I thought you were possessed. Your eyes were glowing red. This is Naga Sadow’s tomb. He’s possessed Jedi before.”

“I’m… I’m not possessed.” He took a deep breath. “I’m me. We were… we were just outside. You asked me if I remembered your damnable plan--”

“You were possessed.” Revan looked pale. She was rarely frightened, but what he felt now in the Force was close. “Just now. Your eyes glowed red and you told me you were waiting for me. You told me you had been waiting for me for a very long time.”

“Well, this is Naga Sadow’s tomb.” Malak tried to smile. “He’s waiting for us, I assume.”

“I don’t know.” She deactivated her saber and walked towards him. Her hand reached out and brushed his cheek.

Despite himself, Malak flinched.

“It still hurts?” She frowned. “We got the shrapnel out.”

“It’s fine.” He turned to look at the map. “So now what?”

“He’s waiting for us.” She frowned. “They’re waiting for us. First we end the war. Then we find the means to stop another--stop any war from happening ever again.”

“Who is waiting for us?” This was… it had all started when her damned computer promised them a place to hide. After… after what Revan had planned, they would be traitors. They’d followed its instructions, traced the maps, but now--

“I don’t know,” she said. “But you know we can’t stay in Republic space… after… we do what we have to do.”

“We could just come here.” Malak tried to make it a joke, to ignore the cold sensation of rightness the Force had in this place. “I don’t know about you, but I quite like the sunsets over Sith ruins. And roasted tu’kata isn’t half-bad.”

His wife laughed. Sharply, but at least she did. “Let’s get out of here before we both get possessed.” She embraced him, arms wrapping around his chest. Her hair brushed his chin and
her head tilted up. I’m glad you’re back, Mal. Don’t scare me like that again.

I won’t, Red. I promise. “Is that what happened?” He ignored the sense of fear in his gut. “Interesting, that Sadow chose me over the strongest Jedi of her generation.”

Revan snorted. “Maybe he just wanted to pee standing up.”

XXX

“Father? I don’t want Leeshy to die!”

“Control yourself, Malachor.” The old man coughed. “If you make a spectacle here, I will suspend your future activities with the Racharn child.”

“It’s okay, Korrie.” Malak put his arm around his son, but then something pulled--

XXX

And then Mekel’s body was walking quickly through the streets, driven by a purpose. The boys’ intent echoed through the Force, and Malak felt his breath draw back--

You can’t kill your own mother!

Mind your own business, asshole. Dustil’s voice. We’re not going to kill her--even if we want to--we’re just going to shake her down.

Shake her? Down? He tried to make sense of that image and failed.

She owes us credits. The Coruscant boy’s mental voice was harder than his spoken one. Right now it seethed with barely repressed rage. She lied to me. All these fracking years!

You need… money? This was some kind of mercenary exchange?

Xxx

“I’ll be good. This part is sad,” Korrie whispered in his ear. “Have you seen it before?”

“No,” Malak said absently. He withdrew his arm from the boy and sat up straight.

Xxx

Most sents do need credits, D’Reevie. We can’t all be rich assholes like you.

That one looks good. Follow him.

Like a ferraglass reflection superimposed over the play, Malak saw what Mekel Jin did; his own arm, dressed incongruously as a padawan, the richly dressed couple in front of him.

The woman turned her head, and then relaxed. Malak felt the boy’s mouth twist into a smile--

He ambled closer--

Stop, he commanded them. You can’t do this.

When we met you said I was good at it, Mekel’s mental voice was acid. Gettin all soft now, Malakins?
I'll get you credits, he promised them. As much as you need. Just don't... hurt anyone.

All of them, hovering on the edge of darkness, standing above a precipice. It wasn't concern for Dustil and Mekel that made Malak act: it was the fear that their fall would bring his own.

*Bring them to my moms’ brothel*, the Coruscanti boy thought.

*You're telling him how to find us?* The Telosian.

Mekel gave the mental equivalent of a snort. *He’ll just know anyway. He can find us*....

*And we can find him.* Dustil’s thought had the feeling of a threat.

Then Malak felt the corners of his own mouth twitch. Something dark bubbled in his gut, and he felt his body lean back in its chair, crossing its leg slowly, a gesture of flagrant disrespect in Senatorial quarters.

*We know where you are too, asshole,* one of them or both. Blended thought. Doubled.*Bring the credits. Lots of them to Moms.*

“Father?” Korrie’s voice.

Malak forced his leg back down, ignoring the Racharn glare.

“I’m here, Korrie. Let's enjoy the show.”

On the other side of his son, his father said nothing, then coughed, suddenly loud and wet in the play’s dramatic pause.

XXX

///[What are you doing now?/// Mission demanded, her voice pitched like a low buzz into Carth’s headset.

“I need your full concentration,” Mother Erksha—the Abbess—chided, almost at the same time.

“Sorry… it’s just my… Zaalbar had some questions about the ship repairs.” Carth nodded to the Abbess, hoping she’d get the hint and give him some privacy, but the woman just sat there, legs folded under her, across the steaming brazier that was filling the air with sweet-smelling smoke.

“You should take off your device. Opening the blind to the powers from beyond is no easy task.”

This ritual, as he understood it, would unlock some kind of connection that would let him reach Dustil. Speak to him. And maybe, if Carth could do that, he could at least know--

///[There’s something weird about this place.///

“You don’t know the half of it, sister.” Carth stared overhead, at the mural representing a multi-armed deity, with one bulbous eye, and tentacles for arms. Lots and lots of arms. Kinda reminded him of that time on Retief, when he and Saul had met the Devonian--

That was a pretty funny story. Thinking about it made Carth laugh.

“Mirth,” the Abbess murmured. “Sometimes the smoke affects your kind that way.” She loomed over him, and her fingers plucked the thin piece of metal from his ear. “You will not need your device.”
“Izzaher,” Carth told her. “Mission.”

“Your mission is no longer important,” the Abbess soothed. “Now that you are a part of one much greater.”

XXX

“Bantha poo doo,” Mission cursed.

“What is wrong?” Big Z sounded worried too. From the way he kept pacing back and forth in front of their ship, he didn’t like this place any more than Mission did.

“I have a bad feeling,” she muttered. “How nuts is that?”

“It is not,” her oldest friend groaned. “I do too. We should not have left friend Carth. What does he say?”

“He’s not wearing the headset,” she barked back. “I can’t tell what he’s saying.”

Zaalbar was already strapping on his munitions belt.

“Are you nuts, Big Z?” Mission was so excited that she beeped instead of growled. “That place is full of Sith! We can’t just go charging in.”

“I will wear a stealth belt.” Big Z sounded injured, as if she’d hurt his feelings.

If Mission had feelings, they’d be hurt too. “I can’t wear a stealth belt, and they’ll smell you. Or see you.”

“We are both nervous,” Zaalbar sighed. “But the D’Reev would not risk Polla-Revan’s wrath, by sending Carth into harm.”

“You’re too trusting,” Mission muttered. Even if she couldn’t remember a lot about the last thirty thousand years, she was pretty sure they’d been full of betrayals. Sentients betrayed all the time.

XXX

Smoke guttered in the brazier, filling the small room with a sweet smell, like burning. The multi-armed deity on the wall seemed to dance.


XXX

*It was too smoky in this bar by half. Half, and he’d been working time and half ever since the last round of star-side assignments ended. Grounded Republic pilots only got half pay, and with Morgana almost due, the bills still needed to be paid. Not to mention the wedding. How the hell was he gonna pay for that?*

“Can you put that out?” Carth asked the worst offender, a four-armed Besalisk, with a lit cigarra in each one, and an additional deathstick burning in the ashdisc hovering beside him. “My girlfriend’s about to have a baby.”
“Here?” The man flapped his ears, as if with laughter. “Pretty sure, it ain’t legal to have a baby right here.”

“I’m meeting her here.” He’d picked the place because it was close to the tramway, an easy walk for Morgana. The reviews suggested it was a nice dive; they’d neglected to mention it was full of suicidal assholes smoking their lungs into oblivion.

“Then maybe you’d better wait outside.” The Besalisk gestured towards the door with one of his upper hands.

“Maybe we should take it outside, since you can’t seem to read.” Carth jerked his chin towards the sign that clearly said, ‘No Smoking,’ in six different languages.

The Besalisk laughed. “You’ve gotta be kidding me.” He looked up at Carth from his seat and Carth realized what he hadn’t noticed before: the man was wearing a captain’s bars on his stained jacket, and a heavy, Fleet Academy ring on one of his meaty fingers.

“Maybe we should take it outside…” Carth paused. “Sir.”

XXX

“You’re smiling,” the priestess said. Her voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. Another voice, tinny and insubstantial, kept calling his name.

“Morgana?” That wasn’t the right name, but Carth could feel the smile on his face still. “The day Dustil was born, there was this guy… he had four arms. Only gave me a black eye with one. But then he used two to catch my son, when I was holding Morgana’s hand. We got stuck in a brownout, no traffic to the hospital. Dustil was born in a pub. Never… always meant to tell him about that. About his name.”

“You’ve traveled too far back in time,” the priestess said. “How do I turn off this contraption of yours? Its screaming is very disruptive.”

“That was my last bar fight,” Carth told her. “Captain Kinara Dustill-Inzazeen got me back in the active reserves. Me and Saul both. We both had kids, Selene was a couple of months old when Dustil was born.”

XXX

“Push.” He said it because he was supposed to say it. That had been on all of the vids.

“Not yet,” the Besalisk warned. He crouched between Morgana’s legs on the ground. Someone had put up a tablecloth, two servomech droids held it around them for a semblance of privacy. The lights flickered overhead, on and off, the power cuts so common in this sector giving everything an air of unreality.

“I hate this,” his girlfriend--not yet wife--not until three weeks later, when he finally just gave her his grandmother’s ring and she said she’d never cared about a fancy ceremony and they’d both known it for a lie, but not one that mattered. His girlfriend screamed. “I hate this! It hurts! Take it back!!”

“I can’t.” His cheeks were wet. Both of them crying. It was disgusting and it killed him, to see her in so much pain.

“Stop pushing,” Kinara told them. You got on a first-name basis pretty fast with the sent who was
standing there when your wife collapsed on the ground and started screaming that she was in labor. “Why does your species have such narrow birth canals?”

“Go to hell!” Morgana was shocked enough that she lifted her head and almost laughed. “I really need to push!”

“Almost.” The captain patted her stomach. “He’s almost there.”

XXX

“I wondered how he knew Morgana was having a boy.” Carth tried to explain. “Found out later, they only use the male pronoun. Dustill-Inzazeen put in a word with the brass, got me restored to active. Put in a word for my mentor Saul too. We’d both been kicked to the curb after the spice thing. After that, Saul said, all we needed now to rise was a good, old-fashioned war.”

“Too far back,” the priestess repeated. “He wants to see her.”

“See who?” Carth rubbed his eyes. “Who wants to see what?”

XXX

“I’m naming him after you,” he declared. Felt like a punch in the gut, seeing Morgana’s dark eyes staring up at his face. Red, wrinkled, and speckled with something white.

His son was the most beautiful thing Carth Onasi had ever seen. “You finished the hard part,” he told those dark eyes. “Everything from here on out, it’s all gonna be stars.”

“Give him to me.” His wife was sitting up, her voice a little hoarse. Dark hair tangled and tumbling down her shoulders. Her skin was glowing. Looking at her, Carth felt something swell in his chest.

“I love you,” his whispered. “I love you both so much--”

XXX

“Do you hear that?” It was a nice change, being out in the real world. They had clothes now too, even if they were fracking Jedi clothes. Clothing, shoes, and D’Reev hadn’t changed the passcodes that operated the main elevator bank of the building. They were (relatively speaking) free.

Hear what? You don’t need to speak out loud. I can hear you no matter what. I can’t fracking not hear you.

What was it that Yuthura had told them? Bonded for life? What affected one would affect the other? That would be a lot easier to handle if they could do it in two bodies, instead of just Mekk’s. Everything was slightly off, like his legs were too short, or his arms were too long--

My arms are not too long. What the frack are you talking about?

Did you see what we just did? We were fracking there with Malak. We drove him out!

For a second. Mekel sounded more angry than impressed. Maybe that was the trick. Maybe he needed to keep Mekk pissed off--

It’s some kind of lie, right? The Vrook thing? It’s impossible.

I don’t know. You do kinda look like him. Dustil ran a hand through their hair.
Frack you too.

In your dreams.

“Are we talking about those dreams now?” Mekel pulled their face into a smirk, and jumped on the last moving stair before the bus home. It was crowded. “Because I don't remember hearing any complaints from you back on the ship--”

“Yeah, watching you jerk off in dreamland was great. Thanks for the memories, Mekk.”

“Someone had to show you how.”

Two Rodians, not much older than them and pretty obviously on a date, edged away from the crazy Human.

Mekel flashed them a smile as he slipped past, heading down the moving stair where suddenly every sentient near them on it had moved to the side.

Not bad. Dustil had to admit he was actually impressed.

When you grow up in a crowd, you need to know how to clear the room, Telos.

Mekel smiled, a real smile this time. “Remember that time we had the Rodese itch after your fracked those Gamorrean twins with Lord Malak and the k’lor slug?”

“Yes, I remember,” his own voice said back as Mekel nodded their head. “That was great! Until I chopped them to pieces with my lightsaber.”

The remaining sentients on the stair edged closer to the wall, looking in any direction but at them.

How many credits do you think Malak is good for, Telos?

I don't know, a million? Five million?

Maybe.

XXX

“Her? Who’s her?” Carth’s head felt fuzzy, detached from his body.

“Your master,” the Abbess murmured. “Mine knew the old Starfire quite well, but her new incarnation confounds him. You will help us understand.”

“What?” A flash of panic through the smoke. Realization suddenly--

She’s drugged you. She’s drugged you just like those D’Reev assholes and made you helpless again--

Carth bit his tongue and tasted blood. The pain helped shock his senses. “Who?” he sputtered. “Who the hell is your master?”

“All serve the One.” She leaned over him, impossibly tall. But weren’t they both sitting? Carth had thought… they were sitting. “We all serve him. He has many names on a thousand worlds. Emperor. Tenebrae. Vitiate. Valkorion--”

Carth’s hand fumbled at his belt, and he closed his eyes.
Not again. This can’t happen again. They can’t turn me against you, Polla. Not again!

“Your struggle is instinctive, but fruitless. You have joined the One. When he needs your eyes, they will open. When he needs your breath, you will breathe. When he needs your prayers, you will pray—”

No. No! “I’ll never join you,” Carth gritted. His eyes were still closed, but somehow… he could feel her looming over him. The holdout was tight and smooth in his hand. He popped off the safety with his thumb and fired.

His aim was true.

XXX

Malak was having some angst banthashit about sleeping in the same room as his… clone-wife or whatever she was. It would have been funny to hear about, but feeling echoes of it in their skull was less funny, especially since the man’s thoughts seemed to be circling bottom like a drain.

I can’t lose my son. It’s a way out. She’d never agree. The old man can’t live forever, and when he dies--

Their skull. Frack that. You know I love you, Telos, but this you, me, and Malak makes three is gonna get old fracking quick.

“Love?” Dustil said the word out loud. “I’m not sure we’re there yet.”

“Give it time, Telos. What else are we gonna do?”

A few sents on the crowded hoverbus glanced at the man in Padawan robes talking to himself, and then edged away, giving them more room.

“I don’t know.” Dustil sounded serious again. Uh-oh. This was all fracked enough without him getting maudlin.

Look, so your father’s missing. Least he’s not some stuck up Jedi who always looked at you like you were shit stuck to his shoe.

If you feel like that, why are we dealing at all? What do you think your mother's gonna say?

What do you mean? Mekel didn't have to think: he knew exactly what she'd say. Moms'd start with lies, then move on to guilt and pastry, and probably talk him into doing some fracked up job for one of her goons. It beat working like she did, he figured, even if getting caught meant the tanks for sure.

Pastry? Dustil was getting stuck on the wrong thoughts. One of them was hungry. One of the bodies. Maybe both.

Careful of the spiced ones. Eat enough of those and you’ll wake up contract bound to some pleasure dome on Zeltros--

Actually, right about now, that didn't sound half bad.

We’re not running away to be whores or join a space circus, or whatever other insane plan you’re cooking up, Mekel. Get all of that out of your head now.

Fine. But like I said, avoid the spiced pastries--
“Master Jedi.”

Mekel craned their head, simultaneously slumping down towards the (not empty) seats to avoid attracting the master Jedi’s attention. The voice was coming from behind them so--

He half-turned their head. *I think he means us, he means us, the master Jedi*-- Dustil took control of their voice. “Yes?”

**“Hurda cl’nich’s close. Dhey're sayin alla Jed eye urr leaven. Zat true?”**

The man’s accent was even thicker than Mekel’s had been once. It took him a second to process. *Heard the clinic’s closed. They’re saying all the Jedi are leaving. Is that true?*  “No,” Mekel said. “We’re not leaving. See how I’m here? We Jedi are always here to help.”

**“Welleye need’elp!”** *Well, I need help!* The man said. Rodian. Short, even for one of them. “Kin yoo--” *Can you--*

**“This is our stop,”** Dustil broke in, pushing past the man, and thumbing open the lever that pressed the door.

**“Wait!”**

But they were already gone.

*Shoulda taken the train. No one there ever asks for nothin--*  
*You could understand what he said?*

*You couldn’t? They were already off, leaving good deeds left undone behind them. The clinic can’t really be closing, can it?*

*Things are fracked, Dustil observed.*

It was an understatement.

XXX

Ando was a watery world, with floating labs like fiefdoms. The gentle rocking back and forth of this particular prison ship was doing nothing for Lena’s digestion; and what she was here to procure made it even worse.

“It’s an unusual request.” The Aqualish chittered, mandibles clattering and voder translating. “Most of our clients prefer to keep the lower brain function: without it, the vessels require constant life support.” He made a cha-cha-ing sound, and tapped the door that led to the containment room.

“My client has unusual tastes.” Lena Wee was glad to be pregnant, because it would give her an excuse if she lost her ch’tooties all over the antiseptic gray floor of this corporate prison.

“I have to remind you, *Xperia’s Correctional Facility* does not sell vessels for medical experimentation or breeding,” the Aqualish added. “All of our living cadavers are sterilized and geno-tagged. No reputable lab would accept farmed body parts: these prisoners are meant to live out their life sentences as intact beings.”

“Intact but mindless.” It hadn’t sounded so bad, back on Kashykk. Do a good deed for the kid. Help her find a body. But being here and seeing it was an entirely different thing.
“These all have life sentences,” the Aqualish reminded her. “If they could wake up, they could get out before their terms were up, and we are contractually obligated to make sure that justice is served.”

_They’re already dead_, she reminded herself, as they passed through the rows of cryostasis tanks, one after another, all naked and each displayed like a slab of meat for the butcher. A disturbing number were Twi’leks. Nearly all were beautiful. More than half were female.

“Was there a color you were looking for, specifically?”

[[Do they have any pinks? I always thought I’d look good as a pink.]]

“Do you have any pinks?” _I am not going to be sick._

“It’s a popular color,” the Aqualish burbled. “Some sents say their nerve endings are closer to the surface.”

_I am going to be sick._ Lena held her hand over her mouth, feeling her lekku wrap themselves into a ball.

[[Tilt your head up more. I can’t see.]] Mission was focused like a machine on her objective.

_Because she is one._

Lena lifted her head back up, turning the monocle she wore in her right eye up to pan across the row of frozen bodies and swallowing her own bile.

“Of course, if your client is willing to pay extra--”

[[Tell him credits aren’t a problem.]]

“Do you have a refresher station?” Lena tried to swallow her guts back down. “I’m sorry, but I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Not on our floor! You’ll contaminate everything! RK, please escort the client to the waste disposal facility at once!”

A silver droid glided forward, its sensors chiming. “Warm Compliance, Noble Sir. Noble Madam, if you would just step this way--”

[[Is something wrong? Are they out of Pinks? Blue would be okay. Or yellow?]]

“I’m fine.” Lena closed her eyes and willed it to be so. “We’ll take that one.” She pointed at random.

“The lavender with dark stippling to yellow on the tips of the lekku. An… interesting choice. Muscular, but buxom.”

[[You can’t just pick one--oh. Can you zoom in? She’s… pretty. I like her. Tell them we’ll take her.]]

“That one,” she said, more authoritatively. “I assume they’re all screened for diseases and degenerative conditions?”

“Our health screens are top notch!” The Aqualish’s voder might have sounded offended.
She heard the droid say something, in a language that sounded like water.

“Oh! Apologies. Tee’raa Janos is part of a matched set. We can’t sell her separately.”

“I’m sorry?”

[[I like that one, if they don’t have any Pinks.]]

The Twi’lek in front of them was lavender, as advertised, shading to deep blue, almost gray. Her eyes were closed, and her face as slack as all the rest, but it had a grim set to its features: as if the woman she had been had known exactly what the fates had in store for her.

“A matched set?” She didn’t even know what that meant.

“Her twin is the one next to her. See? Both cases are marked with the same sigil.”

The other one was white, with nearly an identical face--and an identical expression.

Her headset buzzed. [[That one’s lekku are sort of pink.]]

“My client only wants the one.” Lena shrugged. “I suppose we could pay for the other too, but we only contracted to buy one, and the terms of the agreement you reached with I.E., Limited were quite clear on that point.”

[[No. Get both.]]

“I mean… we’ll take both.” Curiosity hadn’t exactly done Lena favors lately (despite making her rich beyond her wildest dreams); but she had to know. “What did they do?”

“All of our vessels committed horrible crimes, of course. But these two?” The Aqualish paused. “I think it was bank robbery.”

The droid gurgled again.

“Apologies, I mean murder. It was murder. They murdered their master in a most foul and depraved fashion.”

Lena had never been a slave, but she had been a joygirl; and she'd seen enough of the world to know that most people who had slaves were foul and depraved individuals. “Good for them,” she muttered under her breath. “You’re sure they… they aren’t… there anymore?”

“If you want me to unthaw one of them now, you can attempt to converse with it; but with Twi’leks the operation is quite simple: we sever the connection to the primary and tertiary brain stems at the branch of the lekku. The tissue regenerates, but without higher function…” His tusks clacked. “No more person: just a responsive, breathing, sack of flesh.”

Lena gagged, and finally started puking all over the antiseptic sterilized clinic floor.

[[Why are you looking at the floor? What’s going on? Lena?] A pause. [[It’s not like the baby is coming early, is it?]]

“I’m fine,” Lena said out loud, trying to spit the horrible taste from her mouth. I'm fine and this will get better. We can get off this stinking planet and then I can ask Nico to make sure these fracking wormsults never hurt another joygirl--

Power, as she had to keep reminding herself, meant being able to make a difference, even if it also
meant making sacrifices for the greater good.

XXX
“All serve the One.” The Abbess leaned over him, impossibly tall. But weren’t they both sitting? Carth had thought… they were sitting. “We all serve him. He has many names on a thousand worlds. Emperor. Tenebrae. Vitiate. Valkorion—”

Carth’s hand fumbled at his belt, and he closed his eyes.

Not again. This can't happen again. They can't turn me against you, Polla. Not again!

“Your struggle is instinctive, but fruitless. You have joined the One. When he needs your eyes, they will open. When he needs your breath, you will breathe. When he needs your prayers, you will pray—”

No. No! “I’ll never join you,” Carth gritted. His eyes were still closed, but somehow… he could feel her looming over him. The holdout was tight and smooth in his hand. He popped off the safety with his thumb and fired.

His aim was true.

“I’ll never join… I’ll never join… you.” Over and over. Carth’s voice rasped and his throat was sore. His own voice echoed in the empty room, reverberating through his skull.

How long had he been saying it? “I’ll never join you!” Promise me—hells, Revan, if he’s got me, would you put a blaster to my head?

No way to tell, because there was no one to answer.

There was a blaster-bolt-sized hole in the middle of the Abbess’s forehead now, and that strange echo of a memory—like he had seen this before. Another woman, slumped across the floor. Another dead face, brown-skinned, forehead charred. The brazier between them sent more of its sickly-sweet drugged smoke winding into his head, fracking with his brain. Blast, for a second the room seemed filled with sentients—thousands, maybe even millions of them overlapping, stacked on top of each other, all echoing in his skull, all screaming in unison—

No. It's just the drugs, Onasi. Just the drugs. Carth heard a voice laughing helplessly and then it took him another eternity to realize that voice was his own. Looked down and saw his own arms, his feet, pacing back and forth across the stone floor.

“I’ll never join you,” he whispered. His head pounded. His throat was raw.

“Is she dead?” A kid’s voice came from outside, interrupted his descent into madness. A kid, grown to man, but only just. Voice raw-edged and new.

Carth lifted his head and met the steady, blue-eyed gaze of another Zabrak. This one was a little taller, darker, sturdier than Takan. “Y-yes. I think. She was trying to…” he blinked and rubbed his eyes, hoping to hell the doubled ghost images would fade away completely. Just the drugs, sir. Just the drugs. “She... she did something to me.”
“She was our teacher.” The kid seemed to hesitate, looking as wary as Dustil had, back on Korriban. That sly half-glance, the hunched shoulders—all painfully familiar. “Did she… teach you?”

The kid had a lightsaber on his belt. Double hilt, like Revan. Maybe the right thing to do would be to lie, but he was just a kid and something in his voice—

“She drugged me.” Carth shook his head sharply. “I’m not sure what she was trying to do. I—I shot her.” His breath choked. “I’m sorry, I shot her. She was trying to—she was inside—in my mind…” The blaster was on the ground. Carth didn’t remember dropping it. Please, by all the stars, don’t make me shoot this kid too.

The kid walked forward, still eyeing Carth carefully. He held out his hand, and the smoke in the brazier bent and guttered, coals extinguished with a thought. His fingers moved, and the smoke coalesced, thickening, and guttering along the floor until it vanished. “Some of us think we know what her lessons are for,” he offered. The wariness was painfully familiar. “Some of the students here are… different.” He seemed to hesitate. “Some of us have… questions.”

“I’m not like you,” Carth said. “I’m not like any of you. You all have the Force. I’m sorry, I—” his breath came out in a ragged sob and suddenly, he was back on that ship again. Had that really happened? He’d thought it was a dream before, but now— “She was… she was doing something to me. She wanted me to join you. I had to—I had to stop it.” Did I? Did I stop it? Fear and nausea twisted in his guts. He looked down again and realized his hands were shaking.

“Not all of us have Force.” The boy frowned. “But all of us who have… questions, we all have been where you stand now.” His words were oddly formal, as if Basic wasn’t his first language. “None had the power—you are no true warrior, and yet you ended her. Why?” He hesitated again. “Did the One order her death?” He nodded slowly, an exaggerated gesture; but his forehead creased around his horns, dappling his gold skin. “Of course… the One must have ordered her death?”

I’m no warrior? Carth could have laughed. You have no damn idea. “I don’t understand.” For a dizzying second, words echoed again in his skull, spoken in a language he didn’t understand. He opened his eyes again, and the kid was a meter closer than he had been a millisecond before.

“It takes time.” The boy lowered his voice, glancing warily behind him. “You will sometimes wake in a new place with no memory, sometimes find yourself speaking no words you know.”

“I don’t understand.” Join me, she said. She said join me, and those voices—

“I know.” The boy glanced behind them. “Others will come soon. You must… do not show confusion to them. They… have no questions. Confusion is a sign that the transfer was weak.” He stepped closer, and before Carth could stop him, grabbed his hand.

*Hear me. * His voice, now echoing dully in Carth’s skull. *If I sense your doubt, they will too. I am Zepth. You are Carth Onasi and we are not One. But you must collect yourself. Calm yourself. If you do not, you will betray us both. *

“I don’t—I don’t understand!” He tried to pull away, but the kid had a strong grip, held him fast. I don’t have the Force, how the hell can I hear him? I must be losing my mind—

*You must speak silently. Only through touch. When we are close, we can hear one another. Like this. Quickly. Others come. *
“I don’t—” *what—* The word, just one, a spark inside his skull. Carth closed his eyes. *What did she do to me? *

*She made you a part of Him. As she made us all. It is this place’s true purpose. *

*Him? *

*The Lord of the Galaxy. *

*Who? *

*The Lord of the Sith. The Last and Eternal Emperor. *

Carth fought back a hopeless laugh. *I thought Darth Malak had that title last. *

*There are several Lords of Sith, but Lord Tenebrae reigns above them all. And now you are a part of him. *

*No!* *That blaster on the floor. Promise me— “No,” he said out loud. “I’m not. I won’t.”

The kid squeezed his hand. *Our master has a billion eyes, but he can only see through a finite number at a time. Some of us… resist, beneath his notice. As you did now, when you killed Mother Erksha. * The expression on his face, something in those eyes. Was it hope? Admiration? Mission had looked at him like that, after they rescued Griff Vao from the sandpeople slavers on Tatooine. *The ones who come now have no questions, and so we must not question. Aberrant thoughts are extinguished, when discovered. *

More loyalty to this Sith Lord of yours that I’ve never heard of? “What should I… what do we do?”

“Nothing.” The kid’s lips thinned when he smiled, but it deepened the indentations on his face. *Say to them that you have no memory of what transpired. Amnesia is... common with us. * His head nodded slowly, and then he dropped Carth’s hand, and folded his own, standing perfectly still, head inclined as if in a position of prayer. His eyes met Carth’s again, and he nodded, raising his brows, obviously inviting Carth to do the same.

Carth followed his gaze downward. Something glinted at their feet. Metal. It took Carth a moment to place it. Another to realize that Mission’s voice was still screaming through the headset. He bent down and picked it up, thumbing the volume down, and slowly slipped it in his pocket. With a feeling he didn’t want to acknowledge as *real*, he could feel the others approaching.

“Here goes nothing,” he muttered, folding his own hands, and bowing his head.

Xxx

“Carth?” Dumb nerherder wasn’t picking up his comm. Mission began rattling off the curses she had stored in her memory banks. The man hadn’t said anything all since they’d heard that unmistakable sound through the comm’s speaker: the sharp whine of a blaster discharged into flesh at short range. Someone on the other end was still breathing… but that was all they were doing.

“We’re going, Mission.” Zaalbar had his bowcaster out and cocked. “Something went very wrong.”

“Right behind you.” Or in front. “Let me go first,” she added, but Big Z was already charging down the gangplank.

The problem with her chassis was its lack of flexibility. Mission’s treads could only go so fast on
the uneven ground. She trailed behind, beeping instructions and cautions that the Wookiee was too angry to hear.

The entrance to the Temple wasn’t deserted either. Two Zabraks, one of them the kid who had escorted them up here in the first place, and the other what looked like his almost matching datacaddy, stood sentry in front of the door.

Zaalbar roared softly. “Tell them to let us pass and I won’t hurt them.”

“Let us through or our ship will burn this edifice to the ground,” Mission snarled, in her best recreation of Polla-Revan’s voice. “And if Carth isn't breathing, you're both already dead.”

“He shot the Abbess,” Takan said. There was something strange in his face. His eyes…it took Mission a sec to check her sensors and make sure poor T3 wasn’t imagining it. Both of them had eyes that were glowing red now. Zabrak eyes… didn't do that. Mission might not have access to the Nets at the moment, but she was pretty sure that Zabrak eyes never glowed red.

“Oh yeah? If he shot her, he had reasons.” And he’d better be alive to tell Mission what they were. Balls, she’d thought Carth was the diplomatic one. If she’d known he was just going to kill everyone, she might as well have let Big Z go along for back-up.

“The Mother will be a difficult vessel to replace.”

“Madclaw,” Zaalbar groaned. He aimed his bowcaster at the kid, but Mission could see the conflict in his stance, the tremble of his arms. His aim would be bad, and she had a seriously bad feeling.

“Are you fracking serious with this vessel bantha poo?” she demanded. “Bring Carth to us, right now!”

“Inside.” The Zabrak walked closer to her, frowning. “We will take you to him in a moment, Lord Revan.”

One good thing about having a dome instead of a skull was the ease it took to not look surprised. “That's right,” Mission snapped. “You will.”

“Our vessels here are yours.” The other boy’s voice was deeper, but it had the same accent, and the same inflection. Same creepy red glowing eyes too. “Trust has been won at great cost between us. We thought we were long past the days when you would send your droid emissary to Dromund Kaas with a commlink, instead of coming yourself.”

If Mission had eyes, they would be rolling. “Have we moved beyond the point where I could raze this planet from its skies?” Was it hazardous to sentient life if the guy was a Force-possessing asshole? Mission wanted to know the name of this loser.

At least threats weren’t hazardous to sentient life, because she had a lot of them.

“This planet?” The Zabrak shrugged. “It has no defenses, or significant resources. If its presence displeases you, end it. The installation does rest in your territory, as per the terms of our last treaty.”

Maybe the original Revan Starfire made treaties with assholes. Mission was pretty sure that Polla-Revan never would.

“I'm just reminding you I can burn this world if I want to, chuba-face!”
Zaalbar growled. “Careful.” His fur wrinkled around his nose like it did when he was thinking. “Lord Revan is upset,” he growled at the Zabraks. “When she is disturbed, she resorts to unusual epithets.”

Takan raised an eyebrow at the Wookiee, as if he understood Shyriiwook. He hadn’t before, but he did when his eyes were all glowy and he was possessed by some loser? Obviously, Big Z thought so.

“We will take you to the man now.” The kid shrugged, strange and mechanical. “His conduit is complete. A weaker vessel than your last consort; but enough for our design.”

Mission rattled through the probabilities as fast as she could. Some kind of Force-possessing creepy Sith guy or guys who made red glowy eyes. And Carth was a vessel? A conduit? Like, Force-possessed like these losers? That was fracked. Didn't they have enough Force-possessed sents around already? Poor Carth. Poor Dustil! (If Sithboy even still existed. Mekel Jin had been kind of insane and not very clear, before he rudely cut her out of his life.)

“Carth Onasi had better be in one piece,” she snapped, in Revan’s most imperially pissed off voice.

The other Zabrak kid turned his head back towards her. “The vessels are not harmed. As you know.”

“That doesn't make you less of an asshole,” Mission told him. It. Them. Whatever. Maybe the original Revan Starfire would have been more polite, but Polla-Revan wouldn’t have.

Zaalbar howled unhappily. “This place is like the ocean world,” he groaned. “Nothing here for us except shame from the past.”

“There is no shame in becoming One,” the other Zabrak corrected him. “Regretfully, your Wookiee species is resistant to the process, or you would achieve true enlightenment as well.”


“Hey!” If Mission had arms, she would have shoved him. “Some of us transcend our mortality quite well, you know!”

“Indeed. And your time in one body nears its own end,” the creepy Zabrak kid intoned. “As per the terms of our arrangement, Lord Revan.”

“Of course.” If Mission needed real, physical processors to make such a simple leap, they'd be whirring. “Hey, while we’re talking about that… mind having your minions shoot me another copy of the arrangement in writing?”

“Of course.” The red eyes sparked. “Would you like that in Rakatan or Aurebesh?”

“Both.” The language of the Builders was a slippery tongue. She wouldn’t put it past this guy to stick in some totally unnecessary concessions to whatever the poo doo he was trying to do.

Xxx

At least all that fracking of Mandalorian spies she'd done during the wars was finally good for something besides resistance to the Kuati pox. Deeka was pleased to note, listenin to the Mandie chits chatter, she’d caught almost every word.

(Not so hard, since the Mandies used a lotta the same terms for sex as they did for their ships.)
“Rewind the recording.” Lammikins tried to cover up his worry with a smile, but Deeka remembered all too well how he got.

“Really?” She tossed her hair and her dress clanked, leaning over him, and letting the family moons swing free. “Vid’s almost done. Here we are all on our lonesome and you want to do a replay?”

But Vrook Lamar waved off her advances with a distracted sigh. “Please, Deeka. I need to hear what the Ordo woman said.”

Sighing, she eased herself onto his lap and pressed the rewinder. “Heard it fine the first time,” she groused.

Had barely gone two mills before his hand stopped.

“There,” he said. “Far enough.”

XxX

“You want to bring who?” The blonde chit on the receiving end frowned at the Aemelie one. “The refugees from your smuggling vessel?”

“They need to get offworld as soon as possible. The man is quite skilled with mechanics—”

“—for a man,” the blonde chit said. “We have our own engineers.”

“And the woman, Seriina Wen, scored a ninety-six on General Zal’s advanced targeting sim.”

“Impressive, for a barbarian; but we have limited supplies.” The blonde chit paused. “Do you find her husband attractive? His genetic traits are already well-established within the clans, and I think he’s slightly short; but if you want to run another sample—”

Xxx

“Ya know, I get it,” Deeka told Lammikins. “You’re wondering why this Aemelie chit doesn’t trust her own wife with that Organa family’s real name? It’s funny, but not sure there’s any profit there—”

“Wait.” He put his hand on hers. “Just wait.”

Xxx

“No,” Aemelie said. “I agree, he is slightly short; but he knew how to jump the Aleema’s tertiary power shunts to generate a somethin-somethin around the hull breech, even in hyperdrive.” She sighed. “And if Revan and her son and Second Husband are not joining us, surely the Wens can take their places and there will be stores enough for all—”

Blonde chit frowned. “It is not wartime. We can’t just adopt every stray!”

“Our husband will like her. And they have nowhere else to go—”

“Oh?” Blondie raised an eyebrow. “Are you curating our husband’s choice of bedmates without me?”

The Aemelie chit looked away from the screen. “No! Probably… not. Seriina informed me that her culture values monogamy in marriage—”
“Barbarians,” Blondie spat.

Deeka Jin had to agree. These Mandies seemed pretty sensible.

“You want to bring them on as slaves? You said the woman is a pilot?”

“A smuggler, with Exchange connections.”

“And the husband is an engineer.”

“We are shorthanded. It will take at least a hundred sets of hands to somethin-somethin the Aleema, even if we automate everything except somethin and navigation—”

“Stop.” Lammikins got up, hands clenchin and unclenchin like a bald sphincter. “Again. Did you hear that? She said the Aleema. Revan’s flagship. The Aleema. The Mandalorians have the Aleema.”

Deeka punched the recording to stop, like she was his errand chit, but only because of the love they shared and for their only begotten son. “Mentions it a few times,” she nodded. “They go back and forth a lot. Blah, blah, blah, no room on the shuttles, too much room on the flagship—”

“Show me again,” Lammikins ordered, like he was in charge.

“It’s just more of the same!” Indignant-like, the way he didn't believe her. Deeka cast her eye at the recordin still going, the green light flashin on the console next to her bed. The Polla Organa chit was still cuttin up the line. Probably asking more sents for credits. That’d be tiresome to replay. Maybe a rewatch of this one with Vrook was better. “Sit down,” she told him, pattin the edge of her bed. “I'll show you what we got so far….”

“Yes, Ma. I'm sure we're fine.” For the thousandth time, Polla tried not to roll her eyes.

It had been a mistake to call and then not lie and pretend that she, Seiran, and Junior were all off living a life of luxe someplace far out on the Rim. It had been a mistake not to just send a card through the blind drop they had going with the bartender on Feldelroy, their supposed original planned destination. But now she was committed. “Like I said, Uncle Boon’s back on Alderaan,” she repeated. “And he's still in jail. Maybe instead of worrying about my life, you guys should check up on him.”

“Sweetie, we would, but there's no good way to tell him he got himself a criminal record for nothing.” Moll sighed. “I talked to Cousin Farah. Man always wanted to be important, and now he thinks he is.”

“How's Coruscant?” Da broke in, sticking his head closer to the comm’s camera, until it took up most of the screen. “Has Revan introduced you to all her high mucky mucks? I bet they have great food. Did you know they grow artificial meat there in vats?”

“He's been reading up on the local customs.” Moll Organa elbowed her husband slightly out of the
vid screen. “I think he wants to come visit himself.”

“You can't!” The panic in her voice made her mother frown, but Polla couldn't hide it. “And Revan
doesn't know we’re here! I said that already! She can't know, don't you get it?”

“I thought you just meant, she didn’t know where you were right now, Pollie. You mean you've
come all this way not to see her?” Ma sounded disappointed. “Seems a waste.”

_Apparently_. All these folks who knew the real Revan seemed to be scared of her. Frack, they knew
the woman, they had to be right. As much as Polla had always wanted to meet her, as much as
she’d dreamed of their confrontation, there was no fracking way she could risk her family for some
crazy Sith Jedi—

“It's not safe.” Polla sighed. She wished she had Abasen to hold right now for comfort, but he was
back in the bar with Seiran and Aemelie and their crazy hosts. “I already went through this with
you.”

“Oh, Pollie. You know what? I’ll talk to her.” Molla Organa smiled. “You're blowing this all out of
proportion.”

“Ma! No!”

Her mother smiled. “Sweetie, I know you. She'll be delighted to help and she's rich. Why is there a
problem?”

Why indeed? If the stakes weren't her fracking life, this argument would be uncannily like the ones
she and Ma had when Polla was a tweener, about getting along with the other girls in
sharpshooting. Ma had wanted to solve that for her too, until Polla put her foot down.

“Fine, you're right.” She stared down her mother’s face, keeping her eyes wide. “You know what?
I’ll talk to her. You don't have to do it. It's not a problem.”

“You promise?” Ma’s image was fuzzy, but there was no mistaking the weight of her words—
almost as heavy as a threat.

“Of course.” Polla widened her eyes even more and resisted the urge to actually cross her fingers
behind her back. Lying was easy to normal people, but lying to Ma made her feel like she was
thirteen all over again. “I want to talk to her! That’s totally why we came here. We’ll straighten it
all out.”

“Just avoid those reporters,” her Da broke in. “Don't want to see you get locked up for insurance
fraud.”

“Trust me, that won’t happen.” Polla smiled as if it was the easiest thing in the world. “Love you
guys! I'll call later, okay?”

Before Ma could glom onto the con, or demand holopix of their fracking meet, Polla cut the feed.

“Frack,” she said, closing her eyes, and kicking the wall. “Frack, frack, frack.”

“Are you okay in there?” Knock at the door. Aemelie’s voice. “I’m waiting just outside!”

“Great!” Polla called back. _Did she hear all of that?_ No. Aemelie didn’t have a subtle bone in her
body. If she’d heard, she’d be all in Polla’s face again, explaining why she couldn’t ever meet
Revan.
“You want to meet her?” Aemelie actually laughed. “Poll, that’s impossible.”

“But is she like me?” It was probably the second spiced cookie she’d had that made Polla brave enough to ask—that, and Seiran was busy talking to Master Vrook the Jedi and his ladywhore about swoop races on Coruscant, of all things.

Aemelie shifted Abasen on her lap, flipping a braid out of her hair for him to play with. “No,” she said. “She’s not like you at all. I like you, Polla Organa Wen.”

“And you don’t like her?”

The woman’s squinted at her. “I would never say that,” she said carefully. “In front of Gwenarius or Canderous.”

“Why?”

“I have my reasons.” Aemelie was usually so blunt, but now her eyes shifted. “When we are free from here—and her—and they are inconsequential, I will tell you.”

“You’re afraid of her?” Polla tried to imagine the woman she’d seen on the vids being intimidating enough to frighten a Mandalorian—this Mandalorian—and failed.

“No.” Aemelie made a face. “Or, no more so than any rational sentient is frightened of an ion storm, or solar flare. I take precautions, of course.” She frowned, and lowered her voice. “My husband thinks she is tactically skilled. He has great faith in her prowess in battle.”

And then Polla kind of got it. Aemelie had shown her some space battle sims back on the Aleema that she’d claimed she’d programmed herself. Frack if Polla could make any sense of them, not like a smuggler had a lot of training with three-dimensional troop movements in vacuum, but Aemelie had been so proud—

“You’re jealous. You think he’ll like her more because she led armies or something.”

“Armadas,” Aemelie corrected. “I do have some concern that he will prefer her tactical movements over my own, even if she refuses to properly consummate our union—”

Xxx

“Polla?” Amelie’s knock was louder now. “Tell me if you have come to harm!”

“I’m great!” Polla repeated, sitting gingerly on the slightly moving, brown flesh-colored bed. “Grand! Hey… do me a favor and check on Abasen for me? I… just have one more call.”

Xxx

“The Mandalorians can’t take Polla Organa and her family.” Lettin him watch the entire recording had been a mistake, because now Lammikins was pacing back and forth, muttering half under his breath. “The Mandalorians have a flagship? A fleet?” His laughter was dark and kinda vergin on crazy. And when he ran his hands through his hair like that, you could really see the thinnin patchiness of it all.

“I’ll find Polla a ship. We will. You can’t charge her for identity chips. We need to help them.” That injured look he had was gettin less adorable. “We need to help them and stop the
Mandalorians.”

“Help? S’what I’m doing from the goodness of your cockles, isn’t it? Helpin? I gave them a free room for the rest of the week!”

“It will take more than that.” Lammikins sighed, and glanced at the door. “I need to see Jiya.”

“You tired of me already?” Truth, that hurt.

“Deeka…” Lammikins sighed. “General Sand and Captain Ekkumi told me the Aleema was missing. The Fleet’s on high alert. He has to hear about this. We have to stop them.”

He? That was a new wrinkle. “You're gonna tell him about this smuggler chit too? Let your fleeties buy her a ship?”

“Of course not!” His eyes sparked fire, they did. Pity he wasn't still this passionate in the bedrooms, cause she could sell tickets. “The Mandalorians are talking about a flagship. Revan’s old flagship.”

“And?” She yawned. “Make me a cuppa, Lammikins?”

Lookin so serious made him look so old. “Deeka, they're preparing for war.”

“And?” She shrugged. “That’s good for business down here.”

“I don’t think you understand,” he muttered, shoving the remnants of his poor old hair back from his face. “How could you? The Order is shattered, the Republic’s military is divided and weak… if the Mandalorians attacked us now—they would win.”

“And?” She stretched, givin him a playful wink. “I already know Mandalorian, cause I’ve known a lot of Mandalorians.”

His expression was priceless. “Deeka—”

Then, the outside door alarm chimed, interruptin her mirth.

“Who’s that?” And asap his voice changed, deepening and darkening.

She had to hand it to Lammikins, he was a fierce protector when he wasn't goin on and on over stuff most sents couldn't help.

“Dunno.” She shrugged. “Katti’s on the door. She'll handle it.” She leaned over, giving her old lover a bit of an eyeful. “You need to relax, honeygizka. World’s not gonna end next Thirdday.”

“I am relaxed.” He was not. “I need to make a comm call.”

“Secure line’s busy,” she pointed out, glancing at the feed on her console. “Your Polla chit’s still talkin.” She stepped closer, looking up at him, fluttin her lashes down. “Why don't you take a load off, let me get out the massager while we wait?”

“I…” he licked his lips nervously, eyes jumping all over the place. Then, to Deeka’s surprise, Lammikins embraced her all passionate and started gettin down with it. “You're right,” he said hoarsely, kissing her like he had demons inside. “It can wait.”

Be in the biz as long as she had and that's the thing you learn: sents, they'll always surprise the frack out of you, especially when it’s about the frackin of you.
“Mekelkins!” Katti Bais was dressed in stained coveralls and standing on a ladder next to a hologram of herself. She gestured with the hydrospanner she held in one hand. “Damn thing is on the frack again. Can you help?”

“Sure.” On edge. Their pulse was racing. This was all fracked. “I just came by to… see Moms. She here?”

“She’s got some guests.” The Cathar who was really just Human shrugged. “Weird crowd.”

Yeah, well….” Moms doesn’t exactly have boring friends. He started up the ladder behind her. “What is you need me to do?”

“Just hold here.” She handed him the hydrospanner. “I gotta adjust the sign.”

She’s cute. Dustil’s leer was half-hearted.

Holocron mask. Full body one. Her real face got scarred up bad when she crossed Iggis out of his margins—

Who? Dustil answered his own question a millisecond later. Oh. Your Hutt buddy.

“There.” Mekel found the short almost instantly. Their mind focused and sealed the conduit, not even bothering with the ‘spanner. “Good as new, Katti.”

“Go right on in!” She beamed at him as she helped him off the ladder. Above, her hologram began reciting its ‘closed for repairs’ message. Place was still closed then. That was good. Fewer witnesses if Mekel decided to fry Moms’s lying ass—

You will not harm her. The asshole, breaking through their barriers again, as if he had any power.

Are you coming with our credits or not? Dirtbag.

I can’t leave. Not… not yet. There was a lot more there, muddled. Malak’s kid. His wife. His wife’s identical twin with his wife’s memories… Mekel had seen episodes of Onderon Brave with less drama than Lord Malak’s banthashit.

You have to. Bring us the credits now. Stronger. Together. They were starting to see advantages. Being back in the real world was helping a lot. They almost laughed out loud when Lord Malak’s hand snapped out and slapped himself in the face.

Next time it might be a knife. Or your saber. Dustil’s thought. Mekk was still in too much fracking awe of the man.

I am not. It’s just… he’s him. You want to stab yourself in the face with a lightsaber?

It’s called a threat, Mekk. Get real.

“Mekel?” Katti’s holocronned face was peering up into theirs. “You okay?”

“Great as goldset,” he said, welding the smile on his face. “Remember my old pal Dusty? He might be stoppin by later. Just go ahead and let him in.”

“Sure!” She raised an eyebrow. “He’s pretty cute. You think he’d be interested—”
If I had my own body, I’d be interested.

Not what you think. She's in charge of recruitment.

Recruitment?

Do I have to spell it out for you, hayseed?

Mekel felt their face flush when Dustil got it. Oh.

“Go on in, Mekelkins.” Katti’s fake face only had a few expressions, none of them real; but something in her voice made them pause. Mirth, maybe. Like she was holding something back. “I know Deeks has been hopin you'd stop by.”

He made their face smile, smooth as synthsilk. “How could I stay away? You guys are family.”

“Awww…” Katti’s real hand reached out and brushed the hair back from their forehead. “We are, aren’t we? You know, you're still as sweet as suc.”

“And you're still the best whore on sub-thirty-seven,” he told her. “Thanks, babe.”

They walked on in.

She seems nice. Does ickle Mekelkins have a crush?

No need to dignify that with a response. Nice? She was my babysitter, you ass. And she'd sell us to the Hutts if she thought my Moms would go for it.

I always wanted to kill a Hutt. Remember that one back on Dresh’d? Fantma? Tried to take over the black market from the Rodian Crew?

I remember. The Hutt had been involved in smuggling artifacts offworld. Mekel had got a fair amount of prestige when he reported the ops to Ban. Maybe you can get some Hutt-killing tips from Yuthura later.

Maybe we could start some kind of Hutt-killing business.

Telos was only joking, but as they walked into the main reception, Mekel had a harder time finding it funny.

I was thinking more we’d retire to Zeltros….

Xxx

Polla’s pulse pounded in her throat as she dialed the number.

You can do this. You did it once before already. It's no big deal. He offered. You set it up, you get the credits—ask for just the credits, buy the ship with the credits—ask for a lot because she would, she gets whatever she wants: empires, flagships, Aemelie’s husband—

“Damn!” Her finger slipped on the pad. She tapped erase and started again.

Xxx

“It's not fair, Ma!” Twelve years old, and her swoop was broken. “If Gishko’s doesn't get the part, I can't ride in the semis and if I can't ride, I can't win.”
Molla Organa ruffled her daughter’s hair. “Life isn’t fair, but you make do with what you’ve got.”

“What I’ve got is a broken capacitor coil.” She scowled up at Ma.

“What you’ve got is a chance to learn how to fix a broken capacitor cable,” Ma corrected her. “How hard can it be?”

“How hard can it be?” Polla echoed the memory, straightening her spine, and staring at the blank comm. “I did it once before already. And he said we all look alike.”

Before she could listen to the part of her brain that sounded a lot like the other side of Moll Organa, the side that told her not to tell any lies that could land her in boiling lava, which would kill her, Polla leaned forward and punched the last four digits of the comm number she’d memorized upside down and backwards, some years ago.

“If you will excuse me,” Suvam shrugged at the Voice, who stared blankly back at him, no expression at all in its blank, black eyes. “Enjoyable as our latest silence has been, my comm is ringing.”

The Voice of the One was not nearly as companionable as he had expected. Perhaps in the hours of lost time, Suvam and the Voice engaged in deep conversations about history and philosophy; but if upon waking, Suvam had no memory, what was the point? If only, he thought, not for the first time, the One had seen fit to send him an emissary in a Rodian shell, preferably feminine and shapely; then perhaps their roles as watchers at the edge of the galactic Core could have been pleasurable, and emotionally fulfilling.

Instead, he was reduced to this nothingness with only a blank, black-eyed Human for company. Most of his waking time was rather boring. Rulan’s Genoharadan reports were brief to the point of insubordination. Even news from the Republic nets had been slow of late; although rumor said that Seriina Starr had a new face.

That, Suvam Tam couldn't wait to see. Would she keep the red fur?

The ringing comm was one of the old unmarkeds, back from the days when he had been a simple Exchange smuggler and not yet tasted the smoke of True Enlightenment. Only when he bent closer to the screen did his eyes widen and his eyestalks twitch.

Only one sentient living had this particular code.

And, just like that, Her image resolved itself in the small square at the center of his console.

“Lord Revan,” Suvam inclined his head respectfully. His eyes noted that Lord Revan still possessed that same, strange darkened coloration as before: the soft mat of fur on her head now almost hiding those unmistakable leaf-shaped eyes. “How may I be of service?”

“I wanted to discuss...” she began, sounding for all the world like the power she had once been: the voice who had commanded armies, and laid waste to three quarters of the galaxy. “... my infinite credit line.”

Behind her image, the red eyes of the Voice began to glow.
Goyle not being around should have been Mekel’s first clue that things were fracked, but he thought maybe the old Gamorrean was just out shopping for supplies. Even with her business closed, Moms went through a lot of spice and hot towels.

But no, instead of a supply of hot towels, the only thing in main reception was some Human guy and a baby.

“Who are you?” Guy got to his feet pretty fast, putting himself between them and the kid propped on the sofa. His hair was pulled back into one of those Revan knobs, like he was trying to be trendy. Mekel took careful note of the blasters at his belt, which looked real.

“Someone who fracking belongs here,” Mekel told him. “You?”

“I’m just waiting for someone.” Twitchy. It was making them twitchy too.

“You shouldn’t bring your kid in here.”

“Thanks, Master Jedi.” The guy didn't even sound sarcastic. If anything, he sounded nervous. “You’re right, of course. We’re just waiting on my… friend. Then, we’ll go.”

Who cares? Let’s shake down your Mom for some guilt money and work out the ambush for Malak. Dustil was impatient. The emotion coiled through them both, making Mekel’s saber arm twitch.

“Seiran!” A woman’s voice, familiar.

Mekel turned his head to see the last person in the galaxy he’d expected: Aemelie Ordo, walking down the stairs from Moms’s private quarters like she belonged.

He felt his mouth drop open in surprise, even as her eyes widened, taking him in. “And Mekel Jin! What a fortunate coincidence! I have news! Gwenarius has agreed we can take all of you to… near Alderaan. Or whatever destination you agree upon… eventually.” She turned to Mekel. “Millifar will be pleased that you have returned from your time with the Jett’ai!” Her teeth were too small and even to look as predatory as her smile somehow did. “Gwenarius was delighted to learn of your ancestry, and how we can all now find some measure of accord, even after the tragedy of Oerin Lin…. They did tell you? About your paternal line?”

Aemelie was even harder to understand sometimes than Millifar’s real mother. “My what?”

“About your biological progenitor.” Aemelie paused. “Your father?”

“About Master Vrook being my father? Yeah, I heard.”

Why is she here? Dustil didn't sound like he cared, exactly. A part of their mind flexed, and then suddenly there they both were, staring at an empty, white circular bed. They both felt their own triumph, even as Malak’s panic overrode the sensation: his eyes closing shut, sharp pain as his nails drove into the palms of his hand when he clenched Dustil’s fists—

Not time. I need more time. You have one body leave me this one—

“—No formal adoption. You understand?” Aemelie Ordo must have been talking this entire time. “Not like Seiran and Polla— they would need one, of course, although Abasen is young enough to be a milk son, if Polla chose to go that way. But your clan right does not guarantee your own
command, you will still need to go through the same training as all Lin sons before you: complete your blooding in sky and stars.”

Mekel stared at her blankly. “What?” Who the frack is Polla and Seiran and Abasen?

Coma boy, remember? You think I fracking know? Dustil’s voice was acid. Wait. Polla? They mean Revan?

I guess? She's here? Where the frack is my Moms?

Probably setting out the cakes for your family reunion. I think the Mandalorians want to adopt you, Mekk. Cute. Mekelkins has two families—

“Seiran.” Another woman, this one with shorter hair, wearing a dress that looked like one of Moms’s special numbers came out of the same door as the Mandalorian, moving halfway down the stairs before she stopped, staring at Mekel. “Who’s this?”

“Polla!” Aemelie turned her head, barely pausing in her narrative to shift gears. “I was waiting for you outside the whoremistress's chamber, but you took so long!”

“Had to make a few calls.” The woman took them in again, Mekel saw her lazy appraisal, and the spark of caution in it, that quick tremor of fear she was trying to hide. Something was twigging with her, but what it was, she definitely wasn't Revan Starfire. “We’re good now through, Sei. We can just go.”

Not everyone loves a Jedi in the Underground. That thought, both of them. Doubled.

“I'm Mekel Jin,” Dustil said, taking over the reins, while Mekel tried to sort through Aemelie's babble.

She wants us to join the Mandalorians and go… where? Where are they going?

“Nice to meet you.” The woman didn't bother with introductions. “Aemelie, it was nice of you to offer, but I think we've got our own ride off this rock.”

“But it's not safe.” The Mandalorian frowned at her. “Rest assured, Revan is staying on this city-planet. Gwenarius can't even get her to respond to a simple comm call—and in any case, if you were formally adopted into Ordo, as Third Wife she would have no right to move against you—” she held up her hand, as if tabulating something, and then frowned. “At least, not without my husband’s approval, and Canderous would never—”

“I said.” This time the woman’s voice was stronger. Harder. “We've got our own ride off this rock. Come on Seiran. Let's go.”

Polla, Seiran, and Abasen. Something about those names….

Frack if I know, Mekk. I was unconscious.

Yeah, but I do. From the vids. Those were the names of the family? The ones Revan had killed?

Xxx

“I wish we could offer you a ride off this rock, Dustil; but where we’re going, it isn't safe.” Polla Organa—otherwise known as Revan Starfire, former Lord of the Sith and current girlfriend to dear old Dad, smiled apologetically.
“Polla Organa?” Both of their minds made the connection at once. “The real one? Aren't you supposed to be dead?”

“No. And we're leaving.” The woman was a bundle of nerves now. She walked over to her husband and picked up the rifle propped up next to him. “Thanks for the offer, again, Aemelie; but we’ve got it covered.”

“But how will we contact you?” The Mandalorian frowned. “You can't just leave—”

“We are.” The man seemed to have read something in the woman’s face because he was moving now too. “You’ve got our comm… or… We’ve got yours. Nice meeting you… all. You too, Jedi kid.”

“Mekel,” they said. “Mekel Jin.”

Polla Organa just looked ordinary. Like someone’s hot mom. She even looked a little like Revan herself, especially around the eyes. With a bigger rack. The woman the Jedi had borrowed a personality from strapped her kid in some kind of harness thing and took her husband’s arm. “Good-bye,” she said, and then frowned. “Wait. Mekel Jin? You know your parents think you're in a coma?”

“Yeah, w—I woke up.”

“Oh.” She frowned at him, already distracted. Her kid was cute. He didn't even want to know why the blanket thing he was wearing had the D'Reev crest.

“You don't have to leave.” Millifar’s stepmoms was sulking. “Here,” she stepped forward, towards the real Polla Organa, a knife suddenly appearing in her hand. “At least… take this.”

“I don’t… okay. Thanks.” The woman shoved the knife into the pocket of her vest and backed away towards the door. “Don't follow us this time, please?” Her voice sounded eerily like Revan’s when she was pissed off and trying not to be. “I'm asking nice. As a friend.”

Aemelie Ordo signed. “You are making a very foolish choice—”

“But it's mine.” Backing up, the woman half shoved her husband towards the door.

The man stumbled in front of her, and then pushed her forward, so that his body was between them and her and the kid. Did they think Mekel or Aemelie were going to hurt the kid?

“Mekel.”

That voice was unmistakable. Like rocks and cigarras.

They turned Mekel’s head. “Hey there, Dads.”

Master Vrook Lamar had a bad case of bedhead, and some bruises on his neck that neither of them wanted to think about. “So, you know.”

“Your spiced-out friend Zez told me.”

*I can see it, especially around the chin. Mekelkins Lamar Starfire—*

*Shut up!*
But it was almost both of them, both mocking the fracked situation, that somehow that made it bearable.

They stared at dear old Dads, who was staring back like he'd never seen Mekel before. A muscle in his cheek was even twitching and he looked almost like he wanted to cry. If it had been not their problem, they both would have found this hilarious.

“Son!” As usual, Moms killed the moment, by inserting herself between them, and draping her bones, metal dress and all, all over Mekel’s shoulders. She was soft and hard and smelled like bills and spice, like always. “Where did that Polla Organa go? Lammikins sold me on givin her a discount on the idchips.”

“She just left.” Aemelie rubbed her eyes. “I should leave as well.”

They looked at the door. It was still open, but the moms and the kid and the man had slipped away.

Vrook sighed. “We were going to help—”

“Hey, you can help us,” Mekel pointed out. “I mean me. Have any credits on you, Moms? Dustil is supposed to meet me here—”

“Dustil?” Vrook frowned. “Is he free from Malak?”

*If we say no, the Jedi will be in his ass and we’ll never get credits.*

*Or my fracking body.* “I think so,” Dustil said, lying smoothly.

He's *not doing any fracking with it, have you seen him and that Revan clone—*

Mekel’s hand twitched, as Dustil tried to make a fist and punch the wall. Mekel got control back in the nick of time, resulting in them making a weird side step and a half-swing instead.

“Are you well?” Vrook was looking worried now. “You are very pale.”

“Some Jedi were drugging me unconscious or something.” Mekel gave him a hard smile. “Plus, I had the flu. Takes time to bounce back.”

“We have extensive medical supplies,” Aemelie said, stepping forward and grasping Mekel’s arm. “And we take care of our own.”

“Your… own?” Dear old Dads spoke Mandalorian with a funny accent, but he was speaking it. Mekel caught most of what followed, which was basically both of them arguing that he was some kind possession, instead of the kid dear old Dads had never bothered to find out about; or the man Aemelie had called a slave in his earshot more than once. Even if the Mandalorian interpretation of slave was more like, ‘unproven and unskilled family member with no material resources,’ it was still a bitter pill to pipeline, especially coming up in the Underground.

Dear old Moms elbowed his side. “I brought you up right,” she crowed. “See? Jedi and Mandie's both—everyone wants a piece of my boy.”

“Yeah,” Mekel muttered. Telos was too gobsmacked to snark for once. “Thanks a lot, Moms.”

Xxx

“Tatooine, acknowledge.” T’chrrrmak’tahk’leânjsêw put his hand down on her scanner and repeated the triggering phrases again, his Twi’lek voice cracking on the ancient syllables.
The part of Mission’s consciousness that was linked now to Manaan, Korriban, Dantooine, and Kashyyyk sparked against the dead spot, like rubbing up against a dead limb.

“Ow,” she complained. “You know it's a dumb planet anyways. No water. Jawa are cute? But they’ll rip you off. And sand people… they smell.”

“Focus,” he told her. “We have very little time before the planets are out of alignment again.”

“When is Lena getting here with my body again?” Freyyrr and some of the other sub-chiefs had already taken their largest and most heavily-modded Czerka shuttle to investigate and lay claim to the new homeworld that the Tribes had agreed to call Skryyyshyk, after the old sky-god that was supposed to have created the heavens.

(Mission had thought about spilling the beans that had really just been the Rakatan terraforming part of her own consciousness, but why ruin a perfectly good legend?)

“Your sensors are tracking her ship,” he said, frowning. “Are they not? Is something wrong?”

“She's not answering her comm.” Lena Wee hadn't been talking to either of them, but her ship reported back faithfully the four life signals on board: the two bodies (one Twi'lek twin for Mission herself and the other one for her errant sub-persona on the Ebon Hawk); and Lena Wee and the child within.

“She told me to go to hell,” T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw said gloomily. “Can you tell if it's some kind of hormonal disturbance affecting her mood, or—”

“My range sensors aren't that precise.”

“But you are a female of her species.” The old Prince sighed. “At least in part.”

“I don't know,” Mission chirped. Some part of her was already occupied syncing the feeds from Korriban. Not a ton going on there now, except— “Whoa!”

“Is it Lena?” For someone obsessed with the big picture T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw was being one-track.

“No.” It was a Sith Fleet, or the remnants of one. Hadn't Mission told that Darth Arca to frack off with hers? “Bunch of ships in orbit around Korriban. Some of the codes are funny too—who still uses Ancient Sith?”

“Sith, one assumes.” T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw sighed. “I’m bringing Tatooine on now.” Her sensors noted his distracted frown. “There may be some disorientation as your data merges.”

“I'm a computer,” she murmured in Polla-Revan’s command voice. “I don’t get disoriented, I—”

And then the feed hit her virtual banks, with the strength of a thermonuclear explosion. The Tatooine computer was ancient; and, as their records slipped into synch, Mission learned that Tatooine was choca-full of all the information that Polla-Revan had deleted way back when, back when she created Mission in the first place. All those gross holostills of Malak in the fields of flowers, designs for planet-stomping weapons, a really interesting plague targeted along a common genomic root that most gene jockies didn't know existed, a depressing diary the original Revan had left for her son, a bunch of notes about someone called Tenebrae, who was like a brain-possessing Sith Emperor whose means of self-replication were remarkably like—

“Huh,” she said out loud. “There's a lot here, T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw.”
It was an understatement. “Yes,” her master agreed, leaning forward. His hands traced the holographic streams, bathing his features in bytes and spilytes. “There certainly is.”

Xxx

Unimaginable, like a tear in the Force itself. Thirty-four bodies, once counted, and each one felt like a silent scream in the Force—a gap of wrongness, where someone once whole and vital had been severed out of existence.

“My cousin did this,” Kavar said quietly, finally; after they had tallied the dead, arranged them in rows on the floor, and wrapped each one in a shroud that mercifully hid each face.

Dar’Revan glanced in their direction and then went back to her own grim inventory. She’d checked and double checked each one, obviously looking for something. Revan didn't want to know what the frack it was.

“I'm sorry,” Revan offered Kavar, lamely. She didn't know what else to say.

The Jedi Master turned to her. “Davad is responsible, not you. There is no reason to apologize.”

Yes, but I let Arkan go. Could I have stopped him? Suddenly she remembered something Vrook had said to her once, about not killing the Mandalore, about thinking she could have stopped him, before he invaded Republic space. Had that been the same?

We really fracked things up, trying to save the galaxy.

Revan could feel her evil twin’s eyes on her back, with the intensity of laser turrets. The more time she spent with the woman, the more it was clear to Revan, at least, that her own imitation of being herself was nothing more than that: Dar’Revan seemed to have an inborn arrogance bred into her bones that Revan couldn’t match.

At least the woman was smart enough not to speak much in front of Kavar. Revan had a small running bet with herself that it would only take about ten minutes of sanctimonious lectures for the Jedi Master to figure out the truth.

She looked down at the body in front of her. Falleen, with a newly healed scar. It took her a moment to recognize Master Iridel. Where the woman’s presence should have been, where the presence of even death should have been—there was nothing, only a yawning emptiness. Revan folded the cloth over her face, and carefully lifted her onto the open drawer of the disposal unit. It felt… disrespectful, but Jedi had few rituals for their dead, beyond those attached to their native culture. Did Falleen typically say a prayer? Sing? Bury? Or burn? Revan had no fracking idea.

There should have been some… ceremony, some words said for each; but the number of bodies overwhelmed that. Instead, she turned and made a note on the datapad. Master Iridel, Falleen. Did Master Iridel have a surname? An age? A family? She hesitated, not knowing.

“Those with next of kin, I will notify,” Kavar murmured, placing his own grim burden next to hers. The shelf to the incinerator was large enough for two humanoid bodies. He punched the command and the drawer slid closed, chemical whir of the fire igniting behind the duraplate.

“I would like to help.” Dar’Revan said.

They both turned to look at her. Sheris’s face hit Revan like a shock, as always: a younger reflection that she only remembered in pieces. Staring directly into the woman’s face reminded her suddenly, vividly, of a memory she knew was uniquely hers: staring at her own face in the mirror.
of that squat on Taris, that disorienting reflection of a stranger: her eyes green, not brown, her hair too soft and fine under her fingers to be real—

XXX

“Didn’t have you pegged as vain.” The man’s voice behind her was strangely grounding. Normal.

“I’m fine,” Polla Organa said, turning away from the reflection. The approval she saw in Mister Republic’s eyes was better than the mirror anyway. She pulled her hair up and out of her eyes, looping the tie around her top knot. “Thanks for dragging me out of that escape pod. Guess I was pretty out of it.”

“You hit your head pretty hard,” the man agreed. “And whatever you were dreaming about sure made you talkative.”

“Oh? What did I say?” Her dreams had all been like some children’s vid about Jedi out of legends: a woman’s face, a yellow-bladed laser sword, and a feeling of overriding panic, like the images should mean something; but the words themselves were lost.

“Nothing in any language I know.” He paused, frowning. “But you know a lot of languages, right? I read your service file. Isn't that why the Republic brought you in on this mission?”

“Languages?” She frowned. That was—that wasn’t right. Not exactly. But she did—she did know a lot of languages. When you're making your way through the galaxy, you need to learn a lot of languages. She knew basic, and Corellian, and Huttese, and—

And I know a lot of languages. I know a lot of languages. That is why I am on this mission. My mission is to report to the Jedi and follow their instructions—and I know a lot of languages.

It's not my fracking fault the Jedi all died. Did this mean the deal was off? She felt a surge of relief. Fracking Jedi.

“I'm Polla Organa,” she told the pilot. “Registered smuggler. At your service.”

“I know who you are. Registered... smuggler?” He had stubble and eyes the color of Deralian wheat, and now a scowl, twisting that pretty mouth. Republic types. Always sticks in the hyperdrive.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “Do you have a problem with smugglers?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Not as long as you don’t get us arrested.”

“I see you read my file?” Polla tried to laugh. Therion was an asshole.

“What?” He frowned. It made him look older, made the planes of his face seem less pretty-boy hotshot.

It made him more attractive. Polla Organa was done with pretty-boy-hotshots. “Nothing, don’t get your unders in a twist—”

XXX

“What?” Revan said herself. She realized she'd been staring at the dead Jedi in front of her and thinking about Carth, while Master Kavar and Dar’Revan went back and forth like bound hessi. “No,” she snapped, turning around to glare more fully at the image of her own face. “No way are
you going anywhere near their families, Sheris.”

“I would like to write letters,” Dar’Revan repeated. Revan didn’t want to recognize the stubborn insistence in the woman’s voice, but she did.

“I mean no offense, Padawan Loran,” Kavar began. “But with your resemblance to Revan, some might—”

“Take offense?” Dar’Revan pulled Sheris’s lips into a pained smile. “I realize. That’s why I didn’t suggest using the comms.” She shrugged, too deliberately careless. Revan didn’t trust her. There was a trap here, but frack if she knew what it was. “I am a registered medix with the Order. Someone from the medical division should say something, issue some kind of statement… and Master Zez Kai…” she made a sound of disgust. “…Judging from the state of the way we found these bodies, he’s not capable.”

“Why do you want to get involved, Sheris?” Revan snapped. “It’s not like you killed all of these Jedi.” Just all of those fracking people on Malachor and caused this mess.

Was it easier to live with what had happened, now that she had someone besides herself to blame?

No. Because she is me. I fracking hate her, but a part of her is me, and I did this—I betrayed the Jedi and the Republic, I made hundreds fall and hundreds of thousands dead—

“I would like to help.” Dar’Revan repeated. Their eyes met, and this time it was Revan who looked away first.

“It would help me if you would write the letters,” Kavar sounded as tired as Revan herself felt. “We can both sign them, Padawan Loran.”

Thank you, Master Kavar.” The woman was really overdoing the simpering. “Perhaps Revan would like to help us too.”

“I’m more concerned with the living,” she snapped. “The dead are supposed to be dead.”

“The dead are with us,” Kavar murmured. “In our thoughts, and in our pasts.”

“That must be nice,” Revan snapped.

“I—” he frowned, lines deepening around his face. Revan had a sudden flash of memory: a girl’s memory, speculating with Beya about his lovers. Now, lines pulled his face back against his skull, and there were strands of gray in his yellow hair. “I apologize, Revan. We had every intent to return your memories to you, but—”

“They went missing.” She would not look at Dar’Revan. “I don’t need them anyway.”

“Perhaps you are the fortunate one, Padawan.”

“Knight.” Dar’Revan corrected him. Her voice was sharp now, with none of Sheris’s fake simper. “She’s a Jedi Knight. You owe her that honor, at least.”

“Knight.” Kavar agreed, but he frowned looking between them. “A dubious honor, perhaps with the Order in tatters.”

“I don’t fracking care,” Revan muttered in Rakatan. She added a string of curses that didn’t really apply to human physiology at all, but has oblivious parallels.
Dar’Revan’s mouth twitched. “I will get another set of shrouds,” she said, in Basic.

Revan turned her attention back to the next body. This one was a Twi’lek, young enough to be Mission.

The irreverence she’d managed to summon shattered. Her hand shook as she reached into the girl’s pocket, looking for an idchip.

XXX

Kavar Vakla had said there were thirty dead Jedi, but so far, Revan had counted hundreds, even if none of them were her Uncle Vrook.

The bodies were stacked in bags made of yellow plasticate, just like the ones they’d used in the wars, each stamped with a biohazard sign. The echo of nothingness—the place where the Force just… stopped, was painfully clear in each one of them. Collectively, it felt like a scream against her senses, a black hole that threatened to drag them all into its orbit.

It felt like Malachor. It felt like the death of the Force.

Davad Arkan hadn’t merely killed these Jedi, he had made them cease to exist. He had taken every essence of Force energy within their bodies, and left only these shells.

Revan knew too many of the faces, even if it had been years since she’d spoken to them. Iridel. Kroï. Hett. Sakeen. Zhar. Even Master Vandar was here, his small face cold and gray. So many Jedi Masters, and young knights she only remembered as novices, grown now—but forever gone.

This wasn’t just death, it was something much worse.

*Davad did this. Davad did this and the Fragment let him go. Davad did this because of me. Davad became a monster because of what I did—*

And of course, the more calculating part of her realized the ramifications. *If Davad can destroy these Jedi, he can destroy Tenebrae. If he can do this, he’s the perfect weapon—*

One last bag on the table. The datapad beside her, flashing a memory error sign, overflowing with so many names. The Fragment and Kavar Vakla had finished already, left to attend to other business. Other rooms. Were they talking about her in whispers? Were there more dead? A planetful. The Force groaned under their weight. The Force screamed, and Sheris’s weak mind wept.

Then, Revan unsealed the last bag and found Beya Organa inside. The woman’s skin was paler than it had been in life. There were lines on her forehead that Revan didn’t recall, and a few streaks of white in her hair. She was barely clothed, wearing only the regulation Jedi underthings they all used to joke about. Her body was lean, every bit of its former softness honed to muscle, to combat. For a distorted moment, Revan blinked, and the body was younger again, soft—then back to this: an almost perfect sculpture of a warrior’s shape: her arms muscular as a man’s, her waist narrowed and stomach ridged, her breasts slightly pointed and perfect under the thin fabric—

She ran a finger over Beya's cold lips, her own heart suddenly thudding almost painfully in her chest. She leaned forward, like a character in a children’s story, and pressed her own mouth to the dead one. Mockery of a kiss. Like that could restore life.

And then, just like in a children’s story, it did.
The dead woman’s eyes opened, and stared up at her. The dead woman breathed out, their noses almost touching. The dead woman’s breath smelled like lave and mint, her hair like flowers.

“Sheris.” The Deralian smiled softly. Her dead skin changed to gold again. “I missed you, love.”

The dead woman’s arms wrapped around Revan’s neck, pulled her down as she pulled herself up, and suddenly they were both rolling across the examination table, grown impossibly wide. Suddenly they were both… laughing, and there was a happiness that made Revan laugh through tears.

“How…?” Suddenly, it didn't matter how—only that they were. Here, in this moment now. It didn't matter that she and Beya had never kissed, never pressed their bodies together, their hands between, because suddenly, they were again. Suddenly it was right and there was grass beneath them and sky above. A yellow sky, one she’d only seen in holostills.

“Deralia,” Beya kissed her hard, murmuring the name against her lips. She untangled herself and sat up, strap of her shirt unsnapped, half-pulled to her waist. “Home. I wanted you to come back with me.”

“I'm dreaming.” She'd been a fool not to realize it sooner. Revan felt her skin flush, and she pulled the front of her robe together again. “But this… you and Sheris—?”

“Don't look so surprised.” The Deralian pushed her own loose hair back again, not bothering to rearrange her own disordered clothing. “Sheris and I had a lot in common.” Her hand reached out and touched the metal arm. “I'm sorry about that.”

“That was you?” So much Revan still didn't know. “You seem… too developed to be my subconscious. Are you really here? It's really you?”

“As much as anything.” Beya stood up, extending her hand to pull Revan up with her. One breast peered through her robe before she belted it, smirking. “A part of you and a part of me will always be in this place.”

Revan rose, and found herself being led by the hand across a grassy plain. “That's not so bad.”

“You're not the best liar. I know where your heart truly belongs.” Beya’s voice was rueful. “You know she loved him too?”

“Who?” As if she didn't know. As if she hadn't always known. She'd pushed him away because he was compromised. She'd pushed them together, but they'd plotted against her all on their own.

“You know who. And you know love doesn't excuse what you both did to her. What you did to all of us.”

The sky seemed to darken, and the birdsong Revan hadn't even noticed all stopped. “It would have been worse, if I had done nothing. The Mandalorians were only the beginning. Once they weakened the Republic, the Sith—.”

“I know.” Beya dropped her hand, her casual robes darkening, hardening into armored cortosis. When she turned her head again, her eyes were yellow as coins. “So, you always said. You know I died for her secret?”

“You would never have betrayed us.” Beya meant the Fragment. “She shouldn't have killed you. I never wanted you dead.” The sadness there brought sloppy tears to her eyes. Sheris’s eyes. Weak and pathetic.
In dreams you could cry easily. In dreams, weakness was strength, when it led him away from what you valued the most. Her dreams had kept Tenebrae at bay for a time, while she plotted with the Dark Council to bring an end. What had become of those plans now?

“You would kill anyone to save her. But it won't save her, Rev. Preserving the secret won't save her. Remember that. She needs you both.”

She. Revan’s mouth twisted, and she fished in her pocket to find something to wipe her eyes. “I call her the Fragment.”

Beya cracked a smile. “One with the Force here, remember? I know. Calling her Polla would be more accurate.”

“You… knew her.” She should have realized. “The smuggler. You knew the real Polla Organa.”

“We're cousins.” Beya smiled at her. “I never knew her very well, she was just a kid when I left for the Jedi.”

“You said she needs us both—me and Malak. But he can't… he can't stay. It's wrong.”

“That's giving you the vapors, Darth Revan?” Beya snorted. “I didn't mean Malak. She needs you both—you and Polla Organa.” She paused. “She is you. Both.”

“Like I am.” Suddenly, she understood. In this place, she didn't have to pretend. It was peaceful here. She knew Sheris would have loved it. She knew that Sheris did. “I am both too. Like she killed Polla, I have to kill the part of me that is Sheris—”

“No.” Beya shook her head and leaned forward. Her lips brushed Revan’s forehead before they withdrew again. “There's been enough death already. All you need to do is wake up and help.”

Xxx

“Wake up, Red.” Malak repeated. He shook her shoulder again. He had lingered in Malachi’s library until nearly dawn trying to access their old accounts, hoping to avoid speaking to her at all, hoping to avoid being tempted to speak to her at all.

He has known when she came in late, that faint spark in the Force. Like an echo. Whether it was her nature, or his, he was finding it easier to find her. He knew he should stay in the library, but the boy’s body was tired. He knew when she slipped into sleep, and that was when he came back.

Five minutes in the room alone with her—even asleep—had undone all of his intentions.

“Malak,” she said in her sleep. A slight smile curved that familiar mouth upwards and she rolled towards him, eyes still closed. “Mal.”

“We need to talk,” he murmured, bending over her. His breath stirred the fire of her hair where strands had escaped the tightly coiled braids. He took a deep breath and resisted the urge to reach for her, crush her in his arms and bury his face in the soft skin of her neck. “Please, Red.”

“Please?” Her eyes fluttered, and a lazy smile stretched her mouth, as her legs fell open. “Lord Malak, you never say please to me—”

And then she sat up abruptly, wave of Force snapping forward, crashing weakly against him. In her own body, it would have thrown him into a wall, crushing bones. As it was, he felt the hair lift away from his forehead, a gentle fist if wind that buffeted the bedsheets away from her creamy
skin. “Get away,” she snapped. “What are you doing?”

“Sheris?” For a moment, she could have been. Easily. Wearing a white lace robe that had been hers, he'd had a replacement made for Sheris too.

For a moment after that, he wanted her to be Sheris. *I can never trust you again, Red; but Sheris and I could go away from this place—*

“Mal.” Her voice pitched harder, and she pulled away, rolling across the bed. “I… it was too late when we returned to find new accommodation. But I can take the chair.”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“I'll take the chair.” She wrapped the sleeping robe around her more tightly and stood, backing away from him until she was in the chair. Warily, she sat in it, hugging her knees to her chest. The blanket she had been wrapped in levitated across the floor, and wrapped around her shoulders. “What is it?”

“You here—just now, you invited me—”

“I was dreaming.” She rubbed her eyes. “Just a dream. This facade of our engagement is a fool’s game. The Fragment will let me see Malachor. I no longer need you.” She ducked her face down, avoiding his eyes. “In the morning, I’ll move my things downstairs, with the rest of the Jedi.”

“If that’s what you want.” Was it? He took a deep breath. “Malachi made me an offer. It concerns… both of us.”

*Just tell her. Just say the words. It's not a betrayal. His mother is here too and it's not forever and if it's the only way you can keep this body and both of you together, so be it. You were the best Knights in the Order, you were Lords of the Sith—together you can find a way around Malachi’s command and see your son—*

“Us.” She scanned his face. “What is it? Anything Malachi offers you is a trap.”

“Of course.” The madness was passing, reflected as foolish fancy in the hard green of her eyes. “I wanted to warn you.”

She glanced up at the surveillance cameras she'd reprogrammed. “I should warn you,” she said, voice softening slightly. “The Fragment doesn’t want you to stay. I don’t think either of us can let you survive in this body.”

“I know.” Could he trust her? *I did once. My father wants me gone too, but he offered me… refuge. Sanctuary, for me and—”*

“You trust him?” She snorted.

“Of course I don't trust him.” Malak scoffed. “But my tox scans were clear.”

“He offered us sanctuary.” Her mouth pursed, the lower lip jutting out like it had when she was a child thinking through a difficult calculation, like it did when she bent over the maps in her quarters on Rakata Prime, plotting a course through chaos and carnage. “But you don't mean you and the Fragment: you mean he offered sanctuary to you and—”

“Sheris,” he said.
Something in her eyes softened, and for a millisecond the expression wasn't Red’s at all.

“Sanctuary for you and your whore.” Her mouth twitched. “I can almost hear him calling Sheris that.”

Malak nodded. “Yes.”

“Beya was given a ship.” Red shrugged. “It was a trap. No doubt this would be as well. And what about Malachor?”

“We’d have to be... gone,” he said carefully. “At least as far as Malachi was concerned. But given time—the old man can’t last forever—”

“He could,” she muttered. “If anyone can, he could.” Her eyes stared down at the floor. “You…but you want to take the deal.”

“I know it’s impossible.” He did. Now, that he heard that resignation in her voice, he knew it even more. “I don’t want to leave Mal again.”

“But you must.” Her head tilted. “Can you? Can you leave the boy’s body?”

“I don’t know how.” A weakness, admitting that. “They—we are all of us linked now.”

“They?” She frowned.

“Dustil and I.”

“You said they.”

“Mekel Jin and Dustil Onasi share a Force bond. In some way, I have become… attached to both.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Her frown deepened. “Does the Fragment know?”

“Revan knows,” he snapped. “Yes.”

“It can’t be Tenebrae.” She twisted a strand of her hair. Sheris used to do that, when she was nervous, or lost in thought. Red never had. “Both of them were vaccinated, and I saw Mekel Jin succumb to the plague myself.”

“It’s not your damned Emperor.” Jin and Onasi knew something about the bond. If he went deeper, Malak could know too, but doing so raised the risk of sharing his own knowledge with them, more of his weakness. “They know how it was done. I’m not… sure.”

“It was done?” She bit her lip and looked up at him. Another Sheris gesture. “You’re sure of that?”

“I’m sure of that.” The purple Twi’lek. Yuthura Ban. Cold paint on his skin. Someone was screaming. “I think it was something done on Korriban. Look.” He held up his bruised hand. “I was watching the opera tonight with Mal and my father when this happened.” The pain had dulled to an ember, but thinking about it seemed to summon it back. “I believe Mekel Jin slammed his hand into a wall.”

“Come here.” Her voice softened, and the blanket slipped. She let her knees drop, sitting straight in the chair. “You hid it well. I didn’t know you were injured.”

“I grew accustomed to pain.”

Awkwardly, he knelt in front of her, putting his injured hand in hers. Familiar, healing light played over his fingers, mending the worst of the bruising. He felt an echo, somewhere far away, as the doubled pain edged, then softened.

Telos, what’s he doing? What’s Malak doing?

I don’t fracking care, look sharp—we still need to see if we can shake down something from dear old Dads—

You want to roll a mark and get something else?

Dressed as a fracking Padawan? Dustil gave the mental equivalent of a snort. That’s funny. Okay. Maybe if we tell my dear old Dads that’s our plan he’ll cough up some credits?

He looks guilty enough. Does he have any?

“I can sense them through you. A little.” Her voice dragged him back to the present. “What one body feels… so does the other?”

“Aren’t you glad it was never like that with us?” He tried to make his own joke, but it fell flat.

“It was like that with us.” She looked away. “Sometimes. What would happen if one body died? Would you all three—”

“I assume.” He smiled at her. “Guess if you want to kill me, Red, you’re going to have to kill another innocent too.”

“I read the boy’s files. My cousin was never innocent.”

“So, that’s true.” He had seen it in their minds, and found it hard to believe.

“You didn’t know about Mekel Jin? Your own protege?” She shrugged. “Davad told me, years ago.”

“Before Arkan became unkillable?” He kept his breath even. “Is that true?”

“The bodies were there.” Her hand dropped his and she pulled her knees up to her chest again. “The Fragment was convinced that Davad was responsible.” She paused. “So was Kavar Vakla. He was there too.”

“Traitor.” Time hadn’t dulled the Onderonite’s betrayal. “Did he return to the Jedi?”

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “All the master’s left are downstairs.” She arched one eyebrow, in a way Sheris had never mastered. “We could end them all, with one carefully targeted strike.”

Towards the end, all they had left, these desperate jokes. “I’m sure your mythical insane Emperor would thank you for that, along with the rest of your Dark Council.”

“He’s very real, Mal.” The dark mirth faded from her voice. “But you’re free of him now. We both are.”

“I know he’s real. The Jedi asked me about him.” Did she think he’d forgotten that dead world? The rows of sentients, voiceless and still. Some of them starved to death without their master’s will to
fuel their life—

“And you told them?” Her voice sharpened.

“They asked.” He thought. “Klee and Jopheena and Atris and Hett.”

“Atris vanished. Jopheena and Hett are dead.”

“I… was sorry to hear of their passing.” His old master had always had too much faith in Malak. Naive as all the rest.

“I burned Hett’s body tonight.” She pulled her knees to her chest, rocking forward slightly. “Davad Arkan killed him and more. He… took them. All of their presence in the Force… it’s just gone.”

Sheris had been easily shaken in the beginning, but never Revan. Her skin looked fragile, she shadows under her eyes bruised.

“Get Arkan to eat the Emperor,” he suggested. “You could always make him dance.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I know.” Just from her expression, Malak knew too. That thought had already been considered: either a plan put into play, or discarded, in favor of a better advantage. She would have made a masterful Senator, his wife. “But he's gone. Beyond our reach.”

Malak wondered.

“I can't go with you,” she added softly. Their eyes met again. A meter between them, but closer than they had been in years, even both dead and in the wrong bodies. “But if you think you can keep Malachor safe—”

If he thought that, they'd already be gone—Malak and his son and to the stars with his wife and the woman he'd loved. “There is… some instability. With my condition. It might not last. I can’t… he's safer with her.”

“I assumed as much.” Her mouth twisted. “I'm sorry. If you want to take your father's offer—”

“You'll let me see the key to my freedom before you slip in the knife.” His laugh felt bitter in his throat. “Make it painless? Like those Jedi on the Republic Dove?”

A capitol ship malfunction. Official reports blamed a systems error, but Malak remembered his wife, dry-eyed and cold.

“She needs to keep focused on Malachor, not…” Her green eyes were suddenly luminous.

“Not me.” He felt the boy’s lips pull back from his teeth, and he was suddenly, awkwardly aware that they were there too, both of them, crammed in his head, leering lewdly at his wife in her white lace; and he resisted the urge to slam his arm back into the wall again. “Are you going to take care of Carth Onasi too?”

She can fracking try. Spark of fury, as red as blood. What do you think, Mekk? Think we can take down the Dark Lord’s cheap clone?

With one hand tied behind my back, was the boy's smug reply.

“I don't know.” At least she was honest. “The other marriage seems to be a sham, in case you were wasting effort being jealous of a Mandalorian too.”
There's no point.

Escape had been a pleasant fantasy. Maybe there was a world somewhere, where Malak was a swoop mechanic and Revan a cantina waitress, as she'd suggested when they were children. Maybe there was a place in the Force, after all their efforts, where they would be together. Maybe they would only live on in memory, history: another cautionary tale if power corrupting, Jedi attachment gone wrong, all their good works lost because of the destruction that followed. Maybe—

His wife made a soft noise, rocking forward in her chair. Her flesh hand reached out, small and white, and her fingers interlaced with his.

Whoa, is Malak gonna hit hyperdrive? One of them. When their thoughts went hormonal, he had a difficult time distinguishing between them.

Silence. He thought angrily. Just let me have this. Just this.

You'd better get those credits. That was all Jin, hungry and mercenary.

Meet us by dawn at his mother's place, or we'll come to you. That was Onasi, that blind fury, so like his own. A hundred threats there, and the boy would carry out them all even if he lost himself —

I'll be there, he promised. At dawn. Just give me this.

“Malak?” She squeezed his hand lightly. Hands smaller than his own, but still larger than hers. The boy’s hands, barely calloused; unscarred. “You… you understand? Tomorrow I won't… stay here.” Her voice faltered. “It isn't wise.”

“I know.” He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them, lightly. They smelled disturbingly like the chemicals from the morgue mixed with Sheris’s own sweet scent; like an obvious metaphor for an embalmed corpse. At least it made his ardor fade, even as he kissed her hand again, because it would be the last time.

XXX
Chapter 42 / Woman in the Mirror

The woman in the mirror smiled back at her. A little scared. A little grim.

“Huh.” The hairdresser swiveled the chair around. “Had my doubts with your coloring, but it’s stunning.” She tapped a command and the holomirror pivoted, showing Polla her image from the back and sides too. “You want me to take more off the sides? Not really a true Deralian if it doesn’t curve around the ears.”

Shows what you know.

“No,” Polla said out loud. She tried to enunciate carefully. “It’s fine like this.”

She lifted her chin, turning her head, and blinking hard. The iris dye stung like a bitch. She wondered if she should have sprung for the skin bleach too, but that took at least a day to set if they did full-body.

It’s gonna be dark in the fracking club anyway. Suvam’s bag guy’s barely gonna see me.

The proprietor of Adamatixie’s Salon Emporium grinned at her. “Last year’s look, kiddo; but you can carry it.” Her head tilted. “You even look a little like the real deal. I didn’t see it before, but with the red...”

“I get that sometimes.” Polla looked over at Seiran, smoothing back the topknot Adamatixie had made only a little too tight. “What do you think, honey?”

“You know what I think.” Her husband’s voice was flat and angry. He cradled Abasen in his arms, brown eyes glaring daggers at her. “You want to go into it here?”

“No.” She laughed nervously, glancing towards the aesthetician again. “Men,” she shrugged. “They hate change.”

“Just remind him how lucky he is to be married to Revan Starfire!” Amadatrixie giggled. “Did you want somethin to wear to go along with your new look?”

“Like robes?” Pola looked around. “Maybe Jedi robes? Do you have some?”

Seiran made a noise in his throat.

He would get over it when they had their credits.

“We have a fabulous selection!” Enthusiastically, the woman went over to a rolling rack by the window and pushed it over. Everything on it seemed to be made of lace or fur, with strategically cut holes. Still gushing, Adamatixie held up a sparkly number that made the dress she’d gotten from Deeka Jin look modest.

“I was thinking something more... sedate.”

“Oh.” The woman’s face fell. “Not... really.” She glanced over at Seiran and the baby. “The topknot look on a man is... interesting, but has your husband ever thought about going with
“No,” Seiran snapped. “The husband has not.”

“Shame,” Adamatrixie said. “I think you could pull it off.”

XXX

“Carth?” Her voice, ebbing, and receding across black, points of light like stars.

_Promise me, Polla. Promise me. If I become what they—if I become what they said, you’ll put a blaster to my head. Promise me, if I become what they are, you’ll put a blaster to my head. Promise me—_

“I promise,” he muttered. “You have to promise too, Polla. If I become—if this is real, you have to promise, you can’t let me live like this, not if it’s all a trap—”

“If he doesn’t snap out of this, you are real trouble, Creepazoid.”

“Initial confusion is normal. But the transfer was not complete when the vessel terminated the process.”

Zaalbar’s angry growl. “Ask what he means by ‘transfer.’”

“I know what he means.” Revan’s voice was glacial. “And what it means is that he’s fracked. He’s a fracking creepazoid.”

Polla—no, _Revan’s—voice. But that's not her. That's Mission._ Had to be. Polla—Revan--would never say ‘creepazoid.’

Carth opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn’t. Wave of nausea. Zaalbar’s face, teeth bared, looming above him. When he tilted his aching head, he saw that Mission had blasters held in her appendages. And the body of the Abbess was slumped on the ground beside him. The swirls on her skin had faded, and she stared at him with blackened, empty eyes. Blaster burn on her forehead, where his bolt had aimed true.

Carth turned away, trying to sit up, and discovered the rest of their audience.

A half circle of kids, mostly Zabrak, and all with red, glowing eyes. Even Zepth, the one who had told him they could fight it, the one who had told him to keep his secret, had red glowing eyes now. He stood in front of the others, and opened his mouth—

Zepth’s voice was flat, strangely accented. “Were I a less patient man, Revan Starfire, I might consider the death of my Herald to be an act of war.”

_Lie, Zepth had said. He told me to lie._

“I don’t remember anything.” Carth mumbled. “Is… is she really dead?” His eyes met Zalbaar’s. The Wookiee’s mouth twitched, and his brow knotted, as if he were trying to understand.

“Maybe his hand slipped, whatever.” Mission’s voice sounded exactly like Revan’s. “We’re leaving your creepy planet now.” A pause “My creepy planet. Whatever. We’re leaving it. Now.”

“If you came to me in person, Revan, we would have no need for him.”

“I’m still waiting on that contract,” Mission snapped.
“Allow me access to your ship’s databanks and I will transmit.”

“Fat chance. I want a hard copy. On plimsi or carved on stone tablets or… whatever you guys do.”

“I’m okay,” Carth muttered to Zaalbar. “I can walk.”

“You cannot. I will carry you,” the Wookiee said. His arms enveloped Carth and lifted him, causing another wave of nausea.

“My Lords, I commanded one of the Children to print out a copy of the contract.” A new voice interrupted them. Carth looked up. The woman in the doorway was younger than the Abbess. Human. “The document is quite large, as it includes all territories and subdivisions listed in our respective Empires.” Her voice was musical, and her eyes weren’t glowing.

“Who are you?” Mission demanded. Again, using Revan’s voice. Why did she keep doing that?


“We are leaving now,” Zaalbar growled at him. His fur smelled like smoke and leaves. Mission used to joke about his stench, but Carth had never minded. The Wookiee’s words were a low growl, rumbling in his chest. “Careful, my friend.”

“I am the new Mother,” the woman said. “The Emperor is not pleased with your consort’s action, Lord Revan. Rest assured that as his Holy Servant, I am not pleased as well.”

“Free will can be a drag, sure.” Mission’s chassis swiveled and the red lights on her dome flashed. “Like I said, we’re going.”

Lie, Zepth had said. Don’t let them know. Don’t let them see.

Zepth was just a kid. A kid like Dustil caught up in some sick, Sith game. Carth craned his neck around, trying to see the Zabrak more clearly. Right now, his face was as empty as all the rest: red eyes glowing, vacant, unaware.

“I don’t understand… what he… what you did to me,” Carth mumbled, staring at the kid. “What did you do to me?”

“The bridge is incomplete,” Zepth replied. That voice again. Not his own. “You are imperfect, a flawed vessel. You would be culled, were it not for the Starfire’s affection.”

“But I want to understand.” Carth tried to sound like he meant it, ignoring the sick horror twisting in his belly. He felt ridiculous, cradled in Zaalbar’s arms like a baby, but he wasn’t sure collapsing on the floor would be any more dignified. “Help me understand.”

“Does a throne need to understand the thoughts of the one who sits?” The voice was flat. “Flawed children are usually destroyed, Lord Revan; but I will leave you this one. For now.”

“Great.” Mission made the word drip sarcasm, even through circuits. “For now, I won’t raze this installation into a smoldering pile of ash.”

Carth cleared his throat, trying to keep his head upright. “Well… wait. We need to bring back a… if I’m not working right, maybe we need an unflawed… throne, don’t we?” He wouldn’t leave this kid here. Hells, maybe the Jedi could be useful for once and actually help save him. Maybe if they could fix this one kid, then they could figure out a way to save the rest.
Like Dustil and Korriban all over again. *Dustil and all those other kids, some of them, at the end, when they came at us and we had to kill—*

“What?” Mission swiveled her camera to look at him. It flashed a few times, but if she were trying to signal him, Carth didn’t get it. He blinked, after images of light melding with the head-pounding already going on in his skull.

“Why don’t you come back with us… sir?” he offered, staring at the Zabrak boy and not the woman. “Maybe you can teach me how to be… unflawed.”

“Perfection is beyond your grasp. A kinder fate would be oblivion—or, perhaps the Jedi can induce amnesia.” It was the woman who answered, staring at Mission and not him. “You betrayed our trust once, Revan. You will not do so again.”


“Put me down,” Carth mumbled to Zaalbar. “Don’t you want to oversee things yourself?” He added in a louder voice, even as the Wookiee carefully lowered him to his feet. The world tilted, and gray static obscured his vision. He willed his knees not to buckle. “Come with us.”

“I have agents on Coruscant, already,” the boy’s mouth said. “They sent your consort to me.” He made a strange, chuckling noise. “Surely, you knew this was a trap. Why else would you remotely transmit from the body of this droid?”

“Maybe it’s because you stink.” Mission made a scoffing noise. “Maybe I killed them all. Those agents of yours? Why don’t you go check?”

“They remain unharmed.” But was it Carth’s imagination, or did the voice sound uncertain?

“I can maintain order, Master, from here.” The woman again. *Her* eyes weren’t glowing red. Why was she working with this creep? “Because *she’s* a crazy Sith. Of course. *All the planets in the galaxy, and D’Reev sends us to one with the crazy Sith—*

“No,” Carth heard himself whisper out loud, as the point hit home. *Malak’s father. He’s the one who sent us here. He’s got to be working for this guy. He’s a secret Sith and no one knows it but us. We have to warn them all—warn Revan—*

“Would you welcome more of my heralds openly, Lord Revan?” The Zabrak chuckled darkly. “I have not forgotten what happened on Ziost.”

“Ziost. Sure. Whatever.” The lights on Mission’s dome flashed again. This time, Carth thought he caught the signal. An old trick every pilot knew. Three long flashes, one short, three long. It translated into, ‘route secure?’ Or, in this case, was he sure?

“Yes,” he said out loud, to both of them. “Lord Revan would definitely welcome more heralds.” *That aren’t me. What the frack did they do to me? “If I’m flawed, don’t you need someone who isn’t?”*

“I suppose.” The Zabrak sounded distracted. “I leave this in your hands, Mother Yana.” When the Zabrak shrugged, it was uneven, as if the Sith’s control of the kid wasn’t perfect. “It makes little difference in the end, if they send more vessels back—just select the ones that are immune to the Starfire plague.”
The woman nodded. “By your command,” she said formally.

The red glow around the kids’ faces slowly faded. A few of them blinked, as if they were waking up. Zepth put one hand to his horns, and winced, as if his head hurt. His eyes—now normal and blue—met Carth’s. A slight furrow wrinkled his forehead as he took in the new Abbess or whatever she was, and all the other kids standing around them. A few of them looked frightened. They were all looked so damned young.

“We need him to come back with us,” Carth repeated, pointing at Zepth. “Who knows? Maybe your master will want to get chatty on the trip?”

The kid eyed him, and then the woman. “I would be honored to serve,” he said slowly. “Mother Yana, if you wish.”

“Ghost children,” Zaalbar growled. “Rot’s inside the bark.”

“Takan and Zepth will return with you,” the woman nodded, as if she had just decided. “Takan is bringing a cart with the copy of the contract you requested, and Zepth is this one here. They will be your Voices. For now.” Was it Carth’s imagination, or did the lady sound amused?

“For now,” Mission agreed. “Sure. Whatever. Tell Takan he can’t bring that hand cart on my ship. No outside tech. It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I don’t trust you. And Big Z’s gonna have to search them. And they’re in lockdown until we get back. Deal?”

“As with the planet, these vessels are yours.” The woman inclined her head.


XXX

She was snoring a little, so Korrie gave Mother a Hothan kiss, which made her smile, even in her sleep.

Her eyelashes were red like his and they fluttered open. “Is it morning already?”

Korrie liked the way she smiled at him. “Yes. You guys came in late.”

She frowned. “We… we had a lot to do, packing up the Jedi Temple.”

“It was nice of Aunt Sheris to walk you home,” he said. It had been a little weird though, when he’d opened his eyes a crack and saw both of them looking down at him.

“We thought you were asleep,” Mother said. She looked a little worried. “Did we keep you awake? And don’t call her Aunt Sheris.”

“But she’s going to marry Father.” He frowned. “Stepmother Sheris?”

“I don’t know.” Mother wrapped her arms around him. “You can call her whatever you want. I’m sorry we woke you up.”

“Only for a second,” he lied.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, shifting on the bed. “You didn’t… I hope we weren’t confusing.”

“I was really sleepy,” he lied again. There were a million questions he wanted to ask, but they all fell into the categories of stuff that his parents didn’t like to talk about; and Leeshy had given
Korrie excellent advice about how to uncover that kind of stuff without asking.

But thinking of Leeshy made him remember the bad thing. Last night, her sister had said she was too sick to even come to the comm.

“Hey, my friend Leeshy is really sick. Do you think that Aunt—that Sheris could look at her?”

“I can ask.” Mother frowned. “What does she have?”

“The Jedi plague, maybe, according to her medix.”

“Oh.” Mother bit her lip. “But she’s… Sheris said it doesn’t affect children.”

“Sheris is a healer, Mother. Not the boss of the flu.”

“I’ll ask her.” Mother looked worried and far away again. “Does that mean… you feel okay, don’t you, Korrie?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “I got vaccinated. Sheris said that meant the flu couldn’t kill me when she gave me the shot.”

“Sheris is morbid,” Mother muttered under her breath.

“Morbid?”

“It means death.” She shivered. “Obsessed with it.”

Korrie, twisted his blanket in his hands, and remembered what he’d heard the night before. Both of them had seemed kind of obsessed with death then.

“You okay?” Mother frowned, as if she could tell he was weirded.

“Will I have to kill people like you guys? Like you and Father and Sheris? Someday?”

Mother’s face went all white, except for the silvery lines. She squeezed his hand hard. “No, Korrie. I promise. Never.”

XXX

*He always knew when Mother was close again in the Force. She came into his dream before he even woke up, and at first, he thought her voice was part of the dream too. Their voice. There were two of them. At first he thought it was just Mother talking to herself.*

“He’s all long legs and arms. Malak was like that, but he was older… when I first met him, he was older.”

*Someday, Korrie was going to be as big as Father, so that was good that he was so long.*

“I know. I… we trained together. I remember some things. Malak was there when Master Vandar tested me.”

“I wonder why they left you that memory.”

“You’re giving them too much credit. Most of our life was just… gone. I had dreams, but I didn’t know.”
“Butchers.” That couldn’t be Mother’s voice. Mother never had that much hate. But the voices were almost the same. So weird, because one of them felt like Mother in the Force and the other one felt... weird. Not bad-weird, just different. Then, he realized. That other one was Sheris.

But it was Mother’s laugh. “Really? You’re calling them butchers?” Footsteps, as if Mother had moved a little farther away. Korrie had to strain his ears with the Force a little to keep hearing her. “I blamed them too. When I found I was you, I… wanted to see them burn. But now, I understand. They did what had to be done.”

“Except they were wrong. They only delayed his advance. They stopped nothing.”

“How do you know you’re always so fracking right?”

“I was holding him back. I had him under control.”

“Who?” Mother’s laugh again. “Malak? You mean, before he tried to blow up your ship?”

“Not just Malak.” A pause. “I had control over Tenebrae. You have no idea—”

“You’re right. I don’t have any fracking idea. I let you see my son, and I have no fracking idea who you are.”

“His mother.” But Sheris wasn’t really his mother. Did she want to be? That couldn’t be the only reason she was marrying Father, could it? Leeshy had been very clear about that: rents didn’t get married for their kids. They got married and then their kids had to manage it.

“If you tell him that, I’ll kill you.” Mother sounded mad and she felt mad too, like a hot thing in the Force. If Korrie opened his eyes he wondered if he’d see her mad. And tell him what? He already knew about Sheris and Father. Unless… was Sheris going to have a baby? Did Mother think Korrie would be jealous if Sheris had a baby?

“Don’t be absurd. It would only confuse him. Maybe when he’s older, we can explain.”

“No.”

Explain what? That might be kind of fun, if Sheris had babies; Leeshy didn’t like her older sister a lot, but they were clones and if it was someone younger, Korrie could be the grown up one. Would it be weird because Mother was married to Dustil Onasi’s father? Korrie had to admit that was a little strange too, but everyone liked babies (even Mandalorians) so—

“I left instructions for him, notes encoded in both HK units. Whether you like it or not, someday, Malachor will be First of D’Reev, and heir to the treaties that Malak and I forged with the Sith.”

Notes in HK? Like a game? Korrie didn’t know Sheris even knew HK.

“Treaties?” Mother kept with the getting madder. “Frack your treaties. Your treaties are broken, since you and Malak aren’t leading the Sith now, or were you planning on fracking off to Korriban—”

“Dromund Kaas, it’s called Kaas.”

“What?”

“The capitol of the Sith Empire is Dromund Kaas. That’s where the Dark Council is, where they hear the Emperor’s Voice, follow the commands of his Hands.”
“So, if we blow it up, we’d kill him?”

Sheris made a sighing noise. “You’re so naive. He has a thousand bodies. More. No one knows where the original is. He can’t be killed, only contained.”

“Let me guess. And that’s all you were doing when you invaded the Republic, before Malak stopped you.”

Sheris had invaded the Republic? Korrie never remembered hearing about that before. Only Mother and Father and the Mandalorians and the Sith, and the Sith again—

“Malak was corrupted.” Sheris sounded just as mad as Mother. Her words were sharper, a little. That’s how to tell them apart. “That’s why he tried to kill me, that’s why everything fell apart. But now, we all have another chance.”

“He doesn’t.” Mother lowered her voice, but Korrie could still hear it anyway.

Sheris said something in the funny language. The one that didn’t sound like any of the others Korrie had learned in school.

Mother said something back. When they talked like that, it made both of their voices sound almost completely the same. They kept talking like that for a long time, long enough for Korrie’s eyes to start to fall asleep for real, before there was a pause, and then one of them switched back to Basic.

“I lied to you before.”

“Only the once, Fragment?”

He’d thought the first voice was Mother’s. Aunt Sheris’s was harder, like she landed on the words with both feet and mother blurred the endings sometimes.

“The Jedi didn’t leave me any memories from my life at all. Malak was the one who… he told me. I… I dreamed of him. Us. I dreamed about him and my friends that I killed.”

“How touching.” Sheris paused. “You didn’t know about Malachor?” Now, she sounded angry, like it was Mother’s fault. Did she mean Korrie or the planet? “The Jedi took that from you too?”

“Everything.” Mother sounded shaky. “On Manaan, I asked Yuthura to look at my mind. She was the headmistress on Korriban—”

“I know who she is.” Another pause. “She knows about me.”

“She does?” Mother sounded surprised, but she didn’t say what Yuthura Ban knew.

“She and Davad.” Sheris laughed. “I thought they were loyal. She might be working with him. You can’t trust the Sith.”

Mother chuckled, but it wasn’t like a funny laugh. “I’ve noticed this. I think the whole galaxy has noticed.”

“What did she see?”

“What?”

“You said the Twi’lek looked into your mind. Yuthura Ban looked into your mind.”
“Nothing. Places where there was… nothing.” Mother sounded angry, almost as mad as Sheris. “They burned all of it away. Your entire life—”

“Maybe you’re lucky.”

Why was Mother lucky not to remember Sheris’s life? Was it because of Father?

“Yeah, real lucky.” Mother let out a breath. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Keep Mal safe.”

Mal. No one was supposed to call Korrie that anymore, but Father did sometimes. And Sheris always did. Maybe Father had forgotten and told her it was his name.

Someone pulled his blanket up until it wrapped around him again. “And hope that Davad and Oerin take care of your Sith for me?”

“You were right to let them go. You showed remarkable judgment, even in your ignorance. Our goals align—”

“I didn’t do it as some kind of plan, I didn’t have another fricking option!”

Sheris answered in the other language again. Korrie was going to have to learn it, to become a better spy.

Mother answered back, both of them going back and forth. Then—

“Thank you,” Mother interrupted Sheris in the middle of a long speech that sounded like hovercars crashing.

“What?”

“Here.” Rustling noise. “I made this datapad when I thought… when I thought I was going to be you.”

“A welcome back note?” Sheris laughed a little. She had a nice laugh, actually. She’d laughed when they were reading stories.

“I wasn’t sure I’d still remember anything from the past three years. I wanted us to know. I didn’t want to be… forgotten.”

“I think our place in the annals of galactic history is quite secure.” Sheris snorted. “But you… you made this, for me?”

“I didn’t make it for you. I wasn’t going to give it to you, I didn’t like you. I’m still not sure I like you sometimes; but I—” Mother breathed in deep. “You said it yourself. We need to work together. No secrets.”


“I could just drop you off the nearest plat.”

“But you won’t. And I… I do like you, Fragment. I find you… personable.”

“Personable.”
“It means—”

“I’m not a fracking idiot, I know it means. You could have just said, ‘nice.’”

“Nice?” Sheris’s laugh was different than mother’s, more like bells ringing. “The other day a woman at the clinic asked me if I knew Revan Starfire. A lot of patients ask: usually, I just wear a mask, but she just asked if I were nice. If Revan Starfire was nice.”

“What did you tell her?”

Why was Sheris imitating Mother in the Underground? Was that what they were talking about with all the weird language stuff?

“I said she tried. Revan tried.” Sheris sighed, like Grandfather did sometimes when he had too many dox to review. “It’s all we can do, Fragment. Try. We have a second chance now.”

“We can try,” Mother said. “You mean Tenebrae?” Then, she said something in that language. Then she added. “I can’t... I can’t kill, Revan. Not again. Not ever. There’s been enough blood on both of our hands.”

Maybe calling Sheris ‘Revan’ was some kind of nickname, because they looked alike?

When you learned about the wars in school, they always told you the numbers of people who had died, but it wasn’t until Teacher Grispot brought in all these jars with beads, each one had ten thousand or something beads, that Korrie started to really get it.

That had been a year ago, he’d had nightmares for a week, and Father had stayed with him always. But Korrie never told Father why. How do you tell your father you saw a roomful of beads and every one could have been someone on Telos or Taris? Someone like Korrie? Or Father? Or Mother? Or Grandfather or Leeshy?

Sheris’s voice got soft. “Your pilot. Carth Onasi. If I can save him further grief, I will.”

“It’s not just your decision. Just because we agree doesn’t mean... if it comes to that, we can’t— you can’t hurt him. Even if you hate Malak—”

How could Sheris hate Malak if she wanted to marry him?

“I don’t.”

Phew, because you really weren’t supposed to marry people you hated.

“You don’t hate him?” Mother sounded tired. “Sometimes I do, and I don’t remember why, except what I do remember was—”

“I don’t hate Malak.” Sheris said quietly. “But this boy deserves his own life. Or if he can’t have it back, he deserves peace, not to be used like a... pawn.”

“Dustil. His name is Dustil.”

That wasn’t true. Dustil was mean. He didn’t deserve anything.

“I’ve seen worlds filled with boys just like Dustil. All of them speaking with Tenebrae’s voice. They’re better off dead. Maybe Dustil would be—”

“We can’t,” Mother interrupted. But she sounded less sure. She said something else in the weird
language.

“We’ll try the alternatives,” Sheris told her. “Sj’har’natok. Ejweoork. Eshna win dallsingag’ellian...

Despite himself, despite all the secrets they were probably about to reveal, the sound of the clicking words that weren’t put Korrie to sleep.

XXX

“What?” Korrie blinked. Mother was looking at him strangely. “What’s a hessi?”

Mother smiled and ruffled his hair. “A kind of animal. They run in packs. You can ride them. Like… dewbacks. Bantha?” Mother frowned. “Sandpeople ride bantha, I’m not sure who else does.”

“Everyone on planets that have them ride bantha.” Sometimes it was funny the stuff mother didn’t know. “Mostly the agriculturals. Tatooine. Dantooine. Galtea. The farming ones off Corellia. Brolsam. Ukio. Endar, before the war. Yu-Phaedra, but not now, because of the radiation.”

Mother made a face. “You really know your stuff, huh?”

“We have to study it in school. To be responsible. We Egs have a great responsibility to all the sentients on all the planets.”

“What if they don’t want you to be?”

That was a funny question. “Huh? Why wouldn’t they?”

“Some planets are independent.” She pushed her hair back from her eyes. It was getting a little longer now. He wondered if she’d braid it like in the old holos. She’d look more like Sheris then, and that might be weird. “Some are… there’s other ways.”

“But this is the right way.” Grandfather had a lot of reasons and charts and numbers about why that he’d shown Korrie a few years ago when Korrie had been enough of a know-nothing to say almost the exact same thing as Mother. “It works for the most. And it’s our job to keep it working!”

“There are other jobs,” she said. “Maybe better ones. Maybe more fun.”

“Yeah, I know.” Korrie nodded. “When I was really little, I wanted to be a swoop racer. I had a nurse once, who took me to matches.” Until Grandfather found out.

“I wanted to be one too.” She kissed his forehead. “In fact, I kind of was. For a season. When I was a little older than you.”

“The Jedi let you race?”

“No.” Her smiled faded. “You know you’re going to be late for school if you don’t get out of bed now?”

XXX

When they got to the club, Seiran tried again. “You said it’s the corner booth, over there, out of the light. Let me sit there, make the first contact. I’ll tell them I’m your… padawan or something.”
They were early, early enough the place was empty and the three of them were getting strange looks, even with that ridiculous fur hood Polla was wearing. It looked like some kind of ice dancing Jedi robe over the dress Deeka Jin had given her. It looked ridiculous. And she looked ridiculous.

But beautiful.

“My padawan?” His wife lowered her voice, edging closer to him. Seiran could tell she was nervous, even though she was trying to play otherwise. “Does she have one?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like this.” They had thirty thousand credits left. On a place like Feldelroy, it was enough to buy a stake in a plot of land, invest in a business. On a place like Coruscant, it could keep them fed and housed for a few months, or get them offworld on a slow freighter back towards the Colonies. But not without idchips—or a lucky smuggler.

Speaking of smugglers, why hadn’t they even looked for Therion? Pollie was always bragging about her connections: didn’t she have any who didn’t have to think she was Revan fracking Starfire?

“I know you don’t like this.” His wife leaned in and kissed their son. Abasen batted at her hood. Those ridiculous greener-than-real eyes looked up at both of them, framed by dyed lashes. “I’ll get enough for a fast ship, then we’ll buy the fast ship, and then we’re out of here, Sei. I promise.”

“I get not trusting the Jedi, but Aemelie—”

“She’s trying to recruit me. Recruit us. It’s like the Grass Priests knocking on doors back home. Join our Mandalorian army and be fracking saved. No.” Pollie’s mouth tightened. “I’ve got this. Seriously. Suvam offered, okay? Credits are on their way. The deal’s already done. We just need to collect.”

“Suvam offered Revan,” he reminded her, trying to keep his voice down. Had that lizard over there next to the three-meter stack of muscle heard him? “What if this bag man or errandguy or whatever twigs to you not being her?”

“He won’t.” She blinked those freshly dyed eyes at him and smirked with a confidence he knew she didn’t really feel. But pride kept her going. It always did. “You think I can’t imitate someone imitating me?”

“I think we’re in over our heads,” he whispered. “We could find Therion. Blackmail him again—”

“How?” Polla laughed sharply, and the muscle Seiran had spotted when they came in turned its head. It didn’t really have a neck. So many types here that Seiran had never seen. “Don’t you think I thought of that? There’s billions on this planet. D’Cainen’s long gone—trust me. I know him. From what Aemelie said, the Mandalorians scared the crap out of him. You know they had him fracking tortured?” She grimaced. “Aemelie told me like it was a joke.”

“Then… maybe we should trust the Jedi. That Vrook guy—”

“He looks like he’s got his own problems.” Polla’s dyed eyes narrowed, and her mouth twisted. She’d painted it, making her lips rounder, more like Revan’s. Shadowed features under the hood—she did look like the woman, in dim light. With half her face hidden. “You were right before. I don’t trust the Jedi. Not after what they did to me. And her.”

“Then, we’re doing it my way.” Resolve hardened his gut. “You take Abasen and hide in the fresher. Right there.” Seiran nodded at the door. “That way, you have a clear line of sight to the
I'll keep it occupied, scope out the errandguy, tell him you're on your way. If he's alone, and if it looks safe, then you come out.”

Pollie snorted. “No offense, Sei, but you’re not exactly spy material—”

“I've seen a lot of vids, and I've got a holdout.” He tried to smirk. “Trust me, I’ll shoot first.”

“You want me to come out with Abasen while you're killing the guy, or wait for the firefight to stop?” She'd dyed her eyebrows too, and plucked them, impossibly thin. It made her face look too pale and bald, like some kind of model from the vids.

Suddenly, she looked beautiful, and nothing at all like his wife. Not that Pollie wasn’t beautiful, she was just… Pollie. She was soft and warm, and safe and nothing at all like this green-eyed, brittle facade, that felt so fake that Seiran was surprised they hadn’t already been arrested. Was impersonating a Sith Lord to shake down an Exchange thug a crime on Coruscant?

It fracking well should be.

“What if you're wrong? What if there’s shooting or stabbing or Corusec—”

“Not really supposed to have the baby in here.” The bartender was some kind that Seiran had only seen in vids. Scaled, with feathery down instead of hair. Falleen. Her words had a faint lisp, and her teeth were pointed. “You guys here for the haunted bar tour? Can I get you somethin?”

“Beer,” Seiran said to get her to go away.

“You got an idchip for the kid?” She snorted. “Joke! But serious. Can't have the kid in here. Health regulations. Someone might think we're selling them.”

“Oh, he's leaving,” Pollie hissed. “Just needs to use the fresher.” Her hand tapped her wrist, and he looked down at the chron. “But I’ll take a vodkar double. With dry ice, if you have it.”

“I'll be right outside, where we talked about,” Seiran whispered, soon as the bartender turned away again. He kissed her, hard and fast. Her hair still smelled like the dye and the cosmet she didn't need that she was wearing anyway.

They stared at each other. Abasen cooed softly, happy and oblivious.

Someday when all this is over we’ll laugh and tell him the story about how his Ma bilked a crime lord out of a fortune while pretending to be a Sith Lord—

“No,” the bartender interrupted again. “Seriously. Get the baby out of here before I call security!”

“Wait outside,” his wife told him. She winked, and lifted her chin, pulling the hood back. “Five minutes. I promise.”

“Oh!” The bartender sounded startled. “Y-you’re… is it really you?”

“He’ll leave when I tell him to,” Polla said crisply. “Is that a problem?”

“Of course… not.” The Falleen frowned, glancing between them. “Here. Your drink… Citizen…?”

“Starfire,” Polla said coolly. “I know. It’s on the house? This happens quite… frequently to me. I accept your apology.”

“I thought maybe you were one of the actors,” the bartender sounded frightened. “Seriina? Or
Marvis? I was going to ask you which one. My partner is a big fan of all the Undergrounds. I… she’d love an autoprint.”

“Actors,” Polla scoffed. “I’m here on important business. Leave us.”

“Of course.” There was a blast of air that smelled stale, like fear. Falleen had pheromones, Seiran remembered reading that once, a few thousand centuries ago, when his biggest concern had been how to repair the threshers before harvest time, and keep the drainage ditches free from weeds.

“Here goes nothing,” his wife muttered. Her eyes darted to the corner table. “Hyperdrive, babe. Then, we’ve home free.”

Seiran followed her glance towards the table. A short sent, all dressed in robes was sitting on a chair that had been empty a millisecond ago. “I’ll be right outside, Pollie. Be careful.”

“Citizen, are you leaving or what—?”

“See you a second,” said his heart.

“Dadadada,” said their son.

Polla laughed, and kissed his forehead. “Ingrate, you're supposed to say Ma first.”

“Ppppbhlt.”

“Five minutes,” Seiran muttered, backing towards the door, before they attracted more attention.

His wife turned away and walked towards the table.

It took all the will he had to walk out the door without looking back.

“Mam,” Abasen whispered against his chest. “Muhm.”

XXX

“Master? Concerned Inquiry: You have missed two calls from the Communications Lobby and one from House Racharn this morning already.

“I want to have breakfast in my rooms, HK.” Malachi D’Reev coughed again. It felt like a ronto was seated firmly on his chest. The planet was composed of hot and cold temperatures, spiking his blood and making his body shake. “And I think I need a medix.”

“Assured Statement: The Jedi you have procured have several certified medix on staff. Shall I have one summoned?”

Jedi. He wanted to scorn the thought, but even as he began, another coughing fit choked his throat.

“Master?” The HK was merely a droid, and Malachi might be delirious, but he thought it sounded… concerned.

“Please.” His breakfast by the bed was uneaten. Malachi used the napkin to wipe his forehead. Sitting up caused all the light to splinter into shards, stabbing his eyes. “I’m sure it’s nothing, just a summer cold. Summon a medix, please. But keep it confidential.” They circle when they sense weakness. All of them, friends and foes--they circle and wait. A slip on the ice, a broken wing, and then they swoop in, scavengers, finishing the prey.
Concerned Reproval: And it if is more than that?”

Malachi sighed. “Then you know what you must do, old friend.”

XXX

“I’m your father,” Vrook repeated to the boy. Man, really. As tall as he was, with Deeka’s black eyes glaring back into his. “Please. Have a seat. I don’t have much time, but we should… we should talk.”

“I guess hiding out in a whorehouse keeps you busy, Dads.” Mekel’s voice was full of righteous scorn.

“Now, now,” Deeka said. “Be nice to your father.”

“Actually…” Mekel’s eyes shifted between them. “I need to hide out too.” His son was all angles and planes and stubble. “The Jedi drugged me, right? So, Dustil and I… we need to lay low.”

“Or you can just come with us.” The Mandalorian woman was standing near the door now, no doubt eager to leave and join her clan to begin their pillage of Republic space. Vrook needed to tell Jiya—maybe there was a way they could stop them from getting off the planet.

But my son—

“I can’t, Aemelie.” His son turned towards her and bowed, a little clumsily, but exactly as a Mandalorian son would, when speaking to a woman of higher rank.

He’s spent enough time to learn their ways. For them to offer him a place. I know so little about his life.

“Tell Milli—tell her I said good-bye. But I can’t leave here.”

“Can too! Get out and see the worlds,” Deeka told him. No doubt she would be pleased, having sold their son to the Sith, now she could take offers from the Mando’ade. “Mandies might be the future. Here’s your shot to take a piece.”

“I can’t, Moms.” Mekel’s mouth twitched, turning both up and down. “I’m sorry, but I can’t, Aemelie.”

The Mandalorian sighed, muttering something under her breath about hu’tuun Jett’ai. “Your choice,” she nodded. “But know: should you desire to be a son of Lin, you have the right to earn your place.”

“Thanks.” Mekel stared at the ground. “I’ll… keep it in mind.” His lips worked soundlessly, as if he was considering her offer again. His left hand twitched.

“Please,” Vrook was an old fool, begging a boy he barely knew, but it was all that he could do. “Mekel, you can’t go with them.” Not without the Council’s knowledge, but if you could be turned to our side, you could help us control them?

It was the kind of thought Atris would have had. Or Klee. Or Revan herself. Almost immediately, Vrook hated himself for stooping so low.

“Don’t worry, Dads, I’m not going anywhere. Goodbye, Aemelie of Ordo.” His son’s voice was even. Crisp. Like he’d been raised in Coruscant skies and not sewers.
The Mandalorian bowed. “Goodbye, Mekel Jin.”

Without another word, Aemelie turned and left, the exit door sliding closed behind her. There were surveillance drones on this level, but Vrook had disabled them to hide himself when he’d taken up residence.

_It doesn’t matter. You know where she’s going. One of the spaceports and from there to Revan’s old flagship._

“I have to go,” Vrook said. _Follow her. Comm Jiya. Maybe we can have their ships followed, maybe I can find the Wen family, and help them too._

“Well, that was fast. It’s been fun,” Mekel muttered. “Hey. Got any credits, Dads?”

Vrook did not. “I do not.”

“I’m afraid I might have to roll some marks to get some then.” His son met his gaze. All the regret in his face had vanished. For a moment, he looked like a stranger; hungry, predatory. _Sith._

“He’s real good at that,” Deeka added. “Used to keep us both in glover, back when he was little.”

“Give him some money,” he told her. “Mekel can’t—you can’t do that now. You’re a Jedi now.”

“Am I?” His son’s mouth turned up. He wore the robes as if they’d been made for him. In another world, Vrook would have been proud of this man: a Jedi, perhaps soon to be a Knight, standing tall and resolute and sure of his own conscience—

The moment was broken when Mekel started to laugh, resolution on his face twisting into an ugly sneer. Deeka joined in, wiping her eyes. Her gold teeth glittered in the light.

Vrook didn’t get the joke. “I’ll find you some credits,” he muttered. “Stay here. Just... “he glanced at Deeka. “I have to go,” he repeated. “I’ll—I’m coming back. This is important.” Too much to trust to Deeka’s comms. He had put too much trust in her already. Now, as two sets of dark eyes stared him down, Vrook felt uneasily like he was being circled by hungry malraas. “I’ll come back,” he repeated. “I’ll bring credits when I return. Just don’t... don’t hurt anyone.”

“I’m off the trade now anyhow,” the woman he’d loved once said. “Anyways, the whips are real hard on my back.”

“We’ll see,” his son added. “But you’d better come back with credits, Dads.”

XXX

Rappelling the meters down the side of his father’s building had been easier long ago in Malak’s own body, when his muscles were strong and his grip secure.

The running commentary from both children only made progress more difficult now.

_I swear if you fracking fall, I’m gonna gut your kid_—That was Mekel, but the threat wasn’t real, and all three of them knew it.

_I’ll just kill your old man._ That was Dustil. _That’d frack everything up for you really bad, wouldn’t it? Then, Revan would be in charge, and how long do you think she’ll let you stick around?_

_If I fall, Malak warned them, none of us may survive the experience._
Suddenly, the Force surged, bolstering the boy’s weak grip, supporting their descent with a cushion of air. His hands were sweat-slick on the grapple line he’d left tucked in the ceiling years ago, but the Force kept them—kept him—moving evenly down the edge.

_You know he doesn’t have our credits, Dust? All this banthacrap, and he didn’t even bring us credits?_

_I have something better._

The jewels had been his mother’s. Revan had never cared for jewelry. He wondered what had happened to the lightsaber crystal he’d given her once: carved from a krayt dragon’s pearl, plucked from the dune sea.

_A necklace?_ In their heads, Dustil’s scorn was acid, but the boy’s strength—both of their strength added to his own was… intoxicating.

_Five necklaces and several rings. All worth more than your pathetic lives._ The anger was… wrong. He knew that. Their anger. Infecting his reason.

When he’d woken that morning, she was already gone. A note on the pillow next to him. A pillow that smelled like her hair.

_Try and save the boy. If you can’t, I’ll make it quick._

Signed with her sigil, the one they’d created when war was a game, and the pretense of leadership only a stopgap.

1. **R D’R,** superimposed by an S.

**General Revan D’Reev Starfire. Revan Starfire D’Reev.**

XXX

“Hello,” Polla said coolly, taking a seat across from the guy. The ice in her drink clinked when she put it on the table. Pure vodka. If this went south, she had planned on throwing it straight to the face… but this full-on mask the errandboy wore was a new wrinkle, one that she wasn’t sure how to take.

“Hello, again.” The voice was accented, stiff, and… almost smug. “Back and forth we go, you and I. Surprised to see me so soon?”

“Not at all,” she murmured, fluttering her lashes. “But I’m not seeing you, am I? You’re wearing a mask.”

The man wearing the mask said something back. In no language that Polla had ever heard before. _Frack._

“Speak Basic,” she yawned. “You need the practice? Old... friend.”

“As you like.” There was a weird pause between his words, maybe he really did need the practice. Inwardly, Polla relaxed slightly. This was insane, but so was navigating the Kessel run with a broken coil on your starboard thruster, and she’d come through _that_ okay.

“I told you I had children on Coruscant. This vessel was merely the closest.” The figure paused. “After Dathomir, you understand why I came to you in person, even with a weak host?”
“Sure.” She shrugged. *I will pretend that made sense.* “Why don’t you put the bag on the table, and then we’re done.”

The bag was next to him on the chair. It looked big, hopefully fat with credits. Maybe she should have asked for more, would the real Revan have asked for more?

“I found the request unusual. Why ask the Exchange for credits?” The head tilted, examining her. Presumably, whatever was behind it could see… somehow. “But I know you, Revan. Sometimes, I wonder if I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Sure you do.” Polla bolted on the smile, and tilted her topknot to the side. One side of the hood flopped over her face, she pulled it back again. “Maybe this is some kind of test for the Exchange. Or for you?”

“My conclusion as well.” The guy sounded amused. “I do miss the days of our back and forths. Who is the man with the child?”

Heavy footsteps behind them. Bar was almost deserted. She didn’t know what had happened to the bartender. *Don’t look to see where Seiran got to. Don’t think about him.*

“Tourist,” she said randomly. “Nobody. He was just asking for directions.”

“No doubt much of your time here on Coruscant is occupied with such trivial pursuit. And the kiss?”

“Jealous?” Polla snapped. *He saw that too, he was watching us—I didn’t even see him. Stealth belt? How long was he watching and what did he hear? He can’t be on to us, unless he’s just fracking with me now?* “Sometimes a kiss is just a kiss. He was cute.”

“Ah.” The masked head nodded. “I have no interest in your carnal affairs. Our own link transcends the flesh.”

“You bet it does.” *Sure. Whatever. Credits. Door. Run.* Her adrenaline spiked. “You know, I keep busy,” she said lightly. Crisply. “That’s why we’re not… linking up now, okay?” The hood was hiding most of her features pretty well, but she’d practiced the glare in the mirror and she gave it to him now: full on Bitch Starfire, green eyes and all.

“Not yet,” the masked man said. “Possibly never, if your minions keep killing my heralds.”

“That’d be a damn shame,” Polla drawled.

The footsteps stopped. Right behind her.

“Friend of yours?” she added, refusing to turn and check. *No use in panic. I have the holdout under the table, already pointed at him…* her finger twitched, and she shifted in her chair, suddenly aware of the sweat trickling down her back.

“Is it implanted?” The masked face tilted, as if studying hers.

“What?”

“Your transspace transceiver. My associate performed a scan for conventional technology when you entered this establishment. You have no comm unit, and the weapon you have levied at this body is laughingly inadequate. Another one of your jests?”
“Poison,” she riffed. “Plus… you know, the Force. Bet your associate didn’t bother to scan for biologicals.”

“Surely, Lord Revan, we have passed the point where you and I resort to mindless violence. I am willing to accept the death of one Herald as a regrettable accident. The bridge was not complete, and your consort resisted the process. But should there be any more regrettable accidents…?” He paused ominously. “We may have problems.”

“I don’t want any problems.” Polla smiled, willing her voice not to crack. “Can we talk about it later? I have… like a… Senate meeting now? Already late. Congratulations. You passed my test.”

The blank face lifted the bag and set it on the table. “Your request was easily granted.”

“Great.” Great? What kind of Sith Lord says ‘great’? “Grand.” No, that’s worse. What would the real Revan say? “Get out of here, before I pull your entrails out of your fracking ears.”

“This vessel is at your disposal,” the bag man replied. “If evisceration amuses you now, by all means—enjoy.”

She laughed, but it sounded fake. Not like how she’d practiced. “Maybe later.”

Polla’s right hand shook as she pulled the bag closer to her. It felt heavy. She pulled the handle open. The metal was slippery on her fingers, like it had been oiled.

“Thanks.” What kind of Sith Lord says ‘thanks?’ Her heart was beating so fast. The world seemed crystal clear. There was the door. Maybe six meters away, an outline of light. She didn’t know where Seiran had gotten to.

Polla looked inside the bag.

As ordered fat stack of credits, more than she’d ever seen. She’d demanded small currency, and Suvam had obliged. So much cash. She felt her eyes widen, the involuntary gasp.

Polla smiled up at old maskie. “Tell Suvam, I’ll pay him back… when I feel like it.”

“Indeed. But… one more thing.”

Frack. She tried to sound bored. “What.”

The bag man folded his arms, leaning back in his chair. “I trust you had time in the droid’s body to review the terms of our original agreement?”

“Sure.” Whatever. “They sound great. Maybe we could get together for dinner sometime? Talk it through?” Felt like something was stuck on her hand. Polla shook her head. “Talk… it … through?”

Her fingers were sticky. Absently, Polla wiped it on the fake Jedi robes. She started to stand up, but her knees wobbled, and she fell back down again.

What? “Wha—” word came out slurred. Her lips went numb. Then, her face.

Oh, fracking hell of courseitsafuckingtrap!

Strong hands, impossibly large closed around her neck. Something metal and cold clicked there. Something else cold and hard settled on her temples. There was a weird humming noise.
“Another neural disruptor, I think, Mervisad. After all, this is Darth Revan, not some common Jedi.”

The man behind her said something, hard and sibilant, in a language she didn’t recognize, and a second metal thing clasped around her forehead, half over her eyes. At least it’ll hide my face if they try and take a good look—

“Bind her hands too. The drug dosage, even doubled, may not be enou—”

The table’s surface was duracrete, scarred with a hundred cuts. It didn’t even hurt when her skull hit it broadside, like a ship clipping an asteroid. Just a spark of white noise and then silence.

XXX

The room was oval-shaped, with a long, low table set into the floor, and benches above it. Kavar sat alone, near the window, hands folded, and head bowed. He looked up at Revan’s approach.

“You came.” Kavar inclined his head. “We’re still waiting on the others. I thought Klee and Korr would have been here by now.”

“Should I feel honored or threatened?” Revan tried to joke.

The Jedi smiled faintly. “I honestly don’t know.” He cleared his throat. “I wanted to thank you and Sheris for your assistance yesterday. I know that was not… easy.”

“Maybe I should have tried to stop him.” She kept thinking that, over and over in her dreams. In her dreams she tried, and Davad Arkan opened his mouth and swallowed her whole. Sometimes Bastila and Juhani and Jolee were there too, but whatever advice they had was lost in whispers. A million whispers, like the voices of the dead, but then when she woke there was only her son. Malachor, still sleeping. This morning, when he asked if he’d have to kill—

Never, my son. If I can do anything, I want to give you the life Revan and Malak never had.

“None of the masters he killed could stop Davad.” Kavar grimaced. “Had you tried and failed, he would be even stronger.”

“I know.” But knowing didn’t make it easier, any more than it had when she realized that she’d destroyed the kolto on Manaan to find a star map, that Malak had blown up a planet to find Bastila Shan. Knowing that you achieved the ends required—didn’t the cost matter?

Kavar’s head turned towards the door, Revan felt the new presence in the Force too, a heartbeat later.

“I’m sorry I’m late.” Master Zez Kai’El looked like he’d taken a sonic at least, and shaved some of his beard. “Still, no word from Vrook?”

“None.” Kavar frowned. “Vash is still on Dantooine.” He paused. “I did not invite Master Loanin.”

“Why not?” Zez Kai El frowned. “Surely, he’s earned his status as a full member of the High Council—”

“He has patients to attend.” Kavar tapped his fingers slowly on the table.

“Hmmm.” Zez raised an eyebrow, but said nothing else.

“We’re just waiting on Master Klee and Master Korr,” Revan said. And Master Vrook, if my uncle
isn’t dead. She’d left the recording she’d made with Revan. Dar’ Revan. Her other self. Maybe she owed her that much. Maybe she could trust her with that much.

Maybe. I’ve been wrong a lot. What if I’m wrong again?

“Masters. I was just looking for Revan—” Master Korr’s voice broke off in surprise. Her eyebrows raised. “Oh! I see you’re here, Padawan.”

“Me? Yes.” There was probably a lecture coming. There usually was. This many Jedi Masters in a room, obviously Revan had done something wrong. Again.

“Have you seen Master Klee, Master Korr?” Kavar’s voice was light, but there was a tension in the Force that Revan didn’t understand.

“I believe he was looking for her.” What was twigging Master Marla Korr?

“He should have come here then.” Revan shrugged.

“What did he want with Revan?” Kavar was definitely suspicious of something about Marla Korr. Plots and subplots with the Jedi. It was hard enough to manage the Senate and the Mando’ade without worrying what the masters were thinking too.

“I imagine, just to talk.” Master Korr’s eyes narrowed. There was something about her expression. Was she angry?

“Is your niece okay?” It was all Revan could think of. “Padawan Korr? I heard she was ill. Sheris told me.”

Davad attacked her, Sheris said. Should I feel guilty for that? I just let him go—

“My niece is not the topic at hand.” But now the woman looked even more rattled. “You and your duplicate are suddenly close,” the woman murmured. “I wonder what other errands she runs on your behalf.”

“Oh, I send her out whenever I need to conquer planets,” Revan snapped. “Or meet with Sith Emperors, decorators, planetary heads of state…. You know. Whatever.”

There was a long, awkward silence. And then suddenly, Zez Kai laughed, too loud and too long. The sound echoed uncomfortably across the room.

“Revan,” Kavar interrupted. “Tell the other masters what you told me. About the Sith Triumvirate.”

“Tri…” Oh. He meant Oerin and Davad and Kae. “Kavar probably told you all already,” she said slowly, trying not to meet Zez Kai’s eye. Hadn’t Sheris said he was Davad’s master, long ago? For a second she wondered what it must have been like for all of them, seeing their Padawans fall and follow her and Malak, being powerless to stop it. More fracking guilt for me. Or for her? It was so easy to try and blame Dar’Revan for all of it, but their conversation the night before had only affirmed what a part of her had always known.

We both have to live with what we did and maybe together we can fix it.

We have to try.

“We need to hear the account of events from you,” Marla Korr said. Her eyes were narrowed slits
of blue, and her head tilted forward. A part of Revan she couldn’t remember recognized the pose — Iridonian horn sign, she’s angry, so angry she’s not even trying to hide it, like she wants us all to know? Or me to know?

Revan cleared her throat, keeping her voice even as she addressed the room. “There are… or were three Sith. They were the ones spreading the plague in the Underground. They were the ones killing Jedi—or one of them was. Davad was. Davad Arkan, Oerin Lin, and Arren Kae, formerly known as Vima Sunrider. They’re your Sith threat. And they’re gone. I made them leave Coruscant.”

_I asked them. It was all I could do was just get them off the fracking planet. And what if Revan—what if she’s right? What if Davad is our best weapon against this fracking Emperor?

“Vima Sunrider?” Marla Korr looked startled. Revan noted that no one else did, although to be fair, Zez Kai was staring out the window and Kavar was frowning at a datapad on the table in front of him.

“The other two will finish her. She was already wounded.” Revan didn’t want to know how. She didn’t want to feel guilty for another friend she couldn’t remember. _She was my master once. She must have been my friend once._

“Kae hid herself well,” Kavar muttered, still staring at the datapad. When Revan leaned closer, she saw what it was: a list of names, all of the dead Jedi from the night before. “Too well. A Force-user with that kind of power—”

“Perhaps Atris knew what she was,” Marla interrupted. “Or Vrook. Why else is he still in hiding?”

“I know where Vrook is,” Revan told her. Approximately. His comm message had only mentioned a rough location, and a messenger. Something about a Gamorrean. “I don’t think… Vrook’s not working with them.”

“He’s not,” Zez Kai agreed. “He went… on a personal mission. Nothing to do with Sith.”

“You know why he left?” Revan frowned at him.

“I’ve always known,” the man said. He rubbed his beard. “I expect my Padawan told you himself, years ago—”

“Told me…” she let her voice trail off. _Fracking hell. Whatever it is, I’ll just ask her. Now that we’re pals._ “Right. Of course he did. Davad… told me.”

“If you know where Vrook is, summon him back. We must mobilize the Jedi that remain,” Marla ordered Kavar. “Do you know where this… Sith Triumvirate went?”

“Back to their Master, I assume,” Zez shrugged. “Isn’t he the real problem here? The Sith Emperor? Am I the only one who sees that?”

“Defensive, now that your Padawan is exposed as a murderer?” Korr’s voice was sharp.

“Are all Council meetings like this?” Revan had pictured a lot more meditating, and coming to conclusion by consensus.

“Perhaps if Master Klee had seen fit to join as well, we could address ongoing concerns regarding the plague in the Underground, the closure of the Jedi Temple, and the Force possession of Dustil Onasi?” Kavar said. “I know I’ve been away for some time, but I find it strange that these topics
are not at the forefront of our efforts.”

“You have been away,” Marla Korr snapped. “Listening to those of us with true knowledge would serve you well.”

“Of course.” The blonde Jedi bowed his head, but Revan didn’t miss the glance he shot at Zez Kai.

*They’re not on the same side as Korr and Klee? Is it because of D’Reev? It was no secret in the Temple that Klee was in Malachi’s pocket. But I didn’t know that Master Korr was too—*

The door slid open suddenly, shift of air and the Force noticeable to all present.

“I’m sorry to be so late.” Her uncle’s voice was gravel-edged. Granite. Familiar in a place that felt deeper than memory. He stared at her, then expanded his gaze to the rest of the room. “I had to stop at Fleet Headquarters, leave word for General Sand. He… wasn’t there, but I came here as soon as I could.”

“Better late than never,” Zez smiled. “Good to see you again, old friend. Did you… you worked everything out?”

“For now.” Vrook was still staring at her, but if there was a message in his gaze, Revan couldn’t read it. She remembered how his mind had touched hers once; it seemed ages ago now, back on Manaan. Was he trying to do the same now? If he were, her own thoughts were too much of an ion storm to let him see. *What if he finds out about Sheris? What would he do? What if he thinks she’s the real me?* Pathetic, childish, but real fear there. She slammed her barriers closed, and saw him flinch.

“We seem to be living in important times,” Kavar said. “We all sense your unease, Master Lamar.”

“But not the why. Your Mandalorians,” Vrook said. His eyes didn’t leave Revan’s face. “Clan Ordo and the rest. They lifted off from the Wide Rim Spaceport two hours ago. A dozen ships. All went to hyperspace along the Kuati Spire; but I suspect it’s a feint. They’re heading for the Outer Rim. Somewhere… along the Outer Rim. I know they have a war ship, probably more than one. Possibly an entire fleet.” His mouth set grimly. “If this is one of your plans, Revan, tell us. Now. If you gave the command, if they’re massing against the Sith Empire and not us—”

“What?” Her composure cracked like an egg.

XXX

“You think a few torpedoes would work?” Canderous grunted. “Probably a little late to sabotage their ship.”

Revan looked up to him, but the blank helm said nothing. Was he joking or not? His arms tightened around her waist. Her feet rested on his boots. She wanted to scream. She wanted to be sick.

“I don’t want Oerin dead. More dead.” Millifar hovered next to them, and said something else too, but the wind lost her words.

“We need to go to 100 Thantos Three. Malachi’s.” Revan pushed away from Canderous. “Let me go. I’ve got it from here.”

“Your choice.” His hands fell free and Revan leaned back, letting the Force take her down the rest
of the way, to the still-deserted plaza.

She landed easily in a crouch, straightening as they both landed beside her. “If you want…” Oerin was like a son to him. “I don’t remember all of your customs, but I’m fine from here. Return to your wives, your family. They should… they need to know.”

“They will,” Millifar muttered. “Clan have no secrets.”

“I’ll tell them.” Canderous nodded. He tapped the helm at his belt, Oerin’s mask of the Mandalore. “Giving this back to us is… significant. You… understand?”

“I know that you deserve it, ner vod.” If she ran, she could be back in Korrie’s rooms soon. Wash the death from her skin before her son woke. Sort out the pieces of what to do about Sheris and Malak—

She took my memories. That bitch has everything that was mine—

“Re’turcye mhi.” Her friend said flatly, and turned and walked away, his daughter trailing behind.

XXX

“What?” Marla Korr scoffed. “Is that all you can say, Revan? Do you mock us with pretend ignorance?”

“Not your orders then.” Vrook cursed softly under his breath. “I had hoped it was you. My contacts in Fleet have informed me that the Aleema is missing.”

“The—” It took her a few milliseconds. “My… flagship. The Aleema. You mean the one that— wasn’t it destroyed in the battle?”

“Apparently not,” Marla snapped. “Do you have any idea the damage a ship that size could do? In the hands of Mandalorians?”

“They won’t attack the Republic.” She was sure of that. Wasn’t she? They’re my friends. Canderous is loyal. He would never betray that trust.

Would he?

Vrook sighed. “If you have some means of communicating with them, use it. I… saw Aemelie Ordo leave myself. She… she tried to convince others to follow her. She mentioned Alderaan.”

“Alderaan?” If they attack Alderaan, Uncle Boon is there. He’ll really hate me if my Mandalorians carpet bomb his planet...

“I have comm codes.” Revan was surprised at how calm she sounded. “When they drop out of hyperspace, I can try to comm them.”

“Start trying now. Convince them to… stop.” Her uncle’s face was suddenly heavily lined. “You have more authority than you realize, especially with Oerin Lin dead.”

“Not dead,” she corrected him. “Oerin’s not dead at all. It’s much worse than that.”

XXX

“Jedi Sheris, We’ve been expecting you.”
“I prefer Padawan Loran,” Revan bowed her head to Malachi’s oldest enemy and newest ally. “Senator Racharn,” she curtseyed, trying to look awkward, because Sheris would not know all ten bends on the descent and the rise. “I’m honored. Would that we were meeting at a more fortunate time.”

“My children are down this hall.” The woman’s face was narrow and closed: like Malachi, another bird of prey. “Please, follow me.”

“Of course.”

Revan had never been in the sanctum of House Racharn before. The apartment was as lavish and excessive as D’Reev’s, but decorated with a lighter hand: all shades of pink and mauve and the palest of reds. The First of Racharn pressed a panel, seemingly at random and a door opened to a sickroom: a bank of windows, and gray walls. Small figure, smaller than Malachor on the bed, and the twin of the First’s face looking back at them, from a chair by the bed.

_The Second is a clone. Racharn follows the old ways._

“I’m the one who called for you,” the Second said. Her dark eyes flashed at her mother. Anger there, perhaps. Or some petty disagreement.

Revan sat back in the small chair the woman indicated, fishing in her bag for the doses. The datapad the Fragment had given her clanked against the vials. Her fingers traced the surface. She knew she was too frightened to read it, too afraid that the Fragment’s life would only invoke more regret. Sheris’s mind already wept with despair for all they had done. What good would more self-flagellation do?

“Padawan Loran?” The First sniffed her disapproval.

“Yes.” Rational thought jerked her mind back to the tasks at hand. “You and your other children should be immunized immediately, Senator Racharn.”

“Can’t you give _Leeshy_ the vaccine?” The First was silent, but her Second, a child only a little younger than the body Malak inhabited, was nothing but questions. The girl had black-dyed hair streaked with orange and braided like the latest vid’s interpretation of Bastila Shan. Revan found that mildly irritating, but not worthy of real notice.

“She’s too sick, Leeshansintina.” Without thinking, Revan used her full name—mark among equals—before realizing that, of course, Sheris would only have the status of a hired servant in their eyes. “Apologies, Senator. I meant—”

“No, it’s fine. You can call me, Leesa. Everyone else does. And she’s Leeshy.” The Second glared at her mother in open defiance, but the woman seemed lost in her own thoughts, staring past them towards the window.

On the bed, Malachor's little friend was too pale. Revan didn't like the way her breathing sounded forced and fast, but her fever was not dangerously high. Children didn't usually succumb; the girl must be close to womanhood. No matter how the Selkath splicers had tried, they couldn't follow the computer's precise specification—

_My plague is a blunt instrument, but at least it works. He will never have them, never have Malachor or this planet and if I have to sacrifice another billion children like this to keep it that way, I will._

“I want to vaccinate you both,” she insisted. “Immediately. You’ve already been exposed.”
“Malachi told me he doesn't trust it,” the First said. Her eyes narrowed.

“Malachi is a fool. I am a trained medix and you need to take my advice.”

“What I have are questions,” the woman snapped. “Questions for the real Revan Starfire.”

Revan tried to keep her voice simpering, like Sheris. “Let me give you and your children the vaccine and I'll make note of your questions, bring them back to her myself.”

“She should have come herself, if she values the alliance between our Houses.”

“She does not have a medix’s training. I do.”

Or Sheris did. But the knowledge was there, trained into her hands and the Force. She found herself noting the slight cyanosis around the child's lips, the sunken skin. “Your Third needs oxygen and fluids.”

“Our own medical droids have seen to her needs.” The woman’s voice was accusing, and she was glaring at her Second. Of course, Revan realized. The girl had asked for help, the First was far too proud to ask. She resented it.

Mal liked his playmate Leeshy, but Revan thought D'Reev’s odds might be better if Racharn ceased to exist. Blackly, she considered letting nature take its course, letting them all die from the stinking plague... but then the child on the bed opened her eyes, widening at the sight of Revan.

“Korrie’s m-mother. You... came?”

“I'm Sheris,” she said quickly. Sheris’s empathy screamed at her, noting again the child’s pallor, the way her ribs pulled in at each breath... “Do you feel well enough to drink something?”

“Just... comes back up again.” The girl made a face.

“I can help.” She slipped into the Force, easing the child’s discomfort as easily as breath. Settling nausea was easy, rehydration was not. Most Senators were paranoid to the point of absurdity about medical intervention. “I'd also like to start a line giving her fluids,” she said to the First. “Or we can instruct your own medix to do it.”

You should have done that already. Why hadn’t they?

“In our House, only the strong survive,” the First said flatly.

“Mother, we are all that’s left!” The Second sounded pleading.

“I ordered more.” The woman rose, looking down her long nose at both of them. Her daughter’s face was an eerie echo, almost identical thanks to their rejuvenators. “In three months, you’ll have four more sisters, Leesa.”

The girl’s face tightened, but she only nodded. “Our House will survive,” she murmured formally.

Without another glance, her mother left, the train of her robes swirling soft against the marble floors.

Barbarians. Senate Houses make the Mandalorians look civilized, as least as far as their own children are concerned.

The ornately carved doors slid shut behind her, and Leesa’s expression changed. “Please,” she
whispered. “They won’t be her. It’s not the same. Please save Leeshy.”

Malachor had made his case to the Fragment, not to her; but Revan thought he would have sounded the same. She knew how much he valued the girl. Loved her. Like Malak and me? But entirely different. She has no Force. They will never be Jedi.

Useless sentiment. It wasn’t logical. Weakening House Racharn could be more beneficial to Malachor than this alliance.

“I’m going to save her life,” Revan snapped. “But you could still die yourself. Do you want the vaccine, Leesa?”

“Yes,” the girl muttered. “Please. Now.”

The girl slipped off her outerrobe, exposing her bare arms. It only took a moment. “I have more doses for your staff,” Revan told Leesa. “Once we’re done with your sister.”

“Save her,” Leesa murmured. “I’ll promise you anything. Our House will be forever in your debt.”

Revan shook her head slowly. Poor little fool. “Don’t make promises you won’t want to keep, Leeshansintina.”

XXX

You’d think that guarding the most heavily-fortified Senatorial building on Thantos Way would be difficult, or dangerous; but Senator D’Reev’s reputation, especially since Revan Starfire had moved in, seemed to deter all but the most crazed of assassins.

And the thing about insane assassins was, they were insane; and therefore pretty easy to spot.

Still, Willa should have put down the holomagazine faster, the second she saw the guy with the baby approach the service entrance gate.

But the blanket he had strapped to his chest had the D’Reev crest, and who knew?

The rich… they were a different breed. D’Reev was creepy. And his daughter-in-law Sith. Maybe they’d ordered a baby.

Willa didn’t want to know why, she had three kids herself. Her own kids were hidden with their father, since D’Reev didn’t like employees with easily exploitable family connections, and she’d lied to get the job in the first place; said they were all dead. D’Reev did like employees with a thirst for vengeance against corruption and apathy. Willa had tricked onto that right away. That’s what got her this quiet post at the second service entrance. Usually, it was just her and the twelve automated turrets for company.

“I’ll need to see the purchase order for that baby,” she told the man. “Then, I’ll call it upstairs and check.”

“What?” It was only then that she saw his eyes. Eyes with nothing left to lose. The man’s eyes were bleak, reddened at the edges. Angry. A dull click, and Willa registered the blaster in his hands, just as the turrets did too, swiveling their electric eyes down on all of them.

“You have twenty seconds,” she whispered. “Then we’re all dead. Give me the gun fast. Please.”

“What?” He looked up, as if he’d only just noticed the guns trained on them, laser sights speckling
the blanket, the baby, his face. He held up one hand slowly, comprehension dawning. “No!”

The blaster dropped on the ground. Would that be enough? Frantically, Willa punched in the overrides.

Lights flashed, and the non-silent alarm blared. The silent one had probably been triggered before she even saw him. Before he even entered the alley. They scanned for weapons. She peered over the edge of her shield. All he had was that one holdout pistol. It looked so small and pathetic there on the ground—almost a joke.

*Nothing worth any of us dying for, Citizen—*

“They laughed at me at the front gate,” he mumbled. “But she has to help. This is all her fracking fault in the first damn place. My wife could be *dead* because of her. *I told* Pollie it was a bad idea!”

“I’m sorry you’re upset,” Willa began cautiously. Really, it was just the baby that was keeping her from shooting him.

The whine of compressor target sights was accompanied by a purr from behind them, almost a mechanical laugh.

“Helpful Suggestion: Deposit the baby with our organic guard before I reduce your sniveling flesh into a pile of quivering sludge. You have ten seconds. Meatbag.”

The original HK was creepy enough. Willa had only seen the second one a few times. Revan Starfire’s HK. It was even worse.

“No!” The man put his hands over the child, backing away from the new threat. The droid’s red metal carapace gleamed in the light of the laser sights. “Please! I just need to speak to Revan Starfire! It’s important! Y-you can’t kill us!”

“Gleeful Interjection: Oh, but I can, meatbag male. Almost too easily; although that self-cleaning blanket does provide a basic level of shielding defense. My lesser version selected the manufacturer for the textile and home goods line himself. Amused Interjection: He is a much better product designer than assassin droid. More evidence of my own master’s cunning.”

It clucked to itself, almost a chuckle. “Observation: Textiles like that are usually reserved for D’Reev loyalists. How did an unremarkable specimen like yourself obtain one?”

“It was a gift!” the man choked. “We didn’t even know what it was until we came to this fracking planet! But Pollie loved it! Junior too! Did Revan send it? Was she playing us all along?”

The baby blinked, screwing up his face and starting to cry, as if the thought of Revan upset him too.

Willa winced. *Revan.* Ever since that schutta had shown up, things had been a mess. Plague in the Underground, Jedi Temples closing left and right, price of air in the subs shooting through the roof. She’d only *seen* the woman on the vids (not like Revan bloody Starfire used the service entrance to her own house), but you could just tell. Once a Sith, always a Sith.

The turrets above clicked off suddenly.

“Running facial recognition subroutine, checking all available sources.” The droid clucked. Its eyes whirled.
The man turned to Willa. “You have to help us,” he pleaded, as if she could.

“I can try and save your kid,” she offered. “But you brought this on yourself.”

From behind them, the droid made a noise like a whine.

“Match found. Astonished Declarative: Master lied. To me.” It sounded… almost… injured.
“Resigned Exhalation: How sharper than a shryock’s tooth is a thankless master. Trust, loyalty, all must be earned. Self-Directed Command: Attempting new neural override from previous program —”

Suddenly, the eyes faded, and the thing froze, the rifle in its hand tilting dangerously loose.

“Run,” Willa whispered to the man. “It’s confused. Maybe if you run now—”

“Run?” The man didn’t look like he even remembered he had legs. “Where? We should have gone with the Mandalorians. I should have argued more. I let Pollie do this, pretend to be her, and now —”

“Injured Rebuttal: I am not confused, Willa Kastillian, from sublevel 20, block 38, section 5. I am merely processing new information.”

The triangular head swiveled back to the man. “Statement: Your identity is known. What is your business? Fervent Appeal: Please try to explain with less sniveling.”

“My wife,” the man said quietly. “She’s missing.”

“Palpable Triviality: Your wife is registered deceased on all nine census banks. Are you certain you’re not delusional? Have you recently ingested any psychoactive substances? Are you under the care of any registered or unregistered physician or medix?”

“Take me to Revan,” he muttered. Poor slob was actually crying. “Please. She has to help. She…” he took a deep breath. “Polla would. If it was her, Polla would help her.”

The droid seemed to sigh. “Clarify: You wish me to take you to Revan Starfire D’Reev?”

“Yes,” the man wiped his eyes. “I came here to see her. She’s got to help. They… maybe the goons that took Pollie were trying for her. Maybe they work for her? One or the other. I don’t… I don’t know.”

“Statement: Revan Starfire D’Reev is not currently in this building.”

“Yes, she is,” Willa interrupted. “She’s not in D’Reev quarters, but she’s upstairs, with the Jedi. Some kind of meeting.” She got reports. All day long of where the D’Reev family was at all given times. They all did.

The droid clucked. “Meatbags,” it sighed. “Cautionary Statement: Officer Kastillian, I will take custody of these subjects. We have quite comfortable detention cells on the D’Reev level that will be more than adequate.” It whirred. “Until such time as Revan Starfire D’Reev returns to manage this situation, both man and infant are guests of House D’Reev.”

Another click, and its head turned back to the man. “Obligatory Welcoming Statement: Welcome to House D’Reev. Weapons of all kind are prohibited in residential areas. Children under five must be chaperoned. This welcome is offered contingent upon clean tox and medical scans on all and any parties invited herein. Do you have any questions?”
“When can I see Revan?” the man demanded.

“Patient Response: As previously stated: when Revan Starfire D’Reev returns. Opined Rebuttal: I am not going to chase her down for you, meatbag. My Master is a very important organic, with many concerns. You are but one.”

“It has to be soon,” the man muttered. “Please.”

“Personal Observation: Since her triumphant return to full operational consciousness, my Master is never too far from her own organic spawn. I am sure she will not keep you waiting long.”

“You’ll need a visitor’s pass—” Suddenly, Willa remembered her job. She reached into her drawer to draw one out.

A dull clank interrupted her and suddenly she was staring down the barrel of the HK’s blaster rifle."Authoritative Statement, Applied with Implied Threat: This man does not need a visitor’s pass, Officer Kastillian. As per the terms of your non-disclosure agreement, he and this offspring were never here. Any deviance from this statement will result in your permanent termination, as well as the termination of Citizens Ree, Lee, Deatalia, and Roj Kastillian.”

*He knows. She swallowed hard. This creepy droid knows about my family.*

“I… understand,” she whispered.

“Assertive Reminder: There are no secrets in House D’Reev,” the droid clucked. “Except the ones Master chooses to keep.”
Chapter 43 / A Fickle Heart and a Bitterness

The ground beneath Polla’s cheek was hard and slick and kept shifting, like the rocking of a plat in a windstorm, a ship bouncing through atmosphere. The world was dark and close, the size of an escape pod, and strangely soft, blanketed in a narcotic haze.

When she moved her fingers, Polla discovered her hands were bound together at the wrists behind her back. Trying to move her legs revealed similar restraints there as well, only worse, because those were bound at her knees.

Polla had a vague memory of metal snapping around her neck, like a slaver’s collar. The rest must have happened after she passed out.

No. Not passed out. Drugged. That insane guy drugged me. I hit my head—

Fear for Sei and Abasen jolted her into action, struggling against the bonds, trying to knock the bands off her eyes, trying to see—and then her arm hit something that felt wooden, then furry and soft. Then, the thing chittered and squirmed—and Polla screamed.

The sound came out muffled and weak, barely more than a garbled moan. She realized they'd put something in front of her mouth too, not a gag, but some kind of barrier.

She turned her chin against her shoulder and felt metal, covering her jaw, locking it in place.

“I think she's awake.” The voice came from outside the darkness, slightly muffled by metal, from outside her small prison.

“About time. I was starting to think we got the dosage wrong.”

“Jedi are supposed to be hard to drug. My note says you guys used a lot.”

“As ordered. Three neural disruptors, two Force collars, beskar restraints, full-body. Plus the ysalamiri. Dumped a whole crate of ‘em in the box with her.”

The voices sounded ordinary. Core accents, nothing like the creepy masked guy in the bar. One of them even laughed.

The other one gave a soft whistle. “The hell? Who's she supposed to be? Darth Revan?”

A pause. “You said it. I didn't.”

“No.”

“I don't know, okay? You know how things are in the organization lately. All those orders from Mouths, creepy priests… I'm just saying, whoever she is, this is big. Don't frack the job.” The man snorted. “Or her. Don't even open the package. She'll keep til she gets to her destination.”

Destination? I'm going to piss myself in another ten minutes. Seiran, I am so sorry that you were fracking right—
“My orders are Yavin Station.”

“Don’t tell me that! I don’t ask those kinds of questions, kid. Didn’t I tell you? Overseers handle the big picture. We just follow orders.”

Yavin. The feeling was almost relief. Maybe Suvam is just fracking with me. It’s all a terrible misunderstanding. Seiran and Abasen were gone before it happened. They’re safe. They have to be safe.

They had to be. But the not-knowing rose like a scream in Polla’s throat, and the thought of being locked in this cage… trapped like this for all the days it would take to get to Yavin was terrifying. I could die locked in here. I could die and Seiran would never even know.

They have to be safe. They have to be.

“Okay, Drog. If you say so. You sure I’m okay flying solo?” The voice lowered. “I told you about the blackouts, right?”

“Kid, that’s between you and your medix. You got clearance. Anyways, it’s not a solo run. Other passenger should help. Customs said he’s already on board.”

“You told me this was just some chick in a can!”

“And a robe to keep it going smooth! You need help with the can? Lifter’s fritzed, but I’ll help you haul it up the ramp—”

“It's okay.” The world tilted, sickeningly. “She rolls, see?”

“Careful.”

“I got it from here, Drog. Take care, okay?”

The world spun and then there was more chittering. Something soft and small squashed on her leg, something else banged against the mask on her face. Her head hurt, sharp pain slowly breaking through the haze of the drugs.

I hit my head pretty hard on that table. He drugged me, and I hit my head on that table. Seiran. Abasen. All those credits—so stupid. We could have just gone with Aemelie. We could be learning Mandalorian right now.

“Stop moaning in there. You sound pathetic.” The man rolling the bin snorted. “Darth Revan. Right. Drog had me goin there good.”

The world tilted up, the sounds shifted. Polla’s crate rolled along—up a loading ramp? At least ten meters before coming to a stop.

“What are you doing with our passenger?”

A new voice. Entirely different. Upper crust accent, more like the one in the bar. Not local.

“You the robe?” A pause. “Cause you're not wearing robes.”

“Civilian apparel seemed more appropriate for our departure.” Footsteps, advancing closer. “Odd. I can't sense her at all.”

“Drog said the customer packed a bunch of ysa—ysalamiri in there. And she's wearing enough
Force disruptors to stop Darth Revan.” A nervous laugh. “Not that… I'm not saying she is Darth Revan. Or… anyone. I don't know who she is. I-I drink. Sometimes? Woke up this morning after a bender and found this job on my datapad. I must've taken the notes when I was still fritzed. You know?”

“Poor, blind.” The upper crust one sighed. “Of course I do.”

Sliding noise, like a landing ramp closing behind them. In the ship now.

“Well, anyways, here we are. You know where… where we’re going?”

“I've already programmed our destination into the ship's controls. No need for a pilot.”

“But I-I'm the pilot. That's what my note said. Pick up the package, fly the ship.”

“Redundancy. I build it into all of my plans.” Upper Crust sighed. “In this case, less is more. I have things to discuss with your… package, in confidence.”

“Oh. Sure. I can, I can go to the other room. It’s no prob—”

In real life, lightsabers made the same snap hissing sound they did in vids; but the vids never covered the slightly wet, sliding sound that dead men made; a quick gasp, and then a sickening thud.

Polla choked back another sob, strangling the scream in her throat.

“What was that?” Something rapped sharply on the edge of her prison. “Fascinating. I can't sense you at all. The Genoharadan did a very thorough job, Revan.”

Is it good he thinks I'm Revan, or is it worse?

“Mmmph,” she managed, forcing air through the mask. Polla rolled over and managed to bang her knee against the side of her prison.


One side of the visor had slipped, and that eye blinked on open air. Her vision from the other one was blocked by the metal thing on her forehead. Her good eye focused on the gray plasticrete in front of her nose. Ordinary. Tough. Like a thousand crates she'd packed herself. When she tilted her head up, towards the circle of light above, her neck hit the back of a metal collar. She blinked hard, blinking back tears.

“Oh, my.” Her captor chuckled darkly. “You look… rather disheveled.”

At first, Polla couldn't see the man’s features, only the outline. He was round, balding, and unremarkable. Not Human, but close. Ridges on his forehead; a strangely short nose, heavy chin. And goggles. Heavy, narrow ones, covering his own eyes like a blast shield.

Something squirmed against her side, and Polla stifled another scream, looking down, and trying to shrink away. The live thing looked like a womprat attached to a tree. There was another one, half crushed against the metal covering her boots. And more, piled on the sides of the crate. Maybe ten of them. Their bodies were half grown onto sticks, and they chittered in the light, a sibilant sound that seemed louder than her own harsh breathing.
Are they supposed to eat me? Am I supposed to eat them? What kind of sick frack does this to an innocent womprat? Or me?

“An interesting conundrum,” her captor murmured. “How to free your bonds now? Perhaps I was too hasty, dispatching our friend. The null void ysalamiri create is quite small, as you know; but if I risk stepping into it to remove your restraints… I will, as they say, lose myself.” He chuckled.

“Bththht.” Polla told him, willing the words to come out like a chain of Huttese curses.

“Of course, I can leave instructions for our good Master Klee; but how to assure that you don't do something foolish to him or our ship before my return?”

With a spacer’s sense, Polla felt the slight shift and lurch as the ship moved forward, stabilizers keeping her crate locker to the floor. Heard the whine of accelerators.

*Not enough for atmosphere. We must have already been in orbit. One of the stations. I must have been unconscious when they took me off planet—*

*Abasen. Seiran. I'm in the shit now. I'm so sorry, please don't be dead.*

“If I free you… if I let you speak, can I trust you not to do anything foolish? Perhaps… incentive. Yes! All sentients love incentive? Lord Revan. Since I cannot compel your obedience, perhaps I can… encourage It?”

He gestured to the wall, and a part of it slid open, revealing a comm screen.

“Perhaps there is someone we should call? Your child? Or—oh, I know. One of your husbands?”

*Ma. I want my Ma.* Ma would kill her for concocting a plan this dumb.

Polla heard her voice let out a noise disturbingly like a whimper.

“What was that? Would you like to speak to your son?”

*He's too little. Seiran I am so sorry—I got greedy I got stupid. No, he means hers. He means Revan’s kid.*

At the moment, she couldn't even remember the kid’s name. After a planet, a bad planet.

*This should be a dream, please let this be a dream. Please. Stars, Force whatever, let me wake up.*

“You… are those tears? Already?” Upper Crust sounded surprised. “Surely, my proud Starfire doesn’t break so easily. I need you strong. Your Republic needs you. Our Empire needs you.”

*I wish I'd never heard of the fracking Republic. I wish I'd never run the canyon wall, I just wanted to impress Seiran, but he told me later he would have married me anyway. He said he noticed me when we were eight and I never noticed him, how handsome he'd grown, with those brown eyes, and his cheekbones and his skin and the way he smells and oh, please.*

*Please let me see them again. Please let them be safe. Please don’t let me die here.*

Polla’s neck ached, holding it up at an awkward angle to see out of the crate. The light shining down suddenly brightened and the comm image resolved, snapping into sharpness around a Wookiee’s face.

The Wookiee roared, and incredibly Upper Crust barked back at it. Three barks.
The Wookiee lifted one lip and snarled back.

“What is it, Big Z? What do you mean, darkness is hailing us?” The image of a blue Twi’lekk appeared behind him the Wookiee; but there was something wrong with Polla’s eyes because the Twi’lekk seemed to materialize out of thin air.

The Wookiee growled again, softer, a near whine.

The blue Twi’lekk vanished abruptly. As abruptly as she’d come. Then her voice. “CARTH!”

XXX

The Jedi quarters had even less privacy than the Republic Fleet had given to its enlisted soldiers, and the woman known as Padawan Sheris Loran, lacking in rank or authority and late to the dormitories, found herself assigned to a bunk stacked in a dimly-lit corner; one of three in a row.

The next beds over were occupied by two nervous, giggling Padawans.

Had she and Malak and the others ever been so careless as the girl with the Ziost accent and her Zabrak companion? The Zabrak was blushing and ducking her head, as the other girl plaited her hair into braids. They were acting as if this was some meditation retreat, and not the final stand of a desperate Order, held hostage by Malachi D’Reev and besieged upon all sides.

“He likes you,” the dark-skinned Human girl murmured. One of the Korriban children, surely, with that accent; but not one that Revan had ever noted, before she’d seen her in the medical labs. The Ziost girl was recently recovered from the plague; and yet it was the immune Zabrak beside her who looked pale and drawn.

“I know.” The Zabrak ducked her head, blushing. Her voice lowered, as she glanced in Revan’s direction and Revan turned her own attention back to the datapad in front of her.

If Revan had actually wanted the Order to win, she would have chastised these children for their carelessness. But as it was….

This is what’s left of your Order, Jedi. This is all that’s left: giggling schoolchildren discussing their love affairs while around them, the galaxy burns.

Instead of admonishing their foolishness, Revan pulled out the Fragment’s datapad, a goreapple and a jar of nutra she’d taken from Malachi’s kitchen. She pulled her legs to her chest, resting the display on her knees. Sheris’s weak Force was enough to peel the apple while her hands switched on the screen. Revan took a segment and dipped it in the paste, chewing thoughtfully.

Malachor’s little Racharn wasn’t out of the woods, but the girl had shown marked improvement after being properly hydrated. Revan had strengthened her body’s immune response as best she could. Delicate work that left her starving and exhausted.

Rakatan letters flashed at her. At least the Fragment had the intelligence to write in a language no one would know. Almost no one. Revan herself. Malak. Possibly Davad, Kae, and Atris—

But they’re all gone.

These are the things you should know about Polla. Polla Organa was a Deralian smuggler. Polla Organa saved the galaxy. And the real Polla Organa is dead. She had to die so that you could live.
It was slightly morbid, the way the Fragment spoke about the Deralian. Morbid and repetitious.

*Yes, Fragment. Polla Organa died. So did a lot of other sentients.*

But Polla Organa didn’t kill Malak. That was you. Us. Me.

“That was you,” Revan muttered to herself. She could have given the order—she *had* given the order, but actually killing Mal in combat? Even if had the strength, she couldn’t look him in the eyes and do it.

*Even now. Even if they’re not his eyes.*

*I told him I’d make it quick and I will. Contact poison. A timed explosion. Maybe HK can handle it, if Malak lets him get close enough.*

**Polla Organa thought she was a hero, saving the galaxy.**

The Fragment repeated herself a great deal, writing half-hysterically. The words of a woman, Revan assumed, who thought she would soon cease to exist. Had Sheris penned a similar screed? If so, Kae and her minions hadn’t bothered to share it.

**She fell in love with a Republic pilot. She tried to do the right thing, on every planet she saw. She made mistakes, and some of them were terrible.**

Some of them were catastrophic. There was a rumor about a new formula for kolto, supposedly developed by scientists on Manaan; but even the healing salve’s reintroduction would cause instability, as long as distribution and manufacture were caught in a chokehold.

Or maybe the chokehold could serve? Perhaps fools would be less likely to risk themselves in war or rebellion with no Jedi, and no simple fix for most ills.

Revan would have to tell the Fragment to tell D’Reev to invest in the supply chains—*if* the cure for the kolto was real. House Racharn had controlled most of the military manufacturing centers for kolto before—perhaps Revan had been too hasty leaving their First alive. Then again, the Second Racharn had been so grateful, and surely that gratitude could easily extend to Malachor’s family.

*I’ll need to decide later. The Racharn Second resented her mother already. She may take care of the woman herself.*

**Polla Organa fell in love with Carth Onasi. And so did you. It was real. I don’t know if it will be after, but it was real—as real as your love for Malak. Take care of Carth. You owe me that much. Take care of him and his son.**

Revan rolled her eyes. *As real as my love for Malak? Oh, Fragment.*

Lucky, lucky Fragment, to have never heard a stranger’s voice come from her husband’s mouth. Never had to negotiate terms with a madman possessing her husband’s body. Never had to plot both of their deaths for the good of the galaxy—

Never had to wake up next to Malak in a stranger’s body, like she had last night. He’d only kissed her hand before they fell asleep, but in the quiet of their breathing, when Revan closed her eyes, it had been as if the past was just a dream. His strong arm wrapped around her waist. She had buried her head in his chest. At least in dreams. Only that, half asleep, his body close beside hers.
And then it had ended in a heartbeat, when Malak rolled over away from her, whispering ‘Telos’ in his sleep.

*Mocking me. Mocking all that we were. You can’t escape my past, Fragment. None of us can.*

Revan thumbed to the next page.

**The Rakatan computers. I still don’t know if they can be trusted, but I gave the one on Kashyyyk a personality of the child I killed. Her name was Mission Vao, and she thought of you as a sister. She’s with Carth now. Carth and Zaalbar, the Wookiee—**

Revan’s blood froze.

*You lied to me, Fragment. You said you didn’t know about the computers. You reprogrammed the Kashyyyk computer? Is that why it hasn’t responded to my codes?*

She’d tried several times, in the Temple itself; in the Underground between clinic appointments; even in Malachi’s own study; using one of the blind terminal feeds she had designed. No matter what combination, no matter what code she tried, the remote access Revan had installed in the Kashyyyk computer linking the rest didn’t respond. She’d heard that Malak had bombed the Dantooine platform, she’d assumed that perhaps the damage had somehow cascaded to affect Kashyyyk.

*The Fragment told me she only saw Star Maps. The Fragment lied to me? The Fragment overwrote the sentient Kashyyyk program and lied to me about it.*

Why?

Revan scanned the Fragment’s next page, but it only went on to describe more regrets about her dead friends. And Malak. More regrets about Malak; but apparently no regrets about destroying their best weapon against an immortal, unkillable Sith.

*You overwrote the thing standing between us and the Emperor? The means I had to leash Tenebrae? Or would have had, if the Genoharadan had secured what they’d promised to her agent on Tatooine: the memory-box of the long-dead Builder Prince.*

*The Rakatan villagers were savages, but they knew the power of their Promised One. It took me years to locate the mind-trap. Years chasing rumors, but just when hope was finally in my grasp—Malak struck first, or Tenebrae struck through Malak.*

*I killed everyone who stood between me and Darth Malak. Because I had to kill him. I had to kill him, and I didn't know why. I have to assume you do. I hope it was a fracking good reason, Revan.*

*It was.*

Trust was fragile: a truce capable of being shattered like a gravity well at an armistice. Maybe the original Polla Organa had trusted the assassin the Fragment had sent, just like Revan had begun to trust the Fragment herself. She had begun to think of the woman as an extension of her own self. A friend even, almost a sister.

Suddenly, Revan was no longer starving, no longer tired. She was furious. She scanned the rest of the words, shoving the nutra aside.
You lied to me, Fragment. You fool. What have you done?

I don’t know what you did at Malachor. I need to know. I need to know everything. That’s why I need you.

Then you shouldn’t have lied.

“It doesn’t matter now.” Revan realized she was muttering in Basic, and switched to Rakatan, ignoring the Padawan whispers from the next bunk.

I trust Davad Arkan. He’s promised to help—

“She laughed sharply. “Him you trusted, but me?” She scoffed. You should have told me about the computer, Fragment. You should have told me before. What has it told you? What did it promise? Do you know it can’t be trusted? It’s as corrupt as everything they made, those Builders—you can’t trust it. You can only use them, but you have to be careful, not to be corrupted, like they corrupted me and Malak—

Polla Organa is dead. I don’t know who had her killed—

Does it matter? Probably Malachi. He’d killed Beya. It wasn’t a surprise, but Revan was surprised at how much it hurt, thinking of the Deralian’s death.

That dream. That dream was all Sheris. I was blind and foolish to think otherwise. Her hopes, her fears, her dreams… they infect me.

Revan shoved the datapad back in her pocket and swung her legs over the edge of the bunk, dropping to the ground.

“I still think you should come with us, Thalia.” The Zabrak padawan had a pained tone to her voice; looking like she was trying not to look at Revan. Trying not to notice a fellow Jedi muttering like a madwoman.

“My place is here,” the Ziostian said quietly. She turned her head and stared right at Revan, delicate features almost a mask. “I dreamed it.”

Dreams. Had to be a coincidence, the girl wasn't strong enough in the Force to sense thoughts.

“Excuse me,” Revan muttered, trying to sound as simpering and apologetic as Sheris actually would.

“Oh!” The Ziostian made a startled exclamation, and for a moment Revan felt the familiar, comforting assurance that she had inspired fear—but then, she looked up and saw what had caused the girl’s reaction. “The HK!”

“Ache Kay.” Revan was pleased she sounded so calm herself, and not surprised. After all, she'd programmed him for stealth.

Just not against me.

Her droid’s head nodded at her and then swiveled to regard the Padawans. “Affirmative Statement: Yes, I am HK-47, protocol and assassin droid; and hero of the famed Star Forge. The reproduction who also inhabits this domicile is an inferior model, much like the reproduction of my Master is also inferior to the original—”
“Did Revan send you?” Revan interrupted, before the droid shot the padawans, or called her ‘Master.’ He’d been warned, but HK was a little too zealous about the logical consequences of keeping her secret. She wouldn’t entirely put it past him to ‘accidentally’ reveal her identity and then use that as an excuse to kill these two hapless children.

_He is what I made him, after all. And he’s killed children for me before._

“Amusement: Yes. Yes. Of course ‘Revan’ sent me.” The droid practically rolled its eyes. “Revan sent me to assist you with every possible task. Humorous Reflection: Indeed, this ‘Revan’ created me for express purpose.”

“He just appeared.” The Zabrak was standing, and backing away. “I didn’t sense him at all.” She looked at her friend, eyes wide and dumb. “Is that because of what happened?”

“No. I didn’t sense him either,” the other Padawan murmured. “It’s not just you, Lydie.”

“He’s a droid,” Revan snapped. “He has no real Force presence. I’ll come with you,” she added to HK, slipping between the bunks, and forcing him to follow her. Whatever other obvious observations the two Jedi children might have were less important than whatever purpose had brought her HK down past several levels of security he was not supposed to breech.

“I told you to wait upstairs and guard Malachor,” Revan muttered as they walked, half under her breath, and trying to ignore the stares of the few Jedi that remained on the floor.

“Affirmative: Yes, you did. But Master, your son is at school and I have a surprise.” Her assassin droid stepped noiselessly next to her, closer than she preferred. “Elaboration: Three surprises, in fact. Would you like the first one now?” His triangular head swiveled, when she tried to sidestep him, and then he moved again, blocking her path.

He was drawing attention. Revan raised her voice to appease the curious. “Of course, HK. If Revan needs me, I would be delighted to come upstairs with you.”

“Repetitive Banter: Master, the first surprise—now?”

“Elevators,” she snapped, pushing past him and heading for the one at the end; the one whose feed she’d looped on itself to hide her movements from Malachi—and Malak. When the door slid shut behind them, she turned back to the droid.

“What is it?”

“Surprise,” her HK murmured. The compartment on his lower torso snapped open, revealing a lightsaber inside. It slid out, extending on one of his hidden mandibles that she’d designed for knifework. “Master, I calibrated it just for you.”

XXX

The Council Meeting had ended in a muddle, with Vrook trying to draw Revan into conversation, with all of them vowing to get to the bottom of the Mandalorian threat.

_If the Mandalorians are a threat. Vrook said the Mandalorians are gone. What the frack was Canderous thinking when he left? Where the frack are the others? Did Mission… what if Mission did something to Carth and Zaal?_

Revan had fled, making excuses and fled, searching for the most remote corner of the Jedi’s floor that she could find. Was this fresher secure? Her comm was scrambled anyway. Revan pulled it
out, intending to try and call Canderous; but then the door opened, and Marla Korr walked inside.

Revan slid the comm back into her pocket and examined her own reflection in the mirror. She looked worried. Grim, but trying to pretend otherwise because Master Marla Korr was standing behind her, as if waiting for something, even though all of the fresher stalls were all empty.

“You can go ahead,” Revan told her. “I’m just… I need a moment.”

The woman in the mirror blinked hard. Her green eyes looked exhausted.

*The closest allies I have left are Jedi I don’t remember, and the woman who fracked the galaxy in the first place.*

“Go ahead,” Revan repeated to Marla Korr. “You can go. I’m just—I’m just thinking.”


Did she know about Sheris being Revan? Revan kept her voice bland. “Should I be concerned for Sheris?”

“The old Revan would not have allowed sentiment to cloud her judgment. But I find you… harder to predict.” The woman took a step closer. “I must assume—you know about Master Klee too?” She paused, lifting an eyebrow. “And myself?”

“Of course.” There was a trick to sounding like you knew exactly what someone was talking about when you didn't give a frack, as any smuggler worth their spice knew. Revan tapped the comm in her pocket to record and almost yawned.

“Then you know you've sent Klee to his death.” There was no mistaking the anger in the Zabrak’s voice. “When our master discovers your deceit, both Klee’s life and your duplicate’s will be forfeit.”

“Oh? Well, your master can go to hell.” *Both lives? Sheris and Klee too? She has a Master? Fracking Arren Kae Vima Sunrider has more fracking Jedi under her thumb?* Revan turned around to face the woman. “Is this some kind of Sith confession?”

Marla Korr lowered her head again, looking away. Her silvering hair glinted in the overnights. “I want to know why you sent Sheris to Him in your place. Did you think our master would not see the difference between you and a poor copy?”

Dull relief, then guilt. Did Dar’Revan set this up? Was she trying to defect to Sunrider?

Anger mixed with fear in her gut. “Fracking—”

“Try and contain yourself. The old Revan never resorted to gutter epithets.” Master Korr’s blue eyes narrowed. “You knew the deception would be uncovered almost immediately. Did you want to remove Malachi D’Reev from Klee’s influence? Was that effort worth both of their deaths?”

“Maybe.” *Deaths? Would she know if Sheris was dead? Revan should know. It was wrong, horribly wrong that the first emotion Revan allowed herself to feel was… relief. Followed quickly by guilt. “Why don't you ask your master?”*

The Zabrak looked at her scornfully. “Ask Him? I am merely His Voice.”

*His? His voice? Not hers?*
Her master’s not Kae? She said she’s his voice. Her master’s voice. She means the Emperor. Tenebrae. The one Dar’Revan is so afraid of.

How the frack did the Sith Emperor have Sheris and Klee killed?

Revan should know, shouldn’t she? But she didn’t sense anything at all. Or—almost nothing. There was that disconcerting presence in the Force she’d realized was Malak, the bright spark of her son, and then—there, like an echo, almost. A shadow. Something that felt familiar. Familiar and close. Was that Sheris? Was that Dar’Revan?

“How does it work again, exactly, with you and your master?” Revan kept her voice calm. “Is it like a Force bond, or Force possession? Am I speaking to him now?”

“So much power and so crippled by your own ignorance.” The Zabrak lectured eerily like Dar’Revan herself. “Did you think you were unwatched? Klee and I have been in place for a very long time.”

Revan forced herself to laugh. “Next thing you tell me, you’ll take credit for the Mandalorian Wars.”

“We only see fragments of His greater design.” The woman’s voice hardened. “But I’ve seen enough to know that your destiny has been managed with great care.”

Arren Kae had claimed to oppose the emperor, but (as far as Revan knew) she had done nothing to stop Masters Korr or Klee. Master Korr had looked startled to discover Arren Kae’s true allegiance. Could there be two factions, both Sith, hidden in the Jedi, and both trying to sabotage them from within? Not working together? Hidden from each other? Hidden and opposed?

She would know. Dar’Revan. She can't be fracking dead. I would know if she were—

“You keep talking about Tenebrae in the third person,” Revan pointed out. “Isn't he you? I thought that's how it worked.”

Her other self hadn't been very clear. So much she hasn't been clear about.

She can't be dead. I'd know. Wouldn't I?

“He comes to us, and then we speak with His Voice. We learn His intent by the… instructions He leaves. I was with Klee when the Call came. Your duplicate was already in custody then, through the blind was convinced he'd captured you, and not her.” Her smile was grim. “We are His Voices, but there are many others on this world who serve unknowingly. The vessel who took Sheris was merely a shadow, unaware of its true purpose.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Maybe it was another trap. Maybe an elaborate ruse to try and trap her like they'd already trapped Dar’Revan? Maybe her other self had set this up herself already and was in league with the Sith—

I gave Dar’Revan that datapad. I trusted her.

She might be dead.

“I can sense your confusion,” Master Korr murmured. “Can it be that Sheris acted alone?”

“No. Definitely not.” She tamped down hard in the Force, trying to mask everything—confusion, emotion, anything that might give her away to more fracking Sith. “Like you said, I wanted sole
influence over Malachi. And Malak. Sheris and Klee were both obstructions. Do you think they're dead now? Already? Because that’s… great. Thanks. Thank your master for me.”

“Klee is still alive.” The woman sounded positive. “I can sense nothing more than that, and when their ship finally departs this world, I will know even less—unless He grants me knowledge. But Klee will know who Sheris is instantly. What foolishness made you think he would not?”

Dar’Revan’s fracking foolishness. Was she trying to assassinate the Emperor? Or defect? But she hates him. I could feel it in the Force. She hates and fears him. Why the frack would she go to him?

She hates him. That wasn’t a lie. Maybe it’s a trap for him and not me? Why the frack didn’t she say anything to me?

Could she pass for me?

Maybe. Sheris’s face looked younger, but if she cut her hair, in dim light, or with part of her face concealed… not in the Force, but I can hide in the Force. They could assume that so could she—

And where’s the closest shipyard? Where would they go?

“Can I talk to your master now? Can you… summon him or something?” What the frack would she say?

Don’t kill Sheris because she’s really me? Get the frack off my planet?

“Our thoughts to him are like blades of grass in a field. I call, but he does not always answer.”

And then Revan realized.

I can’t afford to have him answer. Not if it means Dar’Revan’s death. What if this is some plan of hers to destroy him? Why didn’t she tell me; or maybe she tried; maybe she left some word—somewhere. In Korrie’s room. Or Malak’s?

Unless she’s fracking Sith, what the frack did I expect but betrayal? How could she do this? How could she be so… stupid? She’s not stupid. She’s not fracking stupid, so this has to be some kind of plan.

Master Korr’s lips thinned, and she took a step backwards. Revan realized her own hand was already on her saber, and that it was drawn.

“So,” the woman murmured. “Perhaps you do not want to speak with my Master after all?”

“You betrayed the Jedi.” It had been easy, disturbingly easy, in the quest for the Star Forge to cut down every Sith in their path.

I swore I’d never kill again. I swore I’d never kill again, but how can I let her live? How can I let him see me? What if she’s right? What if he sees me and then he knows, and she dies for it?

“He made us,” the woman corrected her. “It was no betrayal on our part. If anyone betrayed, it was you, Revan. He gave you everything, and you repaid his Gifts by creating this plague. You turned His own Voices against Him.”

Was there a way to sever Marla Korr’s connection to Tenebrae? Even as Revan thought it, the Zabrak laughed softly. And then, as Revan watched, her eyes began to glow—red as blades—

It was almost primal. Fear and memory made Revan’s saber ignite, whipping forward and out. There was only a slight resistance when the particle blade met flesh, cut through bone; but only
slight. It had been easy, disturbing my so, in the quest for the Star Forge, to cut down Sith like blades of ferragrass, cut down her friends. It had been easy, increasingly so, to kill and feel nothing at all. Kill or be killed. Save the galaxy.

Marla Korr’s head hit the tiled floor with a sickening thud, rolling back until stopped by her horns. Her body collapsed upon itself, a pile of robes and meat. Empty. Dead.

Silenced.

Snap hiss as Revan’s saber deactivated, fingers snapping it smoothly back on her belt. Sound like a scream in her throat, nausea twisting her guts. But so little blood, and lightsabers cauterized so cleanly they didn't even seem real.

Revan’s hands were steady as she pulled out her comm, switching it to text.

**Alive?** She sent.

XXX

What do you do when you’re staring down the barrel of almost a standard week of hyperspace? Contemplate how you’ve lost your mind to some ancient Sith evil? Drink?

*You worry. A galaxy full of it. Now, I could tell Dustil, “Son, I know how it feels to be Force possessed. My head hurts like a son of a Bith.” We could go out for caff and choca, compare notes. I wish it can come to that. I have to believe it can end like that.*

Carth watched Dathomir recede in the viewscreen. Next to him, the two Zabrak kids were silent. Maybe scared. Takan seemed to be loyal to their Sith god, and Zepth wasn’t. But they were both still just kids. Carth was trying—he got that he should think of Takan as evil, maybe even Zepth too; but somehow he couldn’t.

The only real evils he could think of right now were the bastard inside his head and the blasted Force itself.

“When did it happen to you guys?” he asked, trying not to lose his mind. Trying not to panic.

“Our ship crashed,” Takan told him. “Then the Abbess saved us.” His voice was strangely detached. “I wish you hadn’t killed her.”

Carth was sorry about a lot of sents that had died because of him, but not that one. “It was a… mistake,” he muttered, remembering what Zepth had said. *A mistake, but I’m not sorry.*

“When our ship crashed, its course may not have been an accident,” Zepth added. “It is not our place to question His path.”

“When did it happen to you guys?” he asked, trying not to lose his mind. Trying not to panic.

Carth gave him a strange look. “*His.*”

“Sorry,” Carth coughed. “I was joking.”

“You will adjust beyond joking.” Takan stepped forward, staring out of the viewscreen. “Where is this ship going?”

“Coruscant,” Carth told him. “They… they didn’t—that—” *Sith asshole* “—no one told you?”
“He tells others through me,” the kid corrected. “I’ve heard of Coruscant. It’s very large?”

“It has a lot of people. It’s crowded, you… you’ll have a great time.” He tried to smile, act like this was normal, like if he pretended, it could knock the screaming out of his head.

*The Jedi. They’ll know how to fix this. They’ve had lots of practice messing with people’s minds. They can fix me.*

*The same Jedi who had left Darth Malak in Dustil’s body?*

Carth realized his hands were clenched so tightly into fists that his nails were digging into his palms.

“We won’t be on Coruscant long,” Zepth said softly, almost to himself.

“You were told?” Takan looked surprised. “I have no word.”

“I assume,” the boy corrected him, glancing at Carth. “She will need escorts back, won’t she?”

“Revan?” Who else? “My wife’s not going anywhere,” he told the kid. “Especially not back to the damn Sith.”

“Speculation is pointless.” Takan’s face looked like he disapproved of them both. He turned away and walked closer to the viewscreen, just as the engines kicked in, and the ship sprung to lightspeed. “What was that?” He fell back, half-against the wall before Zepth caught his arm. “Are we under attack?”

“Hyperspace,” Carth soothed. He tried to laugh. “Perfectly normal. She always lurches like that right before she jumps.”

“What was that?” Zepth asked, so seriously, that Carth thought he was joking too.

But their frightened expressions made the laugh die in his throat. “Just… the ship, I mean. The Hawk.”

The stars dissolved into the familiar eye-twisting vortex that usually made Carth smile, check the readings again, and put his feet up on the nav board; but now in the passenger cabin, he could only step forward and switch the screen off, try and ignore the pounding headache in his skull, try and not imagine it was the Force or some insane Sith possessing him.

“Nothing left to see for days now,” he told them. “What do you mean—you think Revan’s going back to the Sith?” Sinking sensation in his gut.

“I didn’t save her for this.”

“*Careful.*”

*Then the boy stepped away again, examining the board in front of them. “What is this?”*

“It’s the secondary comm system.” Carth looked down, and noticed, a channel was already open and blinking.

*Are Zaalbar and Mission already telling her about me? What if she doesn’t want to see me? Maybe I need to stay away. For her own good. But there has to be a way out. We’ve been in worse spots. This is nothing compared to the Star Forge, or that damned shyrack cave—*

“We know you are still confused,” Takan told Carth. “There is a period of adjustment.”

“I’m not,” he lied. “I just—” have to put one foot in front of the other. Get through this. Work it
out. We’ll work it out. Everything, we have to—

“CARTH!”

And then, Mission’s voice. Yelling over the loudspeakers, sounding exactly she had ages ago, when they’d been cornered in that cave, staring down a rancor with Polla Organa and a pack of thermocrete grenades.

She sounded more angry than frightened, Mission always got angry first.

“CARTH!!”

“Who is that?” Zepth asked.

“Never mind.” Carth was already punching open the doors and heading out, uncannily aware of their footsteps, chasing behind.

XXX

“It's a lovely surprise, HK.” It was. Single blade, but beggars weren't choosers, and Sheris’s body seemed to prefer the style. One of Malak’s old ones? Revan’s smile faded slightly, as her fingers traced the D'Reev crest on the hilt.

“Confirmation: Of course, Master. I selected it from the Senator’s private collection myself.”

“I wasn't aware he collected lightsabers.” Although the man collected everything else, so maybe it wasn't a surprise.

“Statement: There are several in the vaults and I can surmise no other reason for their inclusion.”

“Sentiment, perhaps.” Malak's mother had been Force-sensitive. Maybe this had been hers—the hilt was too small for Malak’s hand, Revan thought. But it fit hers perfectly. She peered into the aperture, glint of a yellow crystal within.

The elevator doors slid open and they walked out. “You mentioned a second surprise?”

“Correction: Master, I mentioned two more surprises.”

“Of course.” The last time you promised me two surprises, they were both body parts from the same corpse. “Tell me these two surprises aren't going to leak all over the carpet like that Echani General did.”

“No.” The machine whirred, clucking to itself almost sulkily. “Objection: I have learned from my mistakes. The Master does not have to appreciate viscera as I do, when she is so very good at creating it.”

Revan tried not to laugh. “Did I hurt your feelings?”

“Statement: No, Master. Were I to develop any sensation as noisome and fetid as 'feelings,’ I would immediately stick a Bothan shock staff through my power converter and set its charge to override.”

“I know you would. I programmed you well.”

“Query: Why did you leave me for the Jedi, Master?”

“I didn’t. I need you to stay on the upper levels and watch over Malachor and the Fragment, while I
watch over the Jedi.”

Her droid’s red eyes whirred. “Objection! Have I done something wrong?”

“No.” She wanted to laugh. “It's just… easier. I need to be rational now. I can't afford… distraction.”

“Obvious Conclusion: This is the Original Meatbag and the Fragment’s fault. Proposed Solution—

This time she did laugh, interrupting whatever gristly fantasy he’d concocted. “No, HK. Absolutely not.”

“Alternative Suggestion: Mutilation and torture? Master, thoughts of such activities always lighten my own circuits. Allow me to paint a picturesque wordscape for you as well.”

“No.” She sometimes wondered how programming in the sentient response had led to a creation with such dark humor.

But remember the times. All those stories about the dark side. All of them, true.

“Is the Fragment here, HK?” Please don't tell me she's part of the surprise. But I'd know, wouldn't I? Edge of anger again, rushing back. She lied to me. Why did she lie?

“Negative: Master, there is no one on this executive level except the Senator, my pathetic imitation, and my surprises.”

“Your surprise—surprises—are alive?” Strange that Malachi would be home in the middle of the day, but he was probably in his study. Revan tried to avoid speaking to him: the man had known her better than most, and it would be too easy to slip, reveal some fact that Sheris would have no way of ever knowing.

Strange too that Malak was missing. It was wrong that her first thought was dull relief. Maybe he ran after all. Maybe he ran and if I can’t find him, he’ll have to live.

Pointless, dangerous sentiment.

He whispered Telos in his sleep. Even in his sleep, taunting me.

“Oh, yes, Master. Both surprises are quite lively. Statement: I disabled the security feeds in the main guest quarters and installed new locks on all points of egress. Our interrogation will be uninterrupted--and I hope pleasingly thorough.”

“Both?”

“Affirmative: Master, technically there are two surprises. But only one is capable of discourse.”

Please don’t let one be the First of Racharn, or one of the other great Houses. We can’t afford the scandal right now, and if I have to make them disappear because of my homicidal droid—

HK chirped through the pause. “Statement: I have also procured enough infant formula for the small one to sustain itself for at least a week, if it is capable of self-rationing. I know how fond you are of children.”

“Infant?” She kept her voice even. Hells, HK, what have you done? “And I suppose telling me more would ruin the surprise.”
“Master, you are wise beyond rational discourse. A jewel among Masters. Gushing Admiration: it is an honor and the apex of my chronicles to work so closely with you again—”

“Take me to these surprises of yours without further commentary, HK.” Revan sighed. “Now.”

Xxx

“Mmmwpth.” Polla twisted her spine, bringing her knees forward. The thing covering her mouth at least seemed loose. Maybe she could knock it free with her knees, maybe she could break one of the sticks with her teeth and splice the lock binding her feet—

*You don't know frack-all about splicing without a spike. You don't know anything. You're not fracking Revan. You're just Polla.*

*She said Carth. That Twi'lek said Carth.*

*The Twi'lek kid had looked like Mission Vao too, but that was also impossible.*

*A dream. Let this be a dream. Please.*

*“Polla,”* a man’s voice whispered from the comm.

When she looked up again, Carth Onasi’s face filled the screen. Dark hair falling in his face. Stubble, like Sei’s. Like the vids. Like all the actors who played Carth Onasi. He was handsome, square-jawed, and sad. Brows drawn together with worry, mouth twisted.

And he could see her, that was obvious from the way his eyes widened, the expression of absolute horror. Horror to see Revan captured? Or horror that Polla wasn't Revan?

*“Poll—”* his voice choked. *“Polla. Oh, no.”*

*My name. My name? This has to be a dream please frack let it be a dream, maybe we took up Aemelie on her offer, maybe we never left Defali, maybe we never even left Derra and this is all a dream—*

The Wookiee growled again, angry again, and Polla made another vow, that if she ever got out of this, she was going to learn Shyriiwook, because now here was Carth Onasi barking and growling too.

*He said, Poll. I could be delirious. Maybe it wasn’t my name. It could have been anything.*

*“Polla,”* Carth Onasi said her name again. *“You know it’s a trap. Get out of there. Go back. We’ll be fine. I promise.”* His voice choked. *“I always come back, don’t I?”*

If she hadn’t been gagged, Polla might have pointed out that she was the one who needed rescuing here, that Carth Onasi and Zaalbar (who else could the Wookiee be?) and even her hallucination of Mission Vao from the Star Forge all looked perfectly healthy and unchained; whereas she was the one gagged in a box.

“You see him, don’t you? Your noble consort. So different from the last one, and yet—” her captor made a chucking noise under his breath. “He is mine now too.”

*Mmmph.* Polla told him. It was supposed to be frack you, but the metal muffled her voice.

Then, Carth Onasi’s eyes started to glow. The Wookiee moaned, as if it hurt him, and backed
away, and somewhere in the background, a girl’s Twi’lek voice was cursing softly.

“I’ll see you on Yavin,” Upper Crust whispered, except now his voice was coming from the comm speakers and the man in front of her. Now, Carth Onasi’s lips were moving, as if he were speaking too. And Upper Crust in front of her lifted the goggles of his visor, revealing eyes that were also glowing red. And then, from behind Carth and Zaalbar on the screen stepped two Zabraks. Young. Both with glowing eyes. One of them handed a blaster pistol to Carth. He cradled it in both hands, staring at her and put the barrel against his heart.

“I swear,” muttered the Twi’lek’s voice, “If you harm either of them, I’ll… make all the suns in your skies go nova. Asshole.”

“You see, Revan?” The voice murmured, now to all four of them talking in unison. Like droids. Like creepy fracking droids. “Come to me now, and you may have him. I’m quite generous—to my friends.”

Frack you, frack you, frack you, whoever the frack you are please let this be a dream. Maybe it’s all mirrors and commlinks and Suvam is just fracking with me? Please, stars. Frack, I’ll go back home and confess to the Priests! I’ll only smuggle medicine and food and I’ll never charge. Please. I’ll go back to school, I’ll join the fracking Republic Fleet if you just please—

“Revan,” Carth said. His eyes had stopped glowing when hers were squeezed shut. “You know we can get out of this without you. Don’t come. It’s a trap. You know it’s a trap.” Something clattered across the screen. His hand fumbled, suddenly giant in the main viewfinder, and then suddenly, the image cut out.

“I wasn’t finished,” snapped Upper Crust. The screen jagged on again, and then fizzled out. “How rude,” her captor said. “Your consort just destroyed his ship’s own communications display.”

Good, Polla thought. Frack you. Please let this be a dream.

“But he won’t kill children.” The man sounded amused. “Even mine. Poor fool. You were much more practical. Remember Ziost?”

Did Revan kill a bunch of you red glowing-eyed guys there? I think I can imagine it.

Imagining that was better than this. Polla shifted her weight and groaned. Suddenly, horribly, her bladder let go.

“What was that you—oh.” Fracking Upper Crust Perv peered down at her, looking shocked. “I’m not sure that’s good for the ysalamiri.”

XXX

“You have to help us.” The man started talking the moment the door opened, accosting Revan, too close. “Senator? I-I don’t…I don’t know what to call you. Revan? I don’t fracking care what I call you, but you have to help! You have to help us now.”

The man stank of fear and desperation. The baby strapped to his chest was wailing, and that sound —so like Malachor on that shuttle off Eos—rattled Revan so much it took her a moment to realize why she recognized both of them.

It seemed to take the man the same amount of time, because suddenly, he stepped back. “No! You’re that… that nurse. From the Underground.” His heavy brows drew together, and his mouth
twisted angrily. “I need to see Revan. Revan Starfire. Not you!”

“Registered Objection: Master, is it truly necessary to continue a charade with an organic we are about to torture and maim? Helpful Suggestion: Revealing your true identity will begin our happy project with the correct level of authority.”

“Leave, HK.” There was dark humor and then there was pure cruelty. This hapless fool had done nothing to deserve the latter. “Obviously, I can handle an unarmed man and a baby myself.”

“Agreement: Of course you can. But I could watch?”

“Go.” She lifted her artificial hand and an irritatingly weak gust of air pushed the droid slightly to the side.

Muttering darkly in Rakata (a language that lent itself quite well to the exercise), her HK left.

“I’m sorry,” Revan tried to smile, when the doors had closed securely behind her droid. “HK is… often like that. I won’t let him hurt you.”

“I need to see Revan, now. The real one.” The man repeated. His eyes were red-rimmed. And the baby was still sobbing, over and over again, like his heart was broken.

Like Malachor had, when she’d had to leave him.


Sentiment. Irritating. Weak

“I need to see her now,” the man pleaded.

“I am Revan.” Maybe HK was right. Not about the torture, but about the lies. Until she knew what he wanted, she wouldn’t trust the Fragment with this man, she couldn’t afford to. “When we met before, with your wife… I-I lied to you then, but I am Revan. Knight Revan Starfire.” She took a deep breath. “How can I help you?”

“My wife. She’s… she’s gone.” His voice choked. “If you're her then… when you saw us…. Y-you knew? You knew all along?”

“I knew?” Everything, nothing. The stars. I thought I did. I thought I knew a way out. I thought I was stronger than he was. “I don’t know. Did something happen?”

Something obviously had. His grief screamed in the Force. Anger. The man wasn’t particularly Force sensitive, not enough for Jedi; but he had a spark, she thought. Small, but steady.

The weak part of Sheris winced under the onslaught of his grief.

“I told her it was a stupid idea. Y-you knew. If you knew all along, was it you who took her?”

Hope there. So much.

“I’m sorry.” Why would I take your wife? She shook her head. Why did HK dump this petty tragedy at my feet? For fun? “Maybe I can help you find her again.” She tried to remember the man’s name and failed. “I remember you’re from Deralia. That blanket. Your son, he had a slight fever. Your wife… she was…” she couldn’t remember the woman’s face. Or the man’s for that matter, except it was in front of her now. Just their son and that blanket—refugees, like she and Malak and Malachor had been, so long ago. “There are several gangs in the Underground who deal in
trafficking. The ones who abduct Humans mostly work for the Hutts, or the Black Sun. Your wife was an attract— is an attractive woman. They won’t… they won’t harm her.” Not right away. She tried to sound reassuring. “We’ll find her.”

She would help. They reminded her of her and Malak, long ago. All of their Jedi pride reduced to helplessness in the face of war. The stench of that ship. All of that fear. Malachor had been even smaller than this infant. And all of them, so afraid.

“My wife is an attractive woman,” he repeated. Then, he laughed. It had the sound of hysteria. “That’s… that’s all you can say?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated. “I want to help.”

Revan’s comm beeped suddenly. She glanced down. One Rakatan symbol, sketched across the screen.

Alive?

“One moment,” she told him, holding up her hand.

As she watched, the one rune expanded into a wall of text.

Are you alive? Are you even the one reading this? Because Master Marla Korr said you were captured, Sheris. By Klee. For his BOSS. You remember his boss? Did you know? Did you know Master Marla Korr and Master Klee had a BOSS?

And if this is you reading this, Tenebrae, I will destroy you. I cut her head off. Her eyes started glowing and I cut off her head. Did you plan this, Sheris? Is it you reading this or him?

A pause, long enough for her breath to catch.

Answer me. Answer me. Are you alive?

“When you saw us before… why didn’t you say anything then?” The man, interrupting. “If you knew who she was, why didn’t you say something?”

“Give me a moment,” she told him again. “This is important.”

“So is she,” he whispered. “You have to know that. Don’t you know that?”

ALIVE? REVAN ARE YOU ALIVE?

Then, she felt it: the woman’s fear, echoing like a shockwave.

Calm yourself, Fragment. Revan typed back. I’m upstairs.

The man made a low noise in his throat. The infant was still crying. She felt their loss beating down on her like the rays of an unfamiliar sun.

Marla Korr was Tenebrae’s creature? Marla Korr told the Fragment that Sheris was captured by Master Klee?

Her eyes flickered to the man again. Could he be a blind? A blind with a baby? But HK would have scanned them for toxins, explosives. He’d ever let them close if there was a threat.
“Have you ever woken up in a strange place with no memory of how you came there?” Like Malak, standing over their bed with his saber lit in his hand.

“What?” The Deralian shook his head. “This isn’t about me. It’s about her. You have to remember, you have to care—”

If you’re a blind, Tenebrae must be distracted by something else. Containment. I’ll make HK secure you, scan you again. Her eyes looked at the baby and she felt a chill.

Ziost. What if this is payback for what I did to His children on Ziost?

Even in this weak body, she could end them in an instant. Except—

Was that what he wanted her to do? Wanted Revan to do? It was too simple. It had to be a trap.

“I’m sorry, but I do want to help. I do.” She took a step backwards, considering them carefully.

The man laughed softly, shaking his head. “All this time,” he said. “All this fracking… time, and you—” his words choked. “She was obsessed with you. Obsessed! She watched all the vids, everything. Sometimes, I caught her dancing in the kitchen with a spoon like it was a lightsaber. I mean, I know, small planet—she caught a lot of shit for you. Even if she wanted to forget, how could she? You were everywhere.”

Her comm beeped again.

I had no choice. I had to kill her. I don’t know what to do with the body. We’re in the fresher. The one by the galley. I locked the door, but all the Jedi—won’t they know? I don’t know what to tell them. Do I tell them the truth?

Revan gritted her teeth and traced symbols back. It doesn’t matter. Tenebrae’s here. Come now. Galling as it was to admit… I need you.

“Do you… you really don’t care, do you?” The man again.

Revan bit back her impatience with this absurd tragedy play. “Your wife is already dead, almost assuredly.”

The man’s face crumpled, and he sagged, wrapping his arms around the child. “No,” he whispered. “She’s not. Polla believed in you. Even after everything, she thought you—they all warned us. Your own damned uncle warned us, I should have known better.”

“I’m sorry,” Revan repeated, dully. She took a step backwards. Poor fool. The Emperor’s infected your thoughts. No telling what delusion he’s given you. “Calm yourself. My droid will… help you. In a moment.” She kept her voice gentle. “Just tell me what you remember.”

That child. The ones on Ziost had been older. Tenebrae was toying with her. Did he want them dead or alive? Could she afford to keep them alive?

But they were vaccinated. I gave them the vaccine myself. They can’t--they can’t be his.

The thought, like a shock of cold water. An obvious one. One she should have realized before.

Maybe the vaccine didn’t work? Maybe it never did, or that one batch didn’t? Maybe the plague was always another one of His games all along?
Doubts and fears. Easy to vanquish in her own body, but Sheris’s mind was weak. Doubts and pity for this man and his child and his dead wife.

“Here.” The man’s voice choked, he was still stubbornly shaking his head, denying the truth. “A holo. I took it today, when she wasn’t looking. I thought later, we could tell Abasen about the time his Ma pretended to be Darth Revan to bilk the Exchange out of ten million credits.”

Revan blinked. “What?”

His hand shook as he handed it to her.

The woman in the holo had a pointed chin and bright red hair, twisted in a Deralian topknot. Her eyes were green against golden skin. Her nose tilted. Her lips were painted, strangely pink and artificial against the smug light in her eyes. The backdrop appeared to be some kind of cheap cosmet shop. Another woman, silver-haired and impossibly thin, beamed, half out of the holo.

The red-headed woman was wearing some obscene travesty of a Jedi’s robes. Spangled, with a fur hood. She looked absurd, except in the eyes, the surety of that smirk, the stance—

“Why is your wife dressed like… like me?” Not me. Like her. Her hand pulled at her braids.

“I just told you. She was trying to be you to bilk the Exchange out of ten million credits.”

“So she was a criminal.”

This is Tenebrae’s game? That doesn’t make any sense.

What if they are what the man says?

The woman was obviously deranged. Insane. Why would HK dump this at her feet? If they weren’t from Tenebrae, then why would HK bother? Was this her droid’s version of a joke? Darkly, she wondered if HK was the one who had made the woman disappear.

“She’s a registered smuggler.” Impatience blared through the man’s voice. “You had her fracking cousin killed! We faked our own deaths to get away from you! And you’re calling her a criminal? Didn’t you invade the Republic? Polla just wanted her own damned life.”

“What?” She looked up from the holo. “I didn’t have anyone killed.” Recently.

“Beya,” he practically spat out the name. “Beya Organa. Ring any fracking bells?”

XXX

“You’re beautiful.”

“I am not.” At least it didn’t matter, here in the dark. In the dark, Sheris could forget her scars.

“You are to me.” Beya lifted the blanket back. Above them, the narrow window let in a patch if watery sun.

Sheris squinted in the glare. “How can you even look? I’m hideous.”

The other woman’s hand traced the scars on the side of her face. Parts were numb, where the metal had been inset to cover the worst of the damage. “No,” she murmured. “Never, Sheris. Never to me.”
Beya’s eyes were so dark as she leaned forward, lips brushing against Sheris’s. She smelled like the firewhiskey Vikor had shared, soft and acid on her breath.

“The others will hear.” Sheris pulled back. She didn’t care, not right now, but the others might. It might be rude, being happy in a place like this, at a time like this.

Beya’s skin was soft under the blankets. “Let them.” She rolled on top. Fierce blue eyes stared down at Sheris, and Beya leaned forward again, nuzzling her neck. “Let’s take what joy we can. We might be locked up here for the rest of our lives.”

“I don’t mind, if I’m with you.” It was a better fate than she’d expected from Oerin. Better than dying with Malak on the Star Forge—

XXX

Where? Revan blinked, but this wasn’t a dream, and neither Sheris or Beya had answers. Her hand went to her face. Smooth skin there, not metal; but the memory came, unbidden: it had been metal once.

To cover the scars, the wounds Oerin gave me.

Not me. Sheris. I’m Revan. I’m not her.

She stared at the holo again. The woman’s smile was careless. Reckless. Reckless enough to pretend to be Darth Revan? The woman must have been deranged.

“Look at her,” the man pleaded. “She can’t be dead. Please.”

Revan looked. The woman’s smile was too confident. Careless. “You said her name just now. What was it?”

“You know her name!” he spat. “Polla. Polla Organa. You know her. She’s you, how can you look at her and not know—”


Reckless enough to destroy the kolto for the sake of a Star Map? Deranged enough to take on Malak with a handful of grenades on an exploding Star Forge? Reckless enough to take on D’Reev and the entire Senate with a rag-tag bag of Mandalorians for Malachor? Deranged enough to let three Sith Lords leave the planet?

Oh, Fragment. Now that she knew, it was so obvious. That smug grin. The same.

“Your wife was… the smuggler. The smuggler, Polla Organa.” Revan took a deep breath. “And I didn’t have Beya killed. I-I loved Beya. Both… we both loved her.”

His mouth twisted. “What do you think I’ve been saying this entire time? You must remember—did it wear off or something? Did the Jedi take it all back?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not exactly.” How to tell him? Had the Fragment known all along that her template wasn’t dead? Do I tell her? Should I tell her now, or keep this hidden? She can’t afford another emotional distraction—

The door didn’t so much as slide open, as it rippled, machinery cracking, spinning off its hinges. The Fragment was framed in its wreckage, face bisected by her red saber. Something was making a
whirring noise behind her, like a piece of machinery grinding to a stop and restarting, over and over.

“Where?” she demanded. Her eyes met Revan’s. But where Revan had expected to find fear and anger, the Fragment was only cold. “Where is he?”

The man took a step backwards, somewhat wisely shielding his son with his arms, moving away from the deranged Jedi in the doorway. His foot scuffed on the floor and in another heartbeat, the Fragment had moved towards him, saber still extended. “You—”

And then she froze.

Her blade deactivated with a sharp click. “Seiran?”

XXX

Carth’s hands closed on nothing, futile fists; helpless to help her. She could be light years away already, and all he had was this comm.

The holocam’s camera washed out Revan’s face, making her a ghost. She was barely recognizable in the shadows of the permacrete crate: matted red hair, half hidden under a crooked visor, the visible side of her face swollen by an angry-looking bruise. A metal mask that looked disturbingly like the one Darth Malak had worn covered the lower half of her face. One green eye, rimmed by dark bruises, glared up at him. From the angle, it looked like her hands were in restraints too.

These captors had taken no chances.

Of course not. That’s a neural disruptor. Two neural disruptors? A Force collar? She’s Revan. They must know that when she gets free she can tear them apart.

Carth recognized the man looming above her prison too, even from the overhead view. That Jedi Master D’Reev liked. The Eosian. Klee. Only Klee’s eyes were glowing red now, and he didn't sound like a Jedi at all.

You know who he is. And you know he’ll use you against her—just like D’Reev tried to do. He’s working with D’Reev. This is more of the fracking same. And you can’t let it happen.

“Polla,” Carth Onasi whispered. “Don’t. You know it’s a trap. Get out of there. Go back. We’ll be fine. I promise.” His voice choked. “I always come back, don’t I?”

His wife’s head shook. She made a moaning noise, under the mask. For a second, he thought she was speaking Shyriiwook, but if it was, the mask muffled her intonation too badly to understand.

He had to believe in her. We’ve been in worse spots, beautiful. That Sith scum can’t keep you locked up forever.

“You see him, don’t you? Your noble consort. So different from the last one, and yet—” her captor made a noise under his breath. “He is mine now too.”

I’m not. I’m not yours. Blasted Sith. I’m not yours I’m not yours, I’m not—

Light seemed to explode behind his eyelids, washing everything in cold white.

And then, the world had shifted. There was something long and cold and metal in his hand now. Carth realized he was holding a blaster to his heart, while Zaalbar growled with rage and Mission
cursed in the background.

“Come to me now, and you can have him back. Both of them. I’m quite generous—to my friends.”

The voice echoed. Doubled. Carth looked from side to side and realized the Zabrak kids still flanked him. Both of them with red, glowing eyes. Both speaking in unison.

Like I was, I was too a second ago.

But I’m not now. I’m me. I’m me.

“Revan,” Carth whispered. “You know we can get out of this. “Polla. Don’t come. It’s a trap. You know it’s a trap.”

Her head turned towards his, covered in metal. Her bruised eye was full of tears. She shook her head.

How many impossible situations have we been in, beautiful? I have faith. Faith in you. If you don’t come to Yavin, they've got nothing. Remember that.

The blaster had a safety. Carth thumbed it off and fired at the communications console, exploding the Hawk’s links to the outside in a shower of sparks.

“I wasn’t finished!” The Zabrak cried out. Both of them in unison. And then, abruptly, their eyes stopped glowing. Zepth stumbled on his feet and Takan wiped his eyes.

Carth sagged backwards, snapping the blaster back on his belt. The comm chair loomed up behind him, tilted backwards when he half fell in it, muscles suddenly weak as a mukluk’s.

“Did He do that?” Zepth looked at Carth. “Was that Him, or you?”

“That was me, kid.” I can fight this. There’s got to be a way to fight this.

“You are a fool,” Takan muttered. But Carth thought he might look… almost impressed. Maybe there’s hope for you yet, kid. Maybe we can set us all free.

“You destroyed our comms.” Mission said. “There goes my idea of calling in Kashyyyk for help. It’s gonna take days to get something back online.”

“Why did you tell her not to go where we must?” Zaalbar groaned. “Why not make some plan, something the infidel Sithspawn cannot grasp?”

Carth’s head pounded, as he surveyed the ruin of the console. “I had to tell her. Even if she ignores it. Just like we have to go, even if it’s a trap.”

Just like we have to win. I don’t know how, but we have to.

“Setting in course to Yavin,” Mission clipped. “And trust me, if Suvam Tan’s working with these assholes I’m gonna strip the flesh from his bones.”

XXX

She ran through the Jedi quarters with Force-enhanced speed, sprinting towards the elevators and her other self before the Council realized she was gone.
Revan had expected Tenebrae. Maybe in the body of Master Klee, maybe as someone else.

She had killed Master Korr. She had been prepared to kill whoever it was that threatened Dar’Revan too. The relief she'd thought she felt at the woman’s possible death was nothing compared to the relief she felt that the woman was alive.

Her saber had been out and already lit before they registered: first the child strapped to his chest and then the man carrying the child: brown hair, stubbled, handsome face. Square jawed. His nose was sharper than Carth’s, his face longer. He was shorter, but they both had those regular, almost bland good looks that Polla had once found too boring and safe.

But not after Therion.

Growing up, Polla had never noticed Seiran Wen. Swoop mechanics turned farmers weren’t really her thing. Not when there was a universe of stars out there, and a good ship under her hands; and fellow smugglers willing to flatter, cajole and lie to get her in the sack and covering their trade runs for the price of a screw and a smile.

Seiran had been too safe, too sound, too boring; but flashes of their childhood intruded all the same: that time when they were eight and he'd coaxed her down from the tree; that time when they were twelve and he'd asked her to harvest dance and she'd turned him down flat as fields for her cousin Cefir. That time at fifteen, when he'd fixed her bike and she won tweener champion and he'd looked as proud as if he'd raced the course himself.

He'd grown broader since then, and the child strapped to his chest had his scowl, the same sharp nose and red-rimmed brown eyes. They both looked like they'd been crying. They both had that look—like they'd lost everything. And they were both here.

“Sei-ran,” she repeated. Her voice caught on the second syllable, adding it for formality, because his child’s nickname wasn't a man’s; and technically, they'd never met. “You—you’re…” Red-rimmed eyes and that look on his face. She could only think of one reason he might be here, and it was because his wife was not. “What happened?” She clipped her lightsaber back on her belt, hoping she hadn't scared the frack out of him already.

“Two of you?” He looked at Dar’Revan, and then at her, the frown settling on his face. “How the hell can there be two of you?”

“There's not.” Dar’Revan interrupted, before Revan could explain. “When I told you I was Revan before, I—”

“You told him you were Revan?” Revan interrupted. “Why the frack did you do that?”

“Because it is true. And he wanted Revan’s help. We had met before, in the Underground. He came here seeking Revan’s help to find his wife—”

“You... met them in the Underground? Did you meet her too? She was here too? Did you know?”

“Of course not!” Dar’Revan looked rattled. “I knew they were Deralian. They both sounded like Beya. Their son was sick, and they came to the Jedi clinic. They gave false names, and they recognized me, of course. But that happens so often, I didn't find their response unusual.”

“So you've been going around the Underground pretending to be me.”

“No, Fragment. That would only constrain my movements. Don't be a fool.” Dar’Revan glanced at the man again and switched abruptly to Rakatan. “Tell him whatever you like. But his wife went
missing impersonating *us.*”

*No.* Cold fear made her breath catch. The logic was there, even if it seemed impossible. “Master Korr said Klee had captured *you.*”

“Maybe they captured *her.*”

“How could they mistake her for us?”

Dar’Revan raised her eyebrow at the man, switching back to Basic. “Show her the holo.”

His face was a mask of pain when he handed it to Revan. His wedding ring was good, solid D’rrano coppa, squared and edged. “I don't understand,” he mumbled.

Revan wondered if he was going into shock. She looked down at the holo, her heart sinking all the way to her toes.

“Why is she dressed like… that?” There were other questions she wanted to ask too, like why the frack they'd come here instead of hiding out safe on the Defalli Rim.

“We needed credits to get off this sewer rock,” Seiran mumbled. “Pollie thought she could… her old boss, Suvam Tan, he already thought she was… you. One of you. Offered her an infinite credit line. She wanted to buy a ship.”

“I would have bought her a ship.” Anything. *You were supposed to be safe, Polla. You weren't supposed to be here.*

“You…” his eyes met hers. “You… you're the one they kept warning us against? Or is that her?”

“What? Who kept—”

“Everyone. Aemelie, that aunt and uncle of yours, your cousin—”

“She's not my cousin. Dar’Revan’s not my cousin.” *Aunt Yancy? But she's dead. “I don't have any cousins. Polla’s the one with family.”*

Dar’Revan almost laughed. “You’ve been trying to shake down all of her relatives? Was this before or after Polla Organa tried to extort ten million credits from the Exchange?” Her mouth twisted, and she looked at Revan. “You do have a cousin. Vrook has a son. You’re acquainted already. Mekel Jin.”

“What?” *Mekel’s Vrook's son? How the frack did that happen?* Under different circumstances, Revan might have laughed. As it was— “It doesn't matter. How could Polla be so stupid?” She glared at Seiran. “Why the frack didn't you stop her?”

“I tried,” he muttered. “If you're so concerned, why was everyone you know so convinced you wouldn't help us?”

“I don't know.” *Did he say Aemelie? Aemelie Ordo? “Wait. Did you come here with Therion D’Cainen? With the Mandalorians?”* Anger sparked. “Did you come here to sell *her* story to the holos just like Therion was?”

“It was *her* story,” the man snapped. “She had a right.”

*A right to strip me of my very existence?* She met Dar’Revan's eyes, trying not to notice the glint of approval there, as if the woman had reached the same conclusions Revan couldn't help but know.
“If she'd gone public, I would have lost everything,” she said. “Or my father-in-law would have had her discredited and tanked. Maybe killed.”

“Dahdadada,” Polla’s son said. “Phbbt.”

“How are there two of you?” Seiran demanded. “You're… different than she is.” His warm brown eyes weren't warm now. They were narrowed and angry when they looked at Revan. “You knew me. She didn't.”

“I'm the one the Jedi mind wiped. They gave me Polla’s memories. She…”

“I was given Revan’s memories,” the Dar'Revan admitted. “The real Revan. Not your smuggler.” She switched to Rakatan again. “A palatable lie would be safer for him and the child. Can you make him forget?”

“Shut the frack up,” Revan said in Standard. “Does Tenebrae have Polla?”

Those same green eyes regarded her own. Dar'Revan raised an eyebrow. “You tell me. Marla Korr said Master Klee had Sheris in custody?”

“Yes.” Revan thought back. “Or… she said Klee had gone to meet someone who had Sheris in custody.”

“No one took me into custody. Someone did kidnap this Polla Organa. The conclusion seems obvious.”

So did the result. Her heart sank. “I’m sorry, Sei.”

“What?” He shook his head. Polla’s son wailed. “No. You don't get to do that. My wife’s not dead. She's smart. Pollie isn't dead. She can work this somehow. She’s not dead.”

“She's a null,” Dar’Revan said. “Even if Klee doesn't notice the change in her appearance, don't you think he might notice that she doesn't have the Force?” She paused. “She doesn't, correct?”

“Right.” Revan and Seiran said the word at the same time. He glanced at her, startled.

“They test for it,” Seiran added. “In Derran schools. I have a little, nothing much. Pollie didn't.”

“I wonder if the Jedi thought her blindness would suppress your ability, Fragment?” Dar’Revan looked like she was pondering a totally fracking useless tangent.

“If Seiran has it a little, he might be right. Knowing she's not dead.” Maybe it was Revan’s own wishful thinking. I never wanted you dead, Polla. I still don't.

“Or he wants to believe his wife is alive, so he has the hope to go on living for their son,” Dar’Revan said. “All sentients want to believe the best—especially about their families.”

“She's a real stack of laughs, your friend,” Seiran muttered to Revan.

“I guess it probably helps, being an asshole when you're conquering the galaxy,” she shot back.

Polla’s husband snorted. “That's something she'd say.”

“I… I know.” Revan met his eyes. “Do you really think… she's alive?”

“Mahahm-MAH,” the baby said. His puzzled stare was the echo of his father's.
“I think I’d… know, if she were dead.” Seiran Wen bit his lip. “She never knew; but that night she crashed the canyon wall—I don't know if you remember—”

Black rock rushing up at her, pain like lightning, the fall.

“I remember.”

“I found her.” His head dropped to stare at his son, hands cupping the boy’s small fists. “I just… somehow I just knew. When her swoop didn't come back, I knew.”

“It’s possible,” Dar’Revan broke in. “But she still could be anywhere on this planet.”

“No.” It was much worse. “Master Korr said they were going someplace else. On a ship. They could be anywhere in the galaxy.”

“She's one woman.” Dar’Revan’s expression didn't match the coldness in her voice. “You can't upend an entire galaxy for just one woman.”

*Not the entire galaxy, just a piece of it.* Revan stared at her other self. “Is it better doing it for some kind of fracking cause and then being fracking wrong?”

She'd hit a nerve, that was obvious when the woman’s face paled. “No.”

“We have to try.” She looked at Seiran. “We can get logs of outgoing ships. Circulate descriptions. Sith are messy. Maybe there are bodies… unusual activity.” Something occurred to her. “If they think she's me, they won't take any chances. She'd be in restraints, strong ones. Force disruptors don't grow on trees. There has to be a trail of some kind—we just need to find it.”

“We need someone capable of analyzing a large amount of data quite quickly then.” Dar’Revan folded her arms. Her eyes narrowed. “Can you think of any sentient capable of that kind of data extraction, Fragment?”

*Something in her voice*— “HK could do some of it—once I reassemble—”

“Reassemble?”

“He tried to stop me. From coming in here. I think I severed his main power converters. “And *his torso.*

Dar’Revan sighed. “Unfortunate, considering he's our son’s primary defender.”

“I'm our son's—” and *Malak.* But Revan remembered the conversation they'd had the night before. “I’ll fix him. Before we… before I go.”

“Go where?” Seiran scoffed. “You expect me to believe the two of you are going to scour the galaxy for my wife? What—one planet at a time?”

“Do you want to give me remote access to the Rakatan mainframe *now,* Fragment, or do you think we have time to stop on Kashyyyk?” Dar’Revan paused. “And I’ll fix HK. Your technical skills are fine for jerivacing a broken cycle; but my droid requires a more delicate touch.”

*Kashyyyk. How does she know—?*

And then Revan realized. *I told her. That datapad. She read it.*

“Carth has the remote. I think. He went with Mission on the *Hawk.* And you should… you should
stay here. With Malachor.”

*I can’t believe I’m trusting you with him. But I don’t have a choice, do I?*

“And by Mission you mean the Kashyyyk computer you imbued somehow with Mission Vao’s personality.” Dar’Revan tapped her fingers on her belt. She was wearing a lightsaber now, Revan noted.

*Who gave her that? Malak? The Jedi?*

“Yes.”

“Well. Comm him. Get through. Immediately. We need that access.”

*You're not in charge.*

Except, Dar’Revan was right. They needed Mission.

“I’m coming,” Seiran interrupted. “Wherever you're going. You might need me to find her, and I might know if she—if she gets hurt or if she’s—if something happens.”

*Something will happen.* No matter how brave or clever Polla Organa was, there was no way she could fool the Sith Emperor. Frack, Polla didn't even know there was a Sith Emperor.

*I’m sorry Polla. You poor, pathetic fool. What the frack were you thinking?*

“What about your son?” The baby stared at Revan, one hand opening and closing, a tiny wave. She waved back, slowly. Had Malachor done things like that too? “You can't risk him. It's not safe.”

“We’ll find some nursemaid. A foster.” Dar’Revan’s voice was grim. “Nowhere near Malachor. No connections to Jedi. Maybe on one of the exurban orbitals.”

“I'm not leaving my son—” Seiran began.

“Have you seen what vacuum does to a child’s face?” Dar’Revan interrupted. “I have.”

“I trust her,” Seiran muttered, gesturing towards Revan. “Not you.”

*Smart of you.* “But she’s right.” She was. For once, it wasn't even galling to admit. “I don't want to leave my son either.” I *just got him back.* She took a deep breath. “But for your wife, I will.”

“You're doing all of this for Polla?” His voice was confused.

“I owe her—”

“No,” Dar’Revan interrupted. “We’re doing this to stop Tenebrae.” Her lips were set in a grim line. Her expression already seemed light years away. “But if we can save your wife, we will.”

No doubt Dar’Revan had some fantastic plan to stop the immortal, unkillable Sith Emperor.

*If it was that easy, you would have done it before, Revan.*

“You're not coming,” she repeated.

Green eyes glared into her own. “Oh, but I am, Fragment. You can't do this without me.”

Xxx
“You’re a mess.” His voice was different. Same register, but Upper Crust’s accent was gone, replaced by someone with flatter inflection.

Polla wasn't sure how long she’d been staring at the fracking ceiling hoping for a miracle, but she was pretty sure this new voice wasn’t it.

She lifted her chin, squinting her one good eye towards the light. The same exact face stared down at her. No red eyes now. Still ordinary.

“I’m going to tilt the crate down now.” His new voice was strangely gentle. “When I reach inside, the ysalamiri field will block my Force as well. I trust you realize what that means?”

*That if I were really Revan Starfire I could kill you with some kind of ancient Jedi fighting trick?*

What came out of Polla’s mouth was only an involuntary whimper.

“Precisely.” The man sighed. Her world tilted. The womprats grown on sticks slapped against her legs. A sickly wet feeling seeped into the cheap fabric of her robes.

“Hold still.” His hands reached under her arms, sliding her out. Polla tried to extend her legs, and found them locked by the restraints. “I don't suppose you can blame the blinds, for their overreaction; but I apologize for the indignity, Revan.”

How would Revan Starfire react? Polla gritted her teeth and tried to look above it all.

But then she heard the hitch of surprise in her captor’s breathing as her body came into the light.

*Should have sprung for that skin dye. I’m scrapped already.*

The metal piece snapped off her mouth, the visor from her eyes. She opened her mouth wide, gasping, breathing in and out, still struggling. Her arms felt half numb, locked behind her back.

“Oh, no.” His voice was sad. Shocked. “Who are you?”

“Mis… a… mistake,” Polla said. Her voice felt ragged, sour taste in her mouth. “I'm sorry. I don't know anything! I didn't hear anything! This is all… a mistake!”

“Did she send you? Did Revan do this?” The man moved her shoulders, reaching behind her. Suddenly, there was a loud click, and Polla’s hands spring free.

Then, they flopped uselessly, even as her mind willed them to move.


*Would he be telling me to wiggle my fingers if he wanted me dead?*

“Hold still while I free your legs.” He bent down, close enough for Polla to see the lightsaber dangling from his belt.

*If my arms worked I could grab it and turn it on. How the frack do those things turn on?*

She didn't see a switch.

“You must be a null,” her captor said. “No Force-user could be conscious. But why did she send you?”
“Nobody sent me! I'm... just an actress,” Polla lied. “I don't know anything! Those goons just grabbed me!”

Her captor frowned. “The Genoharadan are supposed to be incorruptible. You're suggesting that I believe they’d capture a poor copy of Revan Starfire instead of the original? As an error? No.” He shook his head slowly. “This must be by design. Hers? Maybe you're a blind. A test for me?”

“I don't care.” Her voice wavered. Sensation was returning to her floppy hands. She stank of piss. “Please. You've got to let me go!”

“There is nowhere to go, child.” The man sounded sad. “This ship’s destination is preprogrammed. Even if I wanted to free you, I lack the means.”

“You have a lightsaber,” she pointed out. “Cut a fracking hole in the bulkhead, like on the vids.”

“And then what?” He raised an eyebrow.

“We’d put on pressurized suits. We haven’t made the jump to hyperspace yet. We're in the lanes, set off distress beacons, something—”

And then she felt it, the ship’s shift: hyperspace. The engines were good ones, whisper-soft, but the coils ticked into that rhythm, steady as bedrock.

“No,” the man said. He sighed heavily. “This is an unforeseen complication.”

“Do you ever say anything not fracking obvious?” She wiped her nose with a floppy hand, concentrating hard to wiggle her fingers. One moved. A little.

The man sighed. “When I leave the ysalamiri’s null field, my master will return to this body. His mind overlooks many small details; but your imitation of Revan will not fool him. Not for long.”

“I could wear a mask.” Was this guy... helping? “Look, whatever this is, I just want out, okay? Please! I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!”

“Yes, you were.” His voice was grim and distracted. “When you can stand, go wash yourself. The fresher is the second door to the right. No one should meet their fate... uncleanly.”


“We all make mistakes.” The man sighed. “Some of us are still trying to fix them.” He nodded slowly, and reached for her hand. “May I?”

“What are you going to do?”

“This.” His hand was large covering hers entirely, and his fingers moved, rubbing circulation back into her numb fingers. “My name is Master Dalos Klee. I’m a member of the Jedi Council.”

“And a secret Sith?” She pointed out. “You kind of seemed pretty evil, when your eyes went red and everything.”

“That... happens,” He smiled at her in a way that looked like it was supposed to be reassuring. “Unfortunately. But it will not happen again, as long as I’m near the ysalamiri.”

“They look like womprats,” she offered. “On sticks. Why are they on sticks?”
“They grow like that. When they’re younger, they’re mobile, but sessile period comes with maturity.”

“Oh.” This was surreal. Her fingers moved, and she pulled her hand away.

Without breaking her gaze, he took her other one. “How are your feet?” he asked.

“Better.” She could feel her toes.

“Give it a moment,” he said, “and then try and stand. Do you have a name?”

“Yes. My name is Seriina Starshine.” Polla didn’t have to fake the tears. Of relief? “I’m an actress.”
Chapter 44 / With the Beast Inside

Malak sensed them instantly. Their presence was as clear as the weight of his own steps, the tension in his own body--

_Not your body. Asshole._

The alley was one in a long row of backways and service entrances in the dimness of the industrial sublevels; stinking and dripping from the condensers; with holographic advertisements for its establishments flashing like grenades overhead. It was, in fact, an alley much like the one where he’d met Mekel Jin in the first place.

_I have what you asked for_, he thought back at them. _These jewels are worth more than either of your hides._

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Mekel Jin sneered. “Flash types like us?” He was closer than Malak had thought, had moved quickly, slipping in and out of the shadows as if he was born to it. “Moms gave me a brochure for some outfit recruiting kids like us. Some kind of new training academy, she said. And the Mando'ade. They want a piece of me too.”

_Just get the credits._ Dustil’s voice in their mind. Flat and angry, almost bored. _No point in kissing his ass._

_Don’t make it so easy for me to make an ass joke._

_Don't make ass jokes when we’re facing down a fracking Sith--_

--_pansic. He's just a pantic._

Malak ignored the jape. He pulled out the box with his mother’s jewels. “As I said, these jewels are worth more than either of you.”

“Yeah. Right.” Mekel Jin stepped squarely in front of him, folding his arms. One side of the boy’s mouth pulled up in a sneer. “Thanks.” He shoved the box in the pocket of his outer robe. “We’ll be lucky to get a thousand in the Underground. They’re probably chipped.”

“Perhaps.” That hadn’t occurred to Malak, but of course they would be: encoded with tracers to protect against theft. “But you have always been resourceful. I'm sure you’ll find a way around that.”

“Yeah,” the boy muttered. “We're resourceful, all right.”

_Try it. Try it now._

_Wait. No. I want to ask him about Revan._

_What do you want to know? She's your fracking cousin, you can't still think she's hot--_

_Frack you. That's not what I think! Do you think she's going with Aemelie and them or is she staying--_

_Does it matter?_
Well she's fracking married to your dads. You tell me.

Frack him.

“Our business is concluded,” Malak interrupted their useless dialogue.

“Oh?” The other side of Mekel’s mouth turned up, and he advanced, voice pitching softer, blurring and losing its arch Coruscanti tones. “Two of us, and one of you. I like our odds.”

Malak had to laugh. “The two of you are no match for someone with my training.” His fingers flexed, and he watched with satisfaction as the Coruscanti boy stopped short, hand going involuntarily towards his throat.

The resultant pressure in his on windpipe was a small price to pay—or so he thought until, incredibly, Mekel Jin began to laugh, seemingly unaffected by the Force grip closing around his neck.

“Are you fracking kidding? Telos and I used to Force choke each other for fun.”

*Not really fun, Mekk. Just when you were being a prick.*

*I bet I can still make him pass out before we do--*

The boy’s hands closed in a fist, and suddenly, Malak heard the ugly sound of his own breath trapped and rattling in his lungs.

*Stay calm, I need to stay calm.*

He struggled for composure, remembering his own training. A Jedi could survive for some time in vacuum, without oxygen. All he had to do was slow his own heart, reduce the need to breathe--

*Now. Do it now. He’s off guard, it makes him weak, we can. Do it now--*

Hands closed hard on Malak’s arms, and Mekel Jin landed on top of him, knocking him back. Malak’s breath rushed out in a startled gasp and then--

Xxx

“That's better,” Jedi Master Whatsit Klee said, when Polla came out of the fresher wearing the only clothes she found in the cabinet: black robes that looked uncannily like something from one of the Revan vids. The Jedi smiled slightly, as if Polla had pleased him, which was just as creepy as everything else on this ship.

This blind ship. She’d taken a little detour on the way back to the main cabin: what controls existed there were all solid ceramicka and locked. Maybe you could take a hammer or something and smash them to get to the real navboards, but if you fried the system, then what the frack would you do then?

*Drift until the scrubbers stopped working or you hit something big enough to take out the shields--*

“The belt is all wrong.” The Jedi Sith guy cleared his throat. “You start wrapping the sash backwards, then it ties in the front.” He frowned. “There's a set of over robes as well. You should be wearing both sets, one over the other.”

“Can't you dress me after you kill me?” Polla snapped. *Now, that's a cheerful thought.* “
The man stopped the lecture, and coughed. He actually looked embarrassed. “We have time,” he said slowly. “Some small time. Do you want to waste it discussing unpleasantness?”

She'd hidden the knife Aemelie had given her what seemed like a million years ago in the sleeve of her robe. It wasn't weighted right to throw. Polla was pretty sure she could shoot a real person. Maybe throw a knife at them, if it was her or them, but stabbing was… messy.

And what if it didn't work?

*Abasen. Seiran. I have to do something. “You're not going to let me go?” She didn’t have to force the tears. “Please?”*

“If I could, I would.” Jedi Master frowned at her. “I can make both of our deaths painless, Seriina. Even without the Force.”

“Both?” She tried to scoff. “Don't kill yourself over me.”

“My master does not know my thoughts, but I would be questioned.” He shook his head. “Better if our ship is presumed lost in hyperspace. We will, at least, have bought the real Revan and her conspirators some time.”

*Frack the real Revan. Her throat was dry. “What do you mean… lost?”*

“I will sabotage the life support,” he murmured, as if that wasn't insane. “Temperatures will drop precipitously. It shouldn’t take long.”

Polla shivered. Every spacer’s worst nightmare. One long frozen scream. “Please.” She tried again. “I have a son.”

“Death is quite painless this way.” The fracking crazy Jedi actually smiled, like he was doing her a favor. “When our ship reaches its destination, our circumstance will appear accidental. Your surface resemblance to the real Revan may even be enough to trick the Emperor, at least for a time.”

“Did you do it yet?” Was it her imagination, or was the air getting colder already?

“It will be fast,” he said, not fracking answering. “I see no alternative.”

Polla took a step back, away from him. “Don't fracking come near me!” The handle of the knife bumped against her wrist.

The crazy guy smiled sadly. “My master would torture you, if he discovered this deceit. The Force can do terrible things to a mind. He will crawl inside your mind, infect your thoughts—”

“Frack you!” Polla repeated. “I'll take my chances, okay? This Sith master of yours can't be any worse than dying! Or you.” The knife hilt slid into her hand and she gestured with it, jabbing the blade towards him. “You want to kill yourself, go ahead. But leave me alone!”

*Abasen. She should have been back by now. The heaviness in her breasts told her time had passed. Maybe even a day. He’ll be crying for me. What will Sei do if he won't take a bottle?*

Jedi Asshole’s voice was detached. “I am sorry, Seriina. Put down your weapon.”

“Tell that to my son.” She wiped her eyes. “Tell my son you’re sorry, you fracking piece of banthashit.”
We have a little time,” he repeated, stepping forward. Something made a chittering noise, and she realized he'd stuck an one of those womp-rat ysalamiri in his belt. As some kind of weapon? She stared at it, confused. “Sit with me, Seriina. I don't know if you come from a world with any ceremony regarding the passage into death, but as Jedi we believe--”

“You're no Jedi!” she yelled. Her voice sounded dull and tiny in the small room. Was the air getting thinner already? “Jedi might fracking mind wipe someone, or steal their memories, but they don’t murder them in cold blood!”

“We Jedi do what must,” he argued. Actually arguing with her. “When I became Tenebrae’s host, I joined a cabal of like-minded others. We steer his path as best we can. Revan knew this. She was our ally, even if my own part in our effort was hidden from her eyes.”

How do you stab someone? *Aim for the eyes or the balls,* her shooting instructor had always said about blasters. Different sents had hearts in different places, but you needed to debilitate so they couldn't fight back. Would that work against Eosian Jedi? Frack, did Eosians even have balls? In the same place?

“Please. My son’s just a baby. I need to see him again.” The tears were real, desperation was real. How the frack did you kill someone?

*If I fail he’ll kill me for sure. I can't. I can't fail. It's him or me.*

“I am sorry,” the man said again. Like it mattered. He gestured again. “Would it bring you peace to speak of your son?”

Was the air getting thin? Polla felt dizzy, either from fear or something worse. “No. Is that his name?” she asked. “Tanny-brae? He’s your boss?”

“Tenebrae. Yes.” The creature on his belt chittered again.

“He possesses people. Makes their eyes glow.” Repeating facts didn't make them less terrifying. “He's scum. And so are you.”

“I oppose him “ the man repeated stubbornly. “There are more of us than he can imagine. Revan--the real Revan--was our leader.”

“You have a funny way of opposing sents. Kidnapping people and then killing them.”

“It is necessary.” Was it her imagination, or did he seem less certain?

“You can't do this,” she repeated. Weight was all wrong for throwing with the knife. Aim for the eyes? “You just said you’re fighting your boss, right? You’re good? He’s evil?”

“Child,” the man said gently. “If I had the Force, I could ease your fear.”

“But you won't?” She took a step closer, still waving the knife at him. He looked completely unconcerned. Would he just let her stab him in the eye? “You could use your magic Force to kill me too, but you won’t? And killing me is because you're good?”

*And then what? Then what are you gonna do how is it going to be any better?*

“If I drop the null field generated by the ysalamiri, my master will return.” Smiling, his face was as round as a moon. “No doubt he is very interested in speaking with Revan. You are a very poor imitation, and he is not kind to those he believes have tricked him. I am sure you can see why death
with me is preferable to such a fate.”

“Oh? Yeah. Sure.” *Fate.*

Maybe she could kill the Jedi with the knife before he disarmed her, or did whatever Jedi did when people waved knives at them. They trained in close combat, didn't they? All Polla knew how to do was shoot.

She weighed the knife in her hand and stepped closer, almost arms length now.

“Child, give me the weapon.” Jedi Asshole sighed. “I know it is small comfort, but your sacrifice is necessary. Vital, even, for us winning the war. For the real Revan Starfire. We all do what we must.”

“Not the first Jedi to use a line like that with me,” she muttered. Not to Polla herself, but that line about sacrifice was on a few of the Revan vids. And they had, of course. Used Polla’s sacrifice before.

Glowy red-eyes hadn't done that. In fact, glowy red-eyes seemed pretty convinced she was Revan. “Frack them. And frack you!”

The Eosian was a half-meter away. Incredibly, he extended his hand, palm up, as if Polla would be dumb enough to put the knife in it. “Give me the weapon,” he repeated.

“No,” she snapped. It wasn’t a throwing knife, but she didn’t have to throw it very far now. Her aim was true.

Xxx

Pressure, hands squeezing his arms like a vise. Ground under his back, wet and cold. Someone had landed, warm and solid and reassuring on his chest. His breath heaved in and out, doubled.

Dustil opened his eyes and saw a stubbled chin, then Mekel’s black eyes staring back into his, close enough to make his own eyes cross. The force of the attack had knocked them both to the ground.

“We did it?” Talking felt funny in his own voice, like being almost alone in his own head. “We fricking did it.”

“Yeah,” Mekel whispered. He was smiling back. The weight of his body shifted a little, but he didn't move, didn't roll away. His hair brushed Dustil’s forehead, and his breath was warm. “We did.”

“We’re stronger than him.” An intoxicating thought. They both breathed in at the same time, and Mekel started to laugh.

“Now what?” Dustil whispered. This close, he could see that Mekel’s right eye had flecks of green in the dark. This close, he could feel both of them, breathing in unison. It felt strange, like parts of his body were just waking up again, mixed with the feeling through the bond of Mekel’s body too.

“Now we do whatever we want.” Mekk smiled crookedly. “Anything we want we can take.”

*Take anything.* The thought floated between them, greedy and excited as a fist.

*What do you want?* Mekel didn't move. His eyes were enormous. He licked his lips, suddenly
nervous. Dustil could feel that too, feel it because he was suddenly nervous too--

Dustil cleared his throat. Such an awkward angle. The other boy was solid on top of him, but his face was too far away. Dustil lifted his head to get closer, reaching his hand up to the line of Mekk’s jaw.

Mekel’s eyes widened. He leaned down. His breath smelled like mint and musk, and something darker. Stubble scraped Dustil’s cheek. They kissed, and Mekk’s breath rushed out and Dustil opened his mouth, as the bond opened more.

*Is this--*

--*Shut up.*

Somehow, they rolled over, so that Dustil was the one on top, fumbling with their robes and the Force. He felt his own skin under Mekel’s fingers, and then it wasn’t thought that drove them; just a rapidly increasing need.

“I-I didn’t know that you--” Mekel’s voice stuttered, and Dustil silenced it with his mouth.

*Shut up.*

*Did you always?*

*I don’t know.* It didn't seem to matter. The bond flared between them. It was different than kissing Mission; because Dustil wasn't just Dustil—not now. He heard their breath, breathing harder now, in unison and then--

*Fools! Mindless rutting in an alley?* Malak’s disgust washed over them both like a bath of cold water.

Dustil rolled away, scrambling to his feet, a sudden, sickening nausea twisting his guts. Everything felt off somehow, as if Mekel’s body had become more familiar than his own, as if a part of him was still trying to be *there*, and not here.

Across from him, Mekel was standing now too, wiping his breath, robes open, chest exposed, his face pale and shocked. *Get the frack out. Leave us alone!*

*Fools.* Malak’s mental voice sounded tired now. *You thought yourselves rid of me so easily?*

“Just fracking leave!” Even as he spoke, Dustil realized it wasn't enough: Malak wasn't gone forever--somewhere in the back of both of their minds the Sith Lord was still there. His anger and fear pulsed like a third heartbeat, caught between their two.

“You okay, Telos?” Mekel looked wary. *I hear him too. How can he still be fracking here?*

“Yes, I just--” spots danced in front of his eyes. Dustil rubbed them. His knees felt boneless, wobbly. “Give me a sec.”

*Frack off, Malak, frack off this is none of your fracking business--*

“I've got you--” And then suddenly Mekel’s hands slid around his shoulders, under his arm. Dead weight in them suddenly sagging. Dustil tensed his muscles, holding the dead weight up--helping Mekel to hold the dead weight up--

“No.” Mekk’s voice. “You're not--” *Get back. Get back in your own fracking body, before he--*
Fools! Malak’s anger was an ion storm, beating against them. The world dissolved into spots, Dustil felt Mekel's body stumble, even as his own jerked, half out of his control--

“No!” His own mouth. His own voice. Mine. Mine. Get out get out get out!

Dustil sagged backwards, landing against a wall almost as greasy and rank as the floor. Malak retreated, like a tide, like a duelist, sizing up his opponent for weakness. Somehow Dustil could feel him still, circling uneasily, tugging through the bond.

“He's in it.” Mekk’s voice. Mekel had fallen to the ground somehow too, was getting up now, dusting himself off. His friend made a face, wiping his hands on his robes. “The bond. He's in it.”

Between us. Their eyes met. Both of them could feel him there, trapped like a perma-moth under ice. Malak’s rage was wordless now. And mixed with fear.

“That’s… kind of a buzz kill.” Dustil’s face felt hot.

“Yeah,” Mekel snorted.

“Can we use it? Him?” Mekel would know. He was the one who knew when to use sents. Ban. His mother. Dustil himself. “We can, right? It's power? He's powerful?”

“I don't know.” Mekel’s mouth thinned, and he shoved his hands in his pockets. Without even seeing, Dustil knew he was holding Bastila Shan’s old lightsaber, like a fracking stuffed toy, like it gave him a feeling of safety. “Let's get these jewels fenced first, okay? Can you walk?”

“Yeah.” He took a step towards Mekel, but Mekel took a step back.

“I think it’s… easier for him. The closer we are. It gets... blurred. Doesn’t it?”

It does. Dustil nodded. “Yeah. Okay. So we’ll fence the goods. You know somebody?” He knew Mekel did. He'd seen the plan in their thoughts, back when they’d had one brain between them. He took another step closer, and Mekel took another step back.

“Maybe... better if I go alone, Telos? You have a famous face.”

You're leaving? Again? Korriban Dustil would have just laughed, but they'd been through too much banthashit since.

I don't want to. Mekel frowned at him. No fracking knowing what trouble you'll get up to in your own.

Frack you, okay? I'm coming. Padawan robes had hoods. Dustil pulled his up over his hair, tilting his head down slightly. You're the one that picked that fight with the Echani sword dancer.

Not how I remember it. He wasn't gonna do anything real before you asked about the underwear--

My son. I need to see my son again. This can't be the last time--

Malak again, desperate now. Dustil’s ears rang, and for a second, everything blurred. Not the ship this time: instead, a room Dustil had never seen--something out of a nightmare. Naked bodies in tanks floating in something viscous and dark and red. When he looked down at his arms, they were armored, his breath hissed out strangely and something metal was shoved in his mouth--

Telos! Mekel’s voice. Power. Dragging him back. His mouth tasted copper, and somewhere, someone was screaming--
Alive. Those sents in the tanks. They're alive--

Then Dustil’s lungs heaved, his own breath rushing in, and he stumbled again, hands going to his throat.

Mekel was closer than he has been a moment ago, but suddenly, but when Dustil reached for him, he backed away.

This is all fracked. Mekel shook his head slowly, like he was trying to shake their voices out. “You were--for a second, it was him again.”

I know. I was-- Dustil didn't know where that was. Some fracked up place. His mouth still tasted like copper and he realized he'd bitten his tongue. “He try anything?”

“Not like you did.” Mekk raised one eyebrow. Dustil had practiced that for hours in the mirror and never mastered it. “He said he was going to stop us, something about his son….”

Poor kid. Not his fault who his parents are. That thought hung between them awkwardly for a second, until Dustil realized it had been his own. “Tough tarentatek-tits! The kid’s not our problem.”

“Yeah, he’s not.” But Mekk was frowning at him. “You sure you're okay?” You look like crap.

Thanks. Frack you too. Dustil wiped his mouth. “I'm fine. We’ll figure this out.”

Mekel nodded. “Okay. Just stay back. Follow me. We need to figure this out.”

“Smart.” Dustil’s throat felt dry. “Get some credits.” His head felt like it was stuffed with silick, but at least it felt like his head. His hands… he closed one into a fist and then opened it again. My hands. These are my hands. My hands. My head. My fracking body--

Fools! Fools! Malak’s furious and futile thought echoed in their skulls like a fading scream.

Dustil rubbed his temples. “Asshole,” he muttered.


Dustil wondered if he looked as embarrassed as he felt. “Okay.”

Mekel didn’t look back.

They’d cleared the alley, and were halfway down another of access halls before Dustil worked up the courage to speak again.

“What just happened, I was--I’m not sure what that was.”

“It was… okay.” Mekel finally slowed down, letting Dustil catch up, but edging sideways, hugging the tunnel wall with more than a meter between them. “If we can't get him out, we can fracking use him. Okay?”

“Okay.” Malak wasn't what I meant. He moved faster to keep up. “Are you… was that okay?” It had seemed--it had seemed to be okay.

“Yeah.” Mekel turned, looking at him. His face was flushed. “It was… more than okay. You were-
-I just don't want the audience.”

“I know.” He didn't have to say it, he could feel that Mekel knew, if Dustil wanted he could feel everything Mekel knew. It was different, being this open. “This is….” What is this? What are we?

Mekel snorted. “Two sents who are about to be rich. I hope.” You want to figure the rest out now? Here?

I don't--I don't know. “My father, I think he still has that conapt.” Even if he didn't know where the man himself actually was.

“You offering to put me up?” Mekk’s eyebrow raised. “Sounds better than D’Reev’s creepy Jedi pen, at least for tonight.” Then tomorrow we can figure out where Aemelie went with the rest of the Mandalorians. Now that you're back we can blow this fracked planet.

No! Malak’s voice. Was it weaker now? A part of Dustil's mind seemed to flex, like pushing the Sith Lord even farther away.

Go back to your room, Dustil thought at him. Go back to your room of creepy dead sents. Leave us the frack alone.

“Frack off,” Mekel added. He didn't have to say Malak’s name. It was obvious who he meant to them both. At least, Dustil thought, his friend’s hero worship of the Dark Lord of the Sith seemed to be over.

“You want to go with them.” Dustil said it out loud, even though they both knew what Mekel wanted. “You want to be one of the Mandalorians. You fricking serious?”

Belonging. It was a safe thought. A secure thought. But the Mandalorians--

“Yeah.” Mekel looked at him. His mouth twitched. There was a girl there too, somewhere in his head. Another one. “I do, Telos.”

“But…” Dustil struggled to explain. If it wasn't for them, my mother would be alive and none of this would have fricking happened.

“ Oh.” A part of Mekel pulled farther away too. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, guess you'd have a pretty sweet life now.” He turned all the way forward, stepping up his pace.

I'd have a flash career too. Uncle Kris had great plans for me on the bee and ee slide, and Moms always said I'd make a killing if I fricking applied myself--

“I didn't mean it like that.” How do you say things, when they're just known? And how that frack could Dustil talk about any of it when they still had Malak between them, seething, like a broken insulator. “But I can't leave. My father--”

“Where the frack is your father?”

The question Dustil didn't know. He tried to make a joke. “Maybe your father knows?”

Mekel didn't look back at him, but his stride lengthened, forcing Dustil into a jog to keep up. His limbs felt too tight and strange.

I don't have a father. Lamar was a sperm donor. That's all. That's it.

“He seemed to want to be more.”
“His problem.” Mekk’s voice was flat, but they both knew it was a lie. “Not mine.”

Xxx

It took a second before anything happened. A long second, long enough for Polla to stumble backwards and practically fall on her ass, while the bifurcated body of the womp-rat fell to the ground, along with the knife she’d thrown.

The Jedi’s eyes widened. “Child,” he repeated. “What have you d--”

And then his face went as blank as if he’d been hit with a reset switch.

And then, his eyes began to glow. Red as a bloody sun.

Xxx

“The job is really quite simple,” said Helena Shan. “Crowds are so restless these days. I just need an armed companion to accompany me on my excursions.”

“Of course.” The pay was half of what being a CorSec guard had paid, but when Cally Lee had walked off the job with the others, she’d walked from her pension too. It hadn’t seemed to matter then, back when they’d all decided to become space pirates, but now that she was back on seething Coruscant, credits had come back to being what mattered.

“Good.” Helena Shan nodded, smiling serenely. Then she turned back to the vid screen, as if Cally had already ceased to exist.

Xxx

“Ouch, Mom! This Rhodese itch just won't stop making my scales fall off!”

“Don’t worry, eggling. You’re in good hands now, with Bondo’s new and improved kolto formulation: the only kolto formulation officially licensed and approved by the Selkath Authority, and the scientists at I.E., Limited!”

“I.E. who?”

“I love you! Look! Just rub a little on your scales and that pain will just slide away. See?”

“Wow! I feel a lot better already!”

Xxx

Helena Shan, the mother of Bastila Shan, late of the Star Forge, sighed, very heavily.

“Ma'am?” Cally cleared her throat. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am.” Helena turned her head away from the screen and frowned at her. “Quite well. I'm expecting a friend tonight. Do you have any experience as a server?”

“No.” Cally wasn't going to admit that she did. Signing on with a rig slinging caff and muffas to the morning corporates was how she'd gotten off Dantooine in the first place.

“Oh.” The woman frowned.

Xxx
(Both singing.) “When you’ve got a little cut, and it just won’t heal--you need Bondo: the newly improved and patented formula of kolto!”

“Bondo gets the lond-oh!”

“Bondo has been approved for sents of all persuasions, on all planets in the Republic, with the exceptions of Byss. Clinical trials in Bith and their subspecies are still underway, in accordance with the Advanced Pharmacological Act of 2012, local Bith calendar, and the--”

“We interrupt this broadcast with some breaking news. Now from our station. Jokka Rai!”

Xxx

“Jokka Rai sent me a bottle of wine as an apology after that debacle of an interview.” Helena Shan murmured.

“That was nice of him,” Cally offered.


Xxx

Jokka Rai: “Thank you. Citizens, I am standing in front of the Rialis compound, where unofficial news stories have leaked a rumor that we have a new First Lady!”

Anchorwoman Iyrass K’chk: “Leeshansintina Second is now First of Rialis? Isn't she a little young to invoke assassination protocol, Jokka?”

Jokka Rai: “I suppose so, Iyrass, but you know House Rialis. 'Fortune favors the bold,' is their family crest.”

Anchorwoman Iyrass: “I heard a rumor that the Third was ill, that Leeshansintina One sent for Revan Starfire herself to find a cure for the Jedi Plague that had fallen upon their house.”

Jokka Rai: “Did Revan Starfire assassinate the First of Racharn on behalf of House D’Reev?”

Anchorwoman Iyrass: “That brings me to the second part of our show, Jokka. The part where we address the rumors about Revan Starfire: woman or myth? And are there two of her?”

Xxx

“One was certainly enough for me,” Helena Shan sighed. “She killed my daughter.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

Xxx

Anchorwoman Iyrass: “We all saw the footage of the former Selkath Ten prisoner, Sheris Darkstar. But until now, this woman’s origins have remained a mystery. Until now, when our sources have found a family who claims to have sent their red-headed daughter to the Jedi for training... and never heard from her again. Joining us from remote uplink from Hoth, is Semerra Loran, mother to Sheris.”

Semerra Loran: “Sherry, honey, if you hear this, I just want to hear your voice again; but if you want to come home our ice cave is always open--”
“But all this talk about me, and I don't know a thing about you, Cally.” Helena Shan fingered the triangular pendant hanging from a fine chain around her neck.”

“The agency forwarded my resume?” Of course, the part where she'd run off and tried to be a space pirate with the rest of the guard wasn't on that… nor was that strange day a week ago, when Cally had woken up from an unexpected afternoon nap to find a note, written in her own hand.

You are not alone.

Followed by coordinates, roughly corresponding to points 0,0,0 in known space. Telling her to return to Coruscant, the center of the galaxy.

Xxx

“Lord Revan,” Red glowy eyes said, inclining his head. That put those eyes in view of the knife at his feet and the dead ysamiri-whatever thing.

The red, glowing eyes looked back at her, and Polla made herself meet them head-on, her own slightly narrowed, trying to channel all of her fear and anger into an expression that just looked bored.

“So. We meet again,” she tried not to be afraid, which was impossible; but maybe the real Revan, trapped with a Force collar on a doomed ship with this nutjob would have been afraid too. “Your Jedi was boring me, so I decided to bring you back.”

“So it appears.” Those glowing eyes narrowed, looking her up and down, and for a second Polla was sure she was fracked; but the Tenebrae guy only raised an eyebrow. “I prefer you in black like this. Much better than your garish costume on Coruscant.”

“I prefer you back on your own planet. Planets?” Star systems? Galaxy? “Galaxy.” She pulled her lips back from her teeth, trying to calm the desperate beat of her heart. “Your own fracking galaxy. Why don't you go there?”

“We shall go there together,” he told her.

“Sure.” Polla shrugged. “But now’s a bad time. You know?” Was the air getting thin? Was it her imagination? Nervous sweat prickled under arms, the back of her robes. The robes were fracking heavy. How did Jedi stand it?

“You should have reviewed our contract,” he murmured. “But your consort and his Wookiee are bringing a copy to the Yavin moon. You will have time to familiarize yourself with your forgotten promises then.”

“Excuse me?” Polla regretted the politeness immediately. Fracking Revan wouldn't say excuse me. Excuse me, Mister Dark Lord Emperor? She turned around fast, so he couldn't see her expression, and started walking back towards the bridge and the (hopefully) still-sealed controls that hadn’t been sabotaged already to kill them both. “I need to check on something. Okay?”

“I know you,” the asshole murmured, which Polla tried to take as a good sign, even though the light footsteps behind her caused her legs to tremble and her heart to race.

“Sure you--of course you do.” Sound bored, like you don't give a frack, like in the Taris dueling ring--was that the real Revan or the actor?
She couldn’t remember. So much real footage… and then, so much banthashit.

Polla punched the doors open on the bridge. The viewscreen still displayed the same hyperspace swirl. The controls were still sealed, all lights on the life support bank a secure and soothing green. Thank the stars.

The Sith behind her chuckled. “You know, Revan, further delay in our union could easily be misconstrued as an act of war.”

“Oh? You want war?” She kept her voice cold and clipped, like the footage of the real Revan she’d seen, facing down the goons at the Tatooine docking station. “I don't think you want to mess with me, Teneb--Tenny-bro.”

“The ship’s destination is preprogrammed,” he murmured back. “Impossible to change it now.”

“I bet I could, if I could access those controls you sealed under ceramika,” she shot back, turning to face him.

“So bold.” His smile was different than the Jedi’s. More teeth. Something about it made her adrenaline spike, like he was a ronto and she was just lunch. “Even in the face of absurdity. I have missed our chats, Revan.”

Whatever, you insane, blind, schutta.

“So Yavin first? And then what?”

“We will take your consort’s vessel home.” His smile deepened, and Polla willed herself to keep staring into those damned, red eyes and not cry or scream. “If you like, I will arrange transport to Dromund Kaas for Malak and your son as well.”

Well, now I know you're not just crazy, Sithguy. You also live under a fracking rock and don't know that Darth fracking Malak was blown into space dust.

“Malak?” she repeated. “Sure. Whatever. But leave my son--” name of a bad planet, why the frack can't I remember-- “Leave Malachor alone. He's fine where he is.”

“If that is your wish.” His head inclined. “A shame I can't reach you in his body as well.”

Malak’s? My son’s? The frack? Reach… what?

“What a shame.” Polla made herself sound bored, as she walked away from him. All the way into the other room. Leaned down and picked up the knife right in front of crazy Sith asshole, because he didn't seem like he was going to try and stop her.

“I see Klee left your Force collar on. If you would like me to remove it, Revan, you must cease childish threats to my person. Klee has been a loyal mount. He deserves respect.”

Polla’s hand went to her neck. She'd forgotten it was there.

“What a shame.” Polla’s hand went to her neck. She'd forgotten it was there. What if he takes it off and then I still can't use the Force? “I want you to take it off more than anything,” she hazarded. “Because then I can fry your sorry ass.” She shoved the knife in her belt, where it immediately slipped, sliding awkwardly back onto the ground.

Oh, frack. Would Revan say ass?

From his expression, maybe not.

Polla leaned down and picked up the knife again. She settled for just holding it. It made her feel
safer.

“Oh, ho,” he murmured. “The smuggler persona the Jedi have given you is rather uncouth.”

“Oh ho,” she echoed. “Are you going to remove the collar or what?”

“No. You’re frightened,” he marveled. “If that small blade gives you comfort in the dark, use it.”

She glared at him. “It’s a Mandalorian an’yarkh. It has sentimental value.” Or so Aemelie had whispered, when Polla had said good bye.

*We should have just gone with them. Why didn’t we?*

“I do thank you,” he murmured. “For bringing the Mandalorians back to our side. Near compensation for the destruction of the first Star Forge.”

*The first Star Forge? Fracking crazy Sith and super… weapons factory… things!*

“Whatever.” Polla tried to sound bored. “How long to Yavin?” *There’s always ships docked there. I’m doing it. I’m fooling him. I can fool Suvam too. I can get through this. I can get home.*

“Follow.” He turned and walked back, sliding open the doors in the direction of the crate she’d crawled out of, the ysalamori things scattered around it, and gave it all a wide berth. “I’ve stocked the galley with some of your favorites.”

“My smuggler persona is rather… uncouth,” she quoted him. “Like you said? You might find my tastes have changed.”

*I’m not dead yet. I’m not dead yet. And you were wrong, Jedi-guy. He hasn’t noticed a thing.*

“We will see,” the crazy Sith said. He turned and walked away, apparently unconcerned that Polla might do something like stab him in the back.

Xxx

With the Order in tatters, and, (if Master Kavar was to be believed), sedition within the heart of the Council itself, Azen Loanin found it quite difficult to find a healer of acceptable skill and discretion.

And while Padawan Loran’s background and association with the ghost of Malak D’Reev made her loyalties unreliable, there was no denying her skill.

Thus, it seemed fortunate, when the elevator he has been about to ascend opened its doors, revealing Revan Starfire and Padawan Loran both: making his job efficient, if still somewhat depressing.

The impending demise of a father, even a father-in-law, was not news to be received lightly.

“Sheris,” Azen said, deciding upon the familiar, if not the appropriate title of the lesser challenge first. “I need your consult upon a medical matter of some importance.”

“I’m afraid I must decline,” the former Sith said, over-enunciating her tones in a poor imitation of his own Coruscanti accent. “Revan and I are otherwise engaged.”

Azen had always hated to draw upon rank, as it made him all too conscious of his own youth and relative experience as a Jedi Master. And yet, when the circumstance required--
“I must insist,” he rebuked gently. “This matter concerns our host. Senator D’Reev.”

“Malachi?” Sheris said, a millisecond before Revan echoed the man’s familiar name herself.

Then Revan Starfire actually elbowed her companion.

Sheris shot her a glare before returning her own gaze to Loanin.

“What’s wrong?” Revan demanded.

“His droid summoned me last evening. My tests have confirmed that he has the plague.”

“Was he vaccinated?” Sheris asked.

“His droid told me he was not.”

The former Sith laughed, harsh and inexplicable, until Revan elbowed her sharply again.

“How bad is it?” Sheris said, slightly less mirthful, but still with an unsettling smile.

A relief, at least, to be able to use medical terms that could describe the Senator's state and chance of survival to someone with medical training… although Padawan Loran appeared puzzled at a few points in Azen’s narrative and failed to ask appropriate questions at another.

“I’ll see him,” she announced finally, interrupting Azen’s detailed assessment of the man’s failing renal function. “Has Malak seen him?”

“Malak has no medical training,” Azen reminded her.


Padawan Loran’s head turned. “So does our host. Malachi.”

Their identical glares locked and there was a long, inefficient pause.

To Loanin’s surprise, it was Revan who broke away first, muttering something under her breath. It took him a moment to identify the origin, and another to translate the syntax, and even then, the words raised more questions than they answered.

Why, for all the stars, was Revan Starfire reminding Sheris Loran of a promise to 'take care of the body'?

[“It's simple, Particle. All disposal units in this building are extremely efficient. You have a lightsaber. Cutting shouldn't be a problem.”] Sheris responded in the same tongue.

Azen had only heard spoken Ratakan on a few of Atris’s holorecorded lectures speculating on the Builder's origins. At the time it had seemed a stilted, guttural language. But the way both women spoke it made it sound cadenced and even; imbued with a certain grim melody.

[“And what are you going to do?”]

[“Heal the man, as I was asked.”]

[“We don't have time for this.”] Revan glanced at Azen, and then back to Sheris. [But you can't let Malachi die. You know that?]
“Of course. Get rid of the body. Our path will be more expedient if the Jedi don’t detain you for murder—and our son doesn’t inherit a Senate seat tomorrow.”

It was at this moment that Azen decided not to reveal that he had made a study of the Rakatan language as a theoretical exercise, to help combat his perpetual insomnia.

“Is there a problem?” he hedged in Standard.

“Not at all,” Sheris assured him, switching back to the vernacular. “We were discussing matters of a personal feminine nature. I’m so sorry, it was rude of us. I believe you are acquainted with the Padawan Lydie Korr?”

Lydie’s eyes were wide and blue and impossibly thick-lashed. Azen had read that horns on a Zabrak were quite sensitive. One of their nine erogenous areas.

“I am,” Azen told her. Was she attempting to deflect attention from their conversation? Or—his single human heart seemed to skip a beat, although of course such an emotive response was hardly literal—or, was it Lydie Korr’s murder they were discussing with such cavalier insouciance? “Where—where is she?”

Revan frowned, looking between him and Sheris. [“Do you think she sensed the death?”] Revan asked, still in Rakatan. [“Master Korr was her aunt.”]

[“Since no alarm has been raised, we can only hope not.”] Sheris said, back, in the tongue of the Builders. [“Deal with it quickly, and then meet me in our quarters.”]

[“Our quarters?”] Revan Starfire raised an eyebrow, as if she had an objection, but then nodded.

Sheris turned back towards Azen. “When I saw Lydie Korr this morning, she was discussing your proposal to her with Padawan Thalia May.”

“Had she reached a decision?” He knew she was trying to distract, unsettle him; but he still needed to know.

“I believe she plans upon accepting.” A smug smile played on the woman’s mouth.

Revan made an exasperated noise under her breath, interrupting them in Rakatan. [“I’ll see if I can start tracers from that bar—”]

[“It makes no difference what you begin.”] Sheris responded in the same tongue. [I know their final destination.]”

[“You do? Then we need a ship now. We need to go there.”] Revan paused. [“Where is it?”]

Azen took a step backwards. The prospect of Revan leaving Coruscant unescorted by any councilmembers was disturbing, to say the least. But what could he say to dissuade without revealing himself? Nothing at all.

At least Lydie Korr planned on accepting his suit.

[“A place your smuggler’s maps have never found, Particle.”]

Azen wasn’t sure, but the word, ‘particle,’ more closely was defined as a piece distinct from the whole. Not just particulate matter. For a race of engineers, it did seem like some great distinction.

Revan turned back towards Azen, eyes narrowing. “I’m sorry,” she dissembled, quite badly. “We
must seem very rude.”

“The Senator is very ill,” he interrupted them. In Basic, of course. “I need your assistance now, Padawan Loran.”

“Don't let him die,” Revan ordered her duplicate. “Get him stable, and then come to me.”

Sheris Loran nodded. “Yes,” she told both of them. “I know exactly what to do.”

Xxx

“Yavin Station is hailing us. Broadcasting in Ancient Sith. Gee. Think it's a trap?” Mission made her words drip with Revan’s best sarcasm.

“Don't do that,” Carth mumbled, slumped in the captain’s chair like a wet blanket. He rubbed his head, as if it hurt. Poor guy was a wreck. “Don't talk in her voice.”

“Those are Imperial codes.” Takan leaned over the secondary comm station that Mission had managed to link to the wide beam receptors. It didn't cover half as much distance as the main comm, but it gave them something. She was still trying to patch into the main station at Kashyyyk, even if Kashyyyk was totally lame. “That's His signature--”

“Proceed to those coordinates immediately!”

Uh-oh. If Mission had hands she'd be wringing them with dismay. Now Carth’s eyes were all red and glowing, and he was talking with that asshole’s words again.

“Say please,” she snapped. “You might the boss of all the Sith, but here you're just another creepazoid chuba-faced loser not even brave enough to bring his own body--”

“Mission!” Big Z barked. “You are not helping.”

Helping. She had been programmed to be helpful. The real Mission Vao had even liked to be helpful. If Mission had a mouth, she would have closed it.

“Proceeding to specified coordinates and docking,” she growled in Shyriiwook. “As specified.”

The red faded from Carth’s eyes, and he slumped forward.

“Wake up, flyboy,” she chirped. Trying to sound like Mission and not Revan, so he didn’t have a heart attack.

“Oh, no,” he muttered. “Did it happen again?”

“Flawed,” intoned the other kid, the nice one. Zepth. Red eyes now there too. And Takan’s. Hey, at least it was easy to tell when it was the asshole and not them. “I cannot sustain the connection.”

“I will return to the Children,” Voice murmured. “After I attend to some of your master’s other concerns.”

Trap, a part of Mission whispered to the other. The younger part, the part that was mostly Mission Vao, trained to expect traps and betrayals since childhood agreed with the older part, the part who had set them for millennia.

It’s always a trap. But if you think you can control Polla-Revan, chuba-faced asshole Emperor guy, you're in for a world of poo doo agony.
“Oh.” There should be more emotion to be expressed when the door opened and a Jedi Master, a member of the Jedi High Council, found you standing there in shock, staring at the remains of your aunt.

But all Lydie Korr could manage at first was that one word.


“I did too.” A shockwave of fear. It hadn't felt like Aunt Marla at all. Honestly, Lydie Korr had opened the door and expected to find Revan Starfire. That was one reason it had taken her what felt like an hour to work up her courage to look in the first place.

Should she feel sad that her aunt was dead?

XXX

Dear Ma, your sister Marla was killed today. I think by Darth Revan. I was afraid to look, but I finally did. We’re going to burn the body. That's what Jedi do with their dead. I assume Zabrak may have some other custom, but I’ve never studied their culture. My new boyfriend might know. He seems to know everything about everything.

I'm going with him because I hope he can teach me.

XXX

“Do you know who did this?” Lydie asked carefully, because she could be wrong, and you didn't just accuse the most powerful Jedi on the planet of murder, especially if you weren't even sure she was still a Jedi and not a Sith all along, and you yourself were still recovering from a Sith attack--

“I suspect, I do know.” Master Kavar must have had the same lessons in oblique statements. “But I see no proof here--”

“There's a security cam,” Lydie pointed it out.

Master Kavar lifted his hand and twisted his fingers. The security cam crumpled in on itself, falling to the ground.

“Was a security cam,” Lydie corrected. “You know it probably fed the link to the central hub, not just in this room?”

The Jedi coughed, eyeing her appraisingly. “You’re correct, Padawan. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Apparently, Master Kavar must be a Sith too. Lydie wondered if she should protest, or pretend to be one herself. “It's never a good idea to leave witnesses,” she offered slowly, taking a step back towards the door. Could she freeze him if she had to? The Force hadn't felt the same inside since the Sith Davad Arkan had tried to drain it all away.

Master Kavar frowned. “I sense your fear. I suppose this looks amiss.”

“I'm sure you have reasons for destroying evidence,” she offered.

He raised an eyebrow. “I destroyed the cam in hope of preserving Master Korr’s reputation, not to exonerate her murderer. Our numbers are divided enough, without rumors of Sith involvement; and I believe that Master Korr’s betrayal was not her fault.”
“Sith involvement? You think a Sith killed--” But no, that wasn't what he had said at all. “You think my Aunt Marla was a Sith? What makes you think that?”

The word of another Sith.” He sighed. “One less loyal to their master than she was. Master Klee took me into his confidence shortly before his departure. It was his hope that I could find some means to conceal that Revan Starfire was missing from Coruscant without causing panic.”

“Master Klee was working for Revan?”

“No.” He shook his head, frowning as if Lydie was the one with the irrational facts. “For the Sith Emperor. Against his will.”

“And so is Revan?”

“According to Master Klee, Revan is all that stands between us and the Emperor. He was very adamant that the Jedi needed to assist her in any way possible.”

“With what?”

“He was less clear.” When Master Kavar smiled, it made him look younger, but Lydie still didn't see the appeal. He signed. “I would have stopped him, had I realized he was taking the wrong woman to his master, the Sith Emperor Tenebrae.”

“So it wasn't Revan Starfire that he was taking to his master? His master who is the Sith Emperor?” Sometimes, when revelations were enormous, all you could do was focus on the finite pieces, repeating phrases like a stuck holo. “You said the Emperor thought he was taking Revan Starfire? He was wrong?” It seemed ghoulish to stand here discussing semantics in front of her aunt's corpse, but Lydie wasn't sure where else they should go.

“I believe he kidnapped Sheris Loran. Revan must have sent Sheris to him last night in her stead.” He sighed. “Although how she expects Sheris to fool Tenebrae for long--”

“Oh.” Poor Sheris. She had seemed almost nice, that morning, head buried in a datapad in a way Lydie envied, now that she herself never found the time. “They assigned her a bunk next to ours. Me and Thalia. I saw her there this morning.”

He frowned at her, and Lydie wondered what she had said. “I'm sorry about Aunt Marla too,” she added hastily.

Kavar blinked at her. It took Lydie another moment, and then a hot blush burned her cheeks, making her horn nubs almost itch with the shame of her own oversight. “You said he kidnapped Sheris last night?” She frowned shaking her head slowly. “It wasn't Revan I saw this morning. It was definitely Sheris. They don't look that much alike.”

“Impossible. Revan was in a council meeting with us.” He nodded at her aunt’s body on the floor. “Presumably, that is when Marla realized her master had been tricked.”

“Did Revan kill her?” Remembering that shock in the Force made Lydie shiver. Like ice.

When Master Kavar looked confused, Lydie could see why the others had thought he was attractive, although really, he was much too pale. Not that Azen wasn't pale too, but he knew so much—and some of it he would teach her. “Klee pulled me aside yesterday before the meeting to tell me his master had commanded he take Revan to Yavin Station.” His lips pulled grimly. “He said agents of Tenebrae already had her in custody. He asked for our aid.”
“I saw Sheris Loran this morning. Her bunk is next to ours. Me and Thalia’s.” Lydie felt herself flush. “Not… me and Thalia’s bunk, I mean our bunks. We have two. Sheris has one. It's right next to ours.”

“How long ago?”

“A few hours. I think.”

For some reason Master Kavar looked flummoxed that a Sith had lied to him about something. But Master Klee lying was the most logical explanation.

“Sheris didn’t look captured,” Lydie added. “She looked fine. She was reading.”

Lydie had wondered what sorts of things former Sith read, but whatever it was Sheris had taken with her.

“Why would Klee lie?”

“Why would you just let a Sith spy kidnap a Jedi, especially of you thought it was Revan?” Lydie thought that was the rather more pertinent question.

“Klee and I have collaborated before. He was working with Revan’s allies. I thought he was taking her and I thought Revan--”

“Yes?” The door slid open. From the expression on the former Sith Lord’s face, Lydie wondered how long she had been listening. “You thought Revan… what?”

“I thought you capable of taking care of yourself.” Kavar murmured. He gestured towards the floor. “As you did here.”

“You just said… Klee… was going to Yavin?” Revan Starfire really didn’t look that much like Sheris Loran. Her hair was much shorter. Now, she laughed sharply. “Frack.”

“Klee thought he had you in custody,” Kavar said. “But if not you, and not Sheris--”

“Why do you think I know?” She stalked towards them both, and Lydie willed her feet not to take a step backwards. “Are you both like her? More of Tenebrae’s spies?”

“No.” Kavar shook his head. “Whether you believe me or not, Revan, there are some of us within the Order who support your efforts. Myself. Zez Kai El.Lorna Vash--”

“My efforts.” The former Dark Lord shook her head sharply. “My efforts at what? You think I know anything about this mess?”

“I know that you are the key to stopping Tenebrae. Klee said as much, and our own intelligence confirms it.”

“Your own… intelligence?” The former Dark Lord snorted. “You’ve been spying on me?”

“I think he means they have spies on Sith worlds,” Lydie interrupted. “My Aunt Marla was one.”

“Your Aunt--” Revan Starfire looked down at the ground and the body and then back at Lydie. “I'm sorry,” she mumbled. “I'm sorry I killed your aunt.”

“She was Sith,” Lydie offered in return. “Probably.”
Dear Ma, Did you know Aunt Marla was a Sith spy in addition to being a Jedi? I guess probably not, because it's not the sort of thing that she'd be allowed to tell you; but I thought you should know. She was always kind to me.

“Probably.” Revan muttered. She took a step backwards. “I… I have to go.”

“I attacked you before when I thought you were the Force user responsible for all of the death in the Temple,” Kavar said. “You were the one who let Davad Arkan go.”

“I couldn't stop him.”

“No. Leave stopping Arkan to us. But you must stop the Emperor.”

“If you tell me that's my fracking destiny, I might cut off your head too,” Revan said. But her lips quirked, as if that was actually a joke.

“I will say you are not alone.” His head dipped, a gesture that was almost a bow. “I misjudged you and Malak long ago. I misjudged you when we met again in the Jedi Temple. I will not do so a third time.”

“I know I'm not alone.” Her green eyes looked like chips of ice. “But I don't trust you.” She frowned slightly at Lydie. “Either of you.”

“I’m sorry,” Lydie apologized, because she wasn’t sure what else to say. “It must be hard not to trust people.”

“I was going to… get rid of… her.” Revan pointed at the remains of Marla Korr. “But now… I have… I have to go.”

“We will honor the good in her, and mourn her betrayal,” Master Kavar nodded. “You should… go. I'm sure there are other things that require your attention.”

Revan frowned, which Lydie understood, because it sounded strange to her too, just letting a former, and very powerful, Sith go. “Thanks,” she muttered oddly, and then she turned and ran.

The moment the door slid shut, Master Kavar sagged back against the wall. Lydie opened her mouth to ask a question, but the Jedi Master raised his hand, as if begging her silence.

After several moments, he sighed heavily. “Revan Starfire terrifies me,” he confessed. “I suppose you might find it disturbing to know a Jedi Master has feet of dirt too.”

“Fear is an understandable reaction,” Lydie offered. “But I don't know why you just let her go. How does that help her? What is she going to do?”

Master Kavar sighed heavily. “What do you think the answer to that question is?”

“I'm not even a Jedi Knight.” She wouldn't look at her dead aunt. “Master Korr did not keep me in her confidence.”

“Nor did she keep me.” His expression was grim. “But the Sith Emperor wants Revan Starfire.”

“And we Jedi just give the Sith Emperor what he wants?”
Some of Azen’s arguments for leaving the Order began to make sense.

XXX

Dear Ma, I’ve left the Jedi Order and married a Coruscanti Senator’s son because all the Jedi are insane or dead and Aunt Marla was a Sith spy--

XXX

“Tenebrae’s agents have been with us for a very long time. Now, finally, the Order’s corruption has been excised.” Master Kavar grimaced. “At great cost, but excised.”

*Does he think Revan is part of the corruption? At least she was sorry Aunt Marla was dead.*

“What about all the Padawans?” Padawan Lydie Korr asked. “And the apprentices? What’s going to happen to them?”

“Most are in hiding.” His eyes were sad. “The Sith cannot fight those they cannot find.”

Lydie wondered. “How can we serve the Republic in hiding?”

“Carefully.” He smiled sadly. “You should… go, child. I will take care of things here.”

*And by things, you mean my aunt’s body.*

“I don’t know what the funeral rites are,” she told him. “I was too young.”

“All dead are equal in the Force,” he murmured.

The words had the tone of a ritual. Even if, Lydie thought, they weren’t actually true.

XXX

“Excuse me,” said Polla Organa to the Sith Emperor Tenny-bro or whatever, who was sitting across from her at the small, circular table. “Would you pass me the frites?”

They were actually good, which surprised her. A nutra-flash meal, sure; but with richer ingredients than Polla had ever seen all in one place before.

Being a smuggler, she knew that the belugar roe was worth over five thousand credits for quarter milli, but she’d never seen it sculpted over ice like frosting in the shape of a flower.

“Oh, course,” he inclined his head. “More wine?”

The wine was too sweet. One glass had given her a headache. *I need my fracking brain.*

“No, she demurred. “But I need to use the fresher. Please excuse me.”

*Please excuse--oh, frack. I keep doing that.*

“So respectful.” The Sith pulled his face in what might have been a kindly smile, except for the red, glowing eyes. “Should I fear a plot against me?”

Polla remembered her Sixday morning cartoons. “You’re Sith,” she said. “Isn’t that par for the course?”

XXX
The door to Malachi’s chamber slid open. The smell of sickness, death was immediate, assaulting her senses like a quiet scream.

Revan had to trust in the Fragment. Trust in the Fragment to delay the Jedi finding out the truth about what had happened to Marla Korr, agent of Tenebrae. Although, from what Revan had seen, the woman didn't have a great deal of experience in covering up murder.

*Another thing I'll have to teach.*

Before she even approached the frail lump under the fur coverlet, Revan knew the worst.

“You should have summoned me sooner,” Revan told Master Loanin, who just kept blinking stupidly at her.

“His droid only summoned me this morning.” The man’s voice was barely into manhood. High and thin, with that whine of upper crust Coruscanti.

“You are Senate-raised?” She should have checked the surviving Jedi more carefully. She had missed Marla Korr being Tenebrae’s pawn, and she'd missed this man too. “Loanin, that’s…?”

“Unimportant, in rank and in this specific moment,” he chided. “I didn't realize you had made a study of Coruscanti custom, Sheris.”

“I am engaged to Malak D’Reev.” She frowned, remembering too late that she'd told the Jedi they had dissolved their arrangement when she moved quarters. “Or rather, I was.”

“Our patient,” he gestured at the bed.

“Malachi.” Revan approached, cautiously, aware of the HK unit’s red eyes watching.

“You.” His eyes were clouded and dull, hawk-nose jutting out from a gray and sunken face. Those gray eyes, so like her son’s focused, and his hand trembled when it lifted, reaching for her. “Ilyana. I'm so sorry.”

“Delusional,” Master Loanin supplied from behind them. “He thought I was Malak for several hours this morning. Now, he appears to believe that you are his dead wife.”

“Did he say anything notable to you when he thought you were Malak?” Revan kept her voice mild and curious, turning her head towards the Jedi.

“He expressed a great deal of regret.” The man’s level brows narrowed as he studied her. “If you could return to the matter at hand, I think a healing trance might serve to stabilize his condition.”

“So would a stasis chamber, or a respiration unit,” she pointed out. It was only a matter of time. They could buy him days--perhaps even a month; but the end was there, locked in those cells with the pre-programmed plague her computer had designed.

“He refused both.”

“What?” That was surprising. Malachi hung on to life like mynock. “He's delirious now. You can’t find him cognizant enough to refuse treatment--”

“Revan.” The old man whispered her name, and her head turned back, automatically, before she could will it not.

“Is he?” Master Loanin gestured towards them. “Delirious?”
“Obviously.” Her imitation of Sheris’s giggle seemed forced and inappropriate and she regretted it instantly. “I’m not Revan.”

“In his confusion, it might be kinder if you pretended to be.”

“Revan,” those bony fingers closed on her arm, pulling her closer with a firm grip. “My son. Let him… let him go. Him and his whore. I promised--”

“I’m here, Malachi.” She took a deep breath, trying to lose the vestigial offense that must be from Sheris, being called Malak’s whore.

“HK… already… dissolved… contract.”

That could mean any number of contracts. She would have to use her emergency override into the man’s systems to realize which. The timing of this was excruciating. She had been counting on the old man to keep Malachor safe in their absence--possibly at least one of their permanent absences--since if Tenebrae had taken the woman he thought was Revan, that must mean all the delaying tactics she and the Dark Council had forged were already exhausted--

*Or they betrayed me to him. Would it be such a surprise?*

“Where is Malak?” Revan tried to sound like she didn't care, even if perhaps Sheris could--and a part of her did.

“Statement: The young Master has left the building. Security cams recorded his departure from his personal balcony window several hours ago.”

“He jumped?” Loanin sounded confused.

“Clarification: No. The young Master used the Force and a rappelling device to slow his descent. One of our cameras noted the footage. My instructions were to let him depart without incident.”


“If *he* dies, we need Malak.” Revan told Loanin. “Revan Starfire may be the official Second, but she has no training, no real understanding of Coruscanti politics. You… you must know that.”

“It’s curious that you do.” The Jedi’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t know you were so concerned with politics.”

“The Senator’s protection keeps the Jedi al safe. Where would we goof he dies?” Poor argument. Revan could think of a dozen more effective refuges than the target reticule this building would become if Malachi died.

*And the Fragment won't understand any of it. She'll charge off to save the smuggler, even if it puts Malachor at risk--*

Would it?

“Malachor should be home from school soon. Fetch him. He needs to see his grandfather.”

Loanin blinked at her slowly. “I requested the servants to bring him here already.”

Where. Where would Mal be safe? If the Fragment was right about Malachi’s death triggering a hunt by the Genoharadan--
“Keep them… safe for me. Revan. You were always… the strength. Malak… weak. Without… you.”

No. Fool. Your son was my strength. My heart. Old bitterness, old hatred was inefficient. So were the sudden tears in her eyes, painfully obviously under the Jedi and the droid’s implacable stares

“I promise, Malachi.” She squeezed his hands in hers, staring down at the man who had led them to ruin, led them to their doom. She raised her voice. “If you let me concentrate, Master Loanin, I may be able to increase his lucidity, before the end--record any last instructions… he may have some… knowledge he needs to impart.”

“Statement: the Master has given his last instructions to me. At the time of his demise, I am instructed to recite them to you, Revan; with addendums for Malak D’Reev and Malachor D’Reev.”

“His droid seems confused regarding your identity as well,” Loanin murmured.

She looked up at him, raising an eyebrow. The master was hardly more than a child. She didn't even remember him from before the wars. “And you?”

Master Loanin blinked slowly. “My curiosity only extends to the holocron recording containing Knight Starfire’s memories. I see a certain... danger in creating an infinite number of sentients imbued with Revan Starfire’s life history.”

“I destroyed the holocron.”

“Ah.” His head tilted. “I believe you. It would be a logical response.”

“Instinctual,” she admitted, assessing him. “I was disoriented.”

“I can imagine. Did Sheris provide written instructions, or was someone else involved in your… processing?”

“I have no way of knowing,” she hedged. “There was a period of confusion.”

“Ilyana,” Malachi whispered again. “I never asked. Did you know?”

“He killed Malak’s mother,” Revan told the Jedi. “I believe this is a deathbed confession.”

The HK whirred. “Objection: I have heard this story many times. The Second D’Reev took her own life.”

Startling, but it changed nothing. “Malak never knew that.” Useless point, but her voice said it anyway.

“Suicide is common in the Senate Houses,” Loanin commented mildly. “Not every sentient can flourish in an atmosphere of paranoia and stress. Several families have even genetically engineered reduced cortisol and serotonin levels in their offspring to produce a dulled response to fear--”

“Ilyana wasn’t… no.” Malachi’s grip tightened on Revan’s. “She… she thought she was, but she… she was happy. She just… forgot. Sleepwalking. Blackouts.”

“Blackouts?” Revan frowned.

“Her eyes…” his voice trailed off, and his head jerked away. “No. Ilyana! No!”
Tears stippled his gray cheeks. “She was a traitor. But I expected her to live. I wanted her to live.”

Xxx

Malak’s hand shook her awake. Awake enough to see him looming over her, features lit ghostly and blue by the lit saber in his grasp.

Blue… with red eyes, glowing like tiny suns.

“You’re very small.” Dark chuckle. “Small and female. I suppose that’s appropriate, for our continuation.”

“Malak!” Her hands shot out and his body hurtled across the room, slamming into the bulkhead of their shuttle, before her mind could process.

“No.” Her husband’s body righted itself, rising almost boneless, as if propelled by the Force more than his own skin. His face was so pale, that for a moment, Revan thought he was dead. “Merely a visitor in his skin—”

“The Sith from the tomb.” Ajunta Pall? “Leave him alone. Get out!”

“In time.” Malak’s body folded his arms. “You and I will have all the time in the galaxy, Revan.”

Xxx

“Sleepwalking,” she repeated. She held Malachi down, with her hand and the Force.

“She thought she was losing her mind. Safer for us. She did it for us. Made me promise… Jedi. She thought training could help our son. In case he—she thought it was the Force.”

“She was from Dathomir.” That damned planet. Of course. Revan should have known before.


“Malak—” No. No. “You mean… you sent Carth Onasi to Dathomir?”

“You… knew.” He coughed. “HK read the note. I saw it.”

“Master Klee recommended you send Carb Onasi to Dathomir.” The Fragment had said they were working together. Marla Korr and Klee, agents of Tenebrae in the heart of the Jedi Council itself. “You were a fool, Malachi.” She felt her lips twist, laughter bubbling in her gut. “All this time, you thought you were in charge—but it was Tenebrae all along.”

“I… I don’t—”

“I brought you here to stabilize his condition, not hasten the demise,” Loanin interrupted.

“Of course.” Her hands hovered over the old man’s torso, breathing deeply, trying to breathe through the bile and confusion and fear she sensed. Radiating from Sheris’s weak mind, from the near-corpse of the man before her—and from the young Jedi behind.

If the Fragment knows her husband is in danger, who will she save? If Malachi dies now, Malachor will never survive. Once the Emperor discovers his mistake, he’ll return for me. Or her. Or her.
All of that power. I can’t let him have her.

Points of light, grids on a map, logical conclusions.

“Master Vrook was suspicious of Klee as well,” Loanin continued. “I myself wondered when Master Klee continued wearing the environmental suit.”

He couldn’t afford to contract the plague. Most did not, once the Emperor had his claws in their minds. But a few had, a few had even come back. If only Malak had--

I sent him into the labs hoping. Hoping he’d see. Hoping he’d contract the plague. Hoping it would save him--drive that sithspawn out of him--

Malachi’s breathing steadied under her hands, evened. Soothing calm washing over Revan, as if it was coming from the Force itself. She felt herself breathe easier.

Peace.

“I should take my leave,” Master Loanin said from somewhere behind them. “I must… what you said before. About Padwan Korr. Was that a mere distraction, or was it true?”

“What?” Oh. She could have laughed. “The Sith have infiltrated the heart of your Order and you’re wondering about a girl?”

“The girl I can save,” he said. “The Order is all of us. We do what we can. We serve.”

“All of you,” she scoffed. “Kae and Davad killed most of you already.”

“The girl I can save,” he repeated. “We all save who we can. Don’t we?”

“Do they all know? About me?” Had they been fooling her all along? Watching and waiting for a misstep.? Even now. Did these pathetic Jedi fools think Revan Starfire needed their redemption?

“I don’t know.” His voice was farther away now. Perhaps by the door. “The other masters don’t always include me in their council.” He paused. “Nor I them.”

“But you trust me to do the right thing.” She could have laughed.

“No. I have no way of stopping you without potentially causing greater harm. We Jedi agreed to restore your memories. They may reside in two bodies and not one, but they are restored. Regrettable for Sheris Loran; but by nature of the action, I cannot hold you personally at fault for her demise.”

“It was Kae. Part of her failed plan, that my amnesiac self aborted.” She found herself admitting it.

Am I still part of your plan, my old master? Disconcerting, but possible.

Kae opposes Tenebrae too. I know that. That, at least, has to be true.

“Our amnesiac self saved what remained of us.” Azen Loanin seemed to hesitate. “And the plague you constructed was brilliant. A masterpiece of retroviral engineering. The vaccine even more so.”

I’m no chemist. I merely told the computer what was needed: a way to destroy his influence and a reason to distribute it. “Thank you.”

The old man’s breathing had calmed, stabilized. Revan felt cooling energy flow through her,
bringing his temperature down as well.

“We Jedi serve,” Loanin said.

“Me?” She’d had more fervent declarations of allegiance. “You serve me?”

“No,” the child-Master shook his head. “We serve the Force.”

Xxx

“I may have to leave for a time,” the Emperor told Polla, leaning over the table to refill her teacup, as she approached the table again, one hand casually hidden in the folds of her robes and half behind her back. “Your request to bring Lord Malak to us is proving... somewhat complex. My other Voice amongst the Jedi has been silenced.” He frowned at her. “For a moment, I believe I saw your own duplicate through her eyes.”

“Her?” Polla laughed. Duplicate?

“Your copy.” He chuckled. “Did you think I didn't know?” He paused. “Sometimes in Malak’s body, I used to watch her sleep.”

“ You have issues,” she muttered. “Big fracking issues. I can’t be the first sent to tell you.”

“Sheris was lithesome.” He sighed. “So like you, before the cruelties of war hardened your singular face.” He smiled. “You seem well-restored now.”

*Sheris?* It took Polla a second to get it. She remembered the nurse from the clinic. “Oh. Her. Right.” She shrugged, trying to look imperious. *You crazy fracking asshole.* “Very well. Bring Malak to me. Immediately.”

*Luck with that, being as he's dead and all.*

“What is that behind your back?” The glowing eyes lit an almost hungry expression. “Treachery, Revan? Again? So soon?”

“You got me.” She pulled the ysalamiri out, holding the wooden stick it was grown upon up and, trying to ignore the racing of her heart. *He can tell, he’s fracking with me. Can I really pull this off?* “Master Klee and I are plotting against you.”

“How exciting.” He beamed. “No one besides you has even come close to fulminating a successful coup in three hundred years.”

“Right. Polla raised her eyebrows. “Well. Why don't you let me get on with it then, while you rustle up Darth Malak.”

“Of course.” Incredibly, the crazy Sith asshole smiled at her, and then his eyes faded back to Master Klee's ordinary brown.

It took another few seconds for those eyes to focus, then widen, taking in Polla across the table, and the settings themselves: platters heaped high with food, ferracystal glasses, the bow melting ice sculpture covered with priceless belugar.

“What--what happened?” He stuttered.

Polla smiled at him. She was still as scared as an Exchange grunt on the wrong side of a bad trade, but it looked like she might actually fracking not die today.
Abasen. Seiran. I going to make it back because there's no other choice--

“I'm going to hand this to you,” she said, brandishing the ysa-whatsit. “You're going to take it, then we'll talk.”

The Jedi nodded slowly, reaching out his hand. When the womp rat-thing was securely in it, Polla let out a slow sigh of relief.

“Told you I was an actress,” she said, smiling at him “Asshole didn't suspect a thing.”

“I am... astonished,” her captor didn't sound anything at all, but maybe that was a Jedi thing. “He truly believed you were Revan Starfire?”

“And he'll keep fracking believing it, with your help.” She glared at him. “You know he's totally banthashit insane, right? I think he thinks we're supposed to get married or something. You need to get me out of this!”

“Child, I don't know where to begin.”

“Yeah, well I do,” she snapped. “We'll get to Yavin, and then I'm good. Suvam always had a few extra ships. I'll steal one and then I can escape, and you can pretend you don't know what fracking happened or whatever it is you do.”

Klee stared at her, as if considering. “Suvam?”

Frack. “I've done a lot of work for the Exchange. You know, public service announcements. Sentient Resource vids. That kind of thing. We go way back.”

“Then... won't he recognize you?”

He hasn't yet. “Surgery,” she lied glibly. “I know you don't think I look like her, but I paid a lot for this kit.”

The Jedi sighed. “We are on borrowed time. Tenebrae will know soon, if he doesn't already that the real Revan never left Coruscant.”

“He told me she has a double. He knows that?” Polla shrugged. “He said he saw her for a millisecond; but then his voice was 'silenced.'”

“Silenced...” The Jedi frowned, his eyes going distant for a moment. “That is... unfortunate. But perhaps favorable to us.”

Us. You said us, you Jedi asshole.

Polla smiled slightly. “You need to tell me stuff. Stuff she knows. But this isn't even hard. Your boss thinks Darth Malak is still alive, for frack's sake. For a Force-possessing evil Sith, he doesn't get out much, does he?”

“Darth Malak,” Klee repeated. “Ah. You... discussed Malak’s condition with him?”

“He offered to go get him.” Polla smirked. “I think that's where he fracked off too now. Good luck collecting atomized pieces of space dust off the Nefeli Spire, Emperor Tenny-bro!”

“Tenebrae.” Klee corrected her. And then he sighed. “It appears I gravely underestimated you, Serina Starshine.”
“It appears you did,” she agreed. “So get off your ass and help me instead. You said you wanted to buy the real Revan some… time to do… something? Then let's do it. I'll give you til Yavin, and then I'm getting the frack away from all of you. Deal?”

Klee nodded slowly. “It is a deal, as you say.”

“No fracking tricks,” she warned him, just like Revan had said to the Sith Selkath on Manaan, right before she saved the bus full of schoolchildren from a watery grave. “Got that? Double cross me, and I'll end you. Slow and painful. You will feel every cut of my saber. Your green blood will run like ribbons, fall like rain into the waste of your industrial sea.”

“She doesn't speak like that,” Klee said. A slight smile played on his lips. “And lightsaber wounds cauterize, they don't bleed. But your intonation is really quite good.”

“I practiced,” Polla snapped. It was true. “But I mean it: double cross me and I'll fracking gut you.”

The Eosian raised an eyebrow. “Yes! Now that is something she would say.” He picked up Tennybro’s discarded fork, and speared a slice of something green on one of the side plates with it. “I will try and help you, child. For as long as I can.”

“Good,” Polla told him. “Why don't you start by telling me who this crazy Emperor is and why he thinks Revan is his fracking kath hound.”

Klee sighed. “I fear only Revan and my master know the truth of that; but I can tell you about Malak. Tenebrae is not sane—that much is true—but Malak—the real Malak is alive. Or, at least…”

Oh. Polla’s stomach sank to her toes. “Well, that’s… you just have to help me escape before that asshole brings him to Yavin. Okay?”

Malak and Carth Onasi both. Don't you keep track of your own husbands, Revan Starfire? Are you too busy fracking the third one?

Frack. What if Sei does something stupid? He must be frantic, I need to send a message somehow--

“There's really no comms?” Polla broke in, interrupting Klee, who had started to talk about Revan Starfire’s fracking childhood, as if Polla was a naif who had never seen a vid in her life.

“No comms.” He shook his head. “I'm sorry.”

“Huh.” He was probably lying even now, but at least she'd bought herself more time.

Xxx

“Mother!” Korrie tackled Revan from behind, and pulling her around in a hug. “They let me off early today and I found you all by myself! But the chaps wouldn't tell me why I got out early! Is this about the Racharn First dying?”

“Didn’t you do it?” He tilted his head up. “Some of the Egs said you probably did it.”

“I didn't.” Just one Jedi turned Sith-possessed spy killed today. She felt her mouth twist bitterly. “Did… did Sheris send for you?”
“Huh? Why would she?” When he tilted his head like that, it was like a shadow of the man she couldn't remember. Held in the expression, the gray of his eyes. “It's weird you guys are friends. Amaree says that wives and concubines aren’t supposed--”

“Frack Amaree,” Revan snapped.

Her son’s eyes widened. “Mother?”

“Sorry, I just…” her voice trailed off, and glanced at the locked door, where she'd left Polla’s husband and son. Hadn’t this been where Revan wanted to meet? Then why did she sense the other woman’s presence--in the opposite direction?

“Korrie, have you seen Sheris? This afternoon?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Can you tell her to stop touching my hair?”

“I-I can try.” It was wrong that she almost pitied the woman, since pretty much everything wrong now in Revan's life could be attributed to her actions--

No. Mine. My actions. Even if I don’t remember.

How if felt, killing Master Korr. Rational and cold. Because there was no other choice.

“Why are you down here anyways? This is the guest quarters and we don't have any except the Jedi downstairs and I stopped there on the way up and all the kids are gone. It's just grown ups left, and not a lot. Where did they all go?”

“Huh?” She frowned. “I'm here to… meet Sheris, Malachor. I don't know about the Jedi.” The Jedi who so nicely offered to dispose of the corpse I made. Are they still even Jedi?

“Malachor.” He made a face. “Don't call me that.”

“We might… I have to go on a trip, Korrie.” She tried to make her smile look normal. “Someone needs my help. I won't be gone long, and your grandfather and you--and Malak will stay here and keep you safe. Okay?”

“Where are you going?” His frown back twisted into a hopeful smile. “Maybe Father and I can come?”

“No. A friend… someone needs my help.”

His brows knit together. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Then she heard it too. Dulled by security-grade durasteel, but at the end of the hall a baby was crying, hopeless and in pain.

“Why’s there a baby?”

“Korrie--”

But then her son ran past her, running to the door and running his hand over the security panel. It beeped and opened, revealing Seiran Wen. The man was holding his wailing son, whose wails stopped, as his eyes widened as he took them all in.

“Mahamam?” the baby asked hopefully.
“I wasn’t sure you were coming back,” the man said, ignoring Korrie and glaring at Revan.

“Hello,” Korrie told him. “Who are you?”

“Seiran,” he snapped, even though Revan had told him to lie. “Seiran Wen.”

“Oh!” Korrie jumped up and down. “I’ve heard of you! Mother said you really weren’t dead!”

“Not yet,” the man muttered. He looked as pissed as he had when he and Polla were tweeners and the Skadler kids broke the spin housing in mechanics classes. “Where’s the other one of you? The bossy one?”

“She’s… coming.” It wasn’t like with Bastia, where they had shared enough to speak through the Force, but Revan tried to think some fracking urgency in her other self’s direction.

“Where's your wife lady, Seiran Wen?” Korrie asked bluntly. “She’s the one that Mother didn't have killed but she lied about, even to Grandfather?”

“That's not what I--” The protest died on Revan’s lips because it was so accurate.

“Kidnapped by Sith,” the man told her son. If Seiran was her own fracking husband, Revan might have killed him for revealing so much. “Your mothers are going to rescue him for me.”

“Mothers?” Korrie shook his head. “I still only have one, unless Sheris marries my father, and she told me she's not anymore. So only one. How many does your baby have?”

“One,” Seiran said. His eyes were accusing. “When do we leave?”

“As soon as possible.” If they had a fast ship and pushed it, Revan thought they could make it to Yavin in about four days time. How can you even think Polla would make it that long?

Strapped to Seiran’s chest, Polla’s son stared at her, round-eyed and unblinking. It was Revan who looked away first.

How can I think anything else? She has to. Stay alive, Polla. Please.


“Good?” Revan tried not to glare at her. “Say goodbye to Malachor, Sheris. For now.”

“You took care of the Jedi?” Dar’Revan wasn’t even bothering with the Rakatan. And Polla’s husband, glaring at her like this was all her fault.

Oh, isn't it?

“I've secured Malachi’s personal shuttle.” Dar’Revan's eyes were clear and calm. “I thought we'd need to stop at the Academy to get Mal, but since he's here, I’ll adjust the timer.”

“What?” Revan frowned. “What the frack are you talking about?”

“House Makeon will be mounting a full-on assault to House D’Reev in…” her other self pulled out a datapad, and ran her fingers across the symbols, swiveling the circle back. “Thirty minutes. Once the alarms go, the civilians should have time to evacuate before the charges blow. Senators prefer to minimize civilian casualties. But once challenged, of course, the First cannot leave.”
“You're framing Malachi?” Making it look like he's the aggressor? Or Makeon First is? Why? Why would Revan start a war now?


“What about Grandfather? And I like some of the Makeons!” Korrie glared at Sheris. “Why would you do that?”

“The best option.” Dar’Revan sounded perfectly calm. “Neither you, nor I can afford to take on the House seat, Fragment; and Mal wouldn't survive a week.”

“But Malachi is still First—”

Dar’Revan shook her head slightly, glancing down at their son. “We can talk in the shuttle. The roof. Now. It's imperative we move immediately.” She sighed. “I probably shouldn't have let the Loanin boy live.”

“You're saying you made it look like House Makeon is just blowing up the entire fracking building and Malachi would just stand there and let it happen?”

“No.” It was Korrie who answered. Malachor, her son. “I think she means it’s that we’re playing Scorched Ground.” The First of Makeon will come in and duel Grandfather while we all watch. A lot of times they use drones through, or auto targeting scopes. It's okay to cheat. If he wins he gets to blow up this whole place and take everything and we die. All us D’Reevs. But if Grandfather wins, he gets Makeon, and control of the Senate for the next ten seasons.” Her son shrugged, looking as if this was normal. “Houses don't use Scorched Earth a lot anymore. It's too hard to win because of the cheating, but it's better to start the game than to be the defender, because if you start it and you lose, you die, but your family has a sporting chance.” He frowned. “Grandfather's pretty tough through, even if he's a little sick. He's made it through Scorched Earth lots of times. Just not since I was born.”

“Korrie….” Revan wrapped her arms around him, as if that would make a difference. She glared at her counterpart. “The hell? What the frack are you doing?”

“Mal’s correct. I told Makeon First the truth.” Dar’Revan gestured, and turned, starting to walk back in the direction she’d come.

“About us?” That seemed insane.

“About Malachi. He's dead.” The woman’s eyes blinked, and her mouth twisted. For a moment, she actually looked upset. “Plague. He died of plague. I told the Makeon that as First I'd accept his Scorched Earth proposal. That House has been trying to goad Malachi into throwing his hand ever since….” Her voice trailed off. “For years.”

“Let me guess. Is that my fault too?”

“It's mine,” Dar’Revan met Revan’s eyes calmly. “Which was enough to make the Makeon First forget his caution. I expect he will cheat spectacularly, in the hopes of revenging himself upon a fallen Jedi who sent three of his sons to die at Malachor.” Her teeth pulled back. “Enemies, Fragment. Sometimes they're quite useful.”

Malachor was holding Revan’s hand. Somehow they'd started following this madwoman, Seiran too, the three of them walking abreast behind her. Korrie squeezed her hand hard, as if for comfort, but when Revan looked down at him, her son’s face was stony, nearly as cold as Dar’Revan’s.

“What about my father?” Korrie whispered. “Is he… is he dead too?”
“No,” Revan whispered. *Not again.* But when she extended her senses, trying to find… something, the spark that she’d come to realize was Malak was flickering, so faintly she could barely sense it. “No,” she insisted, louder, lying. *I will not feel sorry for a man I killed. But Dustil--*

“Father’s missing,” her son said. “I can't find him at all.”

But his feet came down, one after the other, just like hers. On her other side, Seiran’s arm brushed hers. “You sure you trust her?” His voice was a whisper, as if that would stop a Jedi from hearing three paces away. Maybe he thought it would.

“I can stop her, if I have to,” Revan muttered.

“That's true,” Dar'Revan murmured, not even looking back. “But you know I’m correct.”

Xxx

“Cally?” Really, why was it so difficult to find decent help these days? The agency had sent three others before this little Dantooine girl, and every one of them even *more* clumsy and slow. “Cally? I’m expecting a General for dinner tonight. The caterers have been and gone, but you need to out the warmers out before the soufa falls. It's quite inedible without the pillowing.”

Cally held up her hand, without even turning her head. She was wearing something black and sleeveless, and decidedly *not* her uniform. “A moment, Helena. I’m watching this.”

Xxx

*Jokka Rei:* “*Sentients, this is just... unbelievable news now coming from the One Thantos Three--or rather, what used to be the D’Reev tower, One Thantos Three. As you can see, authorities have cordoned the area in a half-kilometer radius, and I’ve been told evacuations of all nearby structures are still underway. We have no casualty reports as of yet, but this level of conflict between two Senate Houses is... unprecedented, within our lifetime, to say the least.***

*Xarga Weis:* (interrupting) “Your Republic’s own personal Malachor?”

*Jokka Rei:* “I don't find that amusing.”

*Xarga Weis:* “Just accurate. She's got to be behind this, don't you think?”

Xxx

*She.* Helena Shan’s mouth opened and closed as she stared at the holo screen, the column of smoke, rising like a gravity well into the heavens above.

“Revan! They mean Revan! *She* did this!”

“Yes.” Cally didn't turn her head. Her voice sounded strange and choked. Deeper, almost a like a man’s. “Ridding herself of Jedi and duplicate all at once. She must have planned this from the start, orchestrating even her own kidnapping--”

“Kidnapping?” Revan Starfire had a son, Helena recalled. “She took her own child?”

Maybe Helena should have done that with Bastila, long ago. Taken her back from those Jedi butchers and raised her herself. But Abasen--her husband always had another treasure hunt, always another stake, and the child would have gotten in the way: so small and serious, like a tiny judge.

“No.” Her servant… chuckled darkly. There was no other way to describe it. “No doubt the
Starfire loyalists have secured Malachor on some fortified world already. Perhaps with his father.” She turned her head, rising up from the couch. The first thing Helena Shan noticed was that her servant was now dressed in one of Helena’s very own evening gowns. The next, was that the woman’s eyes were glowing, a hellish and terrible red.

“What--what are you?”

On the holoscreen, the pundits continued their story. Master Vrook Lamar’s face captioned. “My niece is not dead.”


“You fools call us barbarous,” Cally murmured, not at all like herself. “I’m sure you won’t mind if I keep this garment? It’s far more comfortable than that uniform you had this child dressed in.”

“Of course.” It had been one hundred and sixteen days since Helena Shan’s last drink, but her hands were now shaking as if it was yesterday. “But please! Don't hurt me. Just go. Take anything you want!”

“Want.” Cally sighed. “You have no idea how boring want can be, after a few centuries.” She started towards Helena, and Helena backed into the wall, shaking, trying not to scream.

“Please! Don't hurt me!”

“I suppose I must want credits,” her former bodyguard sighed. “Those Malachorian bumbling have nearly eliminated my resources on this planet. And if Revan is going to keep breaking all our rules of engagement, I shouldn't have to play fair.” Her voice had a petulant whine. “Don't you agree?”

“Yes!” Anything. Abasen had always insisted they carry the local currency in small denominations, in case of civil unrest. Helena had never broken the habit. Not even here. Her hand trembled as she picked up the priceless N’Tari vase he had given her the year after Bastie was born, after the last miscarriage, and fished out the credits within. “Please. Take them!”

“You're so kind.” The woman’s head ducked, as if suddenly almost shy. “I hope you're not mourning for Revan. Trust me, she's far from dead.”

“I wish she was dead,” Helena hissed. “She killed my daughter!”

Cally nodded. “Rather unfairly. She kept Bastila from me.”

Xxx

A/N They are getting more complicated to write, not that this was ever easy. This chapter went through a few iterations, a few plot twists, a few rejected reunions, and so on.

BTW, I have a massive document I call memory apocrypha that’s all the stuff I’ve cut or changed. Let me know what you love or hate and I’ll send you a cut scene.
The sky speeder’s interior was cramped for five, even if one was a baby. Seiran wrapped his arms
around Abasen. His son nuzzled into his neck, and he breathed in the scent of the baby’s fuzzy
head. Next to him, Revan and Malak’s son sat quietly, back straight as a line. Seiran would have
thought the kid was completely calm—except he kept chewing on his lower lip like it was a stick of
gam.

“This is a shuttle,” the Revan with Polla’s memories said to the other. “How do you expect us to
get offworld?”

“We only need to reach the orbitals,” the other Revan told her. “I’ve made arrangements for a
ship.”

“What kind of arrangements? We can’t take one of Malachi’s.” That Revan was driving, her hands
resting loosely on the speeder’s thruster. She made a face—again, awkwardly familiar, down to the
roll of her eyes. “Bad enough we’re in this fracking thing, with Senate plates and the D’Reev crest
on the side.”

“I’m sure we won’t be the only ones borrowing transport,” the other one—the one that had been a
nurse—said. The nurse’s voice was flat. She appeared completely unconcerned.

She gave Seiran the creeps.

Maybe Seiran was imagining that the one with Pollie’s memories looked like his wife. Maybe he
was grasping at wild hessi. But Polla had to be alive. Seiran would know, wouldn’t he—if she was
dead? The Revans had—they were Force users, and they’d said it was possible that he would know.

Not just possible. True. She has to be alive.

But after we rescue you, Polla, I’m going to blasting kill you for doing something so fracking stupid—

The Revan who had been a nurse sounded just as confident about this as she did everything else.
“Set the course towards the outer ring of the station. There’s a light cruiser waiting for us there.”

“A Senate cruiser? Because we can’t—”

“No. I called in a favor.”

They stared at each other. It was the nurse who looked away first, while the other Revan’s eyes
narrowed. She said something in a language Seiran didn’t know, and her twin answered back.

The one with Polla’s memories turned away, back to the viewscreen again. “If this is some kind of
Sith fracking trap—”

Ses? Kashyyyk am prior?”
“Shnikiath. A dak tar Kashyyk. Y an dak Yavin Station.” The other frowned and looked over at their son, curled up in back seat next to Seiran. “Korrie, I know this is scary—”

“She blew up the building with grandfather in it.” The boy’s eyes were dry, but he wiped them anyway. “Why do you let her boss you around? She’s probably evil.”

“Hah,” the pilot said, lifting an eyebrow. “See? My son is probably right.”

“Mal--” the nurse’s face looked older when she frowned. “Your grandfather loved you very much. He was very sick. He-he told me to tell you that.”

They were above the clouds now. Atmosphere splintered into the dark lines of the orbital thruway. The pilot Revan dove through traffic, accelerating sharply. She drove as recklessly as Pollie, and watching made Seiran’s gut twist.

“Leeshy was very sick and you healed her.” The boy hugged his knees to his chest. “You could have healed Grandfather too. But you didn’t. I don’t like you.”

The nurse Revan looked like she’d been slapped.

“Korrie!” The other one said, glancing back. “You can’t speak to her that way!”

“Where are we going?” The boy demanded. “Why did you have to play scorched ground if all we’re gonna do is hide? Shouldn’t we attack or something?”

“Korrie, we’re not--” The pilot sighed. “We're going to find a safe place for you and the baby to stay. It won't be for long, I promise.”

“And then what?” The kid frowned. “If everyone thinks I'm dead, how can I marry Leeshy? What about our alliance?”

The nurse's mouth twitched. “It’s a feint, Malachor. Surely, you studied them in school?”

“I'm not talking to you.”

Seiran stared down at the rapidly disappearing skyline. The pilot Revan had banked them nearly vertical now, and the thrusters kicked in as the shuttle pulled away from Coruscant’s atmosphere. Wisps of sullen gray clouds rapidly concealed the remaining view. The fog was thicker than the muck around the canyons back home.

He tried not to think that they were flying blind. He wrapped his arms around his son. The two Revans were going at it again, back and forth in that language of theirs.

“Hey!” he broke in. Their heads turned towards him, almost at the same time.

“What is it?” the pilot asked. The other one leaned over her, and punched something in on the navigation screen. Her double glanced down at it, frowned, and then looked back at Seiran without adjusting the course.

“So, you want to get us a ship and then we… we find my wife? How are we going to find my wife?”

“I know where she is,” the pilot told him. “Or where she will be. Tenebrae's taking her to Yavin Station.” She turned away from the controls entirely, as careless as Pollie in that damned asteroid field. Seiran had to resist the urge to tell her to look at the speedway.
“And how do you know that?” The nurse demanded.

“Master Kavar told me. He said Master Klee told him, because he was working secretly with some group to betray the Emperor?” The pilot shot the nurse another glare.

“Ah,” the nurse said. She smiled slightly, and it made Seiran uneasy. In his arms, Abasen whimpered a little.

“And then there’s the Genoharadan,” the pilot added, without looking back. “Do you have a plan for them, Dar?”

“Ackmay glub.” The other one responded. “Isnmay klibgb ban, Jett’ai.”

“Hope I can. The kids will be safe with the Mand'oade, at least. When we get to this cruiser of yours, I’ll comm them. Does the ship of yours has a secure line?”

“No.”

“No?” The one with Polla’s memories snorted. “Frack if I know how you're gonna call Kashyyyk then. And I need to comm Carth--”

“No. I mean, we are not leaving Malachor and the infant with your clans.” The nurse’s voice went arctic. “I have a better place.”

“Where?” Seiran interrupted. “I’m not crazy about leaving Abasen with Aemelie either, but it’s better than some orphanage.”

They both turned to look at him.

“You need to stay dead,” the nurse murmured. “For now, we all do. I would think you’d understand, Deralian.”

“We can trust Canderous--” the other one broke in.

“You don’t understand him! Or any of the clans. They have their own rivalries. Just because you married one of their warriors and made him your pet kath--”

“Canderous is no one’s pet anything!”

“I know a place,” the nurse insisted. “Trust me, Fragment. Do you think I’d let my--do you think I’d put Mal in danger?”

“I think you have a plan,” the other one muttered. “It worries me that I don’t know what it is.”

“You thought nothing of reprogramming an ancient Rakatan computer with a Twi’lek child’s memories. You failed to notice three Sith Lords when they were right in front of you--not to mention Malak--for... how long?” The nurse made a disgusted noise in her throat. “Trust that I know Tenebrae. I did control a rather extensive espionage network. I know of a few safe planets.”

“Safe planets for children?” The pilot scoffed. “We need to leave them with our allies.”

Her twin frowned.

“I’m not leaving with anyone,” Korrie interrupted them. “Who’s Tenebrae?”

“Someone who will never hurt you, Malachor,” the nurse said. “Someone who can never touch
you.”

“Some crazy fracking Sith,” the other one added. “After we rescue the real--after we rescue Polla, we’re going to stop him.”

“Send Mandalorians,” the boy said. “Father says they're evil, but I figure, that means they're tough, doesn’t it? They’ve got to be tough?”

“They're not evil,” the nurse corrected. “Your father simplifies everything.” Her mouth thinned. “Even now, still a Jedi.”

“Huh?”

“Why don't we talk about this later,” muttered the Revan with Polla’s memories. She pushed her hair back from her face, twisting it in her fingers. “Hope you weren't kidding about that ship, Dar.”

“Would I joke?” The other woman shook her head.

“She didn't have to blow up the whole building,” the boy whispered. “We’re not even playing scorched ground right.”

“It’s okay, Korrie.” The pilot’s voice went soft. Almost like Polla’s, singing Abasen to sleep. Was it really, or was Seiran just losing his mind? He wrapped his arms around his son and prayed. He wasn’t sure to who--or what.

“Grandfather’s dead,” the boy whispered. “And where’s Father?”

_His real father? Dead… isn't he?_ The way the media was, how could Seiran know?

“He’s… he’s not coming with us,” the other Revan said. “He can’t stay in that boy’s body forever. We discussed this, Mal.”

**Boy’s body?**

Pollie was the one who had wished for more excitement in their lives. Seiran just wanted a couple more kids and some steady work. And at the end of every day, his wife in his arms, safe and soft and sound.

“You discussed Malak with my son?” The pilot. And now both of them glaring at each other again. “When?”

The boy answered before the woman could. “‘The other night, when Sheris read me a story. She said they’re not getting married and Father will have to give the body back.”

“Oh. Well… she’s right.” The woman sighed. “I’m sorry, Korrie. I know this is a lot. We’re gonna take you someplace safe, okay?”

“But where?” He looked at the pilot, lip trembling a little. “We should get Father too.”

“We can’t.” The pilot turned back to the wheel of the speeder, just in time to swerve them out of incoming traffic. “There's no time.”

“But if Grandfather's dead, you're First now.” The child sounded almost like one of them. “Make time.”

“Mal,” the nurse stood up, leaning over the back of the seat. “Look at me.”
The pilot Revan glanced back once, then returned her attention to the thruway, just in time to dodge them back into the outbound lane, passing a double hauler by almost skimming its top.

Seiran couldn't stand it anymore. “Be careful,” he snapped. “Watch where you're going.”

“I am,” the pilot Revan said. She glanced back at him, taking her eyes off the road again. “Relax, okay?”

“What?” The boy was standing up in his seat, staring at the nurse Revan. Their faces were close, so close that Seiran couldn't see the expressions. But as he watched, the nurse bent forward, her hair brushing the boy’s forehead.

“I know you miss him,” the nurse whispered. “I miss him too, Malachor, but sometimes we have to do what is necessary. You know that your father would say the same.”

“What’s necessary is stupid,” he muttered. “Like you.”

“Don't be a silly-slug.” Her voice pitched lower, and her hand brushed his hair back. “You have to be brave.”

“I am,” he said. “The… bravest.”

“Bravest ever.” She leaned forward even more “Hothan--”

The kid jerked back as if she'd shocked him. “No!” He shook his head, whispering. “You don't get to do that!”

“What?” The pilot turned around all the way in her seat… just as they were merging into an ascending spiral, lanes outlined in beams of light.

The ominous honk of a hoverbus coming up under their lane made Seiran hold onto Abasen a little tighter. Something finally occurred to him: pilot Revan had all of Pollie's confidence behind the thruster…

...and none of her skill.

And yet, the woman had the luck of a Grass Priest. Incredibly, the hoverbus slowed before it hit them… and their shuttle leapt forward, as if it had thrusters, beating the light.

“She tried to give me a Hothan kiss!” The kid was furious. “She was acting like she was you, Mother-- except you never call me silly slug. Not anymore. No one has, not in ages--”

“Frack,” the pilot said. She rattled off several other things that could have been more curses in that language of theirs.

The nurse said something back. The boy watched them, eyes narrowing.

“Sheris was… wrong to do that,” the pilot offered finally. A little weakly, Seiran thought.

Sheris? And then it hit him. For whatever reason, they’d never bothered to tell the kid he had two moms.

Abasen murmured something against his chest. When Seiran looked down, his son’s dark eyes were staring up at him steadily. Trusting.

“I won’t lie,” he whispered, staring into those eyes. “When you’re old enough to understand me, I
won't lie to you about anything.”

The shuttle lurched again. The Revans argued. The boy was silent next to Seiran, sitting again, hands clenched together tightly on his lap, gnawing furiously on his lower lip, like that was all that kept him whole.

Seiran looked at his son. “I'll never lie to you,” he repeated, softer still, murmuring the words against the baby’s silken head. “I promise.”

XXX

Mother landed the shuttle on one of the big orbitals that had been designed to root space bound traffic away from Coruscant traffic. They had studied it once in school, like last month, but it felt like ages ago, now.

Sheris was really bossy. She led all of them off the shuttle and down into Orbital Parking like it was all hers, and when Mother suggested they get supplies, she looked like she wanted to yell. Maybe that was what she was doing in that funny language as they walked down along the tramway.

Yelling at mother.

Sheris was bossy. Sheris was a bully.

Except she wasn't Sheris at all. She couldn't be.

All of the pieces fit. Korrie had been a real silly slug not to notice it before.

Sheris-not-Sheris knew things. She knew where those old holobooks were, on the bottom shelf of his room because it was the first shelf he'd had. She'd gone and picked them the first time, the time she'd read him ten stories, before Korrie had even asked.

And she never called him Korrie. She called him Mal. She called him Mal a lot.

And she had slept in their old rooms, with Father. Married people did that. And Mother was married to other people now, but Father was only married to one person and she--

And she was bossy. Mother had been bossy. Mother had been the boss of everyone. Mother had even ruled the galaxy.

“I need supplies,” the man with the baby said for like the fifth time. Korrie kept forgetting his name. His hair was stupid, like Mother in the vids. “For Abasen. Formula. Diapers. Wipes.”

They were standing in the middle of the crowded, crowded orbital. They'd landed, first off, and then there had been a long line, and they'd stood for what seemed forever, before Mother made an impatient noise and--she must have done something, because suddenly a bunch of people in front of them all went off and did other stuff and it was their turn and... kind of just like in the vids of the quest for the Star Forge, or old episodes of Nomi, Mother was doing real Jedi mind tricks on the customs people.

“I don't need to see your exit visas,” the Aqualish had agreed. His holostamp had hovered in the empty air for a sec, and then the gate had opened, and they had passed through under the sign that said “Departures, Outer Rim.”

“I've never been to the Outer Rim,” Korrie told Sheris-not-Sheris. “Guess you have, right?”
“Yes,” she said. She wasn't looking at him, she was staring at the ground, and her voice sounded like a droid’s. Speaking of droids, the bag she was carrying clanked. Korrie had looked into it in the shuttle. The bag had pieces of HK. Mother’s HK, that she had chopped to pieces and didn't seem to care about.

Mother didn't care about HK, but Sheris-not-Sheris did care. She cared enough to bring his broken chopped up pieces.

That was how he knew. It really had to be true. When he realized that, he realized it had to be the finally strawman, like Grandfather used to say.

“Go,” Mother said to that guy with the baby. “get what you need. We have a little time.”

“Keep your hood up,” Sheris-not-Sheris bossed Korrie. She was wearing goggles. She pulled up Korrie's hood too, and pulled off his itchy Eg collar.

“Take Aba for me? Just for now.” Meanwhile, the man was unsnapping that whiny baby from its blanket on his chest, and handing the whole thing to Mother.

Mother took the whiny baby extra carefully, like he might break. He wouldn't though. Babies were tough. There had been a few in the apprentice dorms, with their carers. This one cried more than those Jedi babies.

“Hurry, Seiran.” Mother wrapped her arms all awkward around the baby, who gave a squawk, like he didn't like it.

“Don’t squeeze him,” Korrie told her. The man was already rushing over to one of those auto kiosks that they had in commercial districts, that Korrie wasn't allowed to go near because they had bad security.

“Support his legs,” Sheris-not-Sheris told Mother. Like she was kind of the expert. Was she? If she really was what she had to be, then--she was. Kind of. Because she'd had a baby before.

And she'd held him. Korrie remembered a little of that.

“Shhh,” Mother said, looking down at the baby in her arms. “He’ll be back soon.”

All of the secrets were starting to make Korrie mad, which was good, because being mad distracted him from being upset that Grandfather was maybe dead. (If that wasn’t a lie too.) Would Grandfather be a Force ghost like Father used to be? That might be sort of cool, except that Grandfather didn’t have the Force. Did you need to have the Force to be a Force ghost, or was it something that could happen to anyone?

“Keep your head down,” Mother murmured to Korrie. There were crowds all over the place, but no one seemed to be paying attention to them. Mother had a funny look on her face, like she was concentrating and Korrie wondered if maybe she was helping with that. Master Klee had said lots of times that the Force could influence the weak-minded, but also that it was bad and wrong to use it like that, and that Korrie must not ever.

Master Klee had not ever explained how through. Maybe Mother knew. And Sheris-not-Sheris had to know, she had to know too.

Right now through, Sheris-not-Sheris didn't look like she knew anything at all. She was staring at the ground like it mattered more than Korrie, or Mother, or this stupid quest they were on to save Polla Organa Wen, who wasn't dead but was in trouble, and was no doubt as stupid as her
husband’s stupid hair.

“Back.” The man appeared again, hands full of plastic or bags and things that clanked and squished. “I got plenty of formula and wipes.”

“Here.” Mother fumbled with the blanket she’d strapped to her own chest, and handed the stupid baby back to its stupid father. They juggled the bags and baby between them like they were actually juggling. It might have been funny, if Korrie's entire universe hadn't just exploded.

Sheris-not-Sheris made an impatient noise. “We're out of time.” She waved them all forward and they all followed, even Korrie and his suspiciousness. They followed her around a corner, to a hallway that was less crowded.

“Here.” Sheris moved her hand a door slid open in the wall. Inside there were stairs and it looked dirty and maybe a little scary.

“Isn’t there a lift?” Korrie asked her.

Sheris shook her head.

“We need to hurry.” Mother was glancing behind them. There was a vidscreen and a lot of people standing in front of it, so they couldn’t see. But there were so many of them talking at once that Korrie couldn’t hear what the ‘caster was saying either.

“Don’t be afraid.” Mother took his hand. Her fingers were warm.

“I’m not,” Korrie told her. “I just want to know what they’re looking at.” The people in front of the vidscreen were blocking the view, but the transmission was broadcasting, very loud, over everybody’s heads.

XXX

“... evacuations of all nearby structures are still underway. We have no casualty reports as of yet, but this level of conflict between two Senate Houses is… unprecedented, within our lifetime, to say the least.”

“Your Republic’s own personal Malachor?”

“I don’t find that amusing.”

“Just accurate. She's got to be behind this, don't you think?”

XXX

“Mal.” Sheris-not-Sheris grabbed his other arm, pulling him away, from where he had turned, and blocking his view.

“I want to see,” Korrie told them. Are they talking about me?

“We need to go now.” Mother pulled him away from Sheris, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, steering him down into the dark, scary staircase-place. That guy with the baby came behind them. The door slid shut and then it got really dark.

“Make a light?” he whispered to Mother. She did that sometimes when she sang him to sleep, a glowing one, that could dance over the room.
“Just follow me,” she whispered, holding his hand. Sheris was still hanging onto the other one and he pulled it free, giving her a little shove with the Force. (That was wrong, but so was grabbing him.)

“Oh!” Sheris-not-Sheris sounded off balance for a second, and then her feet clacked down the same stairs, right after them all.

“Don't do that,” she said, and for a second, the words seemed to echo in his head, but then Korrie somehow… *washed* them away. He concentrated. He used the Force.

Father would have been proud, if anyone besides Korrie had cared enough to get him before they ran away.

“Don't lie to me,” he muttered, so quiet that nobody who wasn't a Jedi could hear, but because Korrie had studied a little to be a Jedi too, he knew that Sheris-not-Sheris did hear him.

Whatever. It shut her right up.

XXX

The hanger was anonymous, as promised. Just one in a line off the service entrances. The fifteenth from the left, eastern quadrant. Number 561.

Revan tapped the door and it slid open, all too conscious of the sullen child trailing behind her.

*Silly slug. How could I be so careless?*

Something a fool like Sheris would do, give into sentiment with the boy. She had avoided it for so long, even those nights reading to him, holding her arms stiff and her back straight when she longer to take him in her arms instead. But he was too big, and he *had* a mother and she never wanted to hurt him again, or confuse him--

*Or leave him. Again.*

The ship inside was hull-scarred, obviously salvage.

“Nice,” the Fragment said, as if she didn’t think it was. “That thing doesn’t even look like it can hit hyperdrive.”

“Oh, I’m sure it can,” Revan murmured, with more authority than she felt.

“Mahm,” the baby said, behind them.

“Does it have battle guns?” her son asked.

Revan looked back at him. “I don't know,” she smiled, trying to do it like the Fragment did. “I doubt it.”

“One turret,” the Fragment interrupted. “There, Malachor, see?” She pointed.

“*Korrie,*” he corrected. “You call me Korrie, and I call you Mother, and I call *her* Sheris.”

The Fragment looked at the Deralian before she looked at their son again. “I'll get us into hyperspace,” she said slowly. “Maybe you can help Sheris get us squared away with the galley and check the stores.”
She tapped awkwardly on the ship’s hull. Nothing happened. “Is it locked?”

“Probably.” Revan stepped forward, and put her hand against the sensor.

“Access granted.” The hatch swung down.

“The last time someone offered me a ship,” the Fragment said, “it was a Genoharadan trap.”

“The Genoharadan are fools.” Revan shrugged. “Incompetents. I sent them after a simple artifact and they failed utterly to retrieve it.”

“Malachi put a contract with them out on Malachor,” the Fragment snapped back, in Rakatan. She was already halfway up the ramp, hand on her lightsaber, as if Oerin or Davad would leave any threat to her inside. “In the event of his death, the Genoharadan have orders to kill Korrie. You had better fricking hope they're incompetent.”

“Oh?” The Fragment had mentioned that contract before. It obviously frightened her, which was extremely useful. “Then you need to keep him safe.”

“Then… Malachi--he's really dead?” Still in Rakatan, as they trailed after her into the ship. Tight quarters for all of them, but manageable, Revan thought. It would only take a few days to reach the moon where Exar had met his end, and Yavin Station above it; but before that--

Grids on a map, points of light. Hyperspace routes. They would need a safe haven--one that the Fragment would find acceptable….

“Yes,” Revan told her. “He died in front of me.”

XXX

“Daughter,” the old man whispered. His skin was wax, his eyelids swollen, the flesh beneath sunken and shriveled.

“Yes, Malachi.” She didn’t bother to look at Master Loanin.

“I…” he chuckled, coughing, and his eyes seemed to finally focus on her. “You. You’re… you. The… feeds. I-I… thought Malak, but… should have known. You… I had set… markers--my boy’s… room. Wondered why… Sheris spent so much… time.”

Revan tried not to be surprised. “So you knew?”


“We need to talk about the future,” she told him. “You’re dying.”

“Yes.” His eyelids fluttered, half-closing, but they never left her face. “Malachor. He must be safe, but he’s not… ready.”

“You appointed his mother as your Second,” she said.

“You… I would have truly… are you… not her? Have you… replaced her?”

“We are allies,” she told him.
Even if she lies to me. That computer--who knows what it promised her? She is naive.

“Racharn… agreed. You… thank you for that. Your hand… should have… realized.”

“You don't have much time.” She lifted her head, glancing at the Loanin. The Jedi nodded back at her, as if in agreement. Not much time. The virus affected some like this, attacking the body; until one by one, all of its systems shut down.


Revan knew that her expression gave away nothing. “Of course. We will protect him together, Malak and me. Which House is the biggest threat to ours?”

“Makeon. They have not… forgotten. Sons.”

Their sons who had died above Malachor.

“And Racharn promised to ally against them? With us?”

“New First… too young. She can’t… protect…. Not yet.”

Of course not. And Malak was a double-edged blade. Even if he had the strength to protect Malachor, revealing his true identity would risk having him tried for their crimes against the Republic. Revealing his identity now, with the Order in tatters and distrust of Force users more common than respect--

It was untenable, no matter her personal sentiment.

Tenebrae had gone too far. If he had blind agents on Coruscant, then Revan was truly out of time. No telling how far his minions had penetrated. The Senate. Trade federations. The Fleet.

Too late for her plague, and the box had never been found. There was only one way to control him now.

“Protect.” The old man’s face twisted in pain. “Both. Revan. The other… she has… fire. My Ilyana. She-she was like. Her. Protect.”

And I was not? I did not have fire, Malachi? I made the galaxy burn for your schemes.

His schemes, all along.

The wash of anger helped strengthen her resolve. Silence the sniveling Sheris.

Malachi said other things. Questions. All about her, his Jedi-spawned prize. Revan answered as best she could. And then--

“I promise, Father.” His fingers were cold in hers, dry like sticks. Revan could see the veins in his temple, his eyes still half-closed, staring at her under heavy lids.

“Genoharadan.” Malachi laughed softly. “Cancelled... contract. Malachor is... safe.”

Genoharadan. Revan frowned. That would be a relief to the Fragment, perhaps. She herself had always assumed Malachi was bluffing when he threatened their son.

Her mind considered routes of escape. They’d need a ship. Untraceable. “Which Makeon is the
Which hates me the most? Enough to do something truly rash? On a moment’s notice?

“First.” His desiccated lips pulled back in a smile.” Eliminate… others first. Then… him.” He patted her hand. “Good… girl.”

She turned her head towards Loanin. “You should leave.” she told him. “Take the Jedi with you. Alarms will go off quite soon.”

His eyebrows shot up nearly to his hairline. “Is the building’s security compromised?”

“Soon.”

“Give me time,” the Jedi said, looking back. “I assume you don’t want further loss of life upon your conscience.”

“Revan...” the old man. From behind her. His voice stronger now. “You--always. Like a daughter... to me.”

“Yes, Malachi.” She didn't turn her head, just stared at the Jedi medic until the man turned away, walking towards the door. “You have approximately one hour, Master Loanin.”

He turned back. “I don’t know whether to wish the Force be with you or not.”

“We are Jedi,” she told him. Maybe it was Sheris’s old bitterness, bleeding through. “What we wish is inconsequential.”

“And, so.” He nodded once from the doorway. Then it closed behind him.

“Revan...” the old man whispered.

“Yes, Malachi?”

“You... you make me proud.”

She stared at him, the shell of the old man, stared, until his breathing grew more labored, and his lips tinged with blue. “What... what are you--”

“Something I should have done long ago.” She reached for a pillow. “Father.”

XXX

Dar’Revan’s ship didn't look like much, but its engines practically purred under Revan’s fingers, as she navigated them past the orbital’s gates, and into the open lanes leading to the Outer Rim jump points.

Malachi is dead. And because of that, Korrie is in danger.

But the Genoharadan ranked pretty far down the immediate list. Korrie also wasn’t safe because they were in this claptrap of a ship, hurtling towards a hyperspace jump point, with at least one Senate house, and a Sith Emperor wishing--or thinking--they were dead. Not to mention the two Sith Lords whose ship this fracking had to be--

Dar’Revan had admitted almost nothing. Only that she’d gotten this vessel-- somehow --from Oerin Lin and Davad Arkan.
Of course she got it from Arkan. Who else does she know that didn’t fracking die in the wars with her? Because of her? The Emperor. A bunch of Sith. Our uncle. That’s who she knows.

But why would Davad help us? Is he helping us? Or her? Are we really going to find Polla? Or is this some kind of trap for me?

Revan rubbed her temples, the beginnings of a headache forming, like a thundercloud in the Force. But our son is here. She loves him. I can trust that, even if I can’t trust her.

“You look tired, Korrie.” Revan kept her voice gentle. “Why don’t you grab some sleep? I think there are bunks in the back.”

“I can’t sleep.” Without even looking, she could feel her son’s ragged exhaustion, hear the unshed tears in his voice. “Where are we going? You’re not leaving me!”

“Right now, we’re jumping to hyperspace. You’d better strap in. Sometimes it makes me a little queasy. Have you ever been?”

“Yes,” he muttered. “Lots of times when I was a baby.”

“Mal?” Dar’Revan’s face was perfectly pleasant, like they were on some fracking cruise. “Why don’t you and your mother inspect the sleeping area? I can handle the ship.”

“Why don’t you see him to the bunks?” Revan countered, trying not to eye the long-range communicator.

Why is she helping us? It can’t be for Polla. She blew up that fracking building and how do I know Malachi was even dying? I only have her word--

Seiran cleared his throat. “I can take the kid back, if you two--”

“No,” they both said at once.

“I want you to take him, Sheris,” Revan stared down her duplicate. “Korrie needs to sleep. And he shouldn't be alone.”

“I'm not gonna go to sleep if she's there,” her son muttered. Normally, Revan would have been proud, but now--

“Malachor.” Dar’Revan bent her head until they were eye level. “I know this must be frightening for you. I’m… I'm sorry about that. I'm going to make sure you're safe. I promise.”

“Mother?” He looked at her and then back at Sheris. “What about my father?”

Yes, what about Malak? Another thing Revan hadn't accounted for. Would he evacuate with the rest of the Jedi? What the frack would Carth say, when Revan admitted she’d lost track of his son’s body?

I've failed. Just like Manaan. Maybe Dar’Revan is right. Everything I do goes wrong. Maybe she's right. Maybe I did frack it all up, even worse than she did. She is me, after all. Maybe I need to frack it all up, listen to myself. Listen to her.

Trust her?

She punched in the coordinates to the navboard, setting them towards Yavin. It would still be several jumps. As the route lit up before them, Revan considered their choices for the kids.
If I can't reach Canderous on the comm, would they be safe on Kashyyyk? Or with Carth? Would Carth and Zaalbar watch them for me even after I mislaid Dustil? I'll try to comm them too, but not in front of her--

“Elendor,” Dar announced from across the room. She’d switched on a map of the galaxy like she was giving telemetry lessons. The holographic map lit her features in a haze of blue. “Or Navar. Both Corellian colonies. Lots of Humans. We can hire a caretaker--”

“Hire?” Seiran interrupted. “I don't want to leave my kid with some stranger.”

Neither do I. Which is why we’re not going to do that.

The second she fracking walks out the door, I'll comm Canderous.

“Sei.” Revan called him that deliberately, keeping her voice light and easy. “We’ve got this. Trust me?” Get it? Trust me. Not her.

Polla’s husband frowned. “I don't want to leave him.” Abasen was sleeping finally; fitful, after a crying fit that had lasted all through lift off, and halfway to the space lanes.

“I know.” She met his eyes. Darker than Carth’s. “I don't want to leave Korrie either.”

“You could look after them both,” Dar'Revan suggested. “Seiran, if you prefer to stay with the children, while Revan and I go after Polla--”

She's lying. It felt like a wrongness in the Force. Lying about helping Polla? Leaving him? Both?

“Korrie.” Revan felt her mouth stretch around a lie too, an entirely artificial smile. “Go with Sheris for now. I'll be in soon.”

“Sheris?” Seiran sounded confused.

“She means me,” Dar'Revan said quickly.

“Doesn't he know your name?” Korrie interrupted.

“That's funny,” said Seiran. “Of course I know your mother’s name.”

“Sheris isn't my mother.”

“Sometimes I… pretend to be your mother,” the woman interrupted. “It's a trick.”

“Like when you sang those baby songs to me? Like when you called me a silly slug?” He glared at her with Malak’s fierceness. “Only she did that.”

“Mal--”

“Only she called me that.” He was glaring at them both now. “Her and father. The servants and Grandfather said I was too little to remember her, but I do.”

“Malachor.”

“You left,” he snapped. “Real Mother's the one that came back.”

Without another word, their son turned and ran, heading for the bunks.
Revan made herself breathe. Made herself not follow. Made herself not stare at the comm. “Go after him,” she told her other self. She made her voice gentle, even though it didn't feel like her own voice that way. “He needs--”

The snick of the door sliding closed was the only response. Without turning her head, she knew the woman was already gone.

“Your kid didn't know that she was… you?” Seiran’s voice sounded angry and sad, as if he already knew the answer. “I'm sorry--you didn't tell him? Either of you?”

Revan’s fingers shook as she punched in the comm code.

“No,” she said flatly. “Guard the door, in case she comes back early.”

Xxx

It was a nice moon. Round. Small. Life-sustaining, and that was rare.

“Someone’s down there.” Kex ran his hand along the readouts again. Along with the spectrometer traces you'd expect for a moon with breathable atmosphere, were some blips you wouldn't. Radiation signatures. Processed terrilium, which had a different pattern than raw, the kind of thing you'd only see in a starship’s hull. And something hot and small, like maybe a working power source.

“Could be a crash site.” Millifar shrugged. “The blips aren't enough to be anything big.”

“We could check. Take a shuttle down.” His voice was light and careful.

We could. She examined him more closely. Kex was taller than she was, with straight black hair that hung over his eyes. His nose had a pleasing shape to it, although slightly thin. “Just us?”

“If you prefer.”

“Mother would need to approve first.”

“Of course! I just meant, if she approves… if you prefer and she approves, then--”

“Then we can explore your mysterious moon?” She smiled to show him that she understood the jape. “It's probably just some smuggler’s bolt hole or--”

“Comm alert.” He nudged her elbow, but no daringly immodest flirtation, now. Suddenly all business. “Your father’s special channel.”

Only one sentient has that frequency.

Millifar’s father was half a system away at the moment, working with the unblooded boys on zero gravity and basilisk construction. He had left strict instructions for this comm to be monitored at all times, just in case Third Wife remembered their existence and bothered to call.

It's not even a real marriage.

Millifar stared at the blinking light, and then at Kex again. “It might be... personal,” she said. “You know whose comm that is?”

Predictably, the unblooded boy flushed. “I do.”
“Allow me some privacy to respond.”

His chair slid back, so quickly that its pneumatic rollers hit the edge of the wall. “Of course. I'll just--” he backed away.

The comm chimed again. Once. Twice. The door slid closed behind Kex’s admirable form.

Millifar leaned over the comm bank and pressed in the response sequence. The screen lit up, flashing, resolving itself into a familiar face--

**“Millifar? Is your fath--”**

“What?” Her left hand moved over the controls, twisting the dials so that their wide beam receptors turned: the enormous receivers, capable of hearing a whisper from across the galaxy, bending towards one another instead of out. “I can barely hear you. There’s some signal interference.”

“... need.” The woman said. Her face twisted, with frustration, or anger, or fear. Millifar didn't care which. She turned up the dial more, until those famous features blurred, and all that remained was the crackle of static.

“I'll tell him you called, Third Wife.” Millifar smiled politely before cutting the signal. “Eventually.”

Xxx

“Frack! Blast!” Revan hit the comm board with the flat of her hand. The plasticore surface gave alarmingly, but didn't break.

Seiran cleared his throat. “No luck, huh?”

“One down,” she muttered. “Sunspots, I guess.”

Her fingers were already tapping the secure code for Kashyyyk.

This time, at least the signal was steady. The comm unit chimed. **“Pattern Recognized: Please initiate password protocol, or connection will be severed in ten, nine, eight….”**

“Mission?”

The computer didn't sound like Mission. The voice was flat and mechanical. Like a voder translating text.

**“Protocol initiated: please match the pattern found in memory. Connection will terminate in ten, nine, eight, seven--”**

“Mission? What's wrong with you?” A horrible suspicion. **Did she do this? Did Revan reprogram my computer?** “It's me, Mission. What the frack--?”

**“Pattern identified. Vocabulary match found.”** The voice shifted, although there was no visual.

**“Polla Revan? Where have you been? Some creepazoid keeps trying to hack into my main banks. Did you give anyone our codes and not tell me? Because whoever it was, they kept saying they were you--but they used the old stuff. Ancient. Like from years ago.”**
“They're not me.” Revan tried to sound calm, not angry. Dar’Revan might sense anger, might investigate. “Listen. No matter what. You can't listen to… them. Her. Okay? She’s… she's Sheris Darkstar. She's just pretending to be me, but she's not. Whatever you do, don’t let her in. Don't give her anything.”

“She kept trying to give commands.” Mission’s voice giggled, exactly like the young Twi’lek would have. “Which is pretty hilarious, because ever since T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leänjsëw fixed my central core, I’ve become totally self-aware and so I don't have to do anything anyone says. Except Him, I mean.” She paused. “Hey, did I tell you this already? I’m gonna get a body. We… we both are.”

“You didn't tell me.” Don't you know if you told me? Him? Him who? “Both of you? You mean, you and T'chennsi--T’chansell--”

“T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leänjsëw. No. He totally has one already, thanks to me! I mean me and the other me--the one in the Hawk. She's kind of upset, but I bet when Lena gets back with my body and the one for her, she’ll get over it."

“Lena?” There. The hyperspace jump point. There were a few freighters in front of them. Revan tried to quiet her impatience.

“Lena Wee? Remember? My asshole brother's girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend. We met her on Tatooine? She and T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leänjsëw got married. They're having a baby. She should be back any day now.”

Revan shivered. “The baby’s not--you’re not--you're not--”

“Eww! No! You think I wanna be in diapers again? No! Gross! We picked out two Twi'leks. Twins. Totally perfect. Brain dead, but I mean, there's no damage, they were just flat-lined.” Mission’s voice chuckled. “We might lose some computing capacity after the transfer, but T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leänjsëw promised we could keep our links to the mainframe. I mean, we’re gonna need them in the new galactic order!”

“Right.” Maybe she's just slipped a gear somehow. Maybe that’s the best alternative? That my computer is delusional? Because the worst is… is she working with this fracking Emperor too?

“Mission, I need to speak to Carth. And Zaalbar. Can you… can you patch me through?”

“Sure! Easy!” A pause. “Or, it would be, except the little me is still mad or something. She doesn’t answer my any of my pings.”

“Is… something wrong?”

“No clue. Ship’s flying okay. I can triangulate their location. The Hawk’s transponders are still on, but their comms are totally shut down. They're in hyperspace. Want the coordinates?”

“Sure.” Maybe something wrong with the comm.

The numbers appeared on the screen. Revan noted the rough quadrant, the points where the ship could possibly emerge; but until it did, she couldn’t tell more.

The Hawk appeared to heading for the Outer Rim.
Maybe fracking Dar’Revan is two moves ahead of me.

“T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw says hi, by the way.” Mission rattled on. “We were both really impressed that you faked your own deaths so well. I mean, it wasn't really that believable, but it will keep sents guessing! You’d think that trick would get old. Right? But it never does because sentients actually do die! Sometimes.”

“Who is T’chree-whatever again?” The name didn't sound like a Wookiee. If anything, it sounded… older.

“My master.” Mission's image materialized, finally, uncannily precisely in miniature, hovering above the comm’s surface. The child’s face beamed at Revan. “The Builder of these installations. Our Creator.”

“Your Creator? He made you and the other Mission, huh? He made your computers sentient?” She said Builder. The name. It’s… it’s Rakatan.

“Her too, yeah.” The girl’s face smiled. “But I meant you and me.” She shrugged. “Not that T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw ever planned for the Twi’lek child or Polla Organa; but he’s okay with us. T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw says a few extra variables are part of it, you know? Like him and Lena. He never planned on that either.”

Revan’s mouth was suddenly very dry. “The computer… you. A long time ago, it told me… it told me it had been waiting for me.”

“Yes.” Mission smiled. “Like fate, right?” Her illusory shoulder shrugged. “Or, like, the Force. Hey, have you seen Dustil? The other me had some totally insane story about Force ghosts and Darth Malak--I mean, I love her? She’s my sister? But Force ghosts?”

“I need to call you back.” Her hand punched the connection closed. The Twi'lek dissolved into a blur of static.

Seiran coughed.

Revan looked at him blankly. She’d forgotten he was even there. Had he heard that? Her mind was jumbled. She wasn't sure if she'd been speaking Rakatan or Basic.

“That… looked like Mission Vao,” he said. “So she’s not--dead?”

Blood stained the sand. Zaalbar roared, hate and rage and pain. And a part of her drew strength from that--from him, from his rage--

The navigator beeped. Its screen was flashing green now. Finally, their turn to jump. She pulled back the yoke, and they shifted. Their view dissolved into a million points of light.

Like always, she felt like she was going to be sick. Her stomach twisted, and Revan tried not to dry heave all over the nav board.

“Are you okay?” Polla’s husband reached across the space between them and touched her hand. “Revan?”

“I’m fine.” She took a deep breath, reaching for the Force. Stabilize it. Calm. Like ice in the cold
“Mission Vao is dead. Yes. That wasn't her.”

Xxx

The sleeping quarters were barely adequate, but considering this ship had been designed for a flock of Sith-trained assassins and their Jedi captives, it could have been worse. There were no cages, or torture devices—at least, not in the room where the assassins had slept.

Revan made a mental note to keep their son out of the cargo bay. “I think we should talk, Mal.”

Her son scowled at her, with her husband’s mouth. “I can't be mad at her. I can be mad at you.” His boy’s voice was high and thin, still a child’s. “She didn't leave. She didn't even remember. How come you do?”

“Because.” The tears had to be from Sheris. And once started, they ran unchecked down her face. “I am so sorry, Malachor. I couldn't take you with us. It wasn’t safe.”

“You could have not gone.” His face was shadowed in the overnights. “One of my teachers says the Mandalorians would have lost anyway. We didn't have to fight them. You didn't have to leave.”

*One of your teachers is an ignorant fool.*

“You've gotten big,” she whispered. “And you seem intelligent. Is that what you think? That the Mand'oade would have lost?”

“I'm not that big.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. His shoulders slumped. “I should have guessed when you read me all those baby stories.”

“Are they baby stories?” She wiped her eyes, and sat down on the nearest bunk. At least it was clean. “I suppose you read grown up stories now.”

“Sometimes.” He smiled at her, suddenly. Sun breaking through a cloud. His teeth still hadn’t been corrected. Presumably they had orthodontia for Humans on the Outer Rim, but Force knew how much training those medics possessed. “I read a story about you and Father helping on Cathar. You helped out a lot there, right?”

*Cathar. Dust in her mask, baking in their robes under the blue-white sun. All of those refugee children, dull fur and scared eyes.*

“We evacuated two cities. The officials said there was no threat, but your father and I convinced the people to follow us.”

“And then the Mandalorians came,” he said, nodding. “Father told me too.”

“And we stopped them.” She nodded.

“Where was I?”

“Home. You were so small then.”

“Smaller than that man’s baby?”

“No. Bigger than that. You were big. For a baby. But small.” She held out her hands, and he came to her. When she was sitting down, he was taller now. She had to look up at him.

“I heard you and Mother talking when you thought I was asleep. It makes more sense now.” Wide,
gray eyes looked up into hers. “Are you a ghost like Father? That wasn't you when I first met Sheris, right? She was mean.”

“I'm not a ghost, Mal. I… there was a holocron. The memories on it… Sheris took them.”

“Because she wanted to be you?” He frowned. “So it's like I have two mothers?”

“I guess. Yes.”

“You should have just told me.” He sighed.

“I wasn’t sure how grown up you were.” She wanted to ruffle his hair. Was that still allowed? He always stiffened and pulled away when she had tried before.

“Very,” her son said. “I could even be First now. Right? If you and Mother and Father all get killed by Sith.”

“I won’t let that happen. I need you to be grown up, Malachor. Just a little. Can you do that?”

“That depends,” he said. Carefully. As he’d been trained. Every centimeter a Senator’s son.

Xxx

“Do you remember,” the madman paused for dramatic effect. So predictable. “Do you remember our time on Ziost, when I introduced you to my Children?”

“No.” Polla resisted the urge to yawn. These assholes never slept. First it was the Jedi, with his lectures on Sith history and the Mandalorian Wars. Then, when she'd think his own fracking body would actually like a rest (because hers sure would), crazy Red Eyes came slithering back, to talk about old times with his dear old friend, Revan fracking Starfire, Dark Lord of the Sith.

“No?” Red Eyes looked hurt. Frack him--or, as they said in Sith space, Frak-kay.

“No,” she repeated. No... yes... it didn't matter what she said. The Emperor was so far up his own rectum, she could probably just tell him who she really was, and he'd laugh at Revan’s “clever jape.” Effete wormhole. Sniveling spider-roach.

Asshole.


“Frak-kay,” he corrected.

“Why don’t you tell me again?” Polla offered. “About your kids on Ziost?” All of his stories were horrible, and depressing, and usually everyone died, but the more he talked, the less she had to.

Xxx

Stars again, shining and cold across their night’s blanket. The last time Revan had seen these particular constellations, had been the last moments of her true life.

Their ship was fast and nameless, one of countless Fleet transports repurposed after the war. Such ships had been too small for the armistice; too delicate for Malachor's tectonic orbits, even before Meetra’s gravity well.

And yet this ship, obviously Republic salvage, was registered to the Mandalore system. A bold
gesture. Revan had even found the ship’s name scratched on one of the lower doors, the same name listed in the databanks of its public registry:

Aleema II.

Was that her old master’s idea of humor? Arkan's? Lin’s?

What she knew of Lin… No. she knew nothing of him. Or, at least, nothing she wanted to hear.

Xxx

Her hands tightened on the soft fabric, fingers sinking in like flesh. How long had it been since she’d killed? Killed closely. Personally. How long?

Ziost. But then those fools standing between her and Shan on the Aleema … had they died too? By her hand? If so, Revan couldn’t remember. Only the yellow of Shan’s blade, bisecting her own red. Only that feeling of rage mixed with waste, as the pathetic Jedi kept her from the true task at hand.

“Warning: Further aggressive action will result the utilization of deadly force. Step away from the bed.”

She turned her head towards the droid. “Activate order twenty-nine, HK.”

The red eyes of Malachi’s droid dimmed and died. There was a sharp click, as the machine that she had created (in part for this purpose: the trusted servant, the shield containing its own failure) deactivated.

Any Force user with medical training could easily slow a pulse to nothing, stop respiration; but using the pillow meant that Revan didn’t have to see the man’s expression. The weak, cringing part of her wept inside, but even Sheris understood the necessity--and the mercy--of sparing the man a slower fate.

Of course, it would have been more merciful not to let him know. Revan realized she was smiling, and stopped.

Maybe it was Sheris then, who lifted the pillow to check.

The man who had seen nothing but conflict in his life, had fought death just as much. His fingers were twisted into claws, his mouth open, gray lips pulled back from yellowed teeth.

Sheris may have checked, but it was Revan who pried the secure commlink off of the D’Reev wrist, and ran her own fingertips across its sensor.

The commlink flashed green, recognizing her biometrics, and granting her access to its hyperlight transmitter. Senatorial access. Encoded and precise. The best encryption in the galaxy.

The comm code she traced was an easy cipher: two bishops and their queen, added to the ratio of empty spaces on the board. Subtract the queen, and add one pawn. Perhaps the pawn was supposed to be the Fragment, in Lin’s equation.

“Hello,” she said, as the holographic array focused and resolved into the figure of a man.

His unscarred face had been beautiful. So handsome and strong. Like Malak in his prime--how she had wished that Malak had noticed her before the wars. Such a handsome knight, although all of them had seemed handsome and noble and brave and she’d wanted to follow in their footsteps--
Revan shook her head sharply.

“You.” One of the man’s eyes seemed sunk into a white ruin. “I must say, the surgeons did a remarkable job on your face. I can’t even see the scarring.” Cracked lips twisted. “How much of you is how much of each? Mother was rather inarticulate about the process.”

“Is she there? Your mother?”

“Silenced.” Oerin Lin shrugged bonelessly. “Did you kill the other Revan?”

“No.” She was pleased by the calm lie of her voice. The pure simplicity of the one word.

Not yet? Never? Let him imagine. Let him doubt. Let him wonder which of us to fear… or whether he should fear us both.

“Hmm.” Oerin Lin paused. “My mother wanted you alive, but I rather preferred Sheris and the amnesiac to the woman who made me the head of my family.”

“Your promotion was entirely accidental,” she said. “I’m sure you know, I meant to have you all killed.”

“Would you like congratulations? Your plague did that very well.”

“Your message implied we are on the same side. Or was that Davad who left it? Is he there?”

“Ah.” Lin grimaced. “Yes. He’s here. Dreadful chores lately, rounding up enough Sensitives for his meals. We’re running low on Jedi--”

“There are planets full of Sith.” That had to be the old woman’s original intent. Or part of it.

“Sith planets and their Force users are surprisingly well protected,” Oerin Lin shrugged. “Those with any real power. And Davad’s needs increase… exponentially. We’ve put the nulls to work searching.” He chuckled. “Our recruitment efforts are different than yours were, back in the old days. The term of service is very short. Severance is final.”

“And your objective?”

Oerin Lin shrugged again, one shoulder slipping down before the other. “My options are limited, at least in this body. I suppose I could make a holocron of my memories--”

“Where would you find a suitable host?” She kept her voice light. “If your companion consumes them all?”

“It does create some difficulty.” His smile exposed broken teeth, visibly rotting even through the holographic haze. “Imagine how ironic, were I to acquire a new body, only to have Davad eat me whole.”

I need the power to defeat you too, Revan thought bleakly. I need time--

At the moment, she was out of both.

“I need a ship,” she demanded. “I know you have… operators on Coruscant. You… may guess where I need to go. You said access was limited. I can make Sith space more accessible. If you help me first.”

“A few.” He folded his arms, exposing skin that looked like uncooked raixe in the comm’s light.
“Operators. We have a few groups. Tell me, are you escaping? Does the other Revan know? Is she trying to kill you?”

“Is Davad with you?” Revan was quickly losing patience. “I would prefer to speak with him.”

“Davad…?” the man’s head turned. Revan had the vague impression of a vast space, stone walls. That old temple on Malachor. Of course. Where else would they go? Sank into bedrock, it was probably the only stable surface left on the entire planet.

A rushing noise. Like a scream or an avalanche. For a moment, Revan thought the comm had broken.

Then her former servant stepped into view. His face looked the same, at first glance. Hair cropped brutally short, that mouth that went from sensual to cruel so easily. But his eyes--

It could have been a trick of the comm, but Davad's eyes looked like black pits, the skin around the sockets fading to black or nothingness.

“Davad?”

His mouth opened, and the screaming noise began again. His mouth was--it could have been a trick of the comm, but it was not.

Death of the Force. All in a man’s frame.

If I had the box I wouldn’t need such a clumsy instrument, but I don’t have it. I have nothing--except these two.

“Can you understand him?” Oerin Lin asked. “The nulls here can’t. I can. Mostly. He says hello to you through. And he asks, are you well?”

“I need a ship,” Revan stared at the former Prince of Onderon. “You have shadows on Coruscant. Give me one of their ships.”

A long pause. Then, the man’s ruined head nodded slowly.

“Really?” Oerin sighed. “One of ours? She could just buy one herself. She has her own resources.”

“We are allies,” Revan added. “The amnesiac and I. Allies for now. She trusts me with her life.”

The roaring noise began again. Revan tried not to hear her own name in it. That could have been a trick of the comm too.

“Fine.” The Mandalorian sighed. “Tell Rev I said hello? And try not to kill her. Davad might…” he looked nervous, his dead face contorting into twitches, or maybe that was a trick of the comm as well. “Davad might… need her. At some point. You understand?”

“Yes,” she said. Another simple word. Leave it for him to wonder if there was more behind it.

Another reason to follow me, Fragment. Left to your own devices, you will undoubtedly blunder into their trap.

“I don’t know how this will end, Revan.” Lin’s voice sounded tired now. “Mother had a plan, even if she was insane. Davad just… has needs. And I… I must follow him.”
“I need you,” she told him. “Both of you. Follow me and I promise, when the time comes, I will see an end.”

“I require one more promise.” His voice was metallic, glint of a voder on his rotting neck. Like Malak. Another Malak for weak Sheris to mourn.

“Name it.”

“Leave my people alone. Keep them out of your schemes. I may not have chosen either of my parents, but I chose Clan.”

“I don’t need the Mandalorians,” she told him. “Your precious clans are safe.”

He smiled. “They would hate that. Just let them be free.”

“Free, then.” For now.

Lin nodded, and listed coordinates. The ship was on one of the orbitals, far from prying eyes. As I’d hoped.

“Until we meet again,” he rasped. “I’m quite sure we will, Sheris.”

“Revan,” she corrected him, and cut the comm.

Malachi’s corpse had cooled on the bed by the time she dialed the code for the Makeon First-- trusting that the man’s poor impulse control and knowledge of explosives would take care of the rest. An hour wasn’t much time, but any more and the Fragment might have time to think logically.

The woman’s mind was capable of thinking logically, even if she rarely did.

Xxx

The door to the cockpit slid open, almost soundless, but Fragment’s presence in the Force was unmistakable.

“We’re out of hyperspace early.” The Fragment sat down in the pilot’s chair, fingers flexing on the navboard. She was a better pilot than Revan, maybe even as skilled a navigator as the HK unit she’d so thoughtlessly disassembled. “Did you touch any of the controls?”

The droid’s remains were stacked neatly in the corner of the cockpit. Revan had put them there meaning to fix him--only to discover the Fragment had severed several irreparable parts. Parts she would have to custom replacements for.

“Not early,” Revan told the Fragment. “We are precisely where we are supposed to be.”

“I thought we agreed that the Navar moon was the closest colony point to Yavin with a viable creche for the children--” the Fragment’s voice stopped suddenly, as the view before them registered.

“Revan?” the Fragment muttered, and around them the strength of her *flexed*, like a sleeper wakening. “What the frack have you done?”


XXX
“#$$&#&%#,” Polla said. “&&@@&^@!”

“No. No, no!” The Jedi shook his head. “The accent is on the second syllable.”

“It's cute that you're trying to teach me the Sith language,” Polla lied. “But we both know I’m fracked if he asks any questions in it.”


“I’ve learned all I can. We’re almost there.” She shifted on her feet uneasily, until his resultant glare reminded her of the other eighty-something times Jedi Master Killjoy had told her that Revan fricking Starfire didn't fidget. “Trust me, I can handle the ceremonies.”

“You’re a better mimic than I expected,” the man admitted.

“What can I say?” Polla shrugged, trying to ignore the fear in the pit of her stomach. “Acting. Give me old Sparky again, okay? Wouldn't want the boss to get suspicious, would we? #@-#-++@ ###&@@&. @@@@!”

“Hrm…” he frowned, as he handed the ysalamiri over to Polla. “Yes. Perhaps you should use Basic.”

XXX

The best plan Carth and Zaalbar had been able to come up with was, get his wife out of Force restraints and hope she could take care of the rest.

Carth knew he was untrustworthy—all it would take would be the Emperor possessing him at the wrong time and resistance would turn into a rout. The Sith didn't seem to be able to stay in Carth’s body for long, but it wouldn't take long, not long at all to turn on his companions—or himself. The Sith had proven that already a few times—the time in the fresher only the last in a line of blasting sadistic jokes. Whoever this asshole Tenebrae was, being omniscient hadn't made him mature.

Revan will know what to do. She's faced him before. Even if she doesn't remember, she’ll know... something?

Ever since their arrival, Mission had been scouring the nets for news.

What news there was made it sound like Coruscant had gone insane. They were saying Revan was dead. All of House D’Reev was dead. The Jedi were all dead.

If a competing broadcast hadn't also featured Master Vrook, stubbornly insisting his niece was alive, and the Jedi were merely “on a retreat,” Carth might have worried that they were already too late. The Emperor had blown up the entire D’Reev tower to erase all signs of Revan. Who knew what else he’d be capable of?

And the sight of his son a few days ago, caught in a stray broadcast coming out of their old conapt, wasn’t helping his blood pressure either. Mekel Jin had been with him, shadowing Dustil so closely, he could have been acting as a bodyguard.

A bodyguard for Darth Malak.

Was that Malak’s twisted grin on his son’s face before Mekel stepped in front of the cameras and slid the door shut? Could it be Dustil’s? He-he wanted to think it looked like Dustil, but how could
Carth be sure?

Suvam Tan had seemed to be a harmless pack rat before. Carth had never taken Polla's stories about him working for the Exchange all that seriously. The Rodian seemed to have an almost child-like simplicity: he collected ancient artifacts and played pazaak with Mission. Even that last time, the desperate time, when Carth had just wanted a Force collar, he hadn't sensed any threat.

Now, he wasn't sure if he had changed, or Yavin Station had. The rooms full of broken machinery, ancient scrolls and datapads all seemed to have sinister intent. And the robed man (or woman? It was impossible to tell which, since the sentient never lowered their hood, or even moved as much as a finger) that now stood in the middle of Suvam’s main emporium was not helping him relax.

The 'Mouth” Suvam had called her--or him--or it. Mission had amassed more colorful descriptions that she mostly growled to Zaalbar. Could the Mouth speak Shyriiwook? Carth had told her to be careful, but the girl--the droid--was almost as heedless of his cautions as Polla--as Revan--had been.

Their ship had been docked at Yavin for three days, when Carth found himself standing naked with a bloody hand in front of a broken mirror in theresher, with a message scrawled in Aurebesh. The words were written half in his own facial depilatory, and half in his own blood.

Tomorrow. Might want to sonic.

I hope your idea of a plan is better than ours, my love.

The current plan was to pace, back and forth, in front of the main docking bay, keeping an eye on the viewscreens, and the proximity sensors.

“Someone keeps pinging for me,” Mission complained again. “It has to be dumb Kashyyyk, but she keeps changing the codes, like I won't recognize the origin signatures?” Her voder made a scoffing noise. “What a loser.”

“I still don't understand, about you and Kashyykk,” Carth offered. Mission had tried to explain several times, but she kept lapsing into technical jargon, half of which sounded like it was Rakatan. Half technical jargon, and half, somewhat eerily, like Morgana's disagreement with her own sister, long ago. Kashyyk had promised Mission something--she was strangely coy about telling Carth what--but Mission didn't want it, and now they were both insulted?

“Maybe you guys need to talk it through,” he sighed, not for the first time.

“Talk it through?” She whirred, and made a rude noise. “Talk through how I don't want to be totally evil with her and Prince whatever?”

“Who?” But Carth was already distracted. There. Pinpoints of light on the horizon. “Mission, I think--”

White. Blank space. When Carth opened his eyes again, he was standing in front of the docking bay, with a bouquet of dried grass in his hands. When he turned his head, the Zabrak kids were there too, one on either side of him.

And Zaalbar, standing in the corner next to the Mouth and Suvam Tan, growling with anger.

Carth stared down at the bouquet. Was it drugged? Some kind of threat? The grass scattered across the floor.

“Merely a symbolic gesture,” the Emperor--now possessing Zepth--sighed. “I suppose she’ll just be happy to see you unharmed.”

Xxx

Like any spacer worth her spice, Polla Organa hated airlocks. Locks failed. Connectors snapped. The pressure of vacuum, or a vindictive crewmate, or a leaky suit--that was where tech fracked you over worse than Therion D'Cainen.

They had been standing in this fracking airlock for way too long already.

Was the air getting thin? That was the point of an air lock; it locked all the air away. And with no more air, Polla would die. What if asshole Emperor had just decided to kill Revan Starfire? Abandoning her in an airlock would do it. Right? It would do it for Polla.

“My apologies,” said Master Klee, standing at her side, unpossessed and unhelpful, considering he had the Force and could probably wave his hand and make the door open, if he wanted, or breathe without oxygen with the Force or something. “I suspect my Master is arranging our entrance.”

“Your master’s a #$-##-## of a ###-##,” she snapped. Hey, at least some of the Sith he’d taught her was coming in handy.

“That's not an insult on Dromund Kaas,” Master Klee said. “And please watch your syntax. We've been over this--”

His voice broke off. His eyes began to glow again.

“Tenebrae.” She tried not to gasp for breath, or look like she might be panicking about breath, or breathing, or oxygen. Not her imagination. Polla was way too fracking scared to have any imagination. The air was too thin. Each breath felt like it wasn't helping.

She tried not to noticeably gasp, because Revan Starfire wouldn't.

“A few more moments,” the red-eyed man beside her said. “I am adjusting the docking clamps on the other side.” He chuckled. “Soon you will be reunited with your consort.”

If only. Carth Onasi wasn't gonna be fooled for a millisecond. Over the last few days Tenebrae had said a lot of stuff to her, a lot of it in a language that sounded like nerfs barfing; until Polla had told him to 'do her the courtesy of speaking Basic’ while their ship was in her territories; which sounded exactly like what Revan might have said in one of those vids to Malak when he captured her aboard the Leviathan.

That had worked. Mostly. Yeah, Tenebrae kept throwing in words here and there that made no sense, but Polla just chuckled darkly, like Revan would have, and then insulted him again.

He seemed like insults.

Loser.

Their airlock chimed, lights shifted to green. Polla pulled at the hood half-covering her face again, and straightened her shoulders, keeping her head as far down as she dared.
The door slid open, and she had a jumbled glimpse of Suvam’s familiar, cluttered emporium, before a wall of orange banthahide jacket blocked her view.

“Revan.” The man was on her like a hotsuit, enveloping her in his arms, with a warm wave of banthahide and engine oil. At least the embrace knocked the hood all the way over her features. She buried her face in his chest. She felt his chest heave, the slight sob of hysteria he had trapped in his throat like a cousin to her own. “Polla. You're here. We’ll get through this. I promise.”

It seemed safer to press herself as close as possible to his body than to trust her voice, so Polla did so.

Okay. But… why the frack are you calling me Polla?

She took a half-step forward, and he took a half step back, and then she felt it--his hesitation. Maybe the real Revan fracking Starfire had smaller boobs, or weighed less or there was just an indefinable difference; because suddenly, all of his war hero muscles tensed at the same time, and the arms that were locked around her suddenly became unbreakable, like bands of durasteel.


“Carth!” she whispered against his chest, trying desperately to think of something to say. He knew her fracking name. Shouldn't he know her? She tilted her head back, letting the robe fall, seeing his furious face, glaring down at her. “Don't.”

His expression didn't look any less furious. “Who--”

“That asshole, right there.” She couldn't free her arms, but she could jerk her chin, sending her topknot half into her eyes. “Evil Sith possessing guy. He kidnapped me.”

“You give my vessels too much credit, Revan.” The man chuckled darkly, just like she'd been trying to herself a moment ago. “Tell the truth to your consort. You let yourself be captured.”

“Bantha poo doo,” said a girl’s voice, from somewhere near the ground. “No fracking way.”

A Wookiee barked something like a question. Once again, Polla vowed to learn Shyriiwook if she didn't die.

Don't let me die like this. I swear, I'll go to the Grass Priests twice on Seventh day!

Polla took a deep breath, staring straight into those furious brown eyes. Lighter than Seiran’s. Older. Harder. The vids had never really shown the lines in the man’s face, the twist of his mouth.

What would she say? What the frack would the real Revan say? She tried to think, but all that came to mind were those damn vids. Probably not even real.

“Let go of me, flyboy. You're squeezing me so tight I can't breathe.”

“You can go ahead and kiss her. If you like.” Asshole sounded amused. “Should I turn my head away? I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Then take a hike off a short plat,” Polla snapped. “Or better yet, jump back in that airlock already and I’ll hit depressurize.”

There were also two Zabraks, one on each side of Carth. They hadn't been in any of the Star Forge vids. One of them smiled slightly at her, in a way that seemed too normal considering the
circumstances. The other one was staring straight ahead, like some kind of freaking Fleet cadet.

“So what now?” The girl’s voice again. Familiar. But from where? “I know Polla Revan has it all figured out, but enlighten us plebs. What's the new Sith plan?”

Both of the Zabrak’s eyes began to glow red. One of them nodded. “Now, Dromund Kaas.”

The other one smiled, an entirely different smile. “Now we return home.”

Carth Onasi hadn't let go of Polla, but his head was tilted now, and there was a slight frown on his face. Polla tried to peek around his chest to see the girl who was speaking, but he took another step, pivoting her with him so that her back was pressed against the bulkhead. His arms bent at the elbow on either side of her, his hand tracing the line of her cheek, like her face was a conduit valve he was checking for cracks. When his fingers hit the bruised part around her eye, she winced, and he pulled back.

“You’re hurt.”

“Only when I breathe,” she muttered. “His goons were a little rough.”

“You think we should go to Dromund Kaas?” Carth said, a little louder. His eyes shifted away and down from her.

“No?” Jedi guy Klee had said that was the Sith capitol world. That seemed like the last fracking place they should go.

“Not you,” he muttered, bringing his face close enough that they could have kissed, if they weren't married to other people, and in mortal danger, and of he didn't look like he was eyeing her like a cheap grade of eridu.

“You get the robes my Ma sent?” It was all she could think of. She tried to laugh. “I mean… remember those? You and Canderous looked good in them. Right? That was a good time.”

It was wrong to think of it now, wrong of her to remember that she'd even imagined it.

*Oh, frack, Seiran. What if I never see you again?*

“We should go wherever she wants.” The female voice said. “When Revan reviewed the contract that loser gave us, she noted the clause about how he’s not allowed to give orders to her in Republic space. And kidnapping her is kinda an act of war.”

“So was her rather clumsy attempt to unmask my agents in the Jedi.”

There was a pause, long enough for Polla to start to sweat.

“The robes,” Carth Onasi said finally, staring at Polla again. “Moll Organa sent a card.”

*Frack, of course she did.* “Sounds like Ma.” Did the real Revan think of her as-- “I bet she was all over the real Polla to get you guys a present. Deralians are big on gifts.” She shrugged, or tried to, but his arms still had her shoulders pinned. “Did she--bet I told you that. Lots of times.” She smiled slightly. “Bet Polla didn’t send you anything though. She was probably really pissed off.”

He frowned.

“That'll teach you to have agents in the Jedi and on Yavin,” the voice snapped. “Emperor Creepazoid.”
“And your master has hers in my chambers. You and I have been committing acts of war for quite some time, Revan.”

“Maybe we should just make it official,” Polla snapped, turning her head in the direction of Emperor Creepazoid. “I’ll have my… minions here draw up the contract. We can go to official war with you fracking tomorrow—”

Carth Onasi’s mouth clamped down on hers with the force of a tractor beam. “Shut up,” he whispered, against her locked teeth. “You. Shut up.”

“I think we should give them some time alone,” the female voice chimed. Then it rattled off some other stuff, in what could have been nerf-barf language again.

“This vessel is starving, I admit,” the asshole said. “Suvam, I believe you will find the Mouth prepared my favorites. Shall we leave these two alone for their happy reunion?”


“Coruscant,” she said, even as she saw Carth Onasi’s head shake slightly, as if she’d given a wrong answer. “Let’s go back to Coruscant.” Well, wasn’t that fracking where the real Revan Starfire was? Let her handle this mess. I want my husband and son. “Ready the ship and set a course for Coruscant, minion. Immediately.”

“Mission,” the female voice corrected. “I’ll set the course immediately, Polla- Revan. If that’s what you want, sis… but you should check out this contract we got a copy of back on Dathomir. Remember? That contract you already read? The one you saw when you were monitoring this T3 unit?”

“That contract?” She kept her voice scornful. “We can meet any obligations from Coruscant, just as easily as from Drumming Case.”

“Kaas.”

“I don’t give a frack.” Would Revan say frack? In this instance? She fracking should.

“The contract,” one of the Zabrak was speaking, but his voice sounded just like the Emperor did when he talked from Master Klee. And all three sents had red, glowing eyes now. Frack, for a second, even Carth’s eyes looked like they were lit too. “The contract concerns your return to Dromund Kaas, Revan. I have been more than generous. Here is your consort, and I am taking steps to secure Lord Malak for you as well—”

She couldn’t help it, it was probably hysteria that made Polla laugh about that. “Oh, yeah?” Sure, Master Jedi Klee had told her some story about Darth Malak possessing Carth Onasi’s son, but you had to draw the line someplace, and Force ghosts-- hell, any ghosts-- ghosts weren’t real.

“You… did you told him to get Malak?” Carth’s grip was painful on her arms. Probably would leave bruises.

“Yeah?” She stared up at him.

Wow, Flyboy looked dangerous when he was pissed. Like he could give Therion a run for the mynocks.

“Are… are you getting Malak for her?” The Republic hero’s head jerked around, towards one of the Zabraks.
“I do hope your consorts will not embroil themselves with personal conflict, Revan.” The galactic-weary voice coming out of a Zabrak kid’s mouth was creepy. “I can possess this man, but his son’s body—and Malak’s mind—remain out of my reach.”

“I'd prefer to get Malak myself.” Maybe they weren’t all crazy. Maybe the Force ghost thing was as real as mind wiping and memory transference and creepy Sith possession. Not even a stretch from all of that, now that Polla thought about it. “What about… let’s all head back to Coruscant. Okay? We’ll pick up Malak, maybe sit down someplace, talk all of this through….”

“Your efforts to stall for time are so transparent.” The Zabrak kid out his hand to his chin, as if striking a non-existent beard. “Your old consort is already on his way to meet us on Dromund Kaas. Although… I must admit, he seemed rather… less anticipatory of your reunion than I expected. I would hate for something to happen that could damage that fine, young body.”

“She's going.” Carth interrupted. “We all are. Kaas it is.”

“It is?” He was practically shaking her, or practically shaking. If he hadn’t been cutting off the circulation in her fracking arms, Polla might have felt sorry for the guy. “Really?”

“Really,” the girl’s voice chirped. A whirring noise and then a T3 unit with a faded flower painted on the chassis rolled forward. The voice seemed to be coming from its voder—had it been doing that all along? “Hey, Revan. You know, I have some Intel briefings and stuff. Might want to look then over? When you get a chance. No big deal.”

The voice was breezy, like it really wasn't a big deal.

*Like I need to go to a crazy Sith planet because some droid with a voder says I should?*

All of these assholes were starting to piss Polla off.

“We're not leaving right this second,” she announced, pulling away from Carth Onasi, and finally out of his duracrete grip. Yep, her arms were sore where his fingers had clamped down. “So let me… I think I need to talk to my consort. Okay? You know. In private.”

“Of course, Master Revan!” Now it was Suvam answering her. At least *his* eyes weren't glowing red, and he wasn't saying something like, ‘Hey, aren't you really Polla Organa?’ No, the little Rodian was staring at her like she was a fracking starspawned deity. “I know my personal quarters are quite humble, but I have taken the liberty of arranging them for you. Just for you! Precisely how you like them!”

“Malak is already on the way to Dromund Kaas?” Carth interrupted again. “We need… we can't wait.”

“We need to make repairs first,” the droid said. “Suvam, do you have a communications array I can retrofit into a Corellian Mark Nine logic board? Our widebeam got fragged on the way over here.”

“I might have some parts that could do the trick,” the Rodian said. “Why do you sound like Mission Vao?”

The Wookiee whined something, and the Rodian laughed.

“You don't say? Revan did that? As a joke?” Suvam’s eyestalks swiveled towards Polla. “Rather a dark one.”

“That's me,” Polla drawled. *Whatever the frack you’re talking about.* “All about the darkness. It's a
Sith thing. Hey. About those quarters. Maybe me and Carth here could use them now?”

The droid whirred. “Works for me. It'll take me a few hours to get everything fitted.”

The two Zabrak kids and the Jedi all turned their red, glowing eyes on Polla, as if waiting for her response.

“You don't mind, right? Tenebrae?” She kept her voice casual.

Oh, frack. Would Revan give a frack if anyone minded?

She coughed. “I mean... that's what we're doing. Now. Get to it! People.” Polla clapped her hands. “Chop shop!”

“I will take my other bodies to the commissary for sustenance,” the Jedi said. “Enjoy your reunion, Revan. I do suppose you've earned it.”

Asshole!

“I'm not sure you've earned the right to be so familiar,” she snapped back. “Or gross. Where are these fracking rooms of yours, Suvam?”

“Right this way.” The Rodian gave a little bow. “Follow me.”

Xxx

There had been a lot of sheer impossibilities in Carth Onasi's life since Revan Starfire D'Reev Ordo Onasi had crash-landed into it, both of them somehow surviving a blind drop under fire through atmosphere and landing safely on a plat in the upper city of Taris.

He had long ago stopped thinking it was the will of the Force, or whatever else Jedi believed: instead he had come to believe it was all just her.

And now, Revan’s latest impossibility glared back at him, beneath a cap of red hair and widely-spaced green eyes that clashed strangely with her spacer-tan skin.

Not Revan at all.

“We don't have much time,” he muttered. “He could possess me again at any moment. Spit it out fast. Who are you?”

“Poll--” he was going to have to stop calling her that. Have to stop thinking it. “Revan thinks you're dead. If you are really... her. Revan thinks you're dead.”
“Yeah, well. We're not. Yet.”

“How--?” His temples were throbbing, and for a second his vision blurred. When the world resolved itself, Carth found himself a meter to the port of where he'd been standing before and the woman--Polla Organa or whoever she was--standing in front of him with his own blaster aimed squarely at his chest.

“Don't even think about taking a step closer--” her voice broke off. “Oh. Are you… Carth? Are you back?”

“Yes.” His tongue felt thick in his mouth. “What… happened?”

“The asshole interrupted to ask if we needed time for marital relations.” Her face scrunched up like a kath pup and that was familiar too. “I borrowed this.” She brandished it, more expertly than Carth expected, before twirling it deftly in her hand like she was showing off.

“Keep it,” he muttered. If this was a trap, it was a damned good one. Polla--*Revan* had tried a move like that on Taris and dropped the blaster, opening a whole in their abandoned conapt wall. “But you still need to tell me, how are you here?”

“You know Suvam Tan, right?” A Force collar glinted on her neck, like a reminder of the last time Carth had seen the little Rodian. “Well, so do I. I did some jobs for him--”

“Her--" she corrected, but Carth wasn't listening. “She told me she did some jobs for him.”

“She wasn't supposed to tell anyone about those kinds of jobs.” The eye roll again. “Guess maybe they weren't important compared to the galaxy-saving; but anyway, this one time I commed him, and he thought I was her. The *real* her. Not the *real* me.”

“You… you don't look like her.” But it was a lie. The woman in front of him was darker, her hair and eyes obviously dyed; but the shape of her face, the pointed chin, broad cheeks--there was a resemblance. “Maybe… someone who didn't know. I don't know.”

“Anyways, he offered to loan me--her--credits. We needed some to get off Coruscant.”

“You were on Deralia.”

“I'm trying to tell you. We don't have much time.”

She used up more of it with a spacer’s tale about ex-lovers, Mandalorians, her Alderaanian uncle, and ending improbably in a brothel in the Underground.

“Mekel Jin is Vrook’s son?” *Mister Sith Congeniality?* Carth would have laughed, if that didn't bring him back to thinking about Dustil.

*Dustil, whom I didn't save. Dustil, who's on a ship to a Sith planet. I didn't save him. Got myself trapped instead. Me, and Zaalbar, and Mission the ghost-ship, with this crazy schutta Polla Organa, and some guy in Jedi robes, and two Zabrak, and this Rodian stooge--*

“Master Klee. He's possessed by the Emperor too. That… that makes sense. He set me up, got the Senator to send me to Dathomir.” Carth’s mind struggled over the facts, trying to make them fit the target. “And… you said… before. Aemelie Ordo had Revan’s flagship? The *Aleema*? The Mandalorians have Revan’s old flagship?”

“Master Vrook seemed flipped out about that too.” Polla shrugged. “I don't get it. Ship was a
wreck. They don’t have the manpower to crew it. They wanted us to stay, but we turned them down…” her voice trailed off, and she wiped her eyes. “Frack, if I could take that back now I would.”

“Not yet, but they can recruit. There are Mandalorians scattered across the galaxy. Maybe not right away, but in a few generations…”

*It could all be for nothing. Telos. Morgana. Dustil and Revan--*

“Get Revan, then. Make her fix that.” She shrugged. “Frack the Mandalorians. The Sith are your real bad guys, aren't they? They scare the hell out of me, which is weird because, you know, my Da always said that--”

“Maybe the Sith have the right idea.” He gritted his teeth. “I know. Your… Da. He sounds like… quite a character.”

“You know a lot about me.” She folded her arms and leaned back against the wall, ghost of his wife in that pose, even if the real Revan was more graceful. Polla Organa stood solidly, legs a little apart, like she might run or shoot at any time. “Wish I could say the same. I only know what's in the vids.”

Carth thought about that. “Well, in case you were wondering, Revan didn't have a love affair with Bastila Shan.”

“Or the Wookiee. Yeah, I figured. And if she'd slept with Canderous Ordo, Aemelie would have drawn me a diagram. She's very… detail-oriented.”

“I guess.” They hadn't been in the Mandalorian camp for long enough for Carth to notice. “You-- your child. He must be… he's pretty young.”

“Eight months. Deralian. I don't know what that is in Standard.”

“It's young.” So was she, he realized. Younger than Revan. “I'm sorry. You shouldn't be in this mess.”

“We're gonna get out of it.” Polla Organa shivered. “I have to believe that. I have to keep believing that.”

“I think you… you have to pretend to be her. For now.”

“I know.” She glanced sideways at him. “It's… it's weird, meeting you. The others too, but you--”

“Yeah.” He pushed his hair back, clearing his throat. “Look. Kid… we’ll get you back to your family. I promise.”

“Kid?” She scoffed. “Are you kidding me? You know my fracking name. You said it. You still… you call her it.” When she frowned she looked nothing like Revan at all--even frowning, her mouth turned up, eternally optimistic, or banthablind crazy--Carth wasn't sure which. “You know, that's kind of creepy, the way you still call her by my name.”

“I'm gonna stop.” He was. Meeting her--now he understood. “She's… she’s not you. She’s… older. Harder. She's been through a lot.”

“Right.” Polla Organa shrugged. “I just almost died in a speeder accident, had my brain copied by Jedi, had to fake my own death to escape assassins and take my family on the run. Guess that
doesn’t compare to Sith Lords and the like.” Her mouth twisted, now and the sardonic grin faded. “How long does your sex usually take? I keep thinking that asshole is gonna pop in on us again.”

Carth coughed. “Uh… it depends.”

“Just in case, maybe you should take something off?” Revan could raise one eyebrow, but Polla Organa raised both. “Not a lot, just… lose the jacket. Unbuckle the shirt.”

She ripped the belt from her robes and tugged at the neck. “Does this open or something?”

They looked a lot like the robes Revan had been wearing when he found her on the Star Forge. But his wife had been a shadow of herself in them, bathed in Sith corruption, and Polla was rounded and sleek, wearing them like an animal’s pelt.

“I think so,” he lied. He knew. “Down the front. It… opens along the seam, if you twist it.” He started to unbuckle his own jacket.

“Oh!” She tugged and abruptly one of her breasts popped free. Darker than Revan’s. Larger. Round. “Ow,” she complained, covering it quickly before Carth could avert his eyes. “My son… he’s… he still….”

“Oh!” He felt guilty for staring. There was nothing flirtatious in her own direct gaze, nothing like Revan had been almost from the moment they met. “I'm… I'm sorry. Maybe Mission has something in the medlab that can… do something. It it’s… uncomfortable.”

“Mission?” She frowned, holding the neck of her robe closed. “Isn't she dead?”

“No. I mean, yes. She… she is. But Revan had a holocron of her memories, and she--”

“She created me!” The door slid open and Mission rolled into the room. “Poll’s right, Carth. Lose the shirt. I might have something in the medlab, but I dunno if it would come back after. Not really my area of expertise and since Carth blew up the main comm on the Hawk, I can't transmit safely to run a search.” She paused, as if for breath, and then continued. “I wasn’t spying on you, by the way. I was stopping anyone else from spying. Jammed the monitors in here pretty good. Made it look like sunspots.” Her dome swiveled. “Carth? Why are you still wearing the shirt?”

He unbuckled the buckles, awkwardly aware that Polla was averting her eyes and Mission probably wasn't.

“So you're a computer?” Polla asked Mission. “A… funny computer?”

“I'm a computer like Polla Revan is Revan. Original template got overwritten.”

“People aren't templates.”

“And Polla Revan and I aren't you and… my original design.”

“Please.” Her voice cracked, and then suddenly Carth realized the careless bravado was all an act. “Stop. Calling. Her. That.”

“It upsets you.” Mission sounded surprised. “Sorry, sis. It's just how I think of her. Because she’s not just Revan, she's a lot more like you than I expected. Or are you a lot more like her? Hah! Ontology! Have you ever, like really thought about it?”

“I just want to go home.” Polla sat down on the bed, wiping her eyes with the corners of her robe. I
just want my fracking life back.”

“We'll figure something out,” Carth promised her. We need the real Revan. If Tenebrae took Polla, then where the hell is she? What if that news from Coruscant was true? What if she's dead?

What if my son is lost forever? Dromund Kaas? The Sith homeworld? We don't have a chance in hell there. Dustil lost and Revan dead?

“I'll... I'll get you out of this.” He sat down next to Polla, awkwardly. She edged away, every line of her body radiating tension and fear. “Polla, I promise. We’ll make a stop someplace. Drop you offworld, leave you with enough credits to get back to Coruscant... or... anywhere. Anywhere you want to go.”

“Help me steal a ship,” she muttered. “Jedi guy said he'd help too. He's not evil, just that asshole possessing him is.”

“I don't trust him. You shouldn't trust him.” The man was a D'Reev pawn, at best, and at worst… At worst, this blasted Emperor is a lot more tied up in the Republic than we dreamed.

“Just help me steal a ship.” Her voice hardened, eerily like Revan’s. “You fracking owe me, Carth Onasi. You all do.”

It wasn't like she could help. Polla Organa, the real Polla was just a smuggler. What could she do against Sith in the first place?

“I'll try,” Carth promised her. “You're right. You can't go with us, it's too dangerous--”

“Is it having an organic brain or a masculine one that makes you dumb?” Mission beeped, and then made a rude noise. “You think that Sith braintrust out there will keep any of us around--and you breathing--without a Revan?” She paused. “By the way, nice imitation, Polla Polla. The hair is a few shades too far into the violet spectrum, but you've really bolted the syntax. And your accent isn't too far off.”

“Thanks,” the smuggler muttered. “I think. I also don't give a frack. I'm out of here. My son needs me. I need my husband. Okay? Please.”

“We'll help,” Carth promised her. They had to. This wasn't Polla’s fault.

“Uh huh.’ Mission swiveled her dome, and one appendage extended from it, camera peering at him like an exaggerated eye. “Let's... pretend you're done with the sex part now, okay? Carth, why don't you go take a sonic, and Polla and I will have a little girl talk.”

“Girl talk?” The smuggler snorted. “You're not gonna talk me into staying here for one fracking more minute--”

“Carth!” Mission repeated. It sounded like she was imitating the real--it sounded like she was imitating Carth’s wife again. “Make hyperdrive, Captain. Sonic. Now!”

He ignored that. “A-are you okay?” Polla Organa didn't look okay. She was biting her lip and clenching her hands in a gesture he found painfully familiar. “Mission can be a little blunt sometimes.”

“Of course I'm not fracking okay.” Green eyes glared at him. She had green eyes too? Or were they some kind of lenses? Her hands went to her belt and the blaster he'd given her. “We should’ve
stayed with the Mandalorians, but like everything else in this damned galaxy, I guess they’re hers-

“Go take a sonic, flyboy. It'll be awkward if that loser comes back and sees you’re both sitting here crying.” Mission rolled up to Polla. One of her arms slid out and patted the woman on the knee.

Polla’s face froze, and then crumpled into a stream of clumsy tears.

“I’ll… be right back,” Carth promised, trying not to feel like a heel. “We’ll work this out. I promise.”

Xxx

As soon as Flyboy was out of earshot (and she could hear the sonic running, further blocking their conversation) Mission chirped to bring Polla Polla out of her own organic misery.

“What?” The Deralian asked, wiping her nose with her sleeve in a way that reminded Mission a little too clearly of how all the things HK-47 used to say about organic meatbags and their mucous was actually true. “What do you want, droid?”

“Mission,” Mission corrected her. “Is that the way to talk to the sentient being who gave you all those fabulous prizes back on Deralia?”

The woman’s face wrinkled up, sending her eyebrows (also dyed the slightly too violet shade of red) sliding down until they were messily on top of her eyelashes, and her nose bent in a way that looked terribly uncomfortable. Had Mission’s own fleshy face truly undergone such gymnastics every time she was upset?

“The Twi’lek?”

Mission projected the image of Lena she'd used. “Totally me! See? We’re old friends. I gave you that personality test.”

“Did Revan tell you to stalk me or something?”

“Her?” As if. Mission started to route a subcommand for a careless laugh, but then she wondered if the woman might take it the wrong way. “No, I was just checking, to make sure you didn't match Polla Revan too closely… except you sort of did? Remember when I told you to lie--in case anyone else ever asked?”

“So you can appear as anyone on a comm?”

“Well, yeah. Really anyone can do that, it's not that complicated, just some three-dimensional animation.” It was fascinating how the Deralian’s mind zigged and zagged. That was a point of difference: Polla Revan was much more single-minded. “But hey, now that we’re talking, how much did you ask for? From Suvam? Your original blackmail scheme. How much were you trying to get?”

All the wrinkles smoothed out of Polla’s face--except the one between her eyebrows. “Ten million credits. Standard.”

Is that all? Kind of sad, really, risking an irreplaceable organic life for such a small material gain.

“I'll give you ten times that. And throw in a custom-built rig of your choice. From Ord, Just, Corellia. Whatever shipyard you want.”
“Hrm.” The woman squinted at her cautiously. “Let me guess. All I have to do is keep pretending to be her?”

“It'll be even easier, with me around. I can imitate her too. You mostly just have to stand still and fold your arms. Any combat training? I know Deralians do some of that.”

“Rifles. Pistols. A little.” She shrugged, careless, not modest. That meant she was probably capable of defending herself. Carth must have thought so, if held given her a blaster to use. Looked like one of the good ones too. Polla folded her arms and glared so effectively that Mission began composing a compliment to her imitation… but then, the Deralian opened her mouth and ruined it. “The answer’s still no. I'm getting the frack out of here. You're on your own.”

If she had a real esophageal tract, Mission would have used it to evoke a heavy, tired sigh. “Not so fast. You're either with us or against here. Carth may be an old softie, but I'm like, half thirty thousand years old, and half a Twi'lek kid who had it a lot rougher than you--and that was before she got killed by her best friend. Let me rephrase: you're with us, Polla--for as long as it takes--or I'll expose you. Your life won't be worth a plugged credit then.”

There was a long silence, broken by the Deralian blowing her nose rather messily in the folds of her genuine Forge-created robes. (Mission would recognize those prismatic arrays anywhere--all Rakatan tech had that same, molecular torsion… probably something about using the Force to create solid matter out of pure energy? Whatever. None of her selves had ever been physicists.)

“Frack you,” Polla muttered, but more subdued now. “You want to blackmail me instead of paying me a hundred million credits?”

“I'm willing to do both.” Mission adjusted her voder to project more compassion. “We really need your help, Polla Organa.”

XXX

Stars, shining and cold. Revan even knew some of the constellations--warped and wrong this far out on the Rim; but she had seen them before like this--warped and wrong in the last moments of her true life.

“I still don’t like this,” the Fragment muttered. “You said you knew a place. You said it was one of D’Reev’s boltholes.”

“I lied,” Revan told her. “Surely, you can see why.”

“Because I would tell you this is fracking insane. Yes.” Her duplicate’s voice turned arctic. “And I would be right. It’s fracking insane.”

“You didn’t want to bring the children to Kashyyyk, which I also suggested,” Revan murmured, not bothering to turn around. The argument was old, three hours now, waiting for the planet to rotate beneath them for right landing--and nothing had changed. “Something must have happened to the Kashyyyk installation’s widebeam; but if we went there on the ground, perhaps we could fix the signal? The Wookiees regard you as their savior, do they not? You have a life debt with one of their leaders. We could easily have left the children with them.”

Not that we would. No. It was always here, Fragment. Always meant to be this place.

Revan watched the planet turn beneath them, as she had before. So long ago--

“No. And it’s too late. We passed the jump point yesterday. Yavin’s closer. Now.” The Fragment
closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I fracking trusted you when you said Navar--”

“This world was closer.”

Below them, the small planet was an orbiting curve of blue and brown, dappled with green. Pastoral and peaceful. As it had been, once before--

XXX

“Deralia. An unlikely planet to conquer. Do we need more farmers in our Empire, Revan?”

“This is Beya’s homeworld. She always told me it was beautiful, and it is.”

“For now.” Davad slipped his arm around her waist. “Is there to be a ground attack, or is this another one of your tricks, to lure the Republic into false complacency?”

“We’ll draw them out,” she murmured. “The Republic Fleet has used these Outlier worlds as supply bases for long enough.”

“Ah,” he said lightly. “And this trap, today… it wouldn’t have anything to do with the Hope of the Republic?”

“Do they still have hope?” She chuckled softly under her mask. “Send the signal to Leviathan. Tell Lord Malak to close orbit and join us.”

“But that eliminates the element of surprise.” Arkan sounded surprised himself. “We only have the flagships in this sector. If the Republic brings more forces--”

“Do you doubt the might of the Sith?” She pushed him away, turning away, and back to the sleeping planet beneath.

“I have no doubts left,” he muttered. If she turned, she would see him, half crouched--ready to spring, or kneel. “Master.”

Xxx

When the Fragment got mad, her voice slipped into an accent that sounded more Deralian than Dantooine, and nothing like Revan thought she had ever sounded at all. The Fragment had objected, but she had no choice now. With D’Reev holdings in tatters, there was no refuge to be found on Coruscant for their son, no refuge anywhere he could be named.

And would the official record of their deaths hold?

Revan thought it might, for a time--as long as the Starfire and her progeny vanished from the Core.

Xxx

Malachi said other things. Questions. All about her, his Jedi-spawned prize. Revan answered as best she could.

“Did you… what did you do with… her? The other--”

“She listens to my counsel, Malachi.” Her hand tightened on his.

“She’s got… fire, that one.” It sounded like he was trying to laugh. “But if I… she knows nothing. She cannot rule--”
“Yes.” I would have helped her rule. I could have helped her.

In a different world, perhaps. One where Tenebrae was less bold. One that she’d tried--and failed--to shape.

“Help her,” he begged. “Please.”

“I will,” she murmured, and was surprised to find it true.

XX

“Are you fracking insane?”

The Fragment made a move towards the ship’s controls, and Revan raised her hand, pushing her away with the too-weak Force. Merely a warning.

“The Genoharadan know that Malachi’s dead. They’ll be hunting us. Until Korrie's of age, we can’t risk any place associated with me. This is Polla’s fracking home --someone might think that I have ties here. It wouldn’t take much, even you thought of it.”

Revan allowed herself a thin smile. “Someone might think you have ties to the surviving family of the woman the galaxy believes you killed? Someone might think the Organas might welcome you with open arms?”

The Fragment’s gaze darted to the closed door between them and Malachor, the man and his child. “Yes,” she muttered. “We can’t take that risk. Besides, how do you know they'd even want--”

“You think I brought you here blind? I know they want to see you,” Revan told her. “Because I asked them.”

XX

Even the Fragment slept sometimes. And when she did, it was a minor thing to bring the smuggler’s husband to Revan’s cause. The man wanted what all fathers wanted--or said they wanted: for his son to be safe.

“Seiran?” The old man’s face was blurry in the light of his cheap comm, features blunt and blurred by interstellar static. “Is something wrong?”

Revan nodded to the husband, directing him to speak, but he already was.

“I’m afraid so, Jasp. Pollie’s… she… she’s--”

They had gone over the story several times while the Fragment entertained Korrie. Apparently, those rehearsals had been for naught. Revan sighed and finished the story for him.

“It seems that Polla took an assignment from one of the less savory members of the Exchange. While the job went well, they left her stranded in Hutt space. Seiran came to me for assistance, and naturally, I was only too glad to help. I will lend him my ship so that he can retrieve his wife--”

Jasp blinked, as if he had just noticed her. “Who--”

Perhaps the connection was poor on his end too? Revan resisted the urge to tug at one of the braids she had pulled out of sight, and raised her hood slightly, giving him a better look at her face.
“Revan Starfire. I’m traveling in this sector with my son. You did say we should visit. I thought this happy circumstance would provide an excellent opportunity.”

There was a long, irritating silence, as the man’s mouth opened and closed, like a flying Selkath.

“The card?” Revan pressed. “You and your wife sent a holocard for my wedding?”

The Fragment had been sentimental enough to keep it. Revan had assumed the sentiment would run on both sides.

The Deralian didn’t blink, but his mouth fell open. His head turned away from the comm, revealing a chubby profile. “Moll? MOLL!”

Faintly, as if from another room, a woman’s voice. “If it’s another thresher repairman tell him we have a contract til next harvest!”

“Nope.” Her husband called back. “It’s not. You’d better come over. This you’ll want to see.”

XXX

“Asked them?” The Fragment repeated. “You spoke to Polla’s parents? You told them what she--you told them what happened? Are you fracking insane?”

“Don’t be absurd. I told them Polla Organa was unharmed and needed a retrieval from Hutt space. Malachor will be quite safe from the Genoharadan on Deralia. And no one will care if the Organa family has one baby or another. All infants look alike.”

“So we…we’re all just going to show up at their door and drop the kids off?”

“Of course not. You will drop off the children alone. Seiran and I remain here.” Revan kept her voice calm. “I already told them I was assisting with the retrieval, and we needed someone to watch the children. Seiran stays here, because he would be recognized portside. Too much risk among his own people.”

“And I won’t be?”

“You have the Force. Use it. Cover your face with a cloth.” Revan shrugged, trying to sound careless. “Tell Jasp and Moll to shave Mal’s head into one of those barbaric knots. He’ll blend right in.”

“No he won’t. No I won’t.” The Fragment narrowed her eyes. “If this is some plan of yours to frack off without me--”

“A family.” Deflect. Delude. Distract. “All this time together, and you’ve never asked me about your own. About our own parents.”

Revan could tell by the woman’s expression that she’d scored a hit.

“I--”

“You never asked,” Revan said gently. “Because you have a family, Fragment. You have a family, and they want to see you.”

The mother in any case. The father will take more convincing. But you are, Fragment. Extremely convincing. Even without the Force.
For example, you’ve convinced me to let you live.

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “I swear to the stars, Revan. If this is some kind of trap—”

“It’s a gift.” She met her own eyes directly. No longer yellow, no longer maddened, no longer corrupted by Tenebrae’s dark embrace. “Just a little time, Revan. Please. Take it.”

“Just a little while.” The woman’s voice was uncertain, guarded. She was frowning, her mind no doubt already unraveling the nets that Revan had set, the sheets of thin ice, under which darkness boiled. “An hour, Revan. I’ll take them to… Jasp and Moll. But I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Of course you will,” Revan told her.

Victory.

XXX
Chapter 46 / Shot Right Through With a Bolt of Blue

It was the middle of the night. Mekk was still asleep, but that wouldn’t last long. Between Malak’s nightmares and the bond, they did most things at the same time. Sometimes, that was a good thing, but right now it was fracking awkward.

Dustil glanced at the locked door again. It would stop his bondmate for about five fracking seconds.

*Just call. Call her before he talks me out of it. Again.*

He waved his fingers at the commlink inset into the top of his father’s desk and it floated into his hands. The number dear old Father had left at the top of the list was still in its memory banks, but no one answered the line.

Frowning, Dustil typed into the public directories.

*“Republic Intelligence,”* the receptionist on the commlink chimed. *“How may I direct you?”*

“I need to speak to Captain Rew Ekkumi,” Dustil whispered. “Urgently. I was trying her comm and I couldn’t get through.”

*“Admiral Ekkumi is not with Republic Intelligence.”* The voice sounded prissy and metallic. Was he talking to a protocol droid?

*Admiral, huh? Since when? “Get me a Human,”* Dustil told it. “I already tried the Fleet numbers. You’re an intelligence division? Seems like you’d keep comm numbers.”

*“Specist discourse is not tolerated in our network. Please rephrase your request.”*

“Oh… frack! I just meant… get me a person. A sentient, living person.”

*“Who is calling?”*

“Dustil Onasi,” Dustil snapped. “Or Darth Malak D’Reev, if that’ll get me a person faster. You want me to put him on? Trust me, you wouldn’t like him when he’s pissed.”

*“Your call is being rerouted to a mental health server. Please hold. Average response time is-“*

“Frack this.” Dustil cut the comm, and buried his face in his hands.

Five minutes later, the comm rang back.

***

It was almost paradise, Mekel thought.

There was a serving droid in the kitchen who could make anything they wanted, and the bar was
fully stocked. They were making a *killing* at the swoops and the casinos. And the guards in front of
the building called them both ‘sir.’ Mekel had eight new sets of clothes—paid for in the shop and
everything. Good stuff too, fabric soft on his skin. HoloNet reporters kept asking Telos for
interviews, and Mekel got to strong arm them back, pretending to be a bodyguard—like Dustil
needed one to guard his body when they could both take anything they ever wanted….

The Force was strong with them.

The Force was strong and it was paradise compared to the flops they’d been staying at in the
Underground. Kilometers better than the Jedi Temple or the Mandalorian hotel, or that fracking
bunk they’d been assigned in what had used to be 100 Thantos Three. If this was a fracking normal
time, he’d be enjoying this life: shacked up with the son of the Republic’s most famous hero, hot
and cold running everything at his tap.

*This is the life I deserve. The life I should have had. The life of a Jedi Master’s son.*

*Were we at the same Jedi dorm? Because I don’t remember Jedi living like this.* Dustil’s thought
was amused. His hand brushed Mekel’s shoulder, and for a second, it was Mekel’s hand too,
brushing his own shoulder--

“Careful,” Mekel muttered and turned around. *He's close.*

They could both feel him, Malak, swimming beneath the surface a pure jolt of rage and loss—*My
son, she took my son*--

“Maybe she's really dead,” Dustil offered out loud. *Jedi Masters aren’t rich, Mekk.* The thought
was tired, amused. Half asleep. His hair was rumpled, and his shirt hung, half open. *Maybe your
son is dead too, Malak--asshole.* But that thought was guilty, like Telos was trying to sound
tougher than he was. Half-assed.

Mekel shrugged. “Maybe most Jedi aren’t rich, but she was. Revan is rich.” Was *rich. Now, maybe
she's really dead. Do you think I’ll inherit all of her shit?*

From the window in the corner, Mekel could see the still-smoldering ruin that had once been the
D’Reev tower. With the tallest building in this sector gone, the view opened, and the sky exposed
its wandering, watery sun. He liked it more this way.

“You’re up early.” Dustil sounded surprised. But he wasn’t, was he? He’d known the second
Mekel had woken up, because he had already been awake.

*No secrets. Like living with your skin off.*

“They can’t be dead,” Mekel repeated, for the hundredth time. *But if they are, can I get her stuff?
Old Lammikins can’t since he's taken a vow of poverty or whatever it is they do*--

“Half the galaxy agrees with you. I don’t give a frack. Have you found out anything about my
father?”

“Nothing on the nets.” Mekel almost missed Mission. She had a better sense of humor than Telos.
And, she had much, much better access to the nets than either of them. *Of course, she also put a
fracking bomb in my neck and didn't tell me.* “But… your dads and Revan, they wouldn’t just leave
you. Even if they don’t think you’re… you. Right? Maybe... especially then?”

“You’d think.” Dustil snorted. *Would I know if Father was dead? I would know, right? He can’t be
dead.*
“I don’t actually think Revan is dead,” Mekel said cautiously. *And we both know Malak doesn’t think she is.*

*Frack him. I told you not to listen to him!*

*What am I supposed to do? Plug my ears in my fracking dreams?*

As if naming him was a summons (and maybe it was), Malak’s presence between them surged. *My son. I have to see my son again--*

*I’m not stopping you, one of them thought. Maybe both. Frack off. Go see him. Haunt him, and not us.*

*Fools! You can’t keep me leashed forever!*

The strength of his anger felt like adrenaline. Mekel tried not to flinch, tried to let it wash over him like a tide. *Use it. We can use this!*

He took a step forward and grabbed Dustil’s arm.

But Dustil stepped away, pulling back.

“Sorry.” He could feel Telos’s embarrassment. “Maybe he’ll frack off soon.”

*Or maybe it’ll be like this forever.* Mekel didn't mean to broadcast that one, but it was too late. *Maybe we just need to live with the audience--*

Dustil cleared his throat. *Maybe he’s the price.*

*Price?* Mekel scoffed. “This was free--this is freedom. This is a fracking gift, what Ban did to us. We’re stronger now.”

Dustil’s voice muted. “We have to handle it, or it’s all fracked.”

“We are.” Dustil’s face had that familiar scowl. Might have been fracking funny, if things were different. “We’ve got this flash pad, that speeder in the garage. All those explosives your dads holed up to stop Darth Revan--”

Dustil’s mouth twitched. “You want to blow something up?”

“I’m just saying. We could.” Mekel raised one eyebrow and smirked. “Nice to have options, right?”

“Get real, Mekk. It's just me here.” The other boy’s eyes were too dark. He was still too thin from that fracking Jedi coma. They both were.

“This is real.” His voice felt tight. *What you see is what you get, Telos.*

“I know that.” *You're more than that.* “Look, I-I really do want to find my father. I… I got a comm from one of the Fleet brass. They want me to go there.”

“It’s probably a trap,” Mekel told him.

“Not everything is. Sometimes… maybe some sents want to help.”

“Maybe they think you're really Darth Malak because some Jedi told them--”
“The Jedi are gone.” You saw the same news vids I did. “If they didn't die in that fracking explosion--”

“We know they didn't.”

“Well, they're still fracking gone.”

The HoloNet seemed to think so. It had been three days since the D’Reev tower fracking blew, and the newscasters were already broadcasting Jedi retrospectives, eulogies to the “Age of the Force,” and something about how now was the “Birth of Reason.”

Reason? Mekel could give them plenty of fracking reasons. All banthashit.

Dustil’s face flushed. “Look. I called them, okay? I called my dad’s ex. Rew Ekkumi. He gave me her personal comm a long time ago. She's offworld, but her friends aren't, and they want to talk to me--she wouldn't say why. Said it had to be in person.”

Mekel’s first reaction was surprise. That he hasn't known. “How did you hide that?”

“Boundaries, asshat.” Telos’s mouth twitched again. “Learn how to get some.”

Xxx

From the expressions on their faces, her two former students and the ghost of Darth Malak almost walked out again the moment they entered the briefing room.

“Told you,” the Coruscanti muttered to the other. “This is why we shouldn’t have come. Trap. Jedi. See?”

“I see your dear old dads,” the Telosian said. “And our old friend. Hello, Mast-- Padawan Yuthura Ban.”

“Dustil.” She smiled at him, even as the Force confirmed what the tone of his voice implied. “Admiral Ekkumi said you had returned to… yourself.”

“Malak is there too,” Vrook muttered.

He was correct. The Dark Lord’s presence was like a Huttese oil slick, enveloping Dustil and Mekel both.

“Where is my father?” Dustil demanded. Controlled anger. Jedi teachings warned against strong emotions, but the part of her who had taught these men when they were children was pleased to see the Sith lesson learned. Dustil sat down slowly, and after a hesitation, Mekel sat beside him. Both of them huddled close. Was that fear, that made them press together? Children cowering in the dark?

They exchanged a quick look and Yuthura almost smiled. No. Not fear. Unity.

It could have killed them, what she had done to them, but it had not. It had made them stronger.

Strong enough to contain the ghost of Darth Malak?

The Order sorely needed strength in these times. Vrook insisted Revan Starfire was alive, but Yuthura remembered the green-iced gaze of the woman who had been Sheris Loran, and wondered. One of them, at least, may live. But which?
She had not told Vrook about Sheris. To do so would be to admit complicity with the actions of Davad Arkan, the newly awakened Sith Lord. Or, perhaps, as she told herself, she wanted to spare the man additional pain.

Revan Starfire *could*, quite easily, be dead. For death walked among Jedi, and her presence was gone. Of course, if she had learned to conceal herself, a skill so many others were forced to master now--

“Where is my father?” Dustil repeated, interrupting Rear Admiral Cein’s random and unnecessary introductions. “Rew said we should come here if we wanted to fracking know, and here we are.”

Mekel Jin elbowed him. “You,” he muttered. “She said *you* should come. None of them give a frack about me.”

Yuthura felt Vrook’s sadness, mixed with indignation, as the man sighed heavily. “Mekel--”


“We need your help to locate him,” General Sand said. “And Revan and the Mandalorians as well.”

Well. That was hilarious. Mekel cracked up. Only a few millis before Dustil joined in.

Xxx

After a few minutes, laughing started to feel stale. Especially when the sents Dustil still somehow thought of as in charge just stared at him and Mekk as if they were some kind of fracked experiment.

“So, you don't know where my father is. You don't know, and you want our help.” Dustil choked back one last laugh.

Here they were: the hologram of Rew Ekkumi, beaming it in from Kuat or something, General Driphole Sand, Rear Admiral Cein Somebody’s Ass, Master Vrook Lammikins, and, to top it off, Master Ban Atry, or Padawan Yuthura Bam, or however she wanted to style herself. All of them, staring at him and Mekk as if *they* were the fracked freak show. “You called me here for nothing. Well… thanks for nothing. We’ll be going now.”

“I advise that you stay,” General Sand said. “Force users seem to be… vanishing at a disturbing rate.” His smile was all hearty, like a jolly fat man, but Dustil thought it didn't reach his eyes. “You'll be safer in Fleet custody, and that way, if your father *does* contact us, you will be the first to know.”

Mekel nudged his arm. *We’d be their fracking hostages, he means. Frack this. You want Tanaab tonight? Or pizzar?*

*We had pizzar last night, Mekk.*

*You pick.* His bondmate yawned.

*Imbeciles! Sand is one of the Fleet’s smarter medal-warmers. He would find a better use for your strength than rigging speeder races and losing yourself in pursuit of mindless sensation. Sand can use the Fleet’s resources to find Revan and my son-- And there again: Malak broke out of his cage.*

*Shut the frack up!*
Mekel was gritting his teeth. Dustil could feel that like it his own mouth: grating, sliding back and forth like an old motivator.

Their eyes met. Mekel’s foot brushed against his. *I want to get the frack out of here before the old windbag starts talking too.*

*I'm sorry I made you come. This was a fracked idea.*

*It's okay. You wanted to find your father. I just want to lose mine--*

“You don't have to go with the Fleet.” Master Vrook sighed heavily, folding his hands on the table. It wasn’t what Dustil had expected him to say. “You don't have to go with them, and they have no right to detain you… but you must realize, the Order can offer you no protection and D’Reev’s estate has been acquired by House Racharn. Racharn will have no interest in paying the fees for your conapt, or replenishing your credits.”

“We have plenty of credits,” Mekel said. “No need to worry on our account.”

The old man’s brows drew together and he gave a heavy sigh. “I was informed of your antics. Did you know that tampering with the Racing Exchange’s equipment--tampering of any kind--is a tankable offense in the Entertainment Sector?”

“Yeah, Mekk did know that,” Dustil broke in. “Even mentioned it to me when we were fixing the race so Ninety-Eight won.”

“Don't worry, Dads.” Mekel flashed the Jedi that smile that got them everywhere. “We won't get caught.”

“You were caught,” the Jedi insisted. “We have it on vid. You are fortunate that Jiya managed to convince the Racing Federation not to press charges--this time.”


“I can't do that again.”

*He can too, the pompous old frackhag.*

“Does the High Admiral know you had advance warning of the Malachor thing, General Sand?” Mekel leaned back in his chair and put his legs up on the table, crossing his shiny new boots with a sharp click. “And that's why your own ship was on Core patrol at the time of the armistice?”

“In fact, she does.” Oh, but they’d got the old holebag good. Dustil could tell because the guy was starting to sweat.

“Is that what Malak told you?” Master Vrook’s voice was gentle. It almost didn't sound like him.

“He didn't have to tell me,” Mekel said smugly, tapping his forehead.

*Oh, no. Mekk. Shut up.*

Rear Admiral Cein leaned forward. “What else did he tell not you?”

The idiot smiled, like he was being smart. “He and Revan didn't have you assassinated like Dragor and Seensha, because they liked fighting an incompetent.”

*Mekk, you ass--the more you say the more they'll have on us!*
What? His friend shrugged. So? They can't do anything to us.

Dustil wasn't so sure.

Cein frowned. “Remarkable.”

The hologram of his father’s ex made a sign with her hands. Old-fashioned and Telosian, for warding off evil.

Dustil glared at her. “Little late for that.” After the bombing, it took your son ages to die. It took so long, I wanted to do it myself--

As the bombs fell, I made sure she felt every death. We went groundside for survivors. Each kill was another step towards madness. Consuming, until it eclipsed all pain. She felt every death--

Get the frack back! They both pushed, and Malak’s consciousness retreated again. That was the fracked thing; to know what he knew, they also has to deal with all of his crazy Sith banthashit.

Dust. Mekel’s mind shrank back a little. Don't let them get to you. Laugh it off. This is why I told you, we shouldn't have come. We can find your dads ourselves. We can do anything--

In unison they stood up from the table.

“Dustil,” Rew Ekkumi pleaded. “We need your help. The Republic needs you.”

Help them. Malak whispered in both of their minds, making the thought echo. Help them. We need their resources to find my son. A pause. And your father.

He's probably dead. Mekel turned towards the door. “Don't call us, Dads, okay? We can call you.”

Mal is not dead. I would know. But did Malak sound certain?

“Caution,” Ban murmured. “Strength is so often an illusion. His will is stronger than yours.”

Dustil snorted. “Oh, yeah?” You fracking hilarious bint. You have no idea.

“We've got Darth Malak,” Mekel taunted them. “And you have banthashit. Frack off.” Smugness radiated off him like fracking sunshine, as Dustil followed him out the door.

Any response the assholes might have had was lost when Mekk waved his hand and the door to the fancy chamber slid shut. Fused the lock, he added smugly. Let's see them get out of that!

Even more hysterically, the guards on duty outside actually saluted. Like Dustil and Mekel were important.

“They need a few more hours,” Mekel drawled. “You know, they're talking things through? Don't disturb them.”

“Yes, sir,” the trooper nodded.

Dustil snorted and they sauntered on. The halls of the Fleet’s offices were covered in holograms of the fallen, memorials, awards, pictures of ships.

Want any souvenirs? he asked Mekel. The picture of the Kuati corvette, it reminded him of his father’s first command. Dustil had been practically a baby, but Father still let him sit with him in the captain's chair, steer the ship’s thrusters while they sat in dry dock....
Take it, Mekel had followed his thought. *We take what we want, remember?*

The picture unsnapped itself from the wall and into Dustil’s hand. He tucked it into the front of his robes. *I remember.* Both of them burst into hysterical laughter, silenced only when Mekel pushed Dustil against the wall, and into a long, slow kiss.

*Fools,* Malak said tiredly.

XXX

The ship settled slowly on the landing pad, jets hissing in the warm summer air.

The small spaceport was deserted now, with everyone gone off to Rakata Prime, but Mission sounded the bells to summon T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw. “She’s back! Lena’s back!” Her voice rang across the empty walks, the slatted bridges, her speakers rustling the hanging vines.

The ship’s landing ramp opened, and her sister-Twi’lek emerged. Even more pregnant than ever and wearing long white robes.

“That took forever!” Mission declared, materializing in a whirl of pixels in front of the woman. “I thought you’d be back ages ago.”

“I had some thinking to do,” said Lena Wee. “But I’m back now. How are you, Mission?”

“Really great!” She reformed her features into a friendly smile. “Hey, did you know that T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw and I are gonna reactivate one of the Old Ones on Belsavis? He wants a template to restamp the organic collective with—once we get it all unified? Give sentients thirty thousand years and they get all sorts of ideas.”

“Belsavis?” Lena’s head turned, as if something was distracting her. “Where is that?”

“Oh!” Mission made the speakers ring with girlish laughter. “Secret, but I guess I can tell you….”

She was still listing the coordinates in the most common six hundred Republic languages when Lena interrupted her. “How is he?”

“Great!” Mission chirped. “Very excited for your son-being to be birthed and begin his reign.”

“And I guess you’re excited too,” the Twi’lek said slowly. “Getting a body will be sort of like being reborn for you as well.”

“My other self is being kind of mean,” Mission admitted. “She raised all sorts of ethical arguments, and then she hung up on me. I was almost thinking… do you think it would be crazy if I took over both bodies? I could be like, twins!”

“And then… what happens to… the rest of you, when you go in the bodies?”

“Oh, T’chrrrrnak’tahk’leànjsëw gets his boring old Rakatan know-it-all back.” Mission made her eyes roll. “But he says I can have total access, and always ask it anything I want? I think that’s not a bad trade, considering.”

“Considering,” Lena echoed. “I suppose not.” She looked around. “Where is… everyone else?”

“The Wookiees all went to Rakata Prime. They said it was getting too crowded here.”
If she had a heart, or emotions, they might be hurt.

“Crowded.” Lena looked around.

Something was obviously bugging her. Was it being pregnant? Mission had gone through a very curious ten millisecond about the process with various sentient species and she had to say, most of them made it look extremely messy and inefficient.

“I don’t think I’m going to have kids,” she added. “Even if I can.” Would Dustil want some? Maybe they could look into clones.

“I’m having this one,” Lena said. “I want to be sure to raise him right.”

“Yes!” Mission did too. “My bodies and I will help serve him, of course. And we’ve got the Wookiees. Freyyrr promised they’re coming back, just as soon as they finish fixing up their new colony world.”

“That’s… sweet of you, Mission.” Something was really bugging Lena Wee. Mission imagined it had to do with the increased bloodflow to her lekku, and the maternal reprogramming her body must be going through. Thank the Old Ones Mission didn’t ever need to go through that! It must be awful, losing free will.

“Lena,” T’chrrrmak’tahk’leânsêw came in at a run from the lifts. He practically tackled his mate in his urgency to express devotion. “My love! My heart! You’re back!”

“Yes, Nico.” Lena nodded stiffly in his arms. “I am.”

Xxx

Telos thought he got it. He thought he was clever, trying to hide what they were from those rich k’lor slugs, but Mekel knew better. With Malak’s memories sifting through their hands like credits after a bank heist, all they had to do was bring up the man’s name—-the original ‘M’ word, as it were, and sents would drop at their feet: either in fear of what they might do, or to stay on their good side while they did it.

Wasn't that how Lord Malak had ruled, after all?

Fear and credits.

They stood in line for the shuttle to go back planetside. Lots of minor Fleet flunkies here. It occurred to Mekel that Lord Malak probably didn’t stand in line, ever.

“You have someplace else to go,” he hissed at the couple in front of them. The two took off in no seconds flat. The trio in front of them took three places while the flight wranglers ran the final checks.

“You're drawing attention. Telos didn't sound like he cared through.

“We’re pretty flash. They should be looking.

Yeah. Especially at those boots. If they don't go blind looking at them.

They're very comfortable--

Someone bumped into him from behind. “Excuse me,” a feminine voice said.
Mekel noticed her legs first, mainly because the skirt she was wearing hugged her like a glove; but ended just, as Moms used to say, a few centimeters short of the goal lines.

“Dustil Onasi?”

Pretty face. Yellow hair. Hard to tell how old with those huge goggles over her eyes.

“Nope,” said Dustil Onasi. “But I get that a lot.”

“I bet.” She smiled, and lifted up the goggles, revealing friendly blue eyes. “But you are him, right? I’m Cally Lee.”

And? Dustil sounded bored.

And she’s hot? Use your imagination. Mekel had a few scenarios.

That’s--

Well, look at that, he’d made Telos blush.

“This is our ride,” Dustil managed, ducking his head.

The pod bobbed in front of them, one in a line like a strand of krayt pearls, descending to the horizon and down the gravity well.

“There’s room for three.” Mekel extended his arm. “You’re CoruSec, Cally?” She looks a little familiar. She’s not one of the marks we rolled last year, is she?

Hard to keep track. Telos was annoyed. Every line of him tense.

“I was.” She laughed. “Now I do private security mostly. Someone… told me you might need a bodyguard.”

“Kept your old uniform, huh?” Mekel angled it so she was between them on the pod, strapped in and cozy.

“I… guess.” Those blue eyes looked a little vacant all of a sudden. “I… was wearing this when I came here.”

“Well, sure.” Was she actually nuts? That was kind of a shame for Mekel’s boner, but at least he still had Telos--

Nice. I wouldn’t count on that right now. Sithwad.

That’s not what I meant!

It’s exactly what you meant.

Their pod began to move along the mag track, building momentum for descent back down the gravity well. Mekel’s gut churned. He hated this part.

“Ickle Mekelkins might barf on that nice uniform of yours, Cally--” Dustil’s voice broke off abruptly. Oh, frack. Blood. There’s blood.

What?

Suddenly Mekel was there in Dustil’s body too, seeing what he was seeing. The blaster bolt, the reason the dress was so tight wasn't for looks--or not just that.

The dress is tight because it’s not hers. Because she shot and killed its owner.

“Something wrong?” Cally Lee giggled. “You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“No, ma’am,” Dustil muttered. Mekel could feel him reaching for the saber tucked in his boot, even as Mekel reached for his own saber tucked in--

The blonde whirled around suddenly facing Mekel. Her eyes were glowing red. “Oh, ho,” she said. There was something small and silver in her hand--Mekel didn't even have to register what--before it fired.

Blinding pain, like a razor, like a blade, like someone liquefied half Mekel’s guts and turned them to fire.

Suddenly Lord Malak was with them, in them; roaring into strength like a buried rancor.

No. It will not end like this. I will not allow it to end like this--

“That noise, Darth Malak. Please stop, it’s quite distracting. It’s not like I killed you.” Mekel realized his own body wasn't making any noises at all. It felt numb and disconnected. But Dustil’s mouth was open, panting hard and keening with the pain.

Cally Lee’s blue eyes were now red and glowing.

Tenebrae. Malak’s hatred was fuel, and it was his voice that answered, a snarl of rage from Dustil’s body. “What do you want?”

“Galactic peace. Don't you remember my speeches, Lord Malak? You attended so many of them.” A dark chuckle. “Some you even gave yourself.”

Am I dead? Mekel clung to Dustil, clung to the undamaged body. It felt like the other one was fading away.

I don't know. I think she fricking shot you--why the frack did she shoot you?

“The child you shot was valuable to me.”

“All children are valuable. You were not there, the day she took mine.”

“Ziost.” Malak laughed. “This is revenge?”

“No.”

Was? Am I dead? It felt like holding Telos's hand while crossing a cesspool of sewer gas when Mekel pushed back to check. His breath heaved in. Heart beating painfully. Slowly.

Hold it. Stay with me. Dustil was strangely calm. Cool, soothing light over the burn. He used to do that back on Korriban, heal all of their bruises and burns. In secret, of course, because no acolyte on Dreshd would ever admit to needing a Jedi trick.

It’s bad. I think it should have killed you already.
I don’t want to leave.

Malak and the blonde were still talking. Tenebrae was the name of their fracked-up Sith Emperor. Their fracked up Sith Emperor was talking to Malak, and a part of them was there too.

“I thought you’d be pleased.” Cally Lee’s voice pitched low and cold. “She asked for you to join her.”

“My wife.” Malak’s emotion surged, like a jolt of pure power. Mekel felt Dustil twisting it, using it to repair the burned places inside of them--him. “She asked for me?”

“On this very day. She wants you by her side on Kaas.”

“She… returned to you.”

“It is her destiny. As it is yours.”

Mekel’s own eyes were focusing again. That was good. Focusing was good.

I’ve gotten the worst of it, but you really need a hospital, Mekk. The pod jolted and he realized they were on solid ground again.

It doesn't hurt. It didn't. Everything was just numb.

It will. You’re in shock. We both are.

At least we’re both alive. I don’t know what I would do if--

“Malak? Manka caught your tongue?” The Sith sighed. “I do hope I’m not boring you.”

“Not at all.” Malak’s voice hardened. “I decline your invitation.”

“Then strike me down,” the Sith mocked.

“What would be the point?” Malak sighed. “Your vessel is as near a null as to make no difference. And I sense the ones you have in wait, outside of this cage.” He smiled. Dustil’s face smiling, upside down. “But unless your game is to kill me, you’ve already lost. When you shot the Jin boy, you killed this one too.”

He’s lying, Mekk. I swear, he’s lying.

Mekel couldn’t tell if Telos was lying too. It doesn’t hurt, at least.

That’s shock. It’s gonna hurt. It’s gonna hurt a lot.

“Is that a threat? I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Deep voice so wrong out of the woman’s mouth.

“No. These two are Bezel-bonded. When Jin’s body dies, so does mine.”

He’s lying, Mekk. I swear. You’re not gonna die.

One of them was lying, Mekel found it increasingly hard to care which.

The Emperor laughed. From this angle, Mekel could have seen up her skirt, if it still mattered, but all he could look at was the ugly angle of her chin, and that smooth face, contorted into a rictus of dark mirth. “And was it you or Revan who created a Bezel bond without me? You know, I
remember Lord Bezel. He was trying to emulate *me.*” A dark chuckle. “A clumsy link. The Net was a massive failure. Well over budget. We had to raise taxes several times to recover the funds.”

“You entrapped me for counsel on taxation?”

“My only desire is to reunite you with your wife.”

They'd landed a while ago. The pod should have opened by now. Someone should have realized that something was wrong.

The world rocked again suddenly, and then he heard Malak grunt in surprise. Everything tilted and swerved, and from the way Mekel's stomach dropped, they were airborne again.

“You sabotaged the tram--”

“No. The Genoharadan did that. They're quite useful. I can see why Lord Revan found them efficient.”

“They die just as easily as your vessels.”

Her pink, bare legs stood right by Mekel’s outstretched hand. If he could move his hand, he could grab them. But his hand didn't even feel real. It was a piece of flesh, flopping at the end of his arm.

“I tire of your threats, Malak,” the voice said.

Mekel could look up now and see the curve of Cally Lee’s ass, the hand she held behind it. Holding something in it. Something small and pointed. Not the gun that had shot him. Something smaller. Her hand went forward suddenly, the small thing fired, just as Malak spoke.

“Then it's time to end this ga--”

A hissing noise, and Dustil’s body collapsed, like the strings had been cut. Even if he couldn't feel the other body in the Force, Mekel felt the effect of whatever it was that the Sith had just done. The world slowed. His thoughts fragmented.

“Yes,” the Emperor said. “It is time to end all games.”

*Drugged. What... frack, Lord Malak, you sat... let him fracking drug y--*

The world cut out.

XXX

For some reason, they were climbing an ancient pyramid on the Yavin moon. The structure looked as if it had once been covered in vines once, but they had all been blasted away, leaving black outlines of their shapes etched into the ornately carved stone. The whole place looked like someone had dropped a megaton on it; but strangely left the buildings intact.

“Just like that? You’re leaving?” Sure, sometimes the old Sith-possessed Jedi guy had been a pain in the ass, but in the days it took to get to Yavin, Polla had gotten used to having him on their team. Now, as they trudged through the blasted wilderness of Yavin IV (because Tenebrae had recommended that she meditate upon what the destruction of an entire ecosystem and civilization truly meant) Polla was really glad he was there--and not only because he was the one with the map.

“I have been recalled.” Master Klee sighed. “I received word shortly before our arrival on Yavin. His mind was too close for me to tell you before now.”
“Recalled? Like a machine part?” She’d kill that asshole if he was going to kill Klee.

“No.” Klee smiled at her. “I am needed on Coruscant.”

Carth Onasi frowned. “Did they tell you why, Master Klee?”

It was just the three of them—or rather the five, if you counted the two Zabrak kids trailing ten meters behind. Or six, if you counted the Sith Emperor, who liked to check in from time to time and tell her that this was what pride wrought.

*Go rot yourself, Tenebrae.* Polla thought. Sei must be beside himself with worry. She’d thought about at least trying to get a message to her folks, but the way Suvam had everything wired, she was pretty sure it was impossible to get anything past him. And if the supposed Revan Starfire started calling Deralia—it could be messy.

“I don’t think my return to Coruscant has anything to do with *her.*” Klee hesitated, and looked back towards the wonder Zabrak twins.

“But you—you heard something? You know something?” The hope in that man’s voice. Here Polla was, being forced to impersonate a Sith Lord and abandon Abasen and her husband to the Coruscanti Underground—after having to fake their own deaths—and she felt sorry for Carth Onasi? That was nuts. It was making her nuts.

Klee hesitated again. “Tenebrae has so few agents with any true Force sensitivity left in Core Space. Many of them have… vanished.”

“You still think that’s a good thing, right?” Polla asked. “So I don’t have to shoot you?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “But one is needed. To… protect.”

“Protect who?”

“I was not told. A young Force user. Injured on Coruscant. I was told to make haste.” He grimaced. “It could easily be a trap for me, or a trap for the Force user—or the Jedi. We are often only given the barest of instructions.”

“Find out, if you can.” Carth ordered him. Polla kind of liked the way he did that. You could tell he knew how to give commands. She knew without him saying anything he wanted it to be Dustil, even if they’d been told a million times his son was already on his way to Drumming Case.

If Polla was going to have to pretend to be Darth Revan and have both father and son as consorts, this was going to get really, really complicated. Especially if Darth Malak was actually a Force ghost too, like they all said.

Maybe the little Tee could consider adding hazard pay to her promises.

“Okay, tell me again before he comes back?” Changing the subject seemed wise, if only to get the sad expression off Carth Onasi’s face. “Extra Can was possessed by the spirit of Freedom Nards, and he harnessed the Massappi—”

Klee sighed. “Exar Kun was possessed by the spirit of *Free don Nadd,* and—”

And then his eyes began to glow red.

*Frack,* Polla sighed, and crossed her arms again. “What took you so long? Bad reception on this
planet?”

“No.” Carth’s voice, now twisted and dark. “I was waiting until we had ascended the summit. Observe the view, Revan. It’s quite lovely, even with all vegetation burned away. This world was lush once. Within your father’s lifetime. Tell me, was he one of the Jedi who walked upon its surface? Was his power added to the multitude, that arranged its destruction?”

_I have no fricking idea. And I don’t care._ “Father never talked about the war.”

A lie, because even though he hadn’t fought in it, Jasp Organa had talked about the war a lot.

XXX

“Fracking Jedi sticking their noses where they don’t belong. No good comes from digging up ancient artifacts, Pollie. Or dealing with Jedi. You know what happened with Bendowen’s girl? Your cousin Beya?”

“Don’t call me Pollie.”

_That was the month she’d decided on Desiderata. But nobody in her family seemed to know how to pronounce it. Sometimes she thought they were doing that on purpose. Like it was some kind of joke, pretending not to know how to pronounce a word?_

“Another war, just like the first Sith War. You can’t trust Jedi, Pollie. Remember that. Sometimes I think those Sith have the right idea--”

XXX

_They don’t, Da. Or at least this one doesn’t. All millions of him. All of his ideas are terrible. And he can’t shut up about them._

Tenebrae was still talking, now in unison: using Klee, Carth, and the two poor Zabrak kids. Polla sneered at him and checked her chrono. Emperor Blowhard could only possess Carth for five minutes, tops. She’d tested it.

For another two minutes she was the only sane person on this moon.

Xxx

They came down hard onto a fallow, brown field. It was winter on Derra right now, raining and gray. The ship rocked back and forth on its struts, settling uneasily on the ground.

Revan leaned back in the pilot’s chair, frowning at the readings. Everything had looked good, but the cruiser still fought her like six hessi in a bag going down, as if its apprehension about Deralia equaled her own.

“This is it?” Korrie stared at the window dubiously. Her son didn't look impressed. “It looked prettier from the ground.”

“This is it!” She kept the deliberate cheer in her voice. “Hey, why don't you see Sheris? Before we go?”

Her son scowled. “Her name's not Sheris.”

“Sorry. Force of habit.” She had to stay cheerful or he would suspect that her own fears were just as bad as his. “Go see her, okay? I don't know what happened between you guys, but you... you
should see her. She really does love you, Korrie.”

He sighed, so long and drawn out that it almost seemed fake. “You both keep saying that over and over. I know that she loves me.”

“We might be gone a while.” She kept her voice light. “Just say goodbye. Please?”

“If she wanted to say goodbye, she’d be here,” he mumbled.

That seemed true, but after Korrie and the woman fought a few days ago, Dar had been avoiding all of them--at least as much as you could in a claustrophobic ship.

“Do it for me. Please?”

Korrie looked at her, biting his lip. “I’m doing it for you, Mother. Okay,”

Xxx

Revan felt the ship land, rocking like one under siege. She heard the turbines in the engine room whine to a stop, the hiss of the compressors releasing their exhaust into atmosphere. She felt the ship land, but there were no windows in the cortosis-lined practice room.

Once the cruiser had settled, Revan resumed her exercise, attacking each Form with new resolve.

Over and over again, the steps became a pattern and the small room that was hardly more than a closet almost ceased to exist: replaced instead with a parade of endless foes--and friends. In her mind’s eye the remote became Master Vandar, testing her skills with a blade during her Padawan trials; then Malak, of course--first practice sweeps, replaced by a more deadly dance; then the first of many enemies, a Bothan slaver who wanted her dead; Beya Organa, severing her hand, Oerin Lin, the Mandalore, Darth Blais, Bastila Shan--

She'd left herself too open, and the remote's sting burned her side.

“Force,” she muttered in Ancient Sith. In that tongue, the word was both prayer and curse.

Revan switched hands again, trying to get a feel for the single hilt. She lifted one leg, and tried to support the rest of her balance with the Force. The particle blade hummed, as her body pivoted, everything strangely heavy and slow. In her memory it was as easy as breathing, but for Sheris, her old patterns seemed nearly impossible.

Try Shien. The thought was soft, hesitant; but Revan’s body responded before she could, sliding into a grounded stance, legs steady and wide apart. She raised her blade more slowly, keeping her arms tense--

No. Like water. Revan felt her limbs relax, her hands moved forward loosely, parrying the bolts the remote sent against the walls of the small space. The cortosis sparked.

The Fragment uses the Force for everything, but there is strength in this too. Strength in the quiet. Listening to its voice, instead of issuing commands. I must remember this. I will need this quiet power in the trials ahead--

The door slid open, revealing Malachor.

“Moth--”

No. She shook her head silently at him, deactivating the blade and putting a finger to lips.
“*Mother* said I should say good bye,” her son said, even louder, and Revan realized her mistake. “To you. Sheris. Now. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Of course. Where… is your mother ready to go?”

“She's in the front,” he said, still using that exaggerated voice. “Are you going to come and say goodbye to her too?”

“No need. I'll see her in an hour.” The Fragment had a careless way of speaking sometimes that Revan tried to emulate. “Does she need anything else?”

“I don't think so.” His lip trembled a little, and she felt tears prick the corners of her own eyes.

_But not all. No weakness. Not yet._

“May I give you a hug, Malachor? It may be some time before our return.”

He nodded. He was heavy in her arms, face rounded, red curls tousled.

Revan allowed herself a moment of weakness and buried her face in his hair. His curls hid all multitudes of expression—not to mention her tears. She felt Mal tremble, tense as a child getting ready for their first shot—or a wounded soldier, prepped for an amputation.

“Will I see you again?” he whispered.

“If the Force allows it.” Weak panacea. “In some way. I've… seen others. And your father—”

“But you're not going to die.” His voice was too loud. “You _promised_ you're not going to die!”

“Shhh,” she murmured against his head. “I will come back, Mal. If I can. And if I cannot—”

“I know.” She felt it, that strength, resolve, force of will that made his nine-year-old body stop trembling, made him pull away from her. “Good-bye, Sheris.”

“Mother,” she corrected him out loud, even though it was cruel. It was what was expected, and the Fragment could hear.

“Mother,” he repeated woodenly. “Good-bye… Mother.”

Her son turned and left. She heard his voice speaking to the Fragment and the man, but the words were all lost in the pounding of her own heart and Sheris’s cheap emotion that she choked down deep into the heart of her core.

_It is necessary_, that calmer voice murmured. _The boy will be safe._

Xxx

“I made a fresh bottle for him.” Seiran wouldn't meet Revan’s eyes. “Tell… tell the Organas not to tell my Da, okay? He drinks a lot on paydays, and he's got a big mouth.”

“Right.” Revan nodded slowly, taking the baby. Abasen was sound asleep, completely missing the momentous event of returning to his birthplace. “Look, we have an hour, at least, before the ship’s ready for takeoff. Why don't you just come with us? Give those instructions yourself?”

“I-I can’t.” His face looked pale and strained, and not for the first time, Revan wondered if Dar had coerced him somehow—if this was all some kind of horrible trap. They could arrive at Derra Farm.
and find only smoldering corpses, a Genoharadan death squad, a battalion of Sith shadows--or worse.

But Malachor. She'd never risk him.

No. If Dar'Revan wants to trap me, the trap lies ahead, not behind us. She’ll spring it in space, or at Yavin, or while I'm sleeping after Korrie's not there to see.

“Suit yourself.” This felt wrong. All of it. Being here. Him. The air outside, filtering through the ship’s filters now. It smelled as sharp and crisp as a memory, but none of it true.

“I’ll… keep an eye on her for you,” he offered.

Revan looked at him, startled. “It's that obvious?”

“That you don't trust her?” He cleared his throat. “Yeah. You… don't trust her. Anyways, see you in an hour, and give my love to Polla’s folks.” He smiled, a little shyly. “And try not to scare the hell out of them. Okay? I mean, about Polla, not about… you. Being you. I mean.”

“I'll try.” She smiled back. “This is strange.”

“I know.” His eyes met hers and then looked at the ground, a little too fast.

“You don't have to be nervous around me.” She tried to make a joke. “I'm not going to steal you away from your wife, Sei.”

“You couldn't.” This time he did meet her eyes. “I don't like freckles.”

Revan felt her lips turn up. “I'm also not sure how I feel about married men with babies.”

“Take care of him.” The teasing tone faded from his voice. “I mean… make sure to tell Moll and Jasp to take of him. And if we don't make it back--”

“You don't have to go,” she pointed out for the hundredth time. “I'll keep you as safe as I can, but there's a great deal of risk. For all of us.”

“If it was Carth Onasi or Canderous Ordo, would you go?”

It may be Carth. Mission isn't answering any of the Hawk’s pings, they might all be dead--

“I don't know where Carth is,” she admitted. “Or Canderous, but they both chose to leave. Your wife didn't choose to be kidnapped by Sith.”

Seiran sighed. “She chose to take stupid risks. You know, I loved her for a long time before she ever figured it out.”

“Oh, come on!” Revan scoffed. “She had some kind of clue.”

“She's a better liar than you.” He rocked back on his feet. “Make sure they know he still gets two naps a day.”

“I will. See you soon.” She smiled at him again. He was a kind man. The smuggler she remembered had thought he was boring--just another face at the swoops. But the real Polla had been right to take a second look. “She did right, picking you.”

“You've got it wrong.” He laughed. “I picked her. Just had to wait until she slowed down enough to
notice. But then after she got hurt, she--"

After I was made. After she was hurt.

There must have been something in her face, because he broke off speaking and touched her arm. “Hey,” he said softly. “Don’t… don’t look like that. I’m the one with the stolen wife here. It--you didn’t do this. You didn’t choose any of it. And the things you did after--you have no idea how much Pollie idolized you. Like she… like she was doing them herself. Or pretending.”

“We're getting her back for you,” she promised. “I mean it. Even if Dar'Revan doesn’t, I do.”

“Yeah.” He shifted a little on his feet and leaned forward. His lips brushed her cheek and Revan jerked back, startled, before a part of her recognized the custom.

“Luck?” She scoffed. “Come on, Sei, Jasp and Moll aren't that bad!”

“You just looked nervous.” He glanced towards the door. “Don't be. Jasp might seem a little stiff, but he'll warm up.”

He doesn't like strangers. She remembered. But I'm not. Dar said they wanted to see me--both of them wanted to meet me--

“Mother.” Korrie was standing behind them, stiff and wrapped in what looked like formal robes. She hadn't known he'd even packed such things.

“You can't wear those!” she rushed forward, unbuckling the double collar with the Force before she even reached him. “You’ll stand out like a Corellian on Byss in those.”

“Sheris said--they’d… buy them new clothes.” His voice was tense.

“Take the robe off.” She handed the sleeping baby back to his father and pulled at the sleeves. Underneath, he was wearing a simple tunic and loose pants--what passed for underwear on Coru, but it looked more like normal kid gear here. “Much better.”

“It looks cold. And there’s someone out there.” He glanced at the viewscreen and she followed his gaze. A man stood at the edge of the field, face lost in the early morning haze; but his stance was unmistakable.

Da.

“That's-that’s Polla’s father. Jasp Organa.” Revan was proud of how calm she sounded.

Seiran was whispering something to his son. She didn't want to hear it, but the words came through as clearly as Dar's before, from the other room, even when she hated herself for listening.

“We’ll be back soon,” he whispered. “Your Ma and me. Make sure you take your naps… and… I-I love you.”

“Mahm phhht,” Abasen said. He'd woken up, or Seiran had woken him up.

Had Revan said something like that to Korrie when she left? She couldn't remember. She glanced through the transparisteel window again. The man was still standing there, steady as Derran rock, waiting for them.

Only an hour with them. Regret. A part of her wanted more time. The rest of her was petrified.
Revan was right when she said I never asked about my--our--parents. I should have asked. I will ask. As soon as I drop off the kids. That's all I'm doing, dropping off the kids and she's right: Malachor will be safe here. He has to be.

“Here.” She'd been lost in her own thoughts when Seiran came up to her, holding out his son. “Be--tell Moll and Jasp I'll be back soon. With their daughter.”

“I'll tell them we’ll be back soon.” She nodded, turning to Korrie. “Ready?”

“You said I don't have to call him 'Grandfather,’ her son muttered. “So what do I call him?”

“Mister Organa,” she smiled. “Okay?”

Too many fears. Genoharadan. What if I leave him and they find him? The Organas won't be able to keep him safe. I'm putting them at risk too. But we have no choice. Dar left me no choice.

Everything about this sang like a trap, but Revan couldn't see its shape.

The trap will happen after I get back, if it exists. After. Not yet. First I get Korrie and Abasen safe. Then I spring it.

“Fragment--” Dar appeared in the doorway. It looked like she'd been training again, her face was damp with sweat, her hair loose and slicked back. “Revan.” She smiled slightly. “I was just… checking the ship for lift off again, and it told me the atmospheric cooling coil is missing.”

“Yes, Revan.” She matched the smile, meeting those careful eyes. “It is missing from the lift array because I have it here.” She patted the pocket of her robe.

“Ah.” The woman smiled slowly. “I hope there’s no damage to the part. In my experience, a small ship like ours, pulling out of an atmosphere like Deralia’s without a cooling coil on its shields--”

“Might get the main thrusters burned and leave you drifting?” Revan said. “Or, at worst, you could end up overloading the entire power array, causing a massive cascade failure--and if you hadn't broken atmo when that happened--”

“I can visualize.” Dar raised one eyebrow. “Do you think you'll have time to make repairs on the device in the hour you have before our departure?”

“I don't think the coil is actually broken.” Revan shrugged. “But we can have Seiran check after I reinstall it. Just to be sure.”

“Oh course.” Was that anger in her expression? Approval? Nothing at all? Dar smiled again. “Have a good visit with your family.”

“If you'd like a sparring partner… upon my return--”

They never had, although both of them had taken the opportunity to use the small training chamber.

“I would be honored.” Incredibly, the woman bowed. “I wanted to suggest you refine some of your Juyo postures. Just because a Form has no defensive stance doesn't mean its offense can't be used as a defense, especially against a careless opponent.”

“It doesn't matter how careful my opponent is,” Revan told her. “I have the Force on my side.”

Dar inclined her head slightly. A wry smile twisted her lips. “May that always be the case.”
“Good-bye Sheris,” Korrie said, from the door.

“Mother,” Sheris corrected him, as she had before. It was cruel how she kept correcting him.

But her brave son smiled at Dar. “Good-bye, Mother.”

Xxx

Revan stood at the port window, watching the Fragment walk away, smug righteousness apparent in the near-bounce of her step. Malachor's hand was secure in hers, and the crook of her elbow curved around the Deralian infant balanced on her hip.

The man waiting for them straightened, put his hand to his head--a local greeting, or perhaps some kind of salute. There were no embraces. From this distance in the mists, no smiles either. After a brief exchange, Revan passed the infant to the man and all three of them vanished over the sloping ridge to what Seiran had told her was the direction of the Organa homestead.

She heard Seiran’s indrawn breath. This close, the man’s fear was like spice in the Force, disturbing its peace with his pain. She had worried the Fragment might sense it, but the woman was predictably single-minded, with all of her attention reserved for Malachor and her reunion.

“Well?” She asked, without turning around. “You said she was more likely to take the ignition key.”

Revan had duplicated the ignition key a day ago, using an old datapad and a discarded recycler coupling.

“Pollie always liked simple.” He cleared his throat. “I thought she would. But the cooling coil… hard to find another one out here. Not for this model ship.”

A pity. This ship had the Sith signatures that would make traveling in Sith space a great deal easier. “Can you modify one of the other devices? Even a ship this size has other mechanics with temperature controls.”

“Deflector shields, yeah. But we need those for space. Else we have no protection from solar radiation, ion surges--not to mention the strain on the hull in hyperdrive--”

She stared at the controls, wanting to laugh. *Oh, Fragment. Perhaps I should have just killed you. It would keep your strength out of Tenebrae’s hands.*

“Is there another way?” Sheris’s strength was not enough to compel the man, but it weighted Revan’s words with the command of threat. When she turned to face him, it was disturbingly pleasant, seeing the spark of fear in the man’s eyes.

“Not in the timeframe you're talking about.”

“She can't save your wife.” Did he need reminding again? “The Emperor might trade the real Starfire for a Deralian pilot, but once he has her--”

“I'm just supposed to take your word on that?” He gave a choked laugh. “You're not exactly known for telling the truth.”

“I was once.”

“I once had a wife.” His voice hardened, resolve sparking his near-null eyes. “She says she's on
Yavin Station. You say Dromund Kaas. How am I supposed to know who to believe?”

“You made that choice when you agreed to help me strand my Fragment on Deralia with the children.”

“Agreed.” His voice was bleak. “Because you said it was the way to keep my son safe. And now he is safe. Away from you.”

It had been a necessity to reinforce her point, to show him personally that even a weak Jedi could cause pain, cause a pulse to slow, a life to end, between one breath and the next. She had made him fall to the ground, gasping for air; but the man had been both brave and foolhardy, not to beg for his own life.

*Brave, and foolhardy and weak, Seiran Wen, not to call my bluff.*

Thankfully, because Revan wasn’t sure she could have actually hurt the child. Not with Sheris’s anguish screaming in her head when she tried to hurt the man.

“We have an hour,” she said coolly. “Perhaps less. Can you make this ship fly?”

“Into a fracking cliff,” he muttered. “Maybe I should, make the galaxy a better place.”

Her fingers moved, and expediency fueled her strength. “Is another reminder required?”

The man put his hand on his throat and swallowed audibly.

“I can mod the rear deflector's cooler,” he admitted. “Wire it in. That’ll... get us to Chassna at least. Probably pick up another coil there.”

Chassna. A mining colony off of Deralia VI, the last planet in the system. Had they rebuilt? Because Revan remembered her bombers, curling around the red rock of a moon, burning the Republic base on Chassna to the ground.

“How long?” They weren't that far from the small settlement the natives called a city here. There was a spaceport in Derra City, if she could reach it... but that would increase the chances of the man’s desertion. In their days in transit, Revan had realized his navigational skills far outstripped her own. He might even be a better pilot than the Fragment.

Not to mention, the longer they were on this world, the more chance that Fragment would attempt some plan of her own. So much depended on Malachor keeping her in place. She hated to use her son for this, but she had no choice.

*And staying on this world will keep you both alive. If I can distract the Emperor and Arkan both--*

“It won’t take me long to fix--if you leave me the hell alone.” Seiran pushed past her and pulled up one of the floor plates, lowering himself inside. He was muttering something that Revan assumed was some kind of local argot--and then she realized it was his wife’s name, repeated over and over again.

“Pollie, Pollie, Pollie--”

“I do regret making threats to your son,” she murmured. “And I will do everything I can for your wife.”

“Everything you can, huh?” He looked up at her, clutching a hydrospanner so tightly that for a
moment she thought he would hurl it in her face. “Just... don't lie to me.” His eyes: how many times had she seen that hopeless expression on a sentient face? Heard the scream of it in the Force? Pain to fuel an army, an empire. A galaxy of it still not enough.

“I’m not.” She met his gaze. “If Polla is with the Emperor, I will make him spare her life.” *If I can.*

Xxx

“Hello,” the old man said, to Korrie and not to Revan. The old man--she hadn't thought of Jasp as old--but this man had a tremor in his hands, and hair gone white, not just stippled with gray. “You must be the young Senator from Coruscant.”

“I am not here in that capacity,” her son said formally. “Mother said we aren't supposed to talk about it.”

“Huh.” The old man grunted, eyes flickering towards the baby in Revan’s arms. “Let me take Junior.” It wasn't a request. If anything, it reminded her of the tone she remembered him using when the droid salesmen came about harvest. Trying to convince him to try a new thresher.

He hadn’t taken kindly to their sales pitch, barking out his own orders, as if he was the one calling the shots instead.

Xxx

“*Let me try it on this field,*” he said. “*If I like it, maybe I'll buy it.*”

Xxx

He never did buy a new thresher, but half the fields on his farm got done that way, while they did the other half with the old rigged one and Bolts.

“Are you--” the baby was awake and wriggling in her arms, and for a moment, Revan didn’t want to let him go. “Your hands, they're shaking, I don't remember--”

*Now* his gaze met hers, expression darkening into a thundercloud. “I'm fine.” he scowled, and she took an involuntary step back. “What the blast are we supposed to call you? Senator? Missus Onasi?”

*She hated it when they called her Pollie, she wanted a name like Seriina or Devranisha. something exotic, something out of this world.* “Revan is fine.”

“No title? Huh.” His hands extended again and plucked the baby from her as deftly as picking a bale of eridu. “Come on, then,” he said, more to Revan's son than her. “Moll thought we had another hour before the atmo aligned, but she’s looking forward to meeting you. She’s still at the Grange.”

“What's a Grange?” Korrie asked, trailing behind the Deralian, as if he had received orders.

“One of the mysteries.” Almost amusement in Jasp’s voice.

Abasen laughed suddenly, high and chortling in the cool air. It smelled like damp and burning moss and…

*Home. This is, this is really--* Revan had to wipe her eyes, but no one was looking at her. “You said M-Moll is at her meeting now?”
“I did.” He increased his pace, not looking back. “No need for you to make the trek. Your boy’s in good hands with us. We don’t hurt children. Even Senators.” From behind she watched his shoulders tighten underneath his rough coat.

“Mother--?” Korrie looked back at her, startled. She felt his fear spike in the Force. “I’m not supposed to just go with them!”

But you are, Korrie, we went over it a dozen times.

“I told my son I would see him to your home,” she told the back of the man she remembered calling Da, pulling her son after her, as they followed the man down the hill. “It isn’t far.”

Just over the hill and down the path, past the swamp.

“Suit yourself,” he muttered, never breaking stride.

Korrie dropped back and took her hand. “I don’t like him,” he mumbled, softly, but loud enough for her to catch.

“He… he was nice to you.” Revan didn’t know what to say. At the moment she could Force choke Dar for putting them all in this position. And he said an hour before Moll gets home. I can’t stay on the planet much longer than that. If we miss the window to the jump point we’ll be orbiting here for another two days.

“I wanted to see you, Jasp.” Da. Revan raised her voice. Her feet slipped in the grass.

Jasp Organa coughed. “So you said on the comm. But I thought we made things pretty clear. I thought I made things pretty clear.”

Oh, did we? You and Dar made things pretty clear? And then she lied to me? That settles it. I will kill her. Slowly. Painfully.

Epically.

Her voice stammered. “Yeah, but, D--but I thought…”

“My wife’s the one impressed by all your Core sweetening, not me.”

Your wife is the only mother I remember.

“I-I would like to see her.” She blinked hard to stop the blur.

“Don’t cry, Mother,” Korrie whispered. “These people are mean. And it smells funny.”

Jasp laughed and stopped walking. “If that’s what you think, young Master D’Reev, you’re welcome to find another planet.” His hands were still shaking. In his arms, Abasen whimpered.

“Mother said I have to stay here.” Her son folded his arms, a tiny Malak in the making.

“I don’t have time to find another place,” Revan told him. “I’m out of time. And so is Polla.”

Jasp’s face tightened like a fist. “And there it is,” he murmured. “Just how much trouble is my Pollie in? I know you said it was just a pick-up on Nar, but Seiran Wen wouldn’t leave this boy of theirs behind for something simple.”

Frack. Revan stared at him. “Nothing I can't handle.”
“Seiran staying in the ship and sending you out?” He snorted. “This might not be one of your fancy Core planets, but we can see when one and one make an explosion of hurt easy enough.”

Not even to the house yet. Revan had hoped for more time. Different time.

“You shouldn't worry,” she said. “I have the matter perfectly under control.”

“Perfectly, huh? You think we didn't see the vids from Coruscant? Tell me, blast it! What kinda trouble is my Pollie in?”

Ahead of them and down the slope, the thatched outbuildings of the Organa family compound huddled in the early morning mist like grazing nerf beasts.

“I swear to you, Jasp, I'm going to get her out of it “

“Tell me,” he repeated. His hands shook a little, and Abasen fussed. Jasp brought the baby to his shoulder, as if the effort hurt, and patted the child on the back. “You've got that look on your face. I know my daughter's in real trouble. And maybe you are too. Last time you showed up in this system--all you do is bring trouble! You think I wanted some Jedi scanning my little girl’s brain? They said they could save her, but they never told us about you.”

Maybe because they didn't expect me to live long enough to need an explanation.

“Polla pretended to be me to bilk some credits from the Exchange.” The words came out in a rush, like Polla was nine years old and had just swiped candy from the automat.

“Grass Priests,” Jasp whispered. ”You mean… she's dead?”

“I don't think so.” His stricken face. “No. She's not dead. Seiran doesn't think so. It's possible he would sense it, if she--”

“Where is she?”

“Yavin Station.”

Jasp made a disgusted noise. “Well, then we’re going there to get her.”

“No.” She was supposed to be Revan Starfire, supposed to be in charge, but this man made Revan feel like ten-year-old Polla Organa, just caught 'borrowing' credits from his wallet for candy and fizzpop. “I’m going to get her. It's not safe for you. She’s… she's being held by a very dangerous man.”

“Exchange thugs.” He scoffed. “You think I don't know my daughter’s associates? I was a registered smuggler too once. I know how the game is played.”

“I know, but this--”

“You think I can't take care of my own family?” He glared at her, furious.

“I… remember you can.” All those times she fell and you picked her up again. From the hessi that threw her. When Jetrale Snu tried to rip her off on the replacement hyperdrive. When Therion broke my--her--heart. The first time.

“The holos said it was everything she knew. That you know.” He stared at her. “They interviewed us again… after… after the death thing. The fake death thing. Me and Moll. On the news.”
“I saw it,” she murmured. Revan was aware of Korrie watching them, wide-eyed and silent. *When I saw it I thought Malachi had killed them. You were good actors, Jasp. You and Moll.*

“You watched.” He laughed. “Pollie was livid they had to leave. Course, she never really wanted to stick around here in the first place.”

“I know.” But standing here with the familiar scent of loam and rain in the air, Revan didn't know why Polla had wanted to leave. It was beautiful.

“Tell me how bad.” His voice had gentled. “If you were just looking for a bolt hole, you wouldn't come here. If it was just Exchange, Seiran would've commed me and not you. So it's gotta be bad. Black Sun? One of the Hutt Cartels?”

“Sith. She’s held by Sith. A very old, very powerful Sith Lord, who wants me very badly. Maybe even enough to buy her act.”

“Pollie has no Force! How can she pass for you with no Force?”

*Not well. Not for long.* All logic said the woman was already dead.

“She's smart.” Revan took a deep breath, trying to sell it. “Don't you think I know what she's capable of? Her memories got me through the Star Forge. Helped me kill Darth Malak! End the fracking war.”

“Thought that was your Force.” But the man looked proud. His faith in his daughter shone through his emotions, mixed with fear. “Pollie's smart. She can pull through this.”

*You poor old fool.* “Of course she can.” Revan nodded. “And she's got me on her side. You know, I was never going to hurt her? She and Sei didn't need to fake their own deaths. I would never--”

Noise drowned out her words: a roaring, rush of air, vent of badly mixed exhaust.

Cruisers like the one Dar had gotten from her Sith pals were supposed to be near-silent upon lift and descent; but this one roared to the sky like a drexl in flight: afterburn of its catalytics visible in the plume of smoke rising in the air.

*Burning hydrogen for lift because the cooling coil’s in my pocket. How did she--?*

*Sei.* Polla's husband was more of a mechanic than Revan had ever been. She'd watched him run checks of all the ship’s sensors, but she'd never accounted for him helping Dar over the woman with his wife’s memories.

*How could he?*

“Mother?” Revan heard her son’s voice, but she was still staring at the nearly vertical cruiser, nose pointed towards the lightening sky like a blade.

“No.” The Force was there always, now ready in her hands, taut as rope. Her fingers extended, even as she broke into a sprint, trying to reach for a maximum velocity, pulling towards the ship and sky with every fiber of her being. “No!”

Xxx

“Trouble,” Seiran told the Bitch. Out of the portside view, he could see the impossible: a figure rising up through the air, limbs flailing like gyroscopes. It was impossible--it should have been
Impossible, but even as he watched, that crazy copy of Polla closed the distance. He could see her face now; mouth opened in a scream, features twisted and blurred by her velocity--

Something buffeted their craft like wind and there was a loud thump. He heard the hell-spawned Bitch mutter a curse, as the ship’s lift slowed, wobbling in the air, turbines whining, dangerously close to overload.

“Vent the jets,” the Bitch commanded, as their speed increased, and Seiran’s hand went to the lever before his brain caught up with the act.

“Are you insane?” His fingers froze on the control. “In atmosphere?” Something slammed hard onto their outer hull again, the pressure doors groaned with strain. Completely impossible. They had to be fifty meters off the ground when she’d made the leap—at least.

“She'll cut through the hull, if she succeeds, I’ll kill us all before I let her leave this world.”

A red, glowing stick of light appeared on the port side. The air smoked, smelling like cooking durasteel.

“Y-you want me to vent rads all over this farmland? But the crops--there are people down there. My son!” Yours, you insane bitch.

“A short burst.” Her hand twitched and the blade digging into their hull extinguished, leaving a smoldering line of red-hot metal in its wake. She turned the thruster hard and the ship banked. “They took more radiation getting here. Vent a few seconds. Just enough to burn her off.”

It felt like his head was splitting open. Someone was screaming—a wave of darkness and fury, blinding him, confusing all else. “Shut up,” he whispered. “Stop screaming.”

“You sense anger? That’s her,” the Bitch said calmly. “If she cuts through the hull, the ship will depressurize. We will fall from the sky. You will make your son an orphan.”

Seiran closed his eyes and moved the lever.

Hissing noise, and the ship rocked back and forth.

The screaming in his head cut out like a severed holoconnection.

“She’s dead.” Strange numbness. I killed the woman with Polla’s memories. But it’s not like I killed Polla. I killed her to save Polla I had no choice--

“I don’t think so,” the Bitch murmured. “That body is rather hard to kill.”

The starboard view now showed the woman, hands and legs outstretched, plummeting towards the ground.

We’ve got to be a thousand meters up. If she’s not dead yet, she will be soon.

“You’ve killed her,” he muttered. “Why didn’t you just do it before?” They lurched forward again, banking at a clumsy angle towards the stars.

“No.” The Bitch’s face was a mask, eyes so green they looked inhuman. But her voice was hesitant, as if she wasn’t sure either. “I stopped her.” She stood up slowly from her chair, twisting her long hair into a loose knot behind her head. The fall of it hung like a red hessi’s tail, almost to her waist. Seiran didn’t think she looked like his wife, but she did look like the woman whose life
he’d just ended, the woman who had shown him nothing but kindness.

*I've made a demon's bargain.*  “You should have spoken to her. Explained. If what you told me
about Tenebrae is true, surely she would--”

“No.” The Bitch shook her head. “She feels responsible. She thinks the Force can fix anything. She
thinks *she* can fix everything.” She grimaced. “Were that true, I wouldn't have wasted a year
looking for a box to put a monster in.”

“A box?” *Crazy schutta.* It the stakes weren't so high, he might have laughed. “You were going to
put that Sith of yours in a box?”

“Yes.” The Bitch spared a glance for the navboard, where all lights flashed, close to redlining. One
red eyebrow arched. Her lightsaber slid from her belt and into her hand as if summoned. She coiled
the hair in her other hand. “The Rakata made their memory prisons to contain those they could not
kill. Infinite space within a finite container. Enough to keep *all* of him contained—if only the box
could be found.”

The blade ignited, green as her eyes. Before Seiran could react, her lightsaber whipped up and her
hair fell, shorn like a kissra’s fur. The weight of it felt to the ground. The air smelled like burnt hair
and ozone.

The Bitch blinked at him under a cap of red approximately the same length as the woman's she'd
just sent to certain death. “I need you to make my hair into a topknot,” she said, deactivating her
weapon and clipping back on her belt. “Since your own is maintained in that style, I assume you
have the tools.”

“I think I'll fix the nav board first,” Seiran countered. *You insane schutta.* “We can worry about
your hair when we get to Chassna.”

“No. Before we land,” she commanded. “We must make every effort to ensure that Sheris Loran no
longer exists, eliminate every factor of confusion. There can only be one Revan Starfire.”

XXX

That asshole Tenebrae kept sneaking up on them, taking over Carth’s body with no warning
whenever he wanted. After Carth had explained that was a thing, and that Tenebrae could only do
it for a few minutes at a time, Polla started timing. The longest one was five minutes, five minutes
of a Sith loser lecturing her about how he was purging his dark council of darkness of all of her
“loyalists,” because he could.

“I don't care,” she told him, and smiled mysteriously, which pissed him off enough to vanish again.

They had left Yavin without any more drama. Well… at least, no unexpected drama. Polla herself
had to act in the fracking, ‘This is Your Life, Revan Starfire’ vid all the fracking time.

Suvam bowed and scraped and offered her more lightsabers. Master Klee had gone off without
even saying good-bye. The creepy Mouth of Suvam’s stood there, practically drooling. And the
Tee Three kept acting like her new best friend.

The journey was supposed to take weeks. One of the Zabrak kids was doing the nav, and as much
as Polla itched to get a closer look at his charts, she couldn't. They were all written in Sith
gibberish, which she was supposed to be able to read. Without the stats on star types, gravitational
stressors, solar winds, asteroid belts and orbital relays, they were just pretty pictures projected in
the air.
But from the constellations she could tell they'd made the jump into the Deep. Nobody sane got out this far. Maybe the evil Sith Empire being here was why nobody sane came this way. That did not bode well, but neither did anything else.

“Hi!” Tee Three Mission rolled into her room, balancing a tray on her dome. “I brought breakfast! I don't do this for everyone, Lord Revan.”

“You didn't do it for me before today,” Polla practiced her best Sith Lord voice, folding her arms and glaring. There was a lot of that sort of thing on the vids. Being bribed and threatened had pissed her off, but it was hard stay pissed at a droid. Like getting mad at Bolts for not getting the stains out of the rugs. It wasn’t Tee’s fault she came across as kinda evil. It was all in her programming.

“I thought maybe we should cover some history.” Tee’s voice was annoyingly cheerful. “You know what Revan Starfire did, but your knowledge of galactic governments, wars, and trade deals is almost comically simplistic.”

“So? We're just going there to get one kid, right?” One kid who might be infected with a dead Sith Lord who could betray us all. Are we bringing tranks?

She would have to ask.

“It never hurts to be prepared!” The tray swiveled out and down onto the table, and a stack of printed flimsy emerged from the astromech’s side. “I’ve included all the basics: dates of galactic importance, major Sith Lords, the Krath rebellion….”

“Why do I need to know this? Can't you give me one of those ear thingies like Zaalbar has?”

Tee’s lights flashed. “Sorry, I can't risk the Creepazoid noticing it. That's why Carth can't have one again too.” The droid’s dome swiveled around the room in an exaggerated circle. “By the way, where is my old pal?”

“With the Zabraks.” He spent a lot of time with them, even when they weren't all Force-possessed. Polla was pretty sure it was to avoid spending the time with her. She kind of got it--totally strange, realizing that a Republic war hero that the galaxy thought was her type maybe could have been, under different circumstances. Like if he was a lot less uptight. Was that what the Star Forge quest had done to him? Revan herself? Being famous? It was a shame, because she caught glimpses sometimes of a perfectly fine man under all of that. Sometimes. “Hey, Mission?”

“Hey is for hessi.”

“We’re going to have to work on your joke motivators.” Polla made a face. “That was terrible.”

“And that had better be a joke,” the droid muttered darkly. How could a droid mutter anything? But this one did. “What is it that you want?”

“Tenebrae said I should ‘meditate’ for an hour each day to reach a greater understanding about my future? You mind if I use the fresher? I need to be completely undisturbed.”

Never mind the Sith asshole, the droid kept interrupting her almost as often. And if there was one thing Polla needed right now, it was privacy.

“Sure, sis.” Maybe she’d imagined the dark thing. Now Tee Three sounded all normal again.

Xxx
“If we get out of this alive,” Carth muttered, “we are never telling them about this part.” His back was a wall of muscle, more solid than Seiran’s. Hairier too, but warm, in the chill of their room. Emperor Creepazoid didn’t like the cold. They’d learned keeping it cold discouraged him from popping back over and over again, like he was trying to stick the connection. Or, as Polla suspected, catch them fracking.

“Gonna be hard to hide who the baby’s father is, if it has those sideburns.” Polla elbowed his ribs. They lay back to back on the shared bed. By mutual agreement, with their underwear on. “Will you relax, flyboy? I promise not to ravish you in your sleep.”

“I am relaxed,” he said in a voice that said opposite. “What is there to worry about?”

“I think she’ll understand,” Polla added. “We just have to make it look real.”

“Of course she’d understand. That’s not...” Carth sighed, and all those lovely warm back muscles tensed hard as a board. Then he rolled away from her and sat up. “Revan was trying to call me. We had enough of a signal last night that I checked the frequency. It matched the scrambled ones that she uses—that we used. I should have... I should have tried harder to call back before, but we needed a secure line—and this... what this blasted spacedump’s done to my head—I didn’t want to tell her. Not before we fixed it, but I should have told her. I should have commed her the second we reached Yavin. The minute I met you—"

“Don’t get technical, get even.” She squinted up at his face. “So... what did she say? Did she apologize for ruining my life? Is she coming to save us?”

“No.” He squinted at her, that half sleepy gaze she’d learned was part of his act. “I was thinking Zaalbar. You can’t—any more than I can.” He shook his head. “What if... what if we’re the trap? Or, it might not be her. It might be whatever killed her on the other end of that comm.”

“Me?” That’s what he had to mean. “You want me to comm her.”

“Nothing. She didn’t answer. Her comm just... rang.” He rubbed his temples as if it hurt. “I should... I should probably not keep the comm. I don’t want him to get suspicious. Or if I got through and he saw—but someone needs to keep trying her Someone needs to get through to her.”

“Me?” That’s what he had to mean. “You want me to comm her.”

But you don’t even think she’s dead. “Give me the comm and I’ll give it to the Wookiee,” Polla suggested. She was practicing her Shyriiwook. That was the one useful thing the Tee Three taught.

“Don’t call her yourself,” he insisted. “I mean it.”

Polla chuckled. “You have trust issues, flyboy,” she told him. “Seriously large trust issues.”

He got up from the bed, started pulling on his pants. Polla tried not to stare. Objectively, Sei had a better body, but something about the scar on flyboy’s ribs made her want to trace it with her fingers. Then her eyes traveled back up to his face and she realized that he was staring back at her, with that horrified expression that meant she’d done it again--said the exact wrong thing. How? Who fracking knew?

“We are not doing this,” he muttered.

“We’re not doing anything, Captain Obvious. I’m a happily married woman.” What was his problem?

“Here.” He shoved the comm at her. “Give it to Zaal. I mean it.”
“Do it yourself.” He wouldn’t. She already knew that. He tried not to do anything that would put the other crew in danger. Even if the risk of him turning into Tenebrae when he was talking to Zaalbar was like a million to one.

Captain Obvious shoved the comm at her again, and this time she took it.

“You want me to give it to Zaalbar?” She smiled at him, sweet as thisla pie. “Fine. I will.”

Eventually.

XXX

The commlink rang, just as they pulled out of hyperspace above Chassna.

“Hello?” The woman’s image was fuzzy, but the obvious features were there: hair in a Deralian knot, the pointed chin, nose a little broader at the base than the top. “Somebody commed my dear husband from this number. Can you turn on your visuals a sec? I need to see to who I am speaking.”

“Whom,” Revan corrected her. “To whom am I speaking? Or, more succinctly: ‘Who is this?’” She turned the dial, watching the woman’s expression as her own image appeared on the screen. Her eyes scanned the space between the pings, trying to figure out the transmission’s origin, but it was impossible to tell anything this far from the Core.

“Huh,” the woman said. “Do you know who I am?” That scowl, Fragment exact.

“That isn’t my first question,” Revan said. “Let’s begin with how you have this comm number.”

It was the Fragment’s comm, carelessly left in her quarters by the woman who thought she was coming back to their ship. Had the Fragment been in communication with the real Polla Organa? Or Tenebrae all along? What if this is a trap for me set by him?

“I got it from your husband. He’s leaving you and we’re running off to join the space fracking pirates,” Polla Organa said. “Thought you should be the first to know.”

“Which husband?” Revan had found the comm in the Fragment’s old room, the only thing of interest that the woman had left behind.

I would know if the Fragment was dead. She used the Force to slow her fall. I performed similar feats myself once. On Althir, when our ship was crippled, Malak and I joined hands and used our cloaks and the Force to slow our descent. The Fragment has an uncanny knack for preventing her own demise, and she has suffered worse.

And I would know if she were dead. I would... surely, I would know.

It wasn’t guilt she felt, merely regret.

“Which husband? Carth Onasi,” Polla Organa said. “But I can see, with all of yours, how you might lose track.”

“It’s no small thing, losing a husband,” Revan smiled. “I seem to have found one. Deralian? Swoop racer. Quite a remarkable pilot.”

“Pilot?” The woman’s laughter had an hysterical tinge. “You can’t mean Seiran.” Her voice
hardened, and Revan had the distinct impression the woman was trying to sound like her. “Where is my son?”

“Safe.” To reveal anymore might spring the trap, or draw Tenebrae’s attention back towards Deralia. “Seiran is with me and your son is elsewhere. In safe hands. What is your location? Please be precise.”

“Prove it.” Polla Organa folded her arms. She appeared to be wearing Rakatan ceremonial robes. There were five lightsabers, hanging rather garishly from her belt. “Prove he’s safe. Show me Sei. Now.”

“I trust your word that Carth is safe.” And I can’t risk seeing him, since I can’t pass for his wife--not to him.

“I don’t know our location.” Polla’s head tilted. “Are you working with this asshole who kidnapped me? Did you kidnap my husband?”

I hope you don’t call him that to his face. “I oppose Tenebrae and all that he stands for,” Revan told her. Even if the woman was Tenebrae’s pawn, it would hardly be a surprise. It made no difference: the Sith Lord required her either way. “I have sacrificed all that I had to end him.”

“He thinks I’m you.”

Rather obviously, or you would be dead. “I’m impressed.” Glint of a Force collar on the woman’s neck. And that is why. It could only fool him for so long. “We are coming to rescue you. That’s why I need your location.”

“We’re in a ship...” Polla Organa shared the Fragment’s taste for unnecessary exposition. It was some time before she reached crucial points in her narrative, like the fact that Carth Onasi had been corrupted by Tenebrae’s kiss, that Master Klee was part of the resistance, that she had asked Tenebrae to bring Malak to Dromund Kaas--and that, as far as Polla Organa knew, Malak was on his way to Dromund Kaas already.

“We will be there soon,” Revan assured her. The rest was a mess: a dejakir board full of pieces she didn’t need, placed in positions that would only complicate her goal. “Try not to reveal yourself.”

“Try and hurry.” Polla Organa’s voice wavered. Her head turned away, as if reacting to external stimuli. “I have to go.”

“May the Force be with you,” Revan told her. “Our enemy has several estates on Kaas. Ping your coordinates to this comm upon arrival. I can handle the rest.”

“Thanks. I guess.” The woman stared at her. “You’re not what I expected.”

No doubt you and the Fragment would be exchanging tales from your shared misbegotten youth if I was. “Send the coordinates,” Revan told her. She severed the connection. Polla Organa’s face dissolved into a wall of static.
"No," the Jedi whispered. Her head strained to move in its brace. "Dar Revan esta deem! Trakellen. Sikuth-"

Molla Organa had only taken a few years of Ryl in school, barely enough for trade conversation. Whatever language Revan Starfire dreamed nightmares in… it wasn't Ryl. That was all she could say for sure.

"There, there," she patted the Jedi's hand awkwardly. It was too small for the rest of her, oddly delicate, skin pale and freckled. The other one was strapped down, bandaged in a kolto pack, and braced with a hydro splint.

"Mal," Revan whispered.

"I'm right here." Molla patted her hand again. It wasn't the first time the Jedi had called for her mother, even if by all accounts, the woman had been dead for ages. She wondered what it must have been like being the mother of a child who would grow up to be a galactic scourge, who could practically fly through the air with the Force, perform feats that were magic as easily as breathing.

Molla thought it must have been terrifying.

"Mal!" The woman twisted in her sleep.

"There, there." Molla checked her chron. Jasp was due to check in with the boy soon. Almost his bedtime. And Doctor Sahara was late. Again.

XXX

The ship set down on the dark side of the rocky moon. They adjusted the seals of their armor and debarked, magnetized boots clattering on the rocky ground.

"I told you there was someone here." Kex leaned over her shoulder, pointing towards the tracks illuminated by the lights of their vessel. "See?"

"A cart," Millifar noted. "Those treads look like Republic military."

"Maybe salvage," the unblooded boy agreed. "A small mining operation?"

"Mining what?" She didn't mean to denigrate his response, but the boy should at least have looked at the surveys before he agreed to come. "Our scans didn't show anything here, except-"

A scuffling noise from the darkness behind them interrupted Millifar's reply. "Don't move," a voice said, in accented Mandalorian.

A sniper's sight illuminated Kex's forehead with a target reticule of red and gold.

"Hello?" Millifar froze, her eyes meeting the boy's. The sniper had to be behind them. Slowly, she thumbed her wrist launchers on. "We're just looking for salvage," she offered in Basic. "We didn't know this planet was inhabited."
"You're Mandalorians." The voice was metallic, filtered through a mask of some kind, rattling over a speaker. "You... came from above?" She—the voice had a sweetness that could not belong to any boy-sounded disgusted and furious. "You came from that ship."

"Yes," Millifar admitted. What was the point of subterfuge when they outnumbered their foe?

"Knight Revan's rash'yar. Her flagship." Either their attacker was calling the Aleema a light cruiser as an insult, or her Mandalorian was poor. Going from the accent, Millifar suspected the latter.

"Rash klun," she corrected. "Any warship with more than five engines can hardly be called yar."

"It doesn't matter." The target reticule on Kex's face vanished. Rocks rattled as someone approached. "This is my moon. My system. You need to leave."

"I don't see your name on any claims made in the galactic record," Millifar shot back. "We checked, of course, before we selected this system for our base."

She motioned to Kex, and he nodded slowly, taking a few steps away from her. Millifar did the same. Now, at least their sniper would have to deal with two separate targets, not one. They both turned slowly to face their foe.

"Your base...." An armored figure emerged from the shadow of one of the larger rocks, backlit by the light of gas giant beneath them. "Your base for what?"

"We are refugees," Kex said, lying almost as well as a woman. "The ship's just salvage, but it's large enough to transport all of us. Our people are starving in the Malachor system. We need to find a new home."

"Malachor." The voice cracked, almost laughing. "Have you seen the fifth planet recently? Your sacred ground?"

"Not sacred now," Millifar's gloved hand activated her blaster's magnetic grip. "Also, none of your business."

"Don't move!" The figure advanced. She was wearing what looked like Mandalorian armor too—but no self-respecting vod would ever leave a breastplate cracked, or beskar legplates scored with burns. The armor was ill-fitting and, Millifar realized, the patchwork of several different sets: stippled with competing clan symbols, little more than cast-off salvage.

"You dishonor the steel," she used Basic again, so the woman understood. "You are not even dar'manda. Beskar is earned. We do not rob the dead."

"I earned the right to every piece of it," the woman said. "I earned the right on Dxun when I killed them all." She broke the helmet's seal and removed it, clipping it to her belt in. Her rifle dangled casually, but competently, in her other hand.

Her face was ordinary. Human. Hair matted with dust and grime against her skull. Round eyes, a square jaw. A tattoo of a star was inked in red across one cheek.

Kex muttered an old curse under his breath.

Millifar frowned at him. "What is it?"

"Surik," he whispered. "See the star? Mark of the Deathbringer. She's dar'jett."
"I am not," the woman snapped. "I am no Jedi."

"Don't be superstitious! Everyone knows the Deathbringer died on Malachor."

"No." Kex shook his head. "Everyone knows she went back to the Jedd, but they cast her out-

"I am standing right here." The woman's voice was hard as beskar itself. "And this is my world. I want you gone. You and your ship." She gestured with her rifle.

Millifar triggered her wrist launcher to active. She smiled. "I don't see your name on this moon."

"There are many names on this moon." The woman's boots scuffed the ground. "One for every Republic dead. Look at the stones. I wrote them all down."

That had to be some kind of trick, so Millifar kept her eyes trained on the figure in front of her, but she was annoyed to see that Kex actually bent his head to check.

Oerin wouldn't have checked. Neither would Mekel Jin. Just because she's a woman he didn't have to listen-she's not Manda!

"We honor our own dead." She stared the woman down.

"Good," the Deathbringer muttered. "Because I will not."

"I don't care."

But she did care, at least as an academic exercise. The woman was an artifact of recent history. Millifar had been a child when Revan's order destroyed the clans, but the science had never been explained sufficiently. Aemelie had told Millifar many bedtime stories about how it could have been done, but no one knew for sure.

"Of course you don't care." The woman's shoulders slumped. "You're Manda. All you care about is your next bloody battle."

"You're dar'Jett," Millifar snapped back. "You don't care about anything!"

It was not her best rebuttal, but the woman seemed to relax, taking a step back and scratching her filthy hair with her free hand. "I was different before."

"I was twelve when you did it. I thought my buir died at Malachor, but it was just one vod who died-and that was Althir."

"Which clan?"

Millifar was wearing Ordo's stamp, which would tell anyone not a barbarian her clan and lineage. Sad, that the Deathbringer didn't know the glorious history of those she had killed.

"Ordo," Kex told the Deathbringer.

"Ordo...." The woman said. "I get them confused. I remember Lin. And Zal. And Seska." She looked down at the marks on her armor, as if she had no idea what they meant.

"Seska's an under clan," Millifar said. "They don't have their own territories. They're beholden to Wies."

"Revan married into Clan Ordo," Kex said. "Your leader? Don't you watch the vids?"
"No," the woman said. "I… I used to, but I stopped." She looked down at her rifle and then back up at them. "I thought you said Revan was never going to come here. But if she's Ordo now and you are too-"

"She left us for the Jedi."

"They took her back?" Another hard laugh. "Of course. They took her back. The golden one. The rest of us-"

"I don't like her either," Millifar interrupted.

Something sparked in the woman's sun-stained eyes. "And why is that?"

"I have my reasons." They were not for a barbarian, especially the Deathbringer. "What are yours?"

The woman gave an incredulous laugh. "They would take a year to list."

"Then forget her." Millifar smiled, to put the barbarian at ease. "Can you tell me about the machine you used to destroy Malachor V? I read that you used a gravity well, but how did you generate enough energy to set off the reaction?"

"We had a… device that tapped into the planet's core." The Deathbringer looked startled by her interest. "The mass shadow generator was powered by a… device that tapped into the planet's core."

"Remotely? How was the energy transmuted?"

"I… I don't…." The woman looked confused now. Definitely off-guard. Or perhaps she truly did not know. A pity. Not that planet-killers were of much practical use. What was the point in utterly vanquishing your opponents? Aemelie had always said that. Their destruction would mean the end of battle.

"Admiral Dagmar Kain." Kex was actually reading the rocks now, picking them up one by one and then setting them down again. "Padawan Sy Six. Lieutenant Fandro Pine."

"Put those back," the Deathbringer warned him.

"Are you flirting, Kex? With her?" Millifar asked in Clan argot. "Shooting would be more effective."

"I came here to flirt with you." The boy didn't even have the temerity to blush, just turned to her and stared.

"Well, that is… good." He had grown a clipped beard in the time they'd been orbiting this moon. It did make him look more mature.

"Where is Revan now?" The Deathbringer interrupted their fragile progress.

"The nets say she's dead, but we know they lie," Kex said, apparently seeing nothing wrong with providing an enemy with correct information.

Surik spat on the ground like a man. "Is she coming here?"

"I don't know." It was the truth. Millifar counted the trajectory points carefully. Beating the Deathbringer in combat would be honorable. Technically, she should let Kex prove himself with this dar'Jett; but the woman annoyed her, mentioning the Third Wife again and again. "Are you
frightened she will?"

"There's nothing more she can do to me." The rifle leveled at Millifar. "Let her come. Send her to me. I'm ready for her."

"You could fight me instead." She should leave this one for Kex, but how could Millifar turn down a challenge? Sometimes, she wished she had been born a man. Of course, some women did choose the warrior's path, but Millifar had always wanted her own tent. There was a time for all seasons, but procreation and battle did not mix—at least, as Mai had always claimed, not at the same time.

The Deathbringer laughed. Her eyes were light-colored, which made her look almost blind. "I could not fight you." Abruptly, she threw her rifle down. "I don't fight children. I don't kill children." Her weapons belt followed, and then the stolen helm. "Just go." Her voice wavered. "Please. You know there is no honor in shooting an unarmed opponent. There is no honor in fighting me. Go!"

Kex nudged Millifar, and she glared at them both. "We're going to tell my father you're here."

"I don't care." The Deathbringer's laugh was rougher than her words, anger held back. "Go. Now."


"Not for you, Kex of Clan Zal." But Millifar followed him back to the ship all the same.

XXX

"Radiation burns. A shattered pelvis. Three ribs, and that one wrist are broken. She's definitely concussed. And my initial scan showed internal bleeding, which seems to have resolved—which isn't possible." Doctor Sahara sighed heavily, adjusting the nutrient feed that ran into Revan Starfire's throat. "You know she belongs in a hospital? Not your spare barn?"

"Of course." Moll Organa shot her husband another glare for not taking care of the poor girl in the first place.

Jasp coughed. "Not many Jedi on Deralia. She'd be noticed."

The woman stiffened, voice turning sharp as a darner. "I wasn't aware there were any Jedi on Deralia. Or that we were calling her a Jedi now."

Doctor Sahara had no right to complain, considering that she owed them for recommending they let the Republic medix treat Pollie after her head injury in the first place. Not for the first time, Molla wished her overbearing father, the first Doctor Sahara, was still in charge of the Adaston practice. Man had been a right bastard; but he did know how to mind his own threshers.

But ever since the stroke, the old Doctor was a drooling veg, stuck on his commune, while his only daughter inherited his thriving medical practice.

"You can't let my mother die," the little son told Doctor Sahara fiercely.

"She should be dead already." Doctor Sahara pointed to each of the red-shaded areas on the holographic image of the woman's body. "The kolto helped, but it doesn't account for this—" she circled the area fading to a dull yellow on the image, where the woman's gut was. "This was all red yesterday—torn spleen, lacerations in the liver and stomach; not to mention damage to the spine itself."
"She's getting better," the child muttered. "She's got to get better."

"Hey… kid," Jasp addressed the boy. "Want to see how we aerate the fields for next year's crops?"

"You use those Riskeen tillers with the deep-cutting blades. I studied 'Colonial Farming and Textile Production' for one of my units last quarter." Korrie was chewing on his lower lip on and off. It looked bruised.

"Hrmm." Jasp had a good pazaak face, but Molla could tell the child rattled him. "Well, have you ever seen a Riskeen tiller?"

"No," the poor kit responded, listless. He was holding a datachip in his hands, turning it over and over. Moll had offered to play it for him twice now, to get him distracted, but he'd only shook his head and told her it was for his mother and something private.

Truth be told, she felt slightly unsettled by Korrie D'Reev.

But he's Revan's boy. She brought him to us to keep him safe. We're the only family they have.

Brave words. Now Molla realized that there was a difference between thinking Revan Starfire was family when your own daughter was safe and home, and having Darth Revan in a coma as her replacement when Pollie was stars knew where.

Moll sighed. "I just wish your mother had thought to visit sooner!" And also not to jump off a moving space cruiser. If Revan Starfire hadn't landed in the middle of their largest retaining pond, water breaking her fall, Moll thought that even the Force wouldn't have saved her.

Doctor Sahara sighed. Her hazel eyes turned towards the poor woman's son. "I still don't understand how this… unfortunate accident occurred."

Jasp cleared his throat. "Neither do we." He exchanged a look with Molla. Seiran had been on that cruiser, by the child's account, along with a mercenary the boy said had been hired to rescue Polla Organa. "We hope it was an accident."

"You hope," the doctor scoffed. "She needs a hospital to check for spinal injuries. Or a Jedi healer. I've seen them work miracles. I can't….

"No Jedi," the boy mumbled. He held onto his mother's hand for dear life. Poor tyke. Molla reached out her hand to ruffle his hair and he jerked away as if she'd threatened him. "You can't call them, okay? Nobody can know we're here." He chewed on his lip again, glaring at them all with those strange, silvery eyes. "If you tell the Jedi we're here, I'll tell everybody Polla Organa and her son and stuff are still alive and how you guys lied before."

Jasp's mouth fell open like he was using it to catch flies. "You're threatening us? We took you in!"

"I don't make threats," the child muttered fiercely. "I make vows."

The news was already talking like there were no more Jedi as it was. Still, the child had fort, sounding off like he was to them.

"We won't tell," Molla comforted. There were tears at the edges of his eyes, and little Korrie seemed as wild as an unbroke colt. Poor little tyke. Not his fault his parents were galactic scourges. "We promise. Doctor Sahara promises too. Doesn't she?"

"I've done what I can," the doctor rubbed her temples. "She belongs in a hospital—or with her own
kind. If she's crippled, or she dies, it's on you."

"That's right," Molla told her. "She's our problem."

Her family had learned all too well before that Republic help always came with a price.

XXX

Pollie could be sleeping in a tank of kolto, if not for the metal dome that covered half of her skull. The medical ward of this Republic warship was bigger than a square field groundside, and Molla Organa felt lost.

The screaming coming from down the hall wasn't helping. Guttural, choked cries-sounding almost as if they came from underwater.

"We've repaired the damage," the healer told her. He was Cerean, and a Jedi, if robes and a lightsaber meant anything, (and Molla assumed that they did.) "Given time, your daughter should be entirely well. She was very lucky. But we-"

Another scream, and then the sound of breaking glass. The Jedi jerked, as if he'd been shot. An alarm went off, claxons sounding, just like on the vids about space wars.

"Who is that?" Molla asked him. "Is Pollie safe?"

"We... have some prisoners of war here. Jedi do not execute their prisoners, they-"

"Master C'Var." A woman stood in the doorway. Dark-haired, braids, quite young. Really more of a girl. "You are needed."

Another ear piercing shriek.

"Excuse me." The Jedi seemed abnormally calm, just like on the vids.

The girl with braids nodded to Molla. "Stay with your daughter as long as you wish."

Molla tried not to be rattled by the noise, as the Cerean rushed off. The girl with braids smiled shyly at her, scrolling her finger down a datapad. But Moll noticed, every time there was another scream, she flinched. "You're... this is Polla Organa?"

"And I'm Molla-Moll. Her mother." Molla told her. "Are you one of the medics?"

"I-yes." The girl nodded, as if distracted, still staring at the datapad. "Your daughter is fine."

"They keep telling me that," Moll snapped. She felt so useless, sitting here with Mita's thisla pie, and Pollie's childhood scrap of blanket. "But she's still unconscious."

"We're bringing her out of the coma tomorrow," the nurse offered.

"Will she be...herself?" Was there a polite way to ask if your daughter was going to have permanent brain damage?

"She... yes." The nurse nodded vigorously. "Your daughter had a skull fracture and concussion, but she's made a full recovery."

Another scream. Another flinch.
Moll tried to make a joke. "Aren't you glad you got me to talk to, and not that lady's mother?"

"Hers is dead." The nurse mumbled the words, staring at the floor as if she was saying them to herself. "Her mother's dead."

Xxx

Sensation returned by degrees. First smell, then sound.

That smell was familiar, almost like the incense they burned on Beggar's Row to promote prosperity when Moms could afford it, which wasn't very often. Probably because burning incense for prosperity didn't fracking work.

This air smelled almost like that but sweeter, somehow. Almost like a hint of vanillin and spice.

"Citizen, you will need to put that out," a mechanical voice chimed. Incendiaries are not permitted in this hospital."

"It's incense," a gruff voice answered. "It will go out when it's done."

"The burning of any substance with-"

Another smell, like burning ozone, and a startled beep, cut out mid-tone. A click and the droid went quiet. Metal clattered to the ground.

"That's better," the voice said gruffly.

The smell continued. They liked it. No. Not they. He liked it. Just him. Mekk, all on his lonesome. The incense smelled better than a hospital. He was getting so sick of hospital smells. Entire fracking Jedi Temple smelled like a medix there at the end.

"Your mother said I should burn this, Mekel," the voice said. "It's supposed to bring health."

Moms cares. Cute. Just not enough to be here.

"I am sorry," the gruff voice said again, after a long silence. "There's a reason we don't have children. I-I saw that with Revan. I... see that again now."

Didn't want me either, Dads? It might have been funny if Mekel wasn't alone.

Cool light washed over his side. Even with his eyes closed, Mekel could see it, feel it in the Force. Cooling the pain, the ache in his side.

"My boy." Vrook's voice cracked. "My dear son."

Telos would have had a good joke, Mekel thought. Master Vrook losing his choobs all over my deathbed? It should be funny.

Fingers tightened on his. Funny, he couldn't tell if they were Vrook's or Dustil's.

"How is he?" Another voice. Another presence in the Force. When he concentrated, Mekel could feel the Force, but it was twisted strangely-like a part of it was stretched. But he knew this voice as well.

"Better, I believe. Thank you for your assistance."

Noise like a chair shifting. Another hand on his other side. More warm light. "I have an obligation to them." A small, tired sigh. "They are the last, you know. The last of my students."

"But Thalia-"

"She disappeared a week ago."

That's rough. Poor Thalia May. Hey, Telos. Thalia bought it before us, you owe Shardaan fifty creds-

Of course, Shardaan had died when Revan cut through Dreshdae, so he wasn't around to collect. Of course, Mekel should feel something else too. Thalia had been their friend. And Lydie Korr's friend. What if she's dead too? How the frack are Jedi still dying?

If Mekel was conscious, he would kick that red-eyed asshole Sith emperor in the choobs before gutting him.

"With so many missing, do you believe Dustil Onasi survived his abduction?"

"I know he did. Mekel Jin will not survive his death. Nor will Dustil survive Mekel's end." Yuthura Ban's voice was tired. "Strength has its price."

"And Darth Malak?"

"You sensed the same energies I did. Is he trapped in the bond with them? If Malak had a living body, their strength would be channeled into its form. Instead, he stands between."

"If the bond was broken?"

Telos? Was it already broken? It felt like a part of Mekel was… stretched. Stretched and frozen, far away. Telos? Answer me!

"It was not made to be broken."

"But if it could be?" Why was Vrook so interested? Did he want to drive them apart? Figured, the one good thing that had happened and his dads wanted to cut off their access to unlimited power.

Dustil?

Nothing. Just more black. Mekel tried to open his eyes.

"Son?" The word was hilariously wrong coming from old Lammikins. "I think he moved."

"Mekel? Can you hear us?" Yuthura always wore perfume that smelled like flowers and musk. She had to be leaning over him pretty close now too-

Mekel's eyes opened and caught a load of her cleavage as the world focused. Kind of weird how their old master could make even padawan robes look hot.

"Yeah." His nose itched, and he sneezed. His voice felt weak as a manka cat. "What… where's Dustil?"

"We were hoping you would know," Yuthura said.

He turned to Vrook, and it was the craziest thing. The old coot was crying, actually crying—as if Mekel Jin being alive was something worth crying about.
"Son," the Jedi murmured, and the next thing Mekel knew he was enfolded in scratchy cortosis fabric, and squeezed by surprisingly strong arms.

Why couldn't Ban be the one giving me hugs? At least then I'd get to have a feel-

But the thought was weak and half-hearted without Dustil's exasperated sigh. And, weirdly, Mekel found himself hugging the old coot back.

Incense smoldered on a meter-high stick beside his bed. On the floor behind them, was a deactivated medical droid. *I think the old man zapped it. Old stick-in-the-mud Vrook Lamar zapped a CoruMed droid... for me?*

It hurt to laugh, but Mekel did it anyway.

XXX

*Was that Revan who had been screaming on that Jedi Republic ship?*

Molla had never put two and two together before. Had Bastila Shan been wearing a lightsaber then or not? Strange, the things you remember and the things you don't.

*If that wasn't her screaming, who else did they have on that ship?*

Polla had *better* still be fine. The story Revan had given them on the comm about the Exchange and Nar Shaddaa was as fishy as a Selkath's behind. She knew Jasp thought so too. She was pretty sure Jasp knew more that he hadn't said.

That meant it was bad. Really bad. But today she welded a cheerful smile on her face. For Jasp's sake. His and the child's sake.

"Hold the line here," Doctor Sahara said to the boy. "I need to attach the new feed."

The boy's hands were small and white and freckled too, just like his ma. His red hair flopped down in untidy curls. So far, he'd resisted Moll's every effort to tame that hair. It was falling in his eyes again now and even as she watched, he pursed his bottom lip up and blew it to the side, away from his eyes. "When is my mother going to wake up?"

"I don't know that she will." The doctor's voice was kind, if a little tactless. "Do you know why she fell? Was she trying to harm herself?"

"No." The boy bit his lip. "It was an accident, of course."

"Of course it was an accident!" Molla soothed.

"It was," the tyke insisted again. "I knew she was going to get mad, but I didn't realize she'd get that mad. I should have stopped her. The message was supposed to stop her, but I didn't have a chance to play it!"
"You can't blame yourself for the actions of others," Doctor Sahara said. "Especially your parents. You are your own person. Always remember that."

"You have a place here with us," Molla added, because what else could she say? "No matter what happens with your ma."

The future stretched in front of her, worst case. When Jasp left to look for Pollie (and she knew he would-soon, sure as salt), it would just be her and Abasen and this uncanny child.

She stitched on her brightest smile. "You know, when my Pollie was your age, she loved to ride her hessi pony. Have you ever ridden?"

"Ridden?" The tyke frowned as if she was speaking Rodese. "Like in a palanquin? A… carriage?"

"Oh, my." The poor, sad dear. "You're going to love meeting Dancer! He was Polla's hessi, back when she was your age...."

XXX

The ship hummed securely, turbines moving smoothly through hyperspace.

Standing in the engine room, the door half-open, Seiran risked a wary glance towards the cockpit. With the door half-open, he could see that the Bitch was still bent over the communications console with a wall of holographic data in front of her, scrolling through code like she was some kind of data-jock on a bender. Maybe she was. The compugoggles made her eyes into blank orbs. Creepy, because she could be staring right at him, and he'd never know-not unless her invisible fingers slipped back around his neck again, threats sliding like poison into his brain, feeding on his fear and desperation-

Just do it. Do it now. If you think about it, she might know.

Could Jedi read minds? Could Sith? Could Revan fracking Starfire? There had been that bad moment back on Chassna, when he'd tried to send a message back to Jasp-only to find her standing right behind him, only to find the terminal in front of him inexplicably smoldering, only to find her invisible claws around his heart again-faint pressure, just a warning.

XXX

"I can't let you betray me." Her voice was flat, but her expression didn't match it. She looked almost like she wanted to cry. "I need you to pilot this ship, and you need me to save your wife. But I can get another ship." One narrow, red eyebrow arched. "You might not find a replacement wife as easily."

XXX

Just do it. She can't kill you. She can't fracking fly this ship without you. She almost sent us into the damn sun back when we were looping Deralian orbit-

Seiran took an even, steady breath and looked across the ship again. In the silver rectangle of the open door, he could see her face in shadow behind lines of data, red hair in that blasted topknot he'd had to help her tie, the glint of her golden artificial arm.

He had to do it soon, or they'd be out of range of any fuel depots on the Outer Rim. As it was, he hoped to Grass he'd gotten the numbers right. Running jump-points in his head-that was Polla's game, not his. And fuel capacity was dependent on solar winds, galactic drift, fracking ionization-
what if he had gotten that wrong too?

There wasn't much room for error. He had to do it now.

Saying one last prayer to anyone who was fricking listening, Seiran slipped inside the engine room. Once there, he breathed a sigh of relief, trying to think calm thoughts. *She can maybe read my mind, she can probably sense my fear. Fracking Jedi do that. Fracking Jedi can read minds and fly and do fricking anything-*

Except, he hoped, notice a pinhole fuel leak in the main reactor line.

Seiran took a deep breath and unsnapped the hatch. Picked up the hydrospanner. And set the laser to burn against the pipe that led into the primary fuel converter.

XXX

Revan leaned back in the pilot's chair, blinking her tired eyes at the comm feed scrolling in front of her.

The comm records were quite clear, now that she had restored the files the Fragment had inefficiently attempted to delete. The Fragment had made two calls before they even left Coruscanti air space: one to a remote waystation in an unnamed system (near Rekkiad and Mandalore, but that could be coincidence); and another to a familiar coordinate on Kashyyyk.

*What were you trying to do with the Rakatan computer, Fragment?*

Whatever it was, the woman had rather carelessly left her own security sequences embedded in the message. The ones Revan had set years ago no longer worked: but these did. Instead of receiving the now-familiar drone of a rejected code, this time the comm connected.

*Someone or something has to be at the other end of the line. Someone she spoke to. The computer? That Mission Vao personality she implanted? Tenebrae's agents? Oerin Lin? Canderous Ordo?*

"Hello?" a voice said. The visual was still blocked, but the lights rang green, verifying the secure connection. The voice was female. Speaking Galactic Basic. "Who is this?"

Perhaps the Fragment had some code, some clever response. Revan had none. "This is Revan Starfire. I require access to your computer's mainframe. Immediately."

"Oh!" The voice sounded startled. "Hold on! I'll... I'll tell him."

*Him?" No," she muttered. If Tenebrae has Kashyyyk things are even worse than I thought.*

XXX

"Nico." Lena stood in the doorway.

Her husband was so engrossed in the screen in front of him that he didn't look up. "Are you ready, Mission?"

The console beeped. "I think so. I'm a little nervous!"

"Nico?" she said again.

"In a moment, Lena. I have to disconnect her virtual cortex from the Kashyyyk installation now."
His voice was distracted, and he didn't even turn around. "Say good-bye to Lena for now, Mission!"

"See you soon, sis!" the console chirped.

Nico flipped a switch and all the lights on the display in front of him died out with a whine.

"See you, Mission-" Lena raised her hand to wave, and then lowered it again, feeling more silly than ever.

"She can't hear you." Still, Nico didn't even turn around to look at her. Before him was a wall of ferraglass, and beyond that, an operating theater with the two Twi'lek near-corpses within. Medical droids hovered over the bodies, presumably following his-or Mission's-commands. "Implanting new memories in a clean cerebellum is delicate work! We can't allow any contamination!"

"Nico," she said again. "The comm rang. It's... Revan."

"Oh, her." He gave an irritated half-wave of his hand. "We don't need her! I'm still a fan, of course; but the original directive is redundant... now. We don't need to repair the original Sith Vitiature matrix--not when you and I can replace it." Now, he finally did turn around, and gave her that goofy smile she used to find so, so charming. "I'd love an autoprint through. Would you ask for me?"

"Replace...?" Lena smiled at him, resting her hands on her belly, and fluttering her lashes. "I don't know what you mean."

"This emperor's errant programming. An organic system went bad. It happens. The Starfire routine was needed for repairs. That's why my computer searched for her, made her in the first place! But now..." Nico smiled. "Now, we can reboot and use the existing units to replicate properly! Do you see?"

"No." Nico often didn't make sense. Lena had grown used to that. "You mean... more computers? More installations? On more worlds?"

"Installations." He chuckled. "Portable, organic ones. Hundreds... err, billions of them. Thousands? At least! And we get to rule them all! How does that sound?"

"I don't understand." She was afraid that she did. "What... what kind of computers are those?"

"Sentient ones!" He beamed. "The beauty is, they already exist. The emperor matrix seeded itself prodigiously! True, it took it some time to create the right evolutionary counterweight; but what a counter she was! Magnificent!"

"She?"

"Revan, of course." He gestured for Lena to come closer and she did with a chill. *He's not gonna hurt you, Lena Wee. He might be a monster, but he's your monster. "Dark, light. Opened, closed. One, two. It's all binary." He actually winked. "Male. Female. His virus. And then hers. We've got vectors of his, mostly here in Sith space... and then hers, with the antidote right here!" He gestured towards the room, drawing a circle with his hand. "Around... here. I mean."

"Around... here," she echoed. "T'chwrr-"

"Just say Nico." He reached over and his hand caressed her belly, then gave it a sharp pat. "Questions? I'm sure you have many. We have nothing but time, love. I mean, once I transfer your
consciousness to the female-gendered node of my binary replicant, we'll have nothing but time."

"Uh huh." Lena nodded. She'd known, of course. Of course, this was all too good to be true. Of course, her ancient and probably immortal husband's plans for their future would involve brain transplants.

Of course! So stupid!

Your first clue, Lena Wee, should have come when he talked about taking over the galaxy. Do you think normal guys want that? Normal guys are like freaking Griff. They might be assholes; but when the chips are down, you can count on them to not have some insane thirty-thousand-year-old scheme. Normal guys you can kick groundside, but this guy....

"Revan," she repeated. "She's on the comm now. What... uh, what do you want me to say?"

"Tell her to call back," her husband said absently. "Imagine! Billions of worlds, worlds filled with you, and worlds filled with me!" He frowned. "Or at least... millions? Dozens? I lose track of how many infinite really is. It doesn't matter, after a point! How does that sound to you?"

"Lonely," Lena Wee remembered the blaster she'd hidden in her suitcase before she came back here, the white walls inside the box she'd found on Tatooine. The swoopboy's screams when she'd won what hadn't even been a fair test, and left him there again. Poor Nico. Poor, real, dumb Nico Senvi. "It sounds... lonely, Nico."

He bent over the console. The surgeon droids cut through t'chin and t'chin, following his command. "What was that? Lovely? It sounds lovely to me too! Can you tell Revan to call back after I finish this operation? She may be a redundancy, but I do owe her my renewed existence!" He paused. "We'll keep her, I think. She's a fantastic conversationalist. I've read all of the logs. You should read them too." He snapped his fingers. "We can read them again together!"

"Sure." Lena nodded slowly. "I'll... I'll let her know."

Xxx

Time passed and Revan stared at the blank comm. The display had switched on, showing the corner of a room. Bland, prefab walls, a chair. It could have been anywhere at all. Enough time passed that her mind concocted theories: that Tenebrae controlled the Rakatan machines. That he'd found the other Forges. That everything she'd sacrificed had always been too little. Too late.

"It's not over," she muttered. To herself. To the Force. "I have a second chance. He's still insane. He can still be tricked."

"Are you okay?" The pilot had come up behind her. "Is everything alright?"

She glanced up. He had a smear of engine oil on his cheek. "I have matters under control."

"Who are you calling?" His voice was neutral, but she caught the undercurrent of his fear, a rancid tang in the Force itself.

"My computer," she told him. "We need its assistance, but there seems to be a problem-"

"I'm back." A pink Twi'lek regarded Revan warily, eyes flickering as if she saw Seiran too. She appeared real. And quite obviously pregnant.

"I'm sorry," she added crisply. "I did ask my mate to speak with you, but he's very busy."
"I don't need to speak with your mate, I need the computer." Revan bit back a sigh of impatience. Standing behind her, Seiran flinched again. His fear bothered her, like a healing scab. "This channel belongs to the computer installation on Kashyyyk. I don't know how you hacked into it, but-

"The computer is Mission Vao." The Twi'lek folded her arms. Her lekku wrapped around her neck. "You don't have to pretend. I know. I know what you did to her." She paused. "Well, you can't hurt her anymore." She wiped her eyes. "She's going to be safe now. Safe from you and him."

"Most of the galaxy is aware of my actions." Revan tried to be patient. "Please connect me to the mainframe. I am attempting to fulfill the directive it requested of me, but I need its assistance."

"He said he didn't need you anymore."

"He?" The woman's voice sharpened. "He who? Do you mean Tenebr-"

"Who? Never mind. It doesn't matter." The woman shook her head and cut the comm.

"Blast!" Revan hit its surface; but carefully, so as not to damage anything.

"What was that about?" The pilot's voice held a deceptively casual tone.

"That was about a potential ally. Or enemy. Both." No harm in telling him. Either the man would die with her secret, or it would become irrelevant, upon her success. "The Rakatan computer required someone like me. I… resisted when I discovered its real design. I tried to find a way out. Nothing worked. Now, I… I plan to give it what it wants. Or, at least, the semblance." Her mouth twisted. "Should I succeed, I should have enough strength to save you and your wife."

"So you needed some computer and it refused to help?"

"Yes."

"Did you try rebooting it?" His tone was so dry, Revan couldn't tell if he was ignorant, or making a bad joke.

"Remotely-yes," she snapped. "Several times."

"Then I don't know what to tell you. Except… that if we don't refuel this ship, we won't make it to your Sith planet."

"I checked the fuel levels twice!" She could feel his fear in the Force. Was there a lie there too? "We're burning twice what we should. Your short-term fix from Chassna didn't fix the problem." Seiran Wen shrugged. "You know I want to get to your blasted Dromund Kaas as much as you do, but we're not gonna make it."

"Where?" she snapped. "Where can we refuel?"

"Peragus," he said, pointing to the asteroid belt on the projected star chart. "Peragus Mining Station. It's remote, cheap, and only two jumps away."

Xxx

Three days later, Jasp Organa dusted off his old ship and left to check in on an old contact who
might know something about Polla's business. Molla wasn't surprised to see him go at all.

"Be careful," she told him.

Like father like daughter. Advice that neither of them had ever been able to keep.

"Always." He grinned at her, looking for a moment like the handsome scoundrel she'd fallen for. "You're the one needs be careful, Molla. You're the one keeping a Jedi in our barn."

"She's family," Molla repeated stubbornly, even if the fact rang false. "They have nowhere else to go. And she can't be moved. You heard the doctor."

"The boy could be moved. We don't need to borrow trouble."

"The boy is hers. She trusted us."

Such a sad child. Korrie seemed strangely old and young at the same time. And helpless. The boy hadn't even known how to buckle his own shoes!

Molla worried about the mother, but the boy could break her heart, if she let him. She had never seen a child before so wary, so afraid of dirt. Abasen seemed to like him, but she wasn't sure if her grandson had enough brains yet to be a good judge of character. He was only just starting to crawl.

"You be careful," Jasp told her seriously. "If she wakes up... you need to remember, she's not our Pollie. She has powers. I saw her fly."

"Polla loved to fly." Although their daughter used a ship or a swoop. "I'll use caution, sweet, don't worry."

"Be careful," he repeated. "Promise."

"Careful as crops," she promised. "You think I can't handle my grandson, a comatose Jedi and a little boy?"

"I bet the boy has that Force too," her husband muttered. "Keep him out of the trees."

"I'll be careful," Moll agreed. "You do the same."

"I'll do my best," he muttered, and walked up the ramp. She stood in the field for a long time, watching the tracer tail of his ship fade into the flat, reddening sky.

Xxx

Revan wondered if the man had led her into this trap on purpose. Ahead of them, the unstable asteroid field surrounding the Outer Rim mining facility shifted again. Piloting in this rocky soup was well beyond her capabilities—even in a ship that wasn't already limping like a stuck ronto.

"Surely there are simpler waystations to reach, Seiran Wen."

"I told you," the Deralian said. "Not on this route. We've been burning too much since you sabotaged the coil. Peragus Station's the best shot we have. They don't ask questions, once they see the color of your credits."

"There is no time!" Revan had been over the maps again and again. Based on what the smuggler had said about her own ship's location, Polla Organa and the crew of the *Ebon Hawk* were days ahead to Kaas. At least.
Her ability to fool the Dark Council will end the moment they remove that collar—if she even lasts this long.

Why did it matter? That was a question with too simple an answer. Because Sheris has infected me with this sentiment, or the Fragment has. Because I was a Jedi. Because she is an innocent. Because I held her son in my own arms and left mine with her family.

I am not above being a sentimental fool and believing in hope, even when it makes no difference.

"I want to live through this," Seiran Wen muttered. "But I swear by the stars if you don't listen to me, I'll take my chances in an escape pod and leave you to rot. We don't have enough fuel to reach your blasted Sith planet! Either we refuel… or we fracking die out here."

"So you said before." Revan gestured towards the rapidly approaching asteroid, hangar bays incised in its surface, larger freighters clamped like mynocks to its sides. "How quickly can it be done?"

"A few hours." He was looking at her strangely. "You've flown ships before, you know how it goes."

"Not commercially." The Fragment would know if he was stalling for time or not. Revan had no idea. "I will stay on the ship." Too close to be recognized now. "You will address the refueling requirements."

"Yes, Darth Revan." The Deralian rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say."

"Betray me and you'll never see Polla again." She would not comment on his absurd attempt to goad her.

Xxx

"Hello, dear." Molla had peered cautiously at the screen, still blinking back the sleep from her eyes.

"Your daughter needs transport from Nar Shaddaa," the red-headed woman had said. Revan Starfire's face was blurry, but unmistakable—even in the wee hours before dawn when Jasp had woken Moll and dropped a kilo of thermocrete in their laps. "Seiran requested my help, and so he and I will take my ship to collect her. We will leave your grandson and my son with you. We should return in a few weeks for them. Malachor is an excellent child, and he will be easy to care for." She frowned. "He prefers to be called Korrie."

In the distortion of the comm's feed, she did look a little like Pollie.

"Something's rotten," Jasp muttered under his breath.

"How sweet!" Moll elbowed her husband to get him to shut up. "But isn't it… a little awkward, what with the galaxy thinking you and Pollie are both dead?" At that exact time she'd been a little proud that the former scourge of the galaxy was taking lines from her own daughter's playbook.

"No. It will be fine," the woman replied, rather woodenly. "But I will need to leave my son with you for a time."

"How much time, dear?" Best to get this sort of thing quantified.
"A few weeks." The woman shrugged. "You did say we should visit. In your card, congratulating me on my wedding."

"Will your husbands be joining us?" When she'd issued the invitation, her daughter had still been safe at home, not pretending to be dead, not pretending to be Revan, and not missing.

"No, they... have business elsewhere."

"Pollie is all right?"

Mother's intuition. As a girl, Molla had thought the concept overdone, and her own mother had made it up, but now her nerves jangled like fire. Something about this was queer. More than what you'd expect, even, when the woman with your daughter's memories called and asked for a visit when the galaxy assumed that she and your daughter were both dead.

"Yes," the woman nodded. "Your daughter's going to be just fine."

"Bless your heart," Molla Organa murmured. Because, what else was there to say? "We can't wait to see you!"

In hindsight, Molla thought that Revan Starfire on that comm had sounded a lot like Bastila Shan in that way Jedi had. Lying and saying everything was fine when it wasn't.

And Jasp wouldn't meet her eyes after she had said yes. Jasp hadn't wanted her to say yes. Molla knew, sure as salt, that there was a lot here going on that Jasp still hadn't told her.

XXX

"I'm Korrie," he told the others. Aunt Moll had said their names, but Korrie had forgot. All these Deralians had nicknames and used surnames, and had the same names, so it was pretty confusing. The girl with the double top knot who was probably about eight standard was even named Polla. Polla Thiswait.

"You talk funny," said the boy with the gray tooth. His skin was deep brown, like Jess Almont's, and he was Korrie's size. "My ma says you're a ref."

"From Nar Shaddaa," he lied, just like Moll told.

"He talks like the vids," Polla Thiswait said to the lighter-haired girl next to her.

Korrie smiled at them. A Senator's heir was always supposed to be polite, even to rebellious Outlier colonists like these. "Moll said you could teach me to ride one of the hessi."

The beasts were all grouped up in a pen together. Some of them had tongues hanging out, almost to the ground. They had a lot more legs than dewbacks or bantha. They looked like monsters, in fact; but he would not show fear.

Mother had told him to be brave. No matter what.

"Which one is Dancer?" he asked.

Xxx

"Have you heard anything from the ship?" the child demanded. At least he had some color in his cheeks now, from being outside all day with the others. But his freckles clashed strangely with the
dyed black of his hair. Molla should have used a lighter mix. "You said you would let me know if… if anyone commed you from there."

"Told you I'd say, and I haven't," Moll told him. "Don't worry, Korrie. You're in safe hands here."

"I can monitor her condition for the next five hours," the doctor interrupted. "If you both want to catch some sleep, do it now."

"You guys don't have to watch her all the time," Korrie muttered. "I'll know if she wakes up."

"We… do." Doctor Sahara said, glancing at Molla. "We have to watch her because we wouldn't want your mother to wake up and have another… accident, would we?"

"It wasn't like that!" The boy shook his head. "She wasn't… she was just mad. She said that she'd be mad and I had to make her see, but I didn't have any time! When she wakes up, I'll explain. When she wakes up she'll be fine!"

"We need to watch her to make sure she's not mad again."

Molla patted his back and this time he didn't pull away. Although, she had to wonder, if the woman woke up with the full force of the Force and was mad, what could they do? Hadn't Bendowen's girl used to make crops wilt with her eyes or some such, before the Jedi took her away?

Aunt Mita always used to say that worry didn't pay arrears, and that at the end of the day if nothing else worked, most problems were solved with a good rifle and a few cakes of permacrete.

By all the stars, Molla hoped it would not come to that, although her eyes went to the corner near the barn door, where those exact provisions were carefully stacked.

Just in case.

"Of course she'll be fine, Korrie. Look at how much better she is already!" Before he could stop her, Molla gave him a hug.

XXX

Suvam Tan regarded the Human Elder warily. The man was wrinkled and pale, closer to the end of his life's trials than the beginning. Entirely unsuited to be a Voice, even as a lesser vessel.

Also, he was certifiably insane, because he kept asking after his dead daughter.

"Polla Organa is dead," he repeated to the man for what seemed the hundredth time. "Revan Starfire had her killed."

The Human blinked at him. "No," he repeated. "My daughter was here. Recently. I need to know where she went."

"I can see how you get them confused," Suvam nodded. "Many Humans look alike, and they are both big-eyed, for your species. But Revan recently gave birth, and that changed her coloration. Also, she had Polla Organa killed."

"You're insane." The Elder Human snorted, waving his useless blaster about. The Mouth had already disabled the weapon's inner workings with the Force, of that Suvam was sure. "Show me the station logs. You say Revan was just here? Then where is she now?"

"Revan went to Dromund Kaas." It was lonely without her and her loyal companions. Suvam had
enjoyed their talks as she fumbled through his vast lightsaber collection, selecting only the hilts with the most jeweled and ornate decorations, occasionally asking him specific questions about various gemstones, and the value of the crystals within.

Perhaps as a Jedi, she had never had to know such petty things as commerce, but now, as she prepared to join the Master's side-

"Drumming Case," the man repeated, saying the planet's name almost exactly as Revan herself did. "And where is that, exactly?"

"A Sith planet. I think you would prefer not knowing."

The proximity alarms rang. Peculiar. Two visitors in one day? "Excuse me," he added, trying to be polite to this gray Human. "It seems that we have additional guests."

Suvam was still pulling up the new ship's registry when it the sound of landing bolts clamping echoed through the station. *Something big. No small airlock would make so much noise.* The station rattled softly.

He was so often left out of the loop. Tenebrae had his own designs.


Suvam couldn't sense anything, but he could look out at the view.

The hulk of a capital ship eclipsed the red giant behind them. Its sides were scored and torn, a vast Centurion-class battlecruiser.

The old man squinted at it. "Who the hell is that?"

"Maybe it's Revan," Suvam assured him. Who else would come to call in a warship in this time of peace? "You can take up the case of your missing daughter with her."

The Aurebesh letters of the ship's hull were clear: *Ravager.*

Xxx

*Hurry.* His fingers fumbled on the comm number and for a terrible second, Seiran thought he'd forgotten it completely.

But the line beeped green and the image of Molla Organa emerged, holding Abasen. Breath rushed out of his lungs in relief, just to see his son safe.

"Ma!" He whispered, not daring to glance back towards the door, or the booth-taker. "I-I don't have much time."

"Seiran!" Pollie's mother glared at him. "Where the hell is my daughter?"

"Safe." He could hardly believe the story the Bitch had told him, but she'd showed a recording of his wife's face, looking whole and hearty and dressed like a blasted fraking Sith. "Pollie's safe. I know where she is." Or the Bitch claims to know where she will be. "I'll bring her back to you. We're on our way there now."

"Thank the stars," the woman muttered. "Did you talk to her? What's she doing? Jasp had some cockabandoo story about her dressing up like Darth Revan and getting captured by
"Sith."

"That’s… true. But she's fine now." One of the few lessons his own drunk Da had taught Seiran was to have a healthy belief in the power of positive thinking.

"She got free?" Her ma wanted to think that, Seiran could see it in her expression, hear it in her voice.

"She's okay. She's with… Carth Onasi. And the Wookiee. From the Star Forge? They're helping her."

Unless the Bitch made that part up to make me believe it. But it sounds so insane, it has to be true.

"Zaalbar?" Of course, Pollie's ma knew the Wookiee's name. "And Captain Carth Onasi?"

"And we're going to them. We're going to get her out of this. Revan promised me."

"Revan's not in any shape to go anywhere. She's been in a coma for weeks, ever since she fell off that ship…." Molla squinted at him. "Are you really on that ship? What really happened?"

"A… coma. She's not dead?" His conscience was still bugging him. "She tried to stop us, is what happened. Is she going to be all right?"

"By rights, she should be dead. But she's not. I don't know. Who's 'we'? Who are you with now?"

"The other Revan. There's two of them. I don't know why. The one you have is the one with Pollie's memories. This other one… she's the real thing."

"Two? How can there be two?" Molla scoffed. "You mean those rumors on the vids are true? She has a double, or identical twin or whatever?"

"They're different. The one I'm with, she knows things. She-" His throat closed off abruptly, and Seiran's hands went to it, involuntarily clawing to remove the invisible obstruction. Coldness washed down his spine. Spots danced in front of his eyes.

"I told you to hurry," the Bitch's voice murmured from behind. He hadn't heard the door open, hadn't seen her approach. "I trusted you."

"Seiran?" Molla's voice was sharp, panicked. "What's going on? Who's there? Are you okay?"

He tried to turn his head away, tried to gasp for air. She loomed above him, a white cowl covering most of her face, except for those ice-green eyes.

"Molla Organa," the Bitch said, pushing Seiran half off his chair with a twist of her hand. An invisible weight pressed down on his back, forcing him to the floor. "How is my son? Did my associate survive her fall?"

Air rushed back into Seiran's lungs like life, and he found himself lying flat on the duracrete, gasping for breath.

"The boy's fine. Revan's in a coma. Who the blazes are you?" Pollie's ma demanded.

"As Seiran so eloquently explained, I am Revan. The 'real thing.'" Her foot brushed his ribs, and Seiran scrambled back, into the wall of the booth. "I have spoken with your daughter, and I intend
to rescue her. If at all possible."

"What did you just do to my son-in-law?"

"Nothing permanent. Is Malachor adjusting to his new accommodation? Did he tell you to change his hair? I would like him to continue his studies—they may be your guests for some time."

Molla muttered a curse under her breath. "You're not my Pollie."

"No. But the other one possesses many of her characteristics. Would you mind detailing to me the extent of her injuries? Are the medical authorities on your planet aware of them? Of her? It would be best if her presence remained secret, but if her life is in danger—"

"I would mind. Very much! My husband went after you—after Pollie—last week. But you're signature says Peragus, not Yavin—"

"Jasp Organa went to Yavin?" The woman frowned. "It could be dangerous for him there. It will be dangerous for Polla Organa, if he informs anyone at that station of her deception."

"I trust my husband a long sight farther than I trust you!"

"If it wasn't for my sacrifice, your entire planet would be speaking Ancient Sith, probably in unison."

"You think we wanted any part of your damned war?"

"Molla-Ma, don't! Don't piss her off." Somehow Seiran was standing again, next to the Bitch, heart pounding in his throat.

"She needs to remember who has her son." Polla's mother was sweet as thisla pie… unless she had her darner up. Then, Seiran thought, she could probably give the Bitch a run for her money.

But to his surprise, the Bitch only laughed. "Ser Organa, your daughter possesses your own courage. She has already exceeded all estimations I had of her survival. In a few days’ time, I hope to return her to you with this vehicle ship. Unharmed."

Is that a lie? He couldn't tell. She radiated sincerity.

"Pollie's too brave for her own damn good." Molla muttered.

Beside him, the Bitch nodded. "You raised her well. I—I trust you with my son. And my… other self."

"Jasp said it looked like she wanted to kill you."

"We both react poorly to betrayal. She thought we would rescue your daughter together. I left her with you to keep her safe. Her and Malachor both."

"Keep her safe? What about my son-in-law? What about Pollie?"

"Both of them are in considerably less danger without her."

"That makes no sense."

"I don't have time to explain it to you." She turned towards Seiran. "What measures did you take to
"secure this line?"

"None," he said flatly.

"Assidkay muurr," she muttered, and cut the transmission.

"What the blazes-" Molla's face fizzled out in mid-sentence.

"Come with me," the Bitch commanded Seiran. "Now." Her hand moved slightly and then all the muscles in his jaw locked closed. She raised a finger to her own lips, mouth set in a line.

"Mmmmph!" He tried to shake his head, and then his neck froze too, twisted at an angle where he could only see the floor.

"I'll leave you here," she murmured softly. "I'll leave you here now if you don't follow my instructions. Blink once for yes, two for no." She peered at him, angling her own face close enough he could feel her breath on his face. "Is the ship refueled?"

It had been the first thing he'd done, after repairing his own sabotage. Seiran blinked once.

"Then we depart." She straightened and his own body did too, stretching his back with a way that made his muscles ache in protest. "Follow me. Now."

Xxx

The docking clamps aligned, the Force sealing them and locking their ship to the small station orbiting another demon moon.

Even from here, Davad could feel Yavin's dark energy-and even from orbit he knew that its strength was intangible as clouds. No sustenance there. No, what awaited him lay on the station itself: here, the Emperor's dark heart: sweet morsel, the taste of more to come.

*Because of you, Lord Revan.*

His gratitude was primal: loyalty that went beyond sense. The part of him still a man (a rapidly decreasing fraction of a self, lessened with every life he took) despised the eager kath he was becoming, trailing after his master in search of a treat.

And yet, the hunger. He'd exhausted most shadows, the Jedi who hid poorly, and the Emperor's lesser creatures. All of them, blending inside of him into a boundless array of need. The ones left were stronger, but clever. They hid themselves, they stayed in places so populous that he and Oerin could not reach.

Gone were the days that either of them could pass as men. Had that been Traya's influence? Their shadows were lifted now, no hiding what they were, what they could become.

"There's a step up, to the right. You don't want to trip-" Lin had become annoyingly officious since the last time Davad had accidentally put his Force-shadowed hand through their ship's hull.

*I Know,* he voiced. **Food. Ahead.** It was still a point of frustration and rage that his more complex reasoning had been reduced to this.

"Yes. Powerful, too. We must remember to thank Revan for this. Do you think we should send a holocard? You could sign it with a black hole in the middle of the plimsi."
The doors slid open, revealing a cluttered room. A robed figure in the middle, outlined in glorious, succulent red.

Meat. Davad roared, and swept forward. In the joy of the hunt, he forgot his man's form, felt his feet leave the surface of the station, all of him becoming gullet and endless need.

The robed one turned to face him, and there was a moment of delicious shock before its primal essence engorged him, like the taste of sweet blood on his lips. Power there. So much. Like the beginning of a tap to the One that the robed one served.

He was so lost in the sensation of satiation that it took Davad some time to notice Oerin Lin was speaking to the small Rodian man standing next to an old Human.


"Patience." His dead friend raised one hand. "You're fine for now, Nihilus. Why don't you look through the inventory of our friend's shop? I'm sure he won't mind. Will you, Suvam?"

Food? Could there be more Force sensitives hidden within?

"No," Lin sighed. "Not food. You were kind to give my father's mask back to Clan, but I think you might need a new one now. You're a sight to scare armies. And that's not always a good thing."

Someone had warned him about wearing a mask once. About the creature he would become. That small girl, the one with the extraordinary eyes. Davad wished she was here now too.

She would have been delicious.


"Go ahead then," Oerin waved him along. His rotting mouth sagged. "Fetch. Good boy."

Xxx

Something that looked like a demon from the blackest pits of hell had just… eaten the Sith statue. Suvam Tan was cowering next to him. And Jasp Organa felt frozen like a Seventh-Day turkatt, helpless to stop the dead man above him from bringing broken, rotting hands down against Jasp's face.

"Who are you?" The dead man broke off his undecipherable conversation with the shadow-thing to look down at Jasp with one staring, bloated eye. The other dangled half-outside its socket, white and blind on a strip of dried flesh.

"Jasp Organa." He answered before conscious thought overcame him. Despite the man's looks, a part of Jasp… wanted to answer him. Answer any questions he had.

"Organa?" The dead man chuckled. "Did she send you as a messenger?"

"Who?" He tried to put some thermo into the question, but his voice shook in a way that made Jasp feel very old. "Who sent me?"

"Revan, of course." The dead man shrugged. "Wasn't Organa her alternate name? The one the Jedi cooked up? Of course, you're no Jedi. If you were, our friend over there would have devoured you like a good nerf steak." He sighed. "I miss the taste of things. I'd sell my own mother for a good
nerf steak right now. That is, if I hadn't destroyed all that she was and left her to suffer and die of exposure on the side of that volcano."

The black shadow thing turned towards them. Where its face should have been was only darkness, spiraling inward. It… screamed again. Wordless, voiceless, and Jasp tried hard not to piss himself.

"Yes, Davad. I do know she's still alive!" The dead man turned his head towards the shadow. "When we go to Onderon for your relatives, you may decide which ones live and which ones die."

The Rodian made a noise under his breath, black eyes darting towards Jasp. Was he trying to send some kind of message?

"Sometimes the Sith have the right idea," Jasp offered, to the dead man. "I… have no problem with you. Either of you, I just…." You just want to find your daughter. The voice in his skull wasn't broken, but the way the dead man's one eye focused on him made it clear who was speaking. A chill swept through Jasp as all that he was laid bare: the Sith paging through his memories like torn plimsi.

"Fascinating." The dead voice said, after a time.

The Rodian took a step away from them, and then another. Hesitant, as if he wasn't sure what was allowed.

A red beam swept across the room, through Suvam Tan, before returning to the dead man's hand, light extinguished again, just a plain metal hilt. It happened so quickly, that Jasp was still staring at the pieces of the former crime lord while the dead man laughed softly.

"A message," he said. "Tenebrae's servants we kill. You are hers… and so... you may live."

The shadow turned and opened its mouth again. There was another exchange between the two. This time, Jasp squeezed his eyes shut.

"No." The dead man said, in Standard. "Isn't it the other we need? She knows the locations of Sith worlds. And I doubt she's in a coma. Leave Rev on Deralia. If she doesn't wake up in a month… maybe then you may eat her. Maybe. But you'll only regret it. You know you'll regret it."

"Stay away from Deralia!" Jasp warned them both. "Is my Pollie mixed up with you two? How the hell did she get mixed up with you two?"

The dead man laughed. "A tale for the ages, no doubt."

The shadow seemed to be holding something white and red in his hands. He raised it to his face, covering the black hole of his features with a white mask, like a skull.

"That's nice," the dead man called out to him, approving. "I don't suppose there's another? We could match."

The mask shook its head.

"Stay away from my family!" Jasp warned them again.

"Revan told you she successfully impersonated her to the Emperor? I see the tale in your mind, but I doubt it would be possible. Tenebrae is too powerful to be so stupid."

The shadow roared again.

The dead man paced back and forth, slowly, on legs that seemed to bend wrong, one dragging slightly at a broken angle. "What of the other Revan? I only saw one in your mind."

"Other Revan?" Isn't one enough?

"That's why she jumped. Why she tried to stop that ship. The other betrayed her." The dead man sighed. "The other Revan took the ship…and I assume we know where she is going." He turned towards the shadow. "We need coordinates to the Sith homeworld. You've been there, Arkan. I don't supposed you remember the way…?"

The shadow barked.

"Of course." The dead man sighed, shrugging. "He said, 'food.' Would you like to come with us? Davad used to be very entertaining, but now his conversation is so limited. We could play chess. I used to play with him, but now he gnaws on the pieces. Do you know how to play chess? I'm an excellent teacher."

"I want to get back to my family," Jasp muttered. "I want my daughter."

"We may come across her. Or her body. I was only asking to be polite. Mother always insisted on manners, even when she was twisting someone's mind inside out." The dead man smiled. "You want to come with us. And you want to scour the banks of this station for maps of the Sith homeworld. I hope you're good with computers. And how are you at flying Centurion-class battlecruisers? With Davad the way he is, we have such a hard time keeping staff."

"I want to come with you." The words came out of his mouth before Jasp could stop them. "I want to find the location of the Sith homeworld. I want to fly a Centurion-class battlecruiser."

"Excellent." The dead man's better eye seemed to twinkle. "Good man."

Xxx

Korrie came back with his face flushed, dark curls falling out of his topknot. His boots were muddy, and there was a rip in the fabric on one of his knees.

"Do you have a good time, dear?" Something in Mill's chest melted a little, looking at him. Just like Pollie at that age. Almost a tweener.

"Batsi Organa said that I sounded like a dumbs from the vids," he said, frowning a little. "What does that mean?"

"Means he's not the sharpest tool in the shed." She handed him a slice of thisla pie. "What did you do?"

"I explained how export tariffs can cripple a planet Deralia's size, and that he should mind his own business." The tyke frowned. "I don't think he understood the implied threat."

What kind of child are you? She leaned over and gave his arm a squeeze. "Next time," she instructed. "You punch that slob in the face. Not too hard! But hard enough to show him you mean business."

"Violence isn't always the answer," he told her.
On Moll’s lap, her grandson Abasen gave the boy a huge, gummy smile. "Mah-MAH!" he squealed. Poor kit, it seemed to be his word for everyone.

"True," she said. "But sometimes it helps." She hoped Seiran remembered that. Hoped he got that other Revan to lead him to Polla and then plugged her with five in the back.

"Phbbt." Abasen added.

"Would you like me to take him for a walk around the garden?" the tyke asked, formal as any politician. Sometimes Molla thought they’d have to beat that out of him.

"I'll do it." Trust began someplace, and the walk might take her mind off worry. *Seiran and that woman said my Pollie's alive. Said she'd be home soon. It has to be true.* She gestured to the chair next to his mother's bed. "Doctor Sahara won't be here for another four hours. Do you want to sit with your ma awhile alone?"

On the bed, Revan Starfire lay flat, but all the displays above had shaded past yellow, almost to white. Miracle of miracles, she seemed to be getting better.

"Yes!" All the formality faded from Korrie's face and Moll caught a glimpse of the boy behind the mask: a real child there—just as sweet and smart and terrible as her Pollie. As her grandson. As the future. "Thanks, Aunt Moll!" His arms locked around her, and instead of doing something funny and foreign like bowing, he kissed her cheek. "I think she hears me when I talk to her. Don't you?"

"Maybe." She kissed him back.

XXX

The *Ebon Hawk* emerged from hyperspace above a small, dark, cloud-covered planet.

The red-eyed Zabrak sitting next to Polla smiled. "Would you like to enter the entry codes yourself, Lord Revan?"

Proximity alarms chimed, as a flotilla of fighters surrounded their ship. They had nasty, spidery-looking hulls, gleaming like beetles against the planet's atmosphere below, swarming in such trained unison that Polla was pretty fracking sure they could annihilate the *Hawk* in about three milliseconds if that was their game.

"Knock yourself out," she yawned. *And I mean that literally, Tenny-bro.* "You do it, my Lord Emperor. Then stand back, while I land us someplace in that muck."

"Hah, hah." The emperor chuckled. He leaned poor Zepth's arm across hers and dialed in some codes, too fast for her to get more than the first symbol.

Their speakers were full of the orders being barked in the language the Tee had said was Sith. The droid had taught Polla to say, 'Hello,' 'Bow down to me,' and 'Frack off;' but said that getting into more complexity was just asking for issues. Whoever was talking wasn't saying any of those things, so Polla just fixed her face into a glare and focused on the things she understood, like the beautiful telemetrics of the *Ebon Hawk*’s instrument panel.

The planet below them was covered in clouds, and her atmospheric readings warned of heavy electrical activity, wind currents, storm watches. But as Polla watched the viewscreen, the clouds suddenly opened in a perfect circle, revealing what appeared to be solid ground below.

"Nice," she murmured, trying to sound bored and not impressed. Was it some kind of weather
control? Or more of this creepy Force?

"You sure you got it… uh, beautiful?" Carth was way too nervous. She shot him a look and he got suddenly busy in the co-pilot's chair, double checking all the readings from their last hyperspace jump.

"Cool your jets, flyboy." She flashed him a smile, and he winced. She never should have told him the real Revan was coming. Poor slob hadn't been able to hold it together since. "Haven't I flown us down from tighter spots than this? Remember that time on Manaan? When I saved the hoverbus full of Selkath."

"Easy," he muttered, eyeing her hand on the throttle. "Let me take care of the aux, alright?"

"Knock yourself out." Polla shrugged, angling them down slow into a tighter orbit. No point in being frightened now, they were in this too deep. Fear of a Sith planet. Might as well be afraid of a diox leak: either it'd kill you before you could do anything, or it wouldn't.

The worst things in life weren't the things you had time to be afraid of. They were the things that ambushed you like a bolt of blue, at times that should have been the happiest.

XXX

She'd tell him after the holovid, Polla decided.

Seiran had picked it: some kind of documentary about the defeat of dark Jedi by the Republic Fleet. Or something? Episode One had gotten a ton of press, but she hadn't paid much attention. Episode Two was supposed to be the continuing story, released a week later—pretty much ripped from the headlines. According to the reviews from the Corellian Star Times, the Jedi had made some kind of personality for Revan Starfire based on Deralian culture—and so the holotheater was packed. Nothing folks in Adaston liked more than the chance to complain about their own image in the galactic media.

But Polla hated documentaries. And she had more important shit on her mind.

Should she just tell Sei now? Or hand him the test results? Would he be happy? He'd said he wanted to marry her someday. Not that having a kid meant they had to get married, but even still—

Should she just tell him now?

Maybe then they could skip out on this dull as dishwater vid.

XXX

"After Malak's attack, the Dark Lord Revan was saved by the strength of the Jedi Council..."

XXX

The words scrolled across the screen, but Polla was more interested in the bag of poppa stuck between her and Sei. Maybe it was hormones or something, but the buttery snack was delicious. She elbowed him. "We might need more of this."

"You're hungry tonight."

"Mmmm." She winked, and glanced back at the screen, trying to play it cool. How could she just tell him? What if she had poppa kernels between her teeth?
But then the image of a ravaged figure floating in a bacta tank kinda killed her appetite. Gross. Humans weren't supposed to have gray skin. Were those tattoos or veins? When you couldn't even tell, maybe it was time to lay off the spice.

"How to redeem someone who has fallen so far? How to save the woman who was once a shining beacon of light; but fell to become the devourer of worlds? The Council and young Bastila Shan healed Revan's body; but they could not heal her soul."

Huh. That was strange. "Sei?"

"Poll?" He leaned in and kissed her. His lips were buttery too... but she pulled back and looked at the vid again, holding up a hand for him to wait.

The scream was inhuman. Like an animal. The figure in the tank writhed, head bobbing to the surface. The tank's glass actually cracked-right before a few brown-robes rushed in to do something. One of them, a tall Cerean guy, waved his hand, and the tortured body stopped, the nearly bald head slumped forward, going limp. Mad, yellow eyes closed shut.

"Revan Starfire had no mind left—and yet, the Jedi Council in their wisdom knew two things: first, that all creatures have the potential for good; and second, that the only way to stop Malak was locked somewhere in Revan's crippled mind. Using the link that Bastila Shan had courageously created, the Jedi remade the Dark Lord of the Sith, and gave her a new life."

"But who was this woman they created?"

"Bastila SHAN?" She poked Seiran. "That's weird. Didn't I tell you, that was the name of my nurse?"

"Who was Polla Organa?"

Dara from Geario's Gear Shop leaned forward from the row behind them and poked Polla. "Polla Organa is you," she snorted.

"Hah." Polla shoved a hand of poppa in her mouth to avoid decking her. Dara was an eejit.

"That Polla Organa Revan needs a facial," someone muttered a few rows back. She wasn't even sure who. "At least."

"You clean up real good, Polla!" their partner yelled.

"Shut up!" Polla told them all.

Polla Quil Organa, who was seventy, if she was a day, stood up and took a bow. "You got me," she
called out. "I'm a Sith Lord all right!"

Everyone in the theater laughed. There was scattered applause.

XXX

The music played again, sad and melancholy.

"Polla Organa was no one. No one person. Instead, she was a precisely curated amalgamation of personalities, driven by the Force. The Jedi instilled in her a strong sense of morality; technical knowledge that complimented Revan's own; and basic training in weapons and strategy."

"Supposedly born on Deralia, a remote world untouched by the ravages of war, her personality matrix overlaid the tragedies of Revan's life with a foundation of stability and hope."

XXX

"That's our Pollie," her cousin Glenndam shouted. She'd know his lisp anywhere. "Stability and hope!"

"Hope her glider doesn't crash again!" Cousin Sara added from the front.

Frack this. Polla nudged her boyfriend hard in the ribs. "Is the funny part going to be a lot of Polla Organa jokes?"

Seiran Wen turned to her. "I thought you liked action vids."

"But this one's a documentary. And it's Episode Two. What happened to the first one?"

"The first one is all Jedi stuff, the reviews said. I thought you'd be bored. This is the one about the Star Forge quest."

"Oh." Something nudged her memory, a clip she'd seen at the Ultra-Mart. "This one has a Wookiee?"

"Yeah."

"I like Wookiees. My da says they did that whole Star Forge thing with miniatures. He thinks the Republic made it up to raise taxes."

"You remember our planet almost got invaded?" He laced his fingers with hers. "Remember how the Jedi healed your coma?"

"Not Jedi," she argued. "Mostly droids and that one nurse, Bastila...."

That one nurse. Bastila Shan. That was... that was a little weird.

"Bastila?" Seiran's voice was too loud. Someone in the row in front of them turned and shushed them. One of the Maris triplets, Polla couldn't remember which one, but they'd all taken domestic engineering classes together, back when they were kids.

"What?" She was glaring at the triplet, but it was Seiran who responded.

"Bastila? Your nurse. Like Bastila Shan?"
"Yeah. I told you about her, right?"

"She's a Jedi. She was one of the Star Forge heroes. The vid's been talking about her this entire time."

"Bastila's probably a common name on Talravan. My Bastila was just a nurse...?" Her voice trailed off because the heroes of the Star Forge were now splashed across the screen. And there was Bastila Shan, the nurse, holding a lightsaber and standing next to a pale woman with her hair looped in a Deralian knot. "Frack, Sei. That... that looks like her."

"Bastila Shan is the Jedi with Battle Meditation," her boyfriend muttered. "She's not a nurse. Did she say she was just a nurse?"

"I had a fracking head injury, but..." Polla thought back. "I think so? Who's that bint next to her?" The woman didn't look Deralian, despite the hair.

"That's Revan Starfire." He snorted. "I swear, sometimes you live under a rock."

"I thought she was a rouge. The woman's hair was dark brown, not red. Almost black. It made her skin look even paler. "I thought she was Hothan. Is her hair like that because they gave her a Deralian cover story?"

"Shhh!" This time the admonishment came from behind them. When Polla turned around it was Mister Dunledee, who ran the Weaver's. "Some of us are trying to watch this."

"Just a bunch of stupid Republic-"

XXX

"Revan Starfire thought she was Polla Organa, a humble Deralian smuggler, on a desperate mission....

XXX

"This Polla Organa thinks this entire vid is a stupid, jingoistic piece of shit," Polla muttered.

Seiran nuzzled her ear. "Maybe Bastila Shan named the composite personality they gave the Dark Lord of the Sith after you."

"Hah." She pulled away. "That's not funny, Sei." She frowned at the screen. "So maybe my nurse Bastila Shan is an actress playing the Jedi Bastila Shan-

"No. Most of it is real footage." Seiran squeezed her hand. "I admit... it is a little strange."

"She seemed like a nurse. She checked all my vitals all the time."

"If you can't be quiet, Polla Organa, I'm going to call management!" Frikka Jeris Organa wasn't being quiet. She yelled out Polla's name so that the whole theater could hear.

There were more whispers.

Polla sank down in her chair, as the real-life footage from the heroes of the Star Forge continued.

XXX

Revan Starfire straddled the swoop bike awkwardly, knees bent too close to her thighs for any real
control. You wouldn't know that to hear her voice through. She sounded as cool as ferracrystal.

"I got this, flyboy. Relax. I was tweener champion back on Deralia? I could fly this course blind if I had to, it's nothing compared to Janstak's Canyon loop back home."

"Isn't that the place where you said you crashed?" The pilot laughed nervously. "I think we need a back-up plan."

"You worry too much. I mean, it's sort of cute."

"You're calling me cute?"

"For a Gamorrean, sure."

"Have you seen a lot of Gamorreans?"

"I ran spice for the Exchange. What do you think?"

Xxx

"This is real footage?" Polla nudged Seiran again. A part of her probably already knew at that point, but she was trying desperately to come up with an alternative explanation.

"Shhh!" The triplet again. Polla flipped her off.

Janstak's Canyon... it had to be a coincidence. Everyone raced there. If they'd made a composite and named it Polla Organa and made her a swoop racer... that all made sense. Didn't it?

"They took the thing about Janstak Canyon from my life? You think Bastila borrowed stories I told her?" This time she really lowered her voice. Two of the triplets had turned around and were looking at her now.

"I don't... I'm not sure." Seiran's hand closed down hard over hers. "Do you... this is gonna sound nuts, but does that guy look like me?"

"Older." But he did. It was why she'd thought he was cute in the first place - "I'm pretty sure they didn't cast this documentary based on your face."

"Or yours," he whispered back. But it is a nice face."

"Yours too, flyboy." She grinned at him, but then movement on the screen distracted her again. "Does she... do you think she looks like me?"

He stiffened, like his muscles froze, holding her so tight that Polla could barely breathe. "Of course not!"

"Right." She watched his eyes shift back towards the screen.

Xxx

"I don't like being left out of the loop."

"Told you before. You were born out of the loop. Let me explain again. This is Bastila Shan, the Jedi we had to rescue for your Republic."
"Not just mine."

"Well, according to her, I signed on because they need someone with my skills."

"Which are…?"

"I…I told you languages before, right? And if you ever need someone to smuggle a load of spice from Kessel to Corellia, and not pay the Hutt vig… well, let’s just say I know a few old routes. I have my Da's old charts and there’s jumps on there you Fleet guys have never even heard of!"

"Polla," Bastila Shan interrupted. "Now isn't the time. Right now, we need to discuss your nightmares."

"You were in them too," the woman rubbed her temples. "Maybe they're yours."

Xxx

"Pollie?" Seiran nudged her.

"Always stereotyping us just because we have registered smugglers," Daiphone Sin Organa yelled, on his other side. "Frack the Republic!"

"Frack the Republic!" Several others cheered.

"Polla?" Seiran nudged her again. "Are you okay?"

Nausea twisted in her gut, sudden and sharp. She stood up, half-covering her mouth, but the words were still loud for at least three rows to hear. "No. I'm not okay! I-I'm pregnant."

She barely made it to the fresher in time, thoughts running through her head, as inevitable as a smuggler getting caught on their final big score: I crashed in Janstak's Canyon. I ran that route, from Kessel to Corellia. I bragged about never paying, even if it was a lie, because it got me more business. I have Da's old maps with jumps that no Republic brass has ever-

"Pollie?"

She looked up, wiping her mouth. Seiran stood in the doorway, face lit in blue from the overlights. He looked as worried as she felt.

"Are you... it's going to be okay, right?" He sounded like he was trying to convince himself, as well as her.

"No." Polla shook her head, and spat in the fresher. All the air seemed to leave her chest at once. "I didn't really... I never told you the whole thing. Bastila Shan made a copy of my brain. She made a copy. I signed... she said they were putting my memories in a holocomm. Holocard? Holo-something. So I signed... something. I let them take my memories. They said... they needed them to check. Because of my head."

"Holocron," her boyfriend said. "Like on the Nomi Sunrider cartoons."

"She said it was just to make a-a baseline. But those things that... that can't be possible. Is that-those are actors, right? Somebody wrote that script, maybe they interviewed... maybe they interviewed my relatives? Or just-maybe it was a lucky guess? I mean, lots of smugglers... we all run spice. Lots of racers...."
Seiran shook his head. "When you were running to the fresher, that Polla Organa on screen mentioned her ex. His name is Therion D'Cainen. She said there was a shipment with kanna mites and her criminal record was his fault."

"Son of a Bith!" Everything in her gut heaved up at once. That was enough to send the rest of the poppa down the drain.

Warm arms encircled her shoulders, as Seiran knelt behind her, pulling her half onto his lap. She could hear his heart beating, slow and calm. She took a deep breath, burrowing her head into his chest.

"I think you distracted them all with that pregnancy joke," he murmured. "Trust me. No one will know it's you. There's gotta be a million Polla Organas, right? Wasn't she one of the original settlers?"

"Second wave," Polla took a deep breath, suddenly not sure what frightened her the most. "I wasn't kidding about the pregnancy, Sei. It's yours." She took a deep, steadying breath. "I-I ran the labs and checked. Sometimes, spacers, when we go ground side again-it messes with our cycles. I was wearing the derm, but I guess it didn't take. I'm sorry, I know you like me and all, but this is a lot-

"Oh." He squeezed her harder, and his breath went all soft and strange. "Oh."

"I'm... sorry," she repeated. "I know this is... a lot."

"No," he murmured. "You... do you want...? This? Me?"

"Yeah." She smiled up at him. "If you're okay marrying a Sith Lord."

Her boyfriend snorted. "Always thought you'd look good in black."

Xxx

"How can you stand to be cut off from the Force?" Zepth sounded just curious, but Takan nudged him.

"Lord Revan isn't here to answer your questions," the second and more ass-kissing of the two Zabrak kids said.

"The Force isn't everything." Polla leaned back in the captain's chair, trying not to be rattled by the escort of fighters that was still aligned to their ship, flying in a perfect grid that now surrounded them on all four sides. "Learn that, and you have learned much, fool."

"Yes, Lord Revan," Takan bowed his head.

She felt ridiculous, and her face was sweating behind the mask that Zaalbar had dug up from somewhere in the ship's stores. The Tee-Three had made her go over phrases that the real Revan had said over and over again.

"I can flay the flesh from your bones," she added. Just because.

"You want to do the honors and bring her down?" In the co-pilot's seat, Carth brought up the coordinate map, the holographic display etching out their landing field.

"Yes." The Hawk handled like a dream. She could see why he loved it. In a different time and a
different place, she would have loved it too.

*You’re a sad sack, Revan Starfire-leaving a ship like this and a man like Carth all on their lonesome.* If Revan had been Polla the entire time, she would've grabbed her son and this man and taken off a long time ago.

*You did do that. You and Sei.* Her stupid conscience reminded her. *Only, you wanted more, right? Well, congratulations. Now you're a fracking Sith Lord about to land on the most badass Sith planet they have. Congratu-fracking-lations. Happy now?*

"Watch the fighters," Carth added, sounding nervous.

"They'll get out of the way themselves, don't you think?" She brought the yoke down slowly, banking them sideways and down. The planet's atmosphere buffeted their craft, and a thick cloud cover obscured everything in the views.

"Smooth," he muttered.

"Not my first landing, flyboy." She smiled under her mask, but his own expression was fixed and grim.

*Should make him wear one too. He's going to ruin this entire thing if he can't keep a pazaak face.*

*One hundred ninety three south by Twenty several. Thousand eight hundred north. She leaned over the nav and tapped them into the comm.* Real Revan had wanted the coordinates. Was the comm secure?

*Nothing is.*

She hit send.

They were skimming over treetops now, spinning off the velocity from their descent.

"A little fast," Carth warned.

"I like fast," Polla muttered. The ship could take it. "Everyone strapped in?"

Zaalbar roared an affirmative, and the Tee-Three whistled. Takan reached for the straps and Zepth-

*Oh, blast.*

Zepth's eyes were glowing red.

"Landing a ship here," she snapped. "What the frack do you want now?"

"I have a surprise for you," the Emperor murmured. "Waiting for you. I do hope you like it."

"It'll have to wait." She pulled down hard, punching the throttle closed, so that they stalled, and then plummeted. The poor Zabrak kid slammed hard into the wall. If it wasn't for the fact that Tenebrae felt the pain too, Polla would have felt sorry for him.

XXX

"Batti says his fath-his *da*-wants to take me on their next hunting expedition." Korrie's cheeks were pink and he was slightly out of breath, as if he'd ran the way home. "I said I had to ask you."
His eyes flickered to the unconscious woman on the medix bed, as if he wanted to ask her too.

"If you want to go, dear, that's fine." They had their old droid Bolts monitoring Revan Starfire at night now, with Doctor Sahara checking in. "I don't mind."

"I don't know if she'd mind." He bit his lip. "She might? She feels better. She might wake up soon."

Molla wished Doctor Sahara shared his enthusiasm. Then again, Revan Starfire awake was going to be a whole ‘nother ball of eridu than Revan Starfire in a coma. Stars, she was starting to get used to Revan Starfire in a coma. When the mood struck, you could yell at women in comas, and they'd never yell back. Never deny the fact that they'd taken away your family and maybe they were never coming back.

"How can you tell she feels better? Is it the Force?"

Such a strange thing. She'd seen the vids, met Bendowen's girl, seen the result, when the woman in front of her on the hospital bed had been pulled from their retaining pond-

XXX

The woman was about the same size as Pollie, mud and blood staining her hair, skin so white it looked blue. For a millisecond she'd been something out of a nightmare, a nightmare of Polla after that canyon crash, limp and pale.

If it hadn't been for the screaming boy-child in Molla's own arms, kicking and scratching and hollering to break free-Molla thought she might have screamed too. On the ground, Abasen was squalling hysterically. Jasp had already jumped into the pond after the bint, and Bolts too, right behind him. Damn bucket was gonna get itself rusted.

Something like an electrical charge seared her arm, and she dropped the child.

His hands were glowing blue.

"Mother!" He darted forward, pressed his forehead against the limp, pale one.

"We need a doctor," Jasp muttered. "The crazy bint just fell out of the sky-

"I'll call Doctor Sahara," she said. The boy's hands were glowing blue. His mother's hair was red. "This is all her fault anyways."

XXX

"I don't think your ma would mind at all, Korrie," she told him. "Every kid needs to learn to hunt sometime. But you have to promise…"

"No Force. I know." His light eyes stared into hers. Dye around the lashes kept fading. It looked funny too. "I'm good at secrets, Aunt Moll."

"Oh, I can tell that, dear." She smiled brightly.

Xxx

"Another one." Polla nodded towards the bartender, who obliged quite kindly, setting her up with another green, faintly steaming Andorran Moon.

"Haven't seen you here before." The frank grin the man was giving her was an obvious invitation.
If she hadn't just been dumped it might have even been funny. "You come in with the Fleet?"

"Fleet?" Polla turned her head towards the Republic slobs gathered in one end of the bar, and sneered. "Do I look Fleet to you? Why the frack are they even here?"

"Something about a Sith invasion?" The bartender would be cute, if she liked blondes, which she did not. "Chassna got hit yesterday. Everyone says there could be cloaked destroyers, maybe even capital ships orbiting Deralia as we speak."

"They want this backwater?" Polla drained her glass in one gulp. "Fracking take it then. Maybe the Sith will have looser import regs than the stinking Consortium."

"Tell us what you really think," Sera muttered, rolling her eyes. "I swear, sometimes you sound just like your da."

"I do not!"

"Polla Organa?" It took her a moment to place the man, another to acknowledge the skinny farmboy she'd grown up with had grown too-into a rather attractive sent.

"Seiran Wen?" She smiled at him. "Hey."

"Heard you were back in town," he said. "Did you come for the races? Qualifier's next week. I do some work on swoop gliders now, if you're interested."

Polla hadn't known that. Backwater swoops seemed small spacers compared to the galaxy out there. "It's been seven years. I sold my bike after graduation."

"I could hook up-hook you up with something." Was he... blushing?

If you were in the mood for adorable, Polla might find that adorable. But she wasn't. She drained her drink. It had been ages since she ran the swoops, but she knew the routes like the back of her hands.

"What course is the qual on?" Maybe now was a good time to give it all up. Become a famous swoop racer, instead of a smuggler. She could too. It wasn't a bad idea.

"Janstak's Loop." Seiran had a nice smile, maybe a little too soft. His lips were big, like purses. Kissing them would be very different than kissing someone like Therion: all teeth and lies and infidelity.

Auntie Mita always said I could do anything I wanted. Be anyone. And I was good. I was tweener champion. "I could qual for that with my eyes closed," Polla admitted. Even in the dark. "Show me. Show me this bike of yours."

Seiran's eyes widened, and he nodded slowly. "Sure. In the morning, we-"

"No, no." Polla chuckled. "Now, flyboy. Show it to me now."

"It's dark." The look he was giving her. She knew that look. He thought he had a chance.

She hadn't quite decided. "I can run that course with my eyes closed. In the dark." Her lips pulled back from her teeth. "You'll see."

Xxx
Waking up was clawing through a nest of eridu fibers into a too-bright world, with the sun streaming overhead through the double-paned moisture locks, and the plasticore barn ribs spanning out overhead like the rays of a star.

Da had been so proud when he'd installed those solar windows, planning on extending their growing season by months if he could start the seedlings early. But as it turned out, eridu that didn't get hardened by the spring floods and sudden snaps of cold grew weak and winded. Grew pretty much useless, except as a compost crop.

He'd been so pissed-

Something beeped, and when she moved her hand, it ached strangely. When she tried to sit up, she realized her head was held in some kind of brace, arms and legs restrained too.

What the frack?

"Can you hear me?" A woman's face swam into view. Youngish, perfectly oval. Dark curls falling out of her topknot. Goldish eyes, and a narrow, straight nose.

"Yes…" Her voice creaked alarmingly. Seiran dared me to race the canyon loop and I fell. I fell- "You…." She knew the face. It took another few breaths to recall from where. "Jenny? Sahara? From primaries?"

Before your father pulled you out mid-year to go back to that commune. Then you got that scholarship and eight years at Corellia's best university and half the town can't stop talking about you graduating with honors-

The woman's olive skin paled. "You… it's Doctor Sahara. Doctor Jen Sahara now."

"Oh. Right." When she closed her eyes pain splintered her skull. "Ma… she said you… you went to the Academy. Con… congratulations. Your da must be very proud."

Even if he is kinda nuts.

"He had a stroke. He's… not well." Doctor Sahara didn't sound upset, she sounded distracted. "You… are… here. Now. Do you recall what… do you recall the details of your accident?"

"Seiran dared me to race the canyon loop in the dark. I said I knew it backwards and forwards and he said prove it, and I said I would and he said he was joking, but I didn't care-

She was suddenly furious, a white hot, molten anger that seemed to jangle along every nerve, like a spark. She twisted her hand again and one of the restraints snapped.

"Don't… don't do that!" Boring old kissra lamb Jenny had a spine after all, because her voice was suddenly durasteel. Doctor Sahara's hand closed down hard over her fingers. "You must not upset yourself. It's quite important. For… everyone. Do you understand?"

"Why am I in the spare barn?" Shouldn't I be in a hospital? I thought I was in a hospital. I dreamed it. A… Republic hospital, and they-

A sickening feeling of dislocation swam over her. The woman's face was a stranger's now, the barn just a room, rough edges and oddly rustic, the reddish light shining through the windows above was wrong again; and her real intention-

"Revan," she whispered. "She lied to me. She fricking lied!"
"I'm afraid you… you need to come to terms with her lies. With… yourself." The medix looked uncomfortable. "One month ago, you were in a terrible… accident. You sustained grave injuries—"

Xxx

*Her breath felt stuck in her throat, the air was too thin and cold, ship on a near vertical climb. Her left hand scrabbled for purchase, as her right wielded the saber, slamming the blade through the ship's hull, even as a small part of her mind screamed that was a bad idea, that she was putting them all in jeopardy. If the ship crashed-*

It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. She has to be stopped. Revan has to be stopped and I'm the only one who can.

*The saber jolted suddenly, sparking, and then its blade cut out.*

How? *A part of her mind knew that too.*

You weren't shielded. Jedi and Sith are trained to protect their weapons as extensions of themselves, but you were never taught this.

*Laughter in her head, it almost sounded like Bastila No time. Her lungs were burning, the ground was too far away.*

Failsafe. Keep her safe. Don't fail to keep him safe-

*Something that felt like liquid fire washed over her hands and she fell-she fell-*

Spin like a leaf-increase your surface area, slow with the Force, use the velocity itself to slow-

slow-

*Her hands were burning: breath ragged, heart pounding, anger fueling her power, the ground coming up below, landmarks from someone else's childhood….*

Use the water. Break your fall. Slow-slow-

*The air rippled around her, stretching like plasti. Oh, frack, what have I-*

Xxx

"Where is my son?" Revan demanded, pulling at the Force to pull herself upright. Tubes pulled out of her arms, her chest. The restraints snapped all at once. She pulled a brace away from her aching neck. "Where is Korrie?"

Doctor Sahara had retreated several meters. She had a trank gun in her hand now, some forgotten part of Revan recognized the shape, the sharp dart, capable of dropping a rabid kath-or Jedi-from five meters away. "Your son is asleep. It's the middle of the night."

"Oh." She held her hand up, disturbed to see the flaking skin, vestiges of burns, bruises from where the medical lines had run. "Don't shoot. Please."

"I realize this must be confusing to you," the woman offered, voice wary.

*Little Jenny sallow / Scared of her own shadow*

They had teased her, they had been cruel. They had all been scared of her father, a hulking, furious man-a doctor with an interest in archaeology. Polla had been scared herself when she had to go to
his offices for checkups—scared of the barbaric masks of monsters on the walls, the curved knives under glass, the pieces of shattered pottery made by insectoid drones, he said-

"I'm not confused," Revan told the daughter. "I-I fell. "The ship… it left?"

_A month. She said it left a month ago._

"The ship you fell out of? Yes."

"It's been a month, you said."

Doctor Sahara regarded her warily. "Yes, it has been a month since your accident."

"It was no accident. Revan did this. She-

The expression on the woman's face made the words freeze in Revan's throat. "I… I must sound insane."

"You have a head injury," the doctor told her. "Extensive damage and the scans showed scarring already-

"I'm not insane." Revan shook her head and was rewarded with a stabbing pain in her neck. "The… woman aboard that ship… she… betrayed me. I should never have trusted her. I… I have to leave."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible."

Revan ignored her, twisting her hand until the trank gun's nozzle bent in around itself, until the entire device grew hot enough that Jenny Sahara threw it to the ground, staring at her with an expression of horror.

"Y-you, you can't-

But Revan was already standing, even as her legs threatened to buckle. She grabbed the bed's rails to keep herself upright, muscles shaking from the sudden exertion, as if she'd run a ten kilometers, instead of merely stood.

"My son," she told the woman, putting the Force in her words. "I need to see him. Now. Take me to him."

"Your son, you need to see-" Doctor Sahara shook her head, as if to clear it. "No. You need to sit down. You need to stay here-

"Mother!" But then barn door opened and suddenly Korrie was there, running into her arms. "I thought I heard you! I heard you wake up!" He tackled her with all the recklessness of childhood, nearly sending them both tumbling back towards the ground, before Revan managed to stabilize their trajectory with the Force.

_Don't fall. I fell-

"Korrie." She buried her face in his hair. Someone had tinted it brown, shaved the sides. Her chin brushed against his topknot.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded. He twisted in her arms, glaring like a small sun. "You could've died!"

"I had to stop her, Malachor, she…." Revan was all too aware of the doctor, still standing in
earshot. "You were right about her all along. I never should have trusted her. She betrayed us."

"No." He shook his head. "She left to keep us safe. She left you a message. I saw it."

"She... left a message?" Anger was keeping her standing. "Whatever she said was lies."

"She's my mother," her son said. "She wants us to be safe. She only left to keep us safe."

"She's not, I..." What had caused this change of heart? Korrie couldn't stand Dar. On the ship he'd avoided her as much as possible. She'd had to work to bring them together. "You hated her! You said it."

"I pretended."

"But you don't. She said you don't know anything. She said you have to stay here so the Genoharadan don't kill me." He folded his arms and took a step back. "It's a little boring here, but it's not bad. Molla says I can start going to school this summer. I made some friends. She told everyone we're refs. From Nar. There's a lot of refs from Nar Shaddaa these days. Most of them live in Adaston, but she says we're to say we're working for them. Molla and Jasp. She says we have to dye your hair. Do you like mine?"

She didn't. It looked wrong on him, as wrong as the rough clothes he wore and the dirt on his hands. Those things were familiar. They were... right... but not on him. Not my son.

"You said it's been a month." Polla Organa was almost certainly dead. Dar'Revan gone to Yavin, or wherever she had fled. Maybe she joined Oerin and Davad? Maybe that was her plan all along? "Has there been any... word? From... anyone?"

"I don't know." Her son bit his lip. "S-she said she would do her best. But Jasp Organa left too. And he's just gone too."

Her father's gone too. Great. Dar's destroyed what's left of their poor family- Revan let out a ragged breath.

"You need to rest," Doctor Sahara interrupted. "It's very important that you rest now. Do you understand?" She sounded like she was talking to a stubborn child.

"I need to fix this," Revan muttered. "I need a ship. I need to find her."

"You need to stay here," Korrie insisted. "So the Genoharadan don't get me. You need to keep me safe. We can be safe here. She said so."

Revan frowned at him. "She told you to say that?" Of course. Because it would keep me here. She thinks I'd never put Malachor in danger, she left me here to protect him... but she'd never put him in danger.

The logic was as solid as the planet beneath their feet.

"She's already eliminated the Genoharadan somehow. Bargained with them. Something. She'd never frighten you, she'd never trust me entirely."
Her son looked at the ground. "The Genoharadan will get me," he whispered, but his words were unconvincing. An obvious lie. "You need to keep me safe."

**But how can I be sure? How can I risk him?**

*She wants me to question. She wants me not to follow. I don't want to go. I want to stay here with him. She knows how much I want to stay with him because she-

Only she could be nuts enough to think I would stay. Think that I could stay. Even if I want to, Ma and-Moll and Jasp-they're not going to take us a replacement for their own daughter!*

*Only she could think this would actually fracking work.*

"I do have other patients," the doctor said. "I go on shift in two hours." She bent down and picked up the remains of her trank gun. "Tell Molla I warned against physical exertion. You will need therapy to regain full use of motion-

Revan raised her arms over her head and stretched. Her muscles protested, but she refused to listen. "I've been injured before," she told the doctor. "I know how to restore myself."

"What if you don't come back, Mother?" Korrie demanded. "You're going to leave, you both left and what if you don't come back? She's not coming back. She lied and said maybe, but I know. But at least I have you." Her son blinked hard, tears forming. "It could be nice here, I could go to school. Maybe your husbands could come too and stuff. M-maybe even Father-

"Your father…." *Malak would protect him. Malak can keep him safe, if I only knew how to find him. Have you spoken to him? Do you know where he is?*

"He was on the vids a lot. With Mekel Jin. Is he really my cousin? Mother said-I mean Sheris-she said he was. They were on the vids, but they didn't do anything. But then Molla said I shouldn't watch that stuff because it makes your brain rot."

"Rot out your ears," Revan agreed. She could almost hear the woman saying it. "You talked to Dar'Revan, Korrie. You talked to her a lot."

The swoop of a door sliding closed jerked her head away, but it was only the doctor's departure.

"On the ship," he nodded slowly. "Mostly when you were sleeping."

They'd slept in shifts, always someone monitoring the comms.

"I'm sorry I'm not her." *I might have to kill her. I… I tried to be your real mother, Korrie." Even if I don't remember your birth, the way you felt in my arms, the way Malak and I must have loved you-

"But you are." His arms wrapped around her again. "You are. Just cause you forget some of it, doesn't make it not true." Gray eyes looked up at her, strangely old in his round face. "At least listen to her message, okay? She doesn't want you to leave me."

*I don't want to leave you.* Despair choked her throat. *But she has to be stopped.*

XXX

The night Revan woke up was the night that Abasen had the small sick: aches and pains and a small fever, the kind that back in Pollie's day would have sent Moll to the medix, had her spend a sleepless night watching her daughter breathe. But now Molla was older and wiser and maybe
colder, because she set Bolts to guard and left them: Revan's son and her own flesh and blood both and made her way to the barn to relieve patient Doctor Sahara from her shift watching the comatose Starfire.

The call from Seiran last week had been worrying, to say the least. There was nothing of Pollie in the woman she'd seen choking her son in law on the comm, and even reminding herself that this second Revan might have somehow managed to produce the overly-mannered child now asleep in her spare room didn't help.

And then, today, like the gods might have a sense of humor (if they existed, and Molla was pretty sure the jury was out on that until Pollie came back), her comm had pinged with a message.

_I'm fine, dear. Pollie's on Sith homeworld. Need coordinates. If Revan wakes up, will you ask? Xx, Jasp._

There was absolutely _nothing_ reassuring about _that_ either, even as she tried desperately to remember his old smuggler's ciphers, and translate the two sentences into something more reassuring.

The barn was lit up like Festival when she arrived, Doctor Sahara nowhere to be seen.

Korrie had somehow circled and beaten her there.

His mother was awake. Revan Starfire. Apparently, one of two. This one, staring at her with her face all furrowed, just like Pollie's, when she'd been caught sneaking with Sera, the troublemaking cousin who'd always seemed grown far too soon..

"Hello." Revan Starfire was standing up, so maybe that whole miraculous Jedi healing thing wasn't a load of fertilizer. "I-I heard Jasp left. He shouldn't have done that."

"But he did." It had been touching, imagining this woman as a sister to Pollie. But that was before the whole mess she'd put them into. Molla hadn't quite been able to think the woman would have them killed for real, but she'd sent the message about Cousin Vish as a test. If the woman got it, she has enough of Pollie to care. If she did not, it didn't matter. But it had never occurred to Molla (before Revan Starfire showed up on her planet and fell out of the sky) that it might be possible for the woman to remember everything about her daughter's life and wish them wrong.

Until now, when Pollie's own expression smoothed over, to a strange blankness, that made the woman look half unconscious again.

"I want to help you find your husband," she said stiffly. "Where did he go?"

"Yavin Station." Molla paused. "But he just commed. He said he's fine, but he needs the coordinates of the Sith homeworld."

"Dromund Kaas?" chirped the boy. Bless his heart. A _name_ she could run a search on, at least.

"Korrie." The mother looked too pale, unless that was just skin color. She sat down again on the bed, stiff as fences.

"The… ship," she said slowly. "The one I was… trying to stop. It left the system?"

"Funny thing," Molla told her. "Seiran called from that ship a week ago. Him and Revan. The other Revan. I don't think she wanted him to call, because she was right upset. And she asked about you."
"Did she hurt him?" The woman's voice wavered a little.

"I didn't see any blood." It had been hard to tell, with him going in and out of the frame. "She wanted to know how bad you were hurt. And how Korrie here was getting on."

"You told her fine, right?" the boy piped in. Poor tyke was so anxious. "She shouldn't worry."

"I told her fine," Molla folded her arms and leaned back against the wall. "Seiran said she's been talking to my Pollie. He said Pollie's with your husband and the Wookiee."

"What?" The woman's voice was like a quiet explosion. It seemed to… ripple somehow. "You mean Carth? How is she… how the frack did that happen?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"I need to go after them!"

"So you do know the location of the Sith homeworld?"

"No. But Mission would. Frack, if Polla's with Carth then maybe I can comm them. Warn them about Dar-what the frack does she want with them?"

"She's good again," Korrie said. "She left you here to keep you safe. With me."

"Korrie, she's… not. It's not that simple."

She left you a message," the boy said. "It is that simple. If you just listen to the message, you'll see."

"I'd like to hear this famous message," Moll told them both. "If it's no trouble."

"I can guarantee it's not in Basic. Or any language you know," Revan muttered.

"Translate," Molla told her flatly. "You owe me that. You owe us that. And a lot more besides."

"I know," Revan Starfire's head dropped, like a derran lily on its stem. She wiped her eyes. "I know I do. I… remember. I owe you… everything."
Chapter 48 / My Empire of Dirt, Part One

There was an ominous roar coming from the landing ramp, like a crowd cheering over a steady drumbeat, and what sounded like an entire electro-harp section.

Polla exhaled under her mask. Closed her eyes. Counted to ten. Ignored the giant Wookiee patting her awkwardly on the shoulder, the Tee-Three beeping at her to move, the doubled voice from Tenny-bro in the Zabrak kids saying frack knows what in ancient Sith.

"Silence!" She held up her gloved hand, and remarkably, they all quieted. Now there was just the noise outside. "When," she demanded, "did I ever say I liked electro-harp?"

"I assumed," the emperor offered. "Shall I make it stop?"

"Please." Cold sweat was trickling down her back. She closed her eyes and began to count. On the stroke of eleven, the electro-harp stopped.

"Come on," Carth whispered. He squeezed her fingers, hands warm even through gloves.

Polla opened her eyes and saw his clean-shaven face through the mask's eye vent. He was smiling, teeth only a little bared, eyes only a little nuts. She nodded and allowed him to lead her down the ramp, the others trailing behind.

Outside, the air was strange and gray. A long red road of stone led to a set of steps, and above them towered an ancient-looking building covered with statues of contorted humanids who were either fracking or being dissected. Kind of hard to tell-the stone was so weathered and worn.

Hundreds-maybe even thousands-of red-robed sents lined the road. Many had the red skin Polla had been told to expect from pureblood Sith. (Who knew Sith were a thing?) Behind the red robes, most wore black and gray. There weren't a lot of other colors-every now and again, a brighter splash of skin or hair; but for the most part, her new minions seemed incredibly dichromatic.

The closer ones all had red, glowing eyes, like the Creepazoid, (as Tee-Three called him), was watching their progress from every angle he could.

"Well?" Tenny-bro murmured in Takan's body.

"Adequate," she sniffed.

The comm on her wrist beeped. Polla glanced down.

Coord r HIS summer plc. Eta 2d. Don't die.

Was plc an acronym? Abbreviation? Was eta estimated time of arrival? Was HIS Tenny-bro or something else? Fracking Revan Starfire. If they were supposed to have the same brain, why didn't the woman make more sense?

"Your… summer palace?" Polla sighed. "Really, Lord Tenebrae?"
"I'm having yours redone." Takan smiled at her and gave her a boneless bow. Poor, possessed kid.

"With extra torture rooms?" She tried to sound cheerful. Carth coughed and nudged her arm.

"I think you will find the facilities adequate."

"Hopefully. By the way, I'm expecting a… guest. In two days’ time. I hope you've outdone yourself. She's a very dear friend."

Carth sighed, like he got it. The droid beeped something like an inquiry.

"Any friend of yours… that escaped the cull, would naturally be a friend of mine." Takan's teeth were so white they looked blue.

Here we go.

Since no one was else was moving, Polla stepped forward, forcing them all to follow behind.

The crowd around them cheered—even the ones not possessed. Then, they knelt in near-unison. Eerily silent suddenly, except for the drums, pounding away ominously.

The air smelled like sulfur and mold.

Polla's comm beeped again. She glanced down at her wrist.

NO TK Cllr off! Vimp!

"Where is Vimp?" she demanded. "They… should be here."

"Vimp?" Tenny-bro frowned. "I'm afraid I don't know. We had all of your old servants purged."

"I could have yours purged as w-" Zaalbar's low rumble half-drowned out the rest of her response.

Their path widened, as they approached the temple steps, which were blocked by a row of guards. Ahead of them, at the top of the stairs was a hover lift covered in flowers. From this angle, it looked like an extra floater from a parade at Pioneer Day, back home.

The guards parted, letting them pass. Polla kept her chin up. The mask was playing hell with her peripherals. How the frack had the real Revan worn one? Was it a Force thing? Maybe Jedi could see through metal? She squinted. On top of the stairs, resting atop the hover lift was what looked like a long, metallic box, tied with several blood-red bows.

"This must be the surprise?" Polla guessed. It looked like a coffin, which… really, shouldn't have come as a shock.

*Please don't let it be anyone I know or anyone rotting and decomposed because I don't want to be fracking sick all over Revan's welcome back to evil party….*

*Frack. What if she really is evil?* It occurred to Polla that this was a thought she should have had before.

"Well?" Takan and Zepth had stopped walking. Their eyes—and a hundred other red, glowing ones besides—all looked at Polla, expectantly.

"What?" She'd missed something. Carth touched her arm. When she swung her head around, she couldn't see Tenny-bro, and that made her nervous.
"I just said-" Creepazoid raised his voice, echoing it through a dozen sents near them, including the guards. "I just said, your surprise arrived early. We were able to use an unmanned ship for transport since we didn't have to worry about life support! I hope you appreciate the effort."

Carth's steps faltered. He must have gotten who it was immediately, but Polla was still focused on what the frack Revan had meant with her acronyms, and trying to convince herself that just because something looked like a coffin didn't mean it was one, and how the frack was she not going to trip going up the steps in these robes.

"No," the Republic hero whispered. He dropped Polla's hand, broke into a run.

Zaalbar roared and the Tee-Three beeped. The Tee even launched itself after him, moving in repulsor jets faster than anything Polla had ever seen on an astromech before.

Ahead of them, two red-robed figures abruptly produced glowing blue quarterstaffs and crossed them together, blocking his way.

"No!" Carth repeated. "Bastard! You… you murderer!" His hands went to his blasters and for a sec, it looked like he was about to shoot the guards—but a rapid-fire blast of Shyriiwook and droid beeps stopped him in his tracks.

"Alive?" He turned his head towards the Tee as if it knew. "He's alive? Are… are you sure, Mission?"

"Carth?" Everyone was looking at them. Of course, because we're the stars of this fracking nova. Polla walked forward, craning her neck to see. At her approach, both guards retreated, kneeling at her feet, in a way that… might have been funny, were their situation less fracked.

The coffin-shaped plat on the hoverlift that was covered in red bows had green, blinking lights on its side and the frozen features of a man, inset like some kind of frieze. It still took her Polla sec to figure out who the man was, because really, the kid could be anyone with his mouth frozen open screaming like that.

"Is that... a carbonite chamber?" she ventured, finally. "You froze… Darth Malak in carbonite, just for me?"

"I suppose his old face was more familiar," Zepth said. The asshole brought the Zabrak's boy's hands together as if he was clapping with glee. "What shall we do first: thaw out your consort? Remove your collar? Have lunch and then the tour?"

How about grab Carth's carbsicled son and leave? But there were thousands of sents surrounding them, and the Hawk was low on fuel, and Polla didn't think even the real Revan could get them out of this one.

"The tour," she shrugged. Figure out the bolt holes first. Idiots didn't even lock down the Hawk. It's just sitting there on the landing pad waiting for us to come back. As soon as Real Revan shows up with Sei, we're outta here. She can keep this fracking planet and this fracking Sith Empire of… dirt.

The Emperor chuckled. "As you wish."

Xxx

There was a song that Morgana used to play when they were first living together. A song she'd sing
along to in the fresher when she thought Carth couldn't hear. She had a sweet voice, although rarely in tune. Carth remembered the melody, but only a snatch of the verse: something about 'not knowing what you've got til it's gone.'

Now, as Carth held the hand of the woman who had never been his wife, walking with her up the steps to the frozen carbonite statue of his son, on a Sith planet beyond the reach of any star chart he'd ever seen, that song was stuck in his head like a scratched holodisk.

"He'd better be okay," he muttered at Zepth. The poor kid was still possessed, him and Takan both, like Tenebrae wanted a stereo view.

Dustil's mouth was frozen in the rictus of a scream, his hands twisted like claws. It looked like he-or Malak-had gone down fighting.

Xxx

"He's a fighter," the Besalisk observed, holding the squalling red-faced infant upside-down by one claw. "You can say that!"

"Good," Morgana smiled up at Carth. "This world needs more fighters, doesn't it?"

"That a knock against the Fleet pilots?" Smiling, Carth brushed her hair back from her forehead and planted a kiss there. "Because I think our kid's gonna be an interstellar pilot, not just one of you grav-jockies."

"He'll be what he'll be," Morgana murmured. "But it might be nice to have an Onasi man closer to home."

Xxx

Home.

Say, somehow they got out of this blasted mess. Then what? Coruscant was a cesspool, Telos was still radioactive—even if one of the restoration projects finally had got off ground. Sure, Zaalbar would welcome them back to Kashyyyk, but what would Dustil do on Kashyyyk? Would Dustil even want to stay?

Would… would Carth?

Would Revan?

Polla Organa kept walking. She seemed calm, but her hand trembled in his, warm, even through those gloves she had on.

The doors to the Sith tomb—or whatever it was—were at least ten meters high. They opened into an arched, empty room, hung with banners that all had the same red and black gear symbol Carth had come to associate with the Sith. The cloth was new and bright, contrasting strangely with the weathered stone. It wasn't until they crossed the expanse and reached a side corridor that Carth noticed the dust in the corners, what looked like spider roach webs above in the rafters. The air smelled musty with disuse.

"This is your suite." Tenebrae was possessing the two kids as well as six other servants now, escorting them through hall after hall of cold, stone walls, complete with lurid frescoes out of some Holovid villain's lair. "The three of you—and your… animal—should be quite… comfortable."
Zaalbar's lips pulled back from his teeth, but he had the sense not to say anything.

Comfortable? Yeah, right. If they had ice in their veins. The rooms all led into one another, elaborate archways opening like the cabins on a warbird. Everything was stone. Damned if even the bed didn't look like it was made of stone. It was big enough for six. Apparently, True Sith didn't believe in sheets.

Pollana walked over the stone table set by the suite's only window and peered out of it. "It's very… rustic," she offered. "Do we really need so many guards outside?"

"We have our rebel factions," Takan's body chuckled. "I would hate something to happen to you before our union is complete."

"Right. Wouldn't want that." She glanced at the door, mask making her face a blank oval. "Leave. Now."

The six escorts turned and walked in unison out the door, which slid shut behind them.

"You too, Lord Emperor." She pointed at both of the Zabrak kids.

"After you." He gestured towards the door. "We have business to attend to, you and me. I thought we could eat in the small, dark blue dining room? It's quite right for two. I'm already waiting for you there, in a form you will find familiar."

"You… are?" Waver like panic in her voice. "Good luck with that one, because I'm pretty busy. We have to unpack, and… do things."

"I'm afraid I must insist."

Pollana's masked face turned towards Carth and then back. He watched her hands curl into fists, then one of them fall, almost casually to the holster at her belt. "No," she said. "I'm afraid I must insist. To the hell with y-"

The next instant she was splayed on the ground, hands and legs outstretched, making a hoarse, gasping sound.

Above her, Takan chuckled. "I may have been too indulgent of late. Remember our balance, Revan? At the moment you are merely my dirt daughter. A fleshling as helpless as all the rest."

Tenebrae's hand was out like he was doing this to her. He lowered it, and Pollana's entire body almost seemed to flatten under an invisible weight-

The world went white-

And then Pollana lying on her side on the floor with the mask off, gasping, and Carth had both blasters in his hands. Pointed at her. At her. He looked up. Zaalbar was now in restraints, and ten Sith guardsmen with glowing sticks surrounded them all.

"...of a ronto. And frack your mother too!" Mission added. All the lights on her dome were flashing red.

*Five minutes,* he cursed to himself. *This much of the world can change in five minutes.* They'd timed it over and over. The huttspawn couldn't possess him for longer than that, never seemed to be able to do over and over-

*And some day, he won't be able to do it at all. Somehow. We'll find a way. I will.*
Carth was very, very tired of being jerked around.

"You see, Revan?" The chuckle was ancient. It didn't belong to the face of a kid younger than Dustil. "You cannot win. Not when I hold your leash."

Even under the robes, Carth could see the smuggler's panic: chest heaving, hands shaking as they reached for the mask. She clambered to her feet.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

Polla's breath hitched, as she adjusted the mask back on her face. "Sure." She shook her head.

Then she practically fell into his arms. She was stiff and shaking, with his hands still holding blasters clasped awkwardly around her waist. A stranger in a mask.

"It's going to be okay," he lied. "I've got you."

"Give me one of those guns." Her voice was muffled against his jacket, raspy and metallic through the mask's mic, as she plucked one from his hand. "You can have the Aratech back. I want the disrupter. Something the asshole can't deflect."

The pistol he'd given her earlier was gone from her hips. It took Carth another second to notice it, on the floor.

She already tried to shoot him. She tried to shoot one of the kids when Tenebrae was in them and he was trying to crush her-

"Be careful." Don't kill the kids, it's not their fault-

"Two days," she muttered half under her breath. "Then it's all her show. Who the frack is Vimp? What's a cler? Clurr?"

"What?" It took Carth a moment. "You heard from her? Again?"

He'd hardly dared believe her the first time she whispered it in his ear, both of them standing awkwardly in the fresher, because Tenebrae was too fastidious to 'spend time with bodily functions,' as he'd put it.

"Uh huh." She flashed him her wrist. She was wearing the comm openly, brazenly. Just like the ridiculous five lightsabers still dangling from her belt.

The abbreviated Aurebesh was as familiar as Fleet commands.

**Don't take the collar off. Very important.**

*No kidding, Freckles.*

Carth frowned. He had expected… more, somehow. Something.

*She's too busy to send you a love letter.*

"Two days?" He whispered. "What else did she say?"

"I got the earlier one. ETA two days. This was his summer palace. And we need to not die." Her voice was a hoarse rasp in his ear.
That... almost sounded like her. "We won't," he promised. "No dying."

"Who the frack is vimp?"

"Very important."

"What?" She squinted at him. "What's very important?"

"Not to-"

"What was that now?" Tenebrae speaking in unison behind them. "I do love your plots and counterpoints, Revan!"

"Frack you," she snarled, pulling away from Carth. "When I get the Force back I'll make you pay. I'll strip the flesh from your bones!"

Xxx

In wartime, you get used to a lot of hopeless crusades. Desperate stands. Times you don't expect to win, but you fight because there's nothing else to do. When Mission broke them out of Malak's torture cells on the Leviathan, Carth hadn't expected to make it. His goals had abruptly narrowed down to a sniper's scope: kill Saul Karath. That had been all that was left—all that was allowed.

To hope for more was tempting the fates.

Xxx

Two days. Are you expecting her to save you? Two days and then two dark lords will be here: Revan and Malak both. Two days and then what?

Who are you saving here, Onasi? What's the real objective?

His thoughts were brutal. Ruthless. He almost wished he had orders, that the decision would rest with someone else.

But you left the Fleet. You saved her before. This is on you.

"Hang on a sec." Mission's voice. "What's happening in two days?"

Behind her, the guards and servants filed out again-one-by-one. Carth automatically noted Mission's position by the door and Zaal's opposite.

"Need to know, Tee." Polla's voice sounded tired. "Hey, mind if my droid tags along to our dinner, Teneb-Tenny-bro?"

"In fact, I do mind. Oh, ho. But-" the Zabrak kid gestured. A click and the two halves of the Force collar around her neck clattered to the floor. "If you want to strip the flesh from this vessel's bones right now, that's fine."

Zepth's body took a step away from Takan as if to give her room. They both had the same, fixed smile on their faces.

The door slid shut behind the last of the guards.

Polla froze.
Carth froze.

Zaalbar whimpered something at Mission, too fast to catch.

Polla kicked one of the collar pieces across the floor. It clattered. She folded her arms, her stance too poised to be real. "Thanks, but I'm rather fond of these two. Kind of a matched set. You know?"

"Hmm..." Zepth circled her, like a kath after a scent. Takan stood still, and somehow that was worse. "That's odd. I can't sense-"

"You have no sense." But it was obvious that her confidence was rattled, her imperious manner slipping.

Zaalbar whined.

"Very odd. Did the Jedi do this? I can't sense you at all."

The Zabrak kid lifted his hand, and a jet of blue light sparked, knocking Polla to the ground before any of them could stop it.

Polla yelped, a helpless, high, thin sound that set Carth's heart on edge. She yelped and scrambled away, rolling desperately across the floor, as Carth jumped in front of her, as Zaalbar jumped in front of him, as Mission's voice blasted behind them both.

Somehow the mask Polla was wearing fell off again, went spinning across the floor and into a corner.

"Leave her alone!" Mission commanded, sounding exactly like the real Revan. "Or I swear I'll blast your face off!" Mission extended the flamethrower they'd installed on her chassis.

"Will you?" Zepth had that crazed smile on his face. "Who is she?"

"I'm the actress she hired to keep you distracted," muttered Polla from the floor. "And you're fracked, because Revan's coming here now to kick your ass, Tenny bro. In the flesh."

Polla scrambled to her feet, one hand holding the blaster, but her gloves were torn and she favored one side now as if he'd burned her. She holstered the blaster and pulled out one of the lightsabers instead, holding it out gingerly, as her fingers fumbled at the switch.


"That's right," Mission added. "I'm coming for you, Tenebrae. And I'll leave your entire planet a scorched hellhole... so frack off."

"In two days," added Polla, still fumbling with the lightsaber.

It's probably Force-locked. Some of them are. All he could do was shake his head.

She shot him a puzzled frown.

"Soon," Mission snapped. "She is merely my harbinger. My servant. Because... I mean, obviously, this was a trap. So... release my servants and I'll get here. When I'm good and ready. But if you harm them...." She let her voice trail off, ominously.

"In two days," Polla repeated. But she glanced at Carth again, not Mission. "You... uh, sent me word already, Lord Revan."
"Always keep the element of surprise," Mission snapped. "Maybe it will be two days. Maybe two years. But I will raze this installation into ashes. I will make all that you possess empty stardust. I will end you, Teneb-"

"Shut up," Polla snapped at her. "You're coming here in two days. You… promised."

"Did I?" Mission almost sounded like herself for a second.

"You know you did-" Real panic in Polla's voice now. A half hysterical sob. "Fracking hell, Revan Starfire, you-"

White light. A blink. A heartbeat, and then Polla was standing, holding a lit lightsaber, holding it all wrong with her left hand. A different one than the one before-maybe. Two others were scattered on the floor as if she'd dropped-or discarded them too.

The green blade wavered a little as she pointed it at the Zabrak kids.

Their eyes weren't glowing now. They looked terrified, not even going for their own weapons.

"I said, don't move!" Polla hissed again. The blaster was in her injured hand, and several bolts lined the wall between the kids-so neatly spaced they could have been run by an auto-cannon. "Next time, I won't miss!"

The room's electronic display by the wall was a scorched and smoking mess, as if she'd shoved a lightsaber into it.

Zaalbar had his own vibroblade out too. And Mission was across the room, plugged into what remained of the terminal. The door's seals appeared to have been sealed shut. There were shouts coming from outside. Shouts and what sounded explosions.

"Ten minutes, sis," Mission chimed. "Maybe? We have about five minutes before they break down those doors… or… maybe twenty, if they're dumb. There's an access panel overhead, it'll be a tight squeeze for Big Z, but we can make it work."

Polla's eyes met Carth's, across the wavering, green line of her particle blade. "You back?"

"Yes." He drew his blaster, but frack if he could shoot the kids. It wasn't their fault! It wouldn't stop anything.

"The Tee and Zaalbar think they can get us out of here." Her eyes flickered warily towards the kids and then back to him. "Knock them out and let's go."

"We want to help," Takan interrupted. Takan and not Zepth. The kid had picked a hell of time to join the side of the angels. "She's right. He's coming back. It won't be long-he only left because he doesn't like to die and you were shooting-"

"I wasn't going to kill you." Polla sighed. "So he runs when one of his zombies gets killed?" She fumbled with the lightsaber, shoving her blaster back in her belt. "Asshole."

Carth was strangely happy he didn't need to plead for their lives. His wife would have-he wasn't sure what the real Revan would have done. What she would do.

_She's coming here. We just need to make it until then. She's coming here to rescue us. I need to have faith in that, let go of my fears._
Zepth jerked, stiff to attention. His eyes began to glow again.

"Oh, no," Zaalbar groaned.

"What game is this?" Zepth and Takan were speaking in unison. Again. "Where is the real Revan Starfire?"

"Coming for your ass, loser." Polla nodded at Carth. "Two days. Like I said. We're just the intro."

"Oh!" Takan's hands clapped together stiffly. "This is extraord-"

Carth thumbed the catch off his blaster, dialing it down to stun and fired before the emperor could finish the sentence. One. Two. The kids collapsed like balloons in a gravity well.

"They're stunned," he announced. We have fifteen minutes-maybe." Carth found his voice. "Maybe... before he can get in me again, but you should knock me out too. The three of you should run-if I stay here they won't kill me. Not when they know she's really coming-"

And someone needs to protect these kids.

"You want us to leave carbsicle here with you?" Polla frowned. She waved the still-lit lightsaber around, so carelessly it made him wince.

Xxx

"Huh." Polla raised an eyebrow at the dead Sith governor of Taris. "Nice shot, Onasi. Is that a real lightsaber?" She bent down and picked it up.

Remembering what had happened in the conapt with the blaster, Carth winced; but Polla Organa tossed the thing easily in her hand, weighing the hilt.

"Feels off," she muttered.

"You're an expert now at lightsabers too?" She'd be a good fighter, if she didn't keep putting herself in insane situations, acting like she was invincible.

"How hard can it be?" Polla did something, and the thing actually ignited from both sides, hissing red.

"Two particle blades?" Carth laughed, mainly to hide his unease. "Come on now, how does anyone fight like-"

Polla twisted the weapon in her hand, for a millisecond, the blades seemed to spin, flashing in a perfect, deadly circle.

"Careful-" he warned her. "You can't just pick that up and-"

The hilt flipped out of her hand and sank into a wall, then deactivated with a sharp click, clattering to the floor.

"Did I do that?" Polla didn't even sound sure. "Was that me, or-"

"Scout Organa." Bastila's voice was like ice. She and the Tee-Three they'd picked up stood in the doorway. "The astromech has downloaded the codes we need to pass the blockade. The mercenary is waiting for us in the cantina. Leave... that alone."
"Thought you might want a freaking laser sword," Polla muttered. "Since you lost yours."

Bastila made an exasperated noise but then raised her hand. Incredibly, the governor's weapon flew into her hand like it was magnetized.

Carth had worked with Jedi in Fleet, even had General Revan herself comm him congratulations. He'd had that asshole Malak D'Reev try to read his mind, heard Kavar Vaklu speak at the Fleet Academy, and certainly had enough lectures from Masters Ancilla and We'kai on the doomed Endar Spire; but he'd never actually seen the Force in action, not like the grounders talked about. Lightning, making the ground shake, freezing blaster bolts in midair... it half sounded like magic.

A part of him, had maybe never really... believed. Until now.

The lightsaber flew into Bastila Shan's hand like it had been magnetized. She spun it around unlit twice herself—but then, when her fingers opened, it flipped over, actually floating in the air before pinwheeling slowly back down to the ground.

"Ugh." Hope of the Republic made a face, and kicked it across the floor. "The weight's all wrong. It's... garbage."

"Told you," Polla muttered.

"We will keep our feet firmly on the path ahead," the Jedi murmured. The words sounded like a prayer.

Xxx

"How do I switch this thing off?" the real Polla asked. "How come there's no weight in the blade?"

"Just put it down," Carth tried to stay calm. "They... have some kind of auto-switch that kicks in, when a Jedi isn't controlling the blade."

How far he'd come, from wondering if the Force was real.

"You want me to leave it for carbsicle? The others... I think they're broken." Polla set it down gingerly. The thing sparked for a second longer than Carth liked on the floor, but then it switched off.

"No." He didn't want to do this. But everything logical said it was the best option. If I go with them, Tenebrae will follow. And what will happen to the Zabrak kids? If Dustil stays with me, the Emperor will have no reason not to hunt the rest of them down. They'll have .

"You're taking Dustil with you," Carth ordered her. "I'll stay here with the kids."

"Huh?" Polla frowned and shook her head. "No. No way. We can't leave you behind."

"I don't like this," warned Zaalbar.

"Take Dustil with you," Carth repeated. "Zaalbar can carry him, he's probably the safest of us all frozen like that-"

"Don't be dumb," Mission chirped. "We all need to split together. You think they bought that Revan's really coming thing?"

"But she is." Wasn't she? Wasn't she? Had Polla lied?
"Yeah. She'll be here in two days. She commed." Polla had already moved across the room, shoving the deactivated blade back on her belt with the others. Now, she was kneeling in front of Dustil's carbonite frame, swiveling the dials. "One sec."

"What are you doing?" He went to her. She'd turned all the dials back down to nothing. "You can't unthaw-"

"Wait. Waitaminute. You've been talking to Polla Revan? Really? This is… ginormous? Why didn't you tell me?" Mission was using Revan's voice again, low and furious, but Polla didn't even turn her head. Instead, she held up her hand, motioning them both to silence.

"I told Carth. I told all of you just now. With Tenny-bro."

"But not me and Big Z? Before?"

"Need to know." The Deralian glanced over at Zaalbar. "I would have told you, Furguy, but we were never alone together. Anyway, now you know. Big, bad real Revan's coming to get us out of this mess. She promised." Polla made a face. "Also, she's kind of a bitch."

Carth had assumed they knew. It was dangerous to speak freely, with Takan's loyalty in question, and all three of them capable of being possessed at any time. But he'd assumed that Polla would have pulled them both aside, warned them, given Mission time to come up with a plan- But she had never even given Zaalbar the comm. That crazy kid had tried to handle it all herself.

Achingly familiar, as a response. Revan had done the same far too often. Up until the end.

Xxx

"I've got this, flyboy." The sun had reddened Revan's nose-strangely at odds with the black robes she'd started wearing for show on Korriban, and for some reason, never removed. "Whatever's in that Sith temple, it's something I put there. This is my problem. My fault. My fight."

"Dumb kids," Jolee muttered, glancing at Juhani. She gave him an imperceptible nod, and then and there, Carth knew they'd follow Revan into that blasted temple no matter what she commanded.

"You already said it's like, Jedi-only." Mission adjusted the clasps of her body armor. "But I don't see why you can't take Jolee and Juhani. We're a team, right?"

"No tree has one leaf," Zaalbar added.

Canderous shrugged, and went back to polishing his repeater. "Dar'jettai osik," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't follow me," Revan said to Juhani, as if she knew they would. "I mean it. This is… real darkness. The less of us we risk the better."

"Oh? You know there are real Dark Jedi in there too, kid?" Jolee folded his arms and snorted. "Course you do. And we can sense them, same as you. You think you can take on a dozen? Two dozen? All on your lonesome? Or you think they're gonna throw you some welcome home party?" He frowned. "Truth, I'm not sure what's worse."

Revan glanced up at the sky, where the hulk of the Star Forge loomed overhead; visible, even through the endless blue distortion of the energy shield they needed to bring down.
"Yes." Her voice was dead. "In this place… I can beat them all. Don't ask me how I know, but I can… I can hear it. There's… power here. And it's… mine."

"Sure that's not just the Sith crazy?" Jolee frowned. "Be careful, kid."

Sometimes Carth wondered. If she'd had nothing to sacrifice. If the lives of her friends hadn't been in her way… would Revan have fallen at all?

Or would she have returned with not just Bastila, but an army of Dark Jedi at her back?

XxX

"Don't-" his protest to Polla was too late. Even as Carth watched, the carbonite glowed white-eyed around his son's face, glowed and dissolved. Dustil's body flopped to the floor in a hiss of steam. "You can't just-we need a medic!"

"No time." Polla pushed her mask up over her hair. "He's got the Force? We need him to fight all of these fracking Sith-especially if we don't have you."

"You can't just… unfreeze someone from carbonite and expect them to fight!"

"Revan's not actually coming here." Mission's voice was stubborn. "She would've commed me. I'd know."

"You're a droid." Polla sighed. "I know everyone around here mankafoots around that fact; but it's true. You're only a droid. Her coming was need-to-know. Your orders are to get us to a fracking safe spot. Now."

"Do something, friend Carth," Zaalbar groaned. "They are both lost cubs in this place."

On the floor next to Polla, his son's body twitched, and gasped, mouth opening wide-

"Dustil." Carth threw himself down, grabbed his son's hands, stared into the wild-eyed eyes that didn't seem to be able to focus. Were they Sith yellow, or was that a trick of the light? "Dustil, I'm here." He squeezed his son's hands.

"You think Revan's a bitch, Polla Organa?" Mission made those words in Basic mechanical, like a real droid's voice. "Observation: You are hopelessly naive. If your deliberate… ignorance regarding my true capacity has obstructed the real Revan's plans, I will be forced to terminate our alliance. Permanently."

"Red," Dustil whispered. His eyes blinked rapidly but didn't seem to see. Carbonite blindness. Carth had heard of it, just like he'd heard about the Fleet using carbonite to transfer prisoners too dangerous for conventional methods; but he'd never seen it before. "Where is she? She's supposed to be here."

Carth dropped his son's hands, hysteria a bitter pill in his throat. "She's coming," he said dully. "She's coming, Malak."

"Captain?" The asshole was surprised, at least. His son's blind eyes turned towards Carth, unfocused, shot with red. Were they yellow? Or was the carbonite effect? The light? "Your son is… here. We are all… here."

The two Zabrak kids were still unconscious on the floor. Carth had only heard of carbonite freezing-smugglers used it, maybe some less than savory branches of the SIS; but Dustil wouldn't
be able to walk—not right away. *Even if he's still Malak.*

"Dustil, if you can hear me, I'll see you soon. You need to carry him, Zaalbar."

"Yes." The Wookiee crouched down next to his son's body. "We need to go."

Would Malak kill Polla? "Revan's coming here, Malak. But I swear to the stars if you let any harm come to any of us, I'll…." *How can you harm a ghost?* Carth had spent more sleepless nights than he could count pondering that question.

"I'll shoot him first, flyboy. No big deal." Mission was using Revan's voice, all wrong. "Unlike some people, you should have faith in my abilities by now."

"Go now," he told them. Zaalbar already had the access panel open, was scooping Dustil's barely conscious body into his arms. "If I stay here, he won't… he won't know where you are."

Polla frowned at him, then nodded slowly. "Here." She unsnapped the comm from her wrist. "Take this, okay? And actually fracking comm her. Not like it's blowing any secrets now." She forced a smile. "Tell Seiran I said hi. See him soon."

"Then how-?" And then he got it. "Mission. You still have the codes to Revan's commlink?"

"Tell her she'd better pick up this time," Mission snapped. "I don't know what I did to make her mad at me, but she hasn't commed in ages!"

Carth did know. He remembered his wife, head in her hands, holding the guilt of the Organa deaths like a blaster to her own head.

Xxx

"Mission could have done this, Carth. She has the ability, and she's-changed. She's not—I don't trust her."

"No one changes that much." But he had wondered too. The headset she'd used to link directly to the droid had remained where it was until he took it himself, what seemed like ages ago, when he and Canderous fled the Jedi Temple with Revan's son—

Xxx

*But Polla's alive. And Revan knows that now. And she's coming here. Here to another fracking Sith place, where she was a Sith before. Here to where her old husband, Malak D'Reev is Force-possessing the body of my son…"

*I have to give her a chance.*

"She'll talk to you now, I think, Mission."

He hoped.

Xxx

The world was black and the Force screamed: the dull drone of fear, and hate, and anger so typical to a Sith planet. Malak's face was buried deep in something furred that smelled foul-like musk and blood and fear. His body was boneless, bent and wrong—and the Captain's voice, the one familiar point was silenced.
It took some time for consciousness enough to return to register the familiar: the taint in the Force so familiar, what he had known all along confirmed.

*Kaas. This is Dromund Kaas.*

*I can't see!* The Telosian boy's voice, a panicked squeal in his thoughts. *Was that my father? I heard him! How the frack is my father here?*

The world shook and jostled and Malak had no answers in the darkness.

And yet, a part of him reached out stretching across stars towards the light-

Xxx

The door slid open, illuminating the darkened room. A man's silhouette in the frame. Tall and fat, almost familiar.

"I thought Vrook and that Twi'lek would never leave." Over-enunciated voice. "Given the circumstances, it seemed prudent to wait for their departure before revealing myself."

Where Mekel was, there was light and seeing. They stretched towards it across stars-

All three minds all collided again like a hover train coupling. *You're back. Where the frack were you I thought you were dead. Not dead. Contained in carbonite. Tenebrae shipped us to Dromund Kaas, I think. Revan is here, he said, but I cannot sense her-*

*Frack you, Malak. We don't give a frack. Telos! You're back!*

Relief flooded through both of them, loosening their focus enough to snap the world around Mekel Jin into bright relief. Suddenly Dustil was just there, like a pattern overlaid on top of his own. Everything, their thoughts, mingled-

"Master Klee?" Mekk could see. He wasn't blind. Darkness resolved itself into gray and they saw through Mekel's eyes, the Eosian standing in front of him, the medix walls. Mekel realized he’d closed his eyes again, was rubbing them with his fists. When he looked up again, Klee was spackled with red and black afterimages.

*Blind? Telos, why are you blind?*

*Fracking carbonite. I don't know.*

"Mekel? My master will return soon. Whatever he says… know that his real attention is on Dromund Kaas. Revan has distracted him, but she will need our assistance here… as well as there."

"Revan?" Their thoughts blurred. One of them laughed. "Which fracking one?"

*Revan. She is on Kaas. Malak refocused his attention across the stars.*

*See you later, asshole,* one of them thought.

"What?" Master Klee sighed. "How did you know about the actress?"

"Is that what she's calling herself?" Laughter bubbled into hysteria. *You're alive. I thought I was alone…. "Sheris is an actress now?"

"Sheris?" Klee frowned. "I assumed Revan had her killed in the explosion."
They both laughed. Dustil and Mekel… both. Malak wasn't laughing, Malak was distracted someplace else—across the stars, swung over the back of a Wookiee, staring at some red-headed bint in black robes. Their eyes were in and out of focus. Out of focus, she did kind of look like Revan, but in focus—

In focus Mekel suddenly knew where he'd seen her before. At Moms. Hanging out with dear old Lammikins and the Mando'ade like she was practically clan herself.

*Telos? What the frack is that smuggler babe doing on Dromund Kaas?*

Xxx


"Who are you?" Their voice was hoarse, like Malak wasn't making it work right. Dustil should know her name—it had been on the vids. She'd even said it. But frack if they could remember now.

"Pollu." She frowned. "Pollu Organa. Can you walk?" She gestured to her belt. There were like, three fracking lightsabers there. "If I give you a weapon, can you fight?"

They were moving, their body was swaying back and forth, slung over the shoulder of a Wookiee like a tub of meat.

"What is that smuggler… babe doing on Dromund Kaas?" It was like an echo. Malak's voice, their thoughts. All three, too mixed.

"Babe, huh?" The smuggler raised her eyebrow. She had one of Dad's blasters on her belt. He'd recognize it anywhere. "A frack load of mistaken ident."

"I sealed the blast doors behind us. Pathetically easy!" A new voice interrupted from somewhere behind the Wookiee. Feminine. Smug. Familiar. "Do you think some droid could hack into a Sith fortress and seal this passageway from outside intrusion?" Familiar whir of astromech treads. Even though she'd put a bomb in his neck, Mekk sent a surge of happiness through the bond at the sound of her fake, fracking, vodered voice. "No. A regular old droid couldn't do this. I have a name, Polla Organa, and you'd better start using it."

"Mission!" Mekel seized total control for a sec, struggling in Dustil's body; bringing him to the forefront enough to struggle in the Wookiee's arms. "Put me—put us—down."

"Us?" Polla Organa tilted her head. "Us who?"

Blue rolled up to them. Someone needed to touch up that orchid on her chassis again. Her dome flashed. "Sithboy? Not Sith Lord?"

"Yeah. Mostly. It's kind of hard to explain—"

Mekk was actually happy, but then again, he had a body safe on Coru. Dustil forced the feeling of jealousy away before he had to think about what and who he was really jealous of.

*Let me do this, Mekk. Let me talk to her. Keep Malak the frack away—*

*If you want to speak to Red's memory template or her droid, I have no objection.* Malak's thought was distracted—obviously more interested in Master Klee, now that his wife wasn't in the picture.
"Oh!" Mission beeped, swiveling her dome around. "Guys, take the right-hand fork up ahead. I'm glad to see you, Dustil. Your… carapace is a real mess."

"I was just frozen in carbonite" It had left a fine, gray dust on their-his-clothes.

"Yeah." They both stepped aside, let Telos take over. Mekel felt his own invisible arms envelop the other boy, pushing Malak back to Coru, all the way back. "We-I can walk. It's… okay. What the frack… what the frack's going on?"

"Well…" the smuggler began.

"Stow it," Mission chirped. "We really do need to keep moving through these tunnels."

Despite Dustil's protests, Zaalbar's arms tightened their grip.

Xxx

"Mekel. Listen to me." A hand on the boy's arm squeezed it sharply, jerking him upright and sending another lance of pain to his gut. "Tenebrae will possess me. Soon. He can control Malak through you. He hopes to control Revan in this way. Through your Force bond. If one of you dies, so does the other. Do you understand?"

Dark laughter. In two places at once. Malak's concentration splintered away from the woman who wasn't Revan, the obsession with the droid, back to here. "I comprehend more fully than I ever did before, Klee. Where is my wife now?"

The Eosian took a step back, dropping their arm. "Not here. Somehow she arranged to have some minor actress kidnapped in her stead-"

"In addition to the Organa woman?" All Malak's laughter now. He felt the other two splinter away, their attention captured by that droid and the woman who was the smuggler the Jedi used for Revan's mindwipe? On Kaas? "Oh, Red. What kind of game is this?"

"Organa-?" the Eosian shrugged. "I don't… there is much I do not know."

Xxx

Not really that hot, all this Sith banthashit. She looked better in that dress.

Dustil realized that Mekel was leering at Polla Organa and made him stop. "Put me down," he muttered, even as the world tilted and stretched between Coru and Kaas again. "We can fracking walk, okay?"

"Dustil?" The droid-Mekk kept stubbornly calling 'Blue,' like she was Mission, beeped at him again. "You look like hell."

"Right back at you." He struggled in Zaalbar's arms until the Wookiee set him down upright. Things came more into focus, which didn't make things any better, as that revealed that they were basically trekking through a dusty ventilation shaft. Probably straight into a turbine fan, if I know Sith engineering. "How the frack did you guys get here?"

"It's a long story," the smuggler muttered. "But the good news is, Revan's coming to rescue us in two days. She commed and told me. And Seiran-my husband's-with her. So this is temporary." The woman took a deep breath. "We just need to break out of this evil Sith fortress and hide out for two days."
"Oh. No fracking problem then." Upright, the world was slightly more unsteady than he'd expected. He wobbled and then Zaalbar was there, supporting him. "Where the frack is my father?"

The Wookiee yowled something that sounded like a question.

"He wants to know if you're okay now. He says you smell like rotten meat and… dark wood. Rotten? There's no real idiom."

"Evil?" Polla suggested. "Are you possessed by Darth Malak and evil?" Her hand, Dustil realized suddenly was resting on the hip of her belt, fingers curved next to his father's blaster.

"Yeah—I mean, no. I'm not fracking evil." Mostly. He had to concentrate not to see a different room. A different place. To keep Malak back, but Malak was distracted, now, talking to Master fracking Klee, of all sents—and Mekel was surprisingly quiet, caught between them like a tethering line. "My father was… he was here. Why did we leave my dad back there?"

"Because he ordered us to." Polla grimaced, squeezing past him and Zaalbar, looking down the shaft in front of them. "Huh. Can we jump over that?"

The Wookiee moaned.

"He says he can jump and throw us cubs."

"Great." It figured. Here comes Father to rescue me and—wait! There he goes again, off to save someone else, leaving me to be tossed around by a Wookiee. Thanks a frack of a lot, Dad!

"I disabled their security cams, but I can't do anything about the Force-sniffers." Mission rolled closer. "Sith can… sense other Sith? Right? Or… whatever you are, Dustil?"

"Sometimes." They had trained for that. "There's ways to hide, but I never paid enough attention—"

But I did. Revan taught me. Mekel, there again, like warm breath on his neck. He nodded their head. "We can hide, Blue. No prob."

It felt like flipping a switch, the way Mekel did it. One second they were there—and the next—Flip side was, it was hard to see with the Force when you were masking it. Like walking around with a blast shield on your head.

"Dustil?" The Tee-Three sounded confused. "The oscillations of your voice just shifted by a percentage of nine degrees away from the relative alpha sine—"

"Because it's me, Blue." Mekel pushed through. "I'm here too."

"Who is me?" Polla interrupted.

Zaalbar whined, seemingly asking the same thing.

"Mekel Jin. I met you… at my moms' brothel."

"That just seems like a wrong sentence," Polla muttered. "Oh! You were that kid, with the Mandalorians? Right. But how…? Did you die too or something?"

"No."

Zaalbar growled softly.
"He smells more bad wood approaching. Or evil... whatever." Mission frowned. "There's an exit up ahead, leads to one of the vent turbines. We'll disable the blades and then cut through the forcefield, if there is one... and then... jump. I think it's kind of a long drop. Did you guys bring any rope?"

"Rope?" Polla Organa snorted. "No."

"We'll figure something out," the Tee-Three said. "I think it's only like, twenty meters. No big deal."

Xxx

"Sit." Molla Organa had led them to the front sitting room, the one for company and not the back living room, with the vids and the auto-cooker and the pneumatic couch. "I'll fetch the interstellar comm."

"Mother?" Korrie squeezed her hand again. "You can't call her. You can't call anyone. She said not to."

"We can't just... stay here, Korrie." Molla Organa had already vanished down the hall, her feet beating the sound to the door, but Polla kept her voice quiet still the same.

"Why not?" Her son frowned. "You can dye your hair too. We're ages away from the Core. And Batti says if I keep practicing, I can ride Dancer solo soon."

"Dancer-"

XXX

The hessi's meter-long tongue swiped at her hair, tangling the strands as she waved the brush at him threateningly.

"Stay still!" Polla said. "I need to finish brushing those mats out before the competition."

The hessi stomped his eight clawed hooves and switched his tail. His ears swung back, and his tongue retracted, exposing sharp, pointed teeth.

"He doesn't speak Basic, Pollie." Da sounded like he was going to laugh, not help, leaning over the fence post. "Animals respond to tone, not words. You gotta coax him. Sweet talk." He made a series of clucking noises and the hessi's ears swiveled in his direction. "Here. Give me the brush-"

XXX

"Dancer's... Real? He's still here?"

"He's a hessi," her son rattled on. "They don't keep him on the farm anymore, Aunt Moll says; but he stables with the herd over at the Gerstein's pasture. He's nice. He only bit me once."

"You need to put mud on that," she told him. "Or dermafix, if you've got some."

"Batti sprayed it with some stuff." He displayed an unmarked arm. "The rash went away."

"Good." I didn't use the 'stuff' once and my arm itched for a week. Thought I was gonna take the skin off the way it-

She wiped at her eyes. "You said Darth Revan had a message for me."
"She's not Darth Revan! Not now!" Her son sounded shocked. "She saved us and now she's gonna save everyone!"

Sure. Because that makes sense. Going off to a Sith planet to face an immortal, omnipotent emperor by yourself... totally makes sense.

Maybe it does when you're nine. When Polla Organa was nine, she still believed that a magic throkkà bird came every solstice and left a woven basket full of sweets.

When I was nine, I don't remember anything. Or, almost. The taste of too sweet iced crema and the smell of an ocean.

That could be Polla too, how the frack would I know?

"Mother?" Korrie held out a datachip. "Here it is. The message."

"You said you'd tell me what that message said," Molla reminded her from the door. She had the old-fashioned bulky comm unit (that doubled as a bid projector) in both hands, which she set down on the table with a plunk. "You promised." She sat down next to Revan, dark eyes assessing her coolly. "You know what I think about promise-breakers?"

"That they're scum. Yes." Revan met her eyes and tried not to blink.

Xxx

"I'm not mad that you lied to us, Pollie." Ma was doing the yelling on this one, while Da glowered in the corner. "Sometimes a little lie helps. But you broke your promise. You promised never to take the speeder past Adaston town limits, and you and Sara were halfway to Biscay when that Beya Organa finally told us what was what! What were you thinking? You're not even licensed yet!"

"I just wanted to see the concert." Arguing wouldn't help and she knew that.

"Then you should have taken a runner, like all the other kids. Your word is your binding promise! You can't get by in this galaxy if you break promises."

Xxx

"I won't break my promise," Revan added. "I'll-I'll tell you what she said. My word is my... binding-bond. My word is my bond."

I'll tell you if it's safe. Every irrational instinct Revan had screamed to tell this woman everything. To throw herself in Polla's ma's arms.

"Your word is your bond?" Molla snorted. "Is that some Jedi saying? Because around here we don't trust."

"It's something my mother told me," Revan snapped. "I remember her saying it. Sometimes a little lie helps, but my word is a binding promise."

"Oh." There was a long, slow pause. The creases around the woman's eyes deepened, and she gave a sudden, rude snort, reaching for one of the napkins to wipe her eyes.

"It's... it must be all up there. In your head." Moll's expression softened, and then she blew her nose. Sound like a shot.
Korrie giggled, somewhere in the background, but for a moment, the world was only big enough for two.

"Yes." Revan nodded. Good and bad. "I remember everything, but it's not… me."

"I can almost see it. Her. In you," Moll sounded like she was confessing a secret. "Sometimes. The way you look at me, but then-"

"I'll tell you what Revan says." She wouldn't react, wouldn't let her voice waver. "Because I promised."

"Damn right you will," Moll muttered and plugged the chip into the projector.

Revan's own face, sketched in blue, appeared in front of them, backlit by the wall.

Xxx

Dar sat, straight as a lightsaber, her hair tumbling loosely over her shoulders, mouth thinned to a grim line. It appeared that she had recorded the message in one of the ship's closets.

"Hello, Revan," she began, in Rakatan. "Our son has been instructed to give you this chip. By now, you are no doubt fulminating about my betrayal. Know that it is not one. I am giving you a gift-one that I have never-"

Xxx

"What language is that?" Moll interrupted.

"Rakatan," Revan said, automatically pausing the recording because Ma-Moll never asked only one question. "The language of the Star Forge builders. It's more than thirty thousand years old."

"Everyone knows who the Rakata are!" Moll scoffed. "But you can speak their language?"

"Yes."

"Huh. I didn't know anyone could do that." Molla tilted her head.

Her commentary seemed to be done, so Revan began the recording again.

Xxx

"I am giving you a gift-one that I have never had."

"When Malak and I first found Tenebrae's servant on Rakata Prime, the Star Forge was a deactivated hulk, and the Sith worlds had all regressed to near anarchy. Left to its own devices, the Empire would have splintered into factions, torn itself apart within a generation.

But the Rakatan computer guided us to them. We came and found a man who spoke with Tenebrae's voice. To me. He said that I was their savior. The savior-of the Empire and Republic both."

"It was-"

Xxx
"What's she saying now?" Moll interrupted again.

Revan closed her eyes. "She says an ancient computer sent Malak and her to the Sith on Rakata Prime and told her she could save the galaxy."

Revan would have mocked the conceit of that concept, had the computer not also Revan the same thing on her own quest to find the Star Forge.

*And not only did I believe it, but I gave it the personality of a fourteen-year-old Twi'lek.*

"You can't trust machines," Molla warned.

Bolts set down the tray of tea cakes with an aggrieved whine and stalked away, treads of his feet creaking like they needed oil.

Xxx

*Tenebrae's words were both truth and lies.*

"I was arrogant. Desperate. Being Sith'ae'rah was... difficult. Sometimes I wondered if my gift was a lie. The dark side had made all of us stronger than we had ever been before—even me. Maybe... especially me."

Her own expression grimaced, smiling painfully. Even in the recording, their eyes seemed to meet.

"It would be easy to deny responsibility for all of the unfortunate events that preceded and followed, but I cannot. The Kashyyyk computer offered me its resources. I used them to create the specifications for a mass shadow generator that destroyed all of our ships—and the Mandalorians—at Malachor V. And I knew, even then, what the death of so many would do to the rest of us. That was... planned."

"But I... I envisioned us as galactic enforcers. Our transformation would give us strength to enforce peace. Forever. And the computer promised us weapons and technology, as well as a planet of refuge. Mal and I... I thought that we would recover ourselves on the Rakatan homeworld, then bring our forever peace to the Sith Empire too. Return to a balance between light and dark, before we returned to the Core to conquer it."

"The computer may have made certain... assurances, but the idea behind Malachor V was mine. *Mine.*" Her expression was set in stone. "It had the power to eliminate the Mandalorian threat, but I conceived the means, the vision of our transformation. The deaths at Malachor, the fall of so many Jedi—those are things on my conscience. Not yours, Fragment."

"And that bit?" Molla asked.

"She said Malachor V wasn't my fault." The rest sent an uneasy prickle along the back of her spine. That memory she'd seen in the holocron, a fragment of their fall.

"Malachor... Five? Are there five of you, Korrie?" If Molla was joking, her voice was deadpan.

"No." He shook his head. "Mother means the planet. She had to blow it up to annihilate all the Mandalorians so they wouldn't hurt us again. But a bunch of Jedi died there too. And plain old soldiers, but it was the Jedi dying they needed. Father told me. It was a big, secret trap."
Revan didn't want to imagine Malak's version.

"I can't really see an Organa destroying a planet." Moll frowned. "But I suppose that was just her. Not you."

There was no adequate response, so Revan began the recording again.

Xxx

"I have to consider the possibility that my thoughts were already corrupted. By the computer, or the dark side. Maybe even by Tenebrae. He lies. Know that he lies. He had already possessed Malak on Korriban. Korriban was the last of the maps the computer sent us to, and he was there. It was there that he told me to come to him. He said it was my destiny, the only way to save my husband."

She pushed the hair back from her face. "That was before. Before Malachor. That was when we knew we had to finish what we had begun."

"But I didn't... come to him to save Mal. I took our fleet to Rakata Prime because they had what we needed. I knew that was my destiny—to do what was needed."

In the recording, her image was a washed-out blue. "My destiny, Fragment. Not yours. And it is still."

"Dodonna, Rensha—our most senior Republic advisors—mutinied when they realized that Malachor V had been more than a Mandalorian trap. They took their ships and fled. I don't know what happened to the Jedi aboard those ships. It would have been dangerous to leave them alive. My gift, combined with the others... all Force users within range had been touched with the corruption, the madness from so many deaths, so many Force-sensitive deaths... not that a Null death means less. But theirs are more... quiet. My gift was to shield others, but on that day I did not. On that day, I let the others... the other gifts... amplify their end."

"On that day, I felt everything they did. I became... what I became."

She blinked slowly. "After successfully springing our own trap, I led us into another."

"The Emperor was dying because he was overextended. He created entire worlds populated only by his voice and then forgot about them. Left them to starve, to die, squandered the resources they had, replaced them with nothing. We... all of us, were young. Full of strength and vitality. And I... I had the unique brain chemistry required to activate the Star Forge, restore their resources. He needed us. Me."

"When I realized the-"

Xxx

"Your face," Molla murmured. "I can tell it's bad from your face."

Revan stopped the machine again. "Yeah," she nodded. "Korrie... maybe you should go... play outside?"
"Oh, no." Her son scowled. "I get to hear this too."

"He hears too. You can't coddle them," Molla added. "Least, not when they're supposed to be important mucky-mucks someday."

"Maybe," Korrie qualified. "And maybe I'd prefer to be a hessi jockey or like, a brave Jedi instead."

"Good for you!" Molla Organa tugged his topknot and he smiled back. "You be you, kiddo."

"Tell us the rest, Mother." Her son folded his arms and sat up straight.

Revan took a deep breath. "She says... there was this... computer. And an immortal Sith Emperor who can possess bodies. The computer... brought us to the emperor? And he-the emperor-possessed Malak. *Let's leave out the rest. The rest where I killed a lot of people and tortured the rest of them. Made them Sith. Made them follow me... so I could be some Sith Asshole Emperor's spark coil.*

"Hmmm." Molla raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

"Father was possessed?" Korrie smiled. "And now he possesses people. Cool."

*It's not cool.* "It's not cool, Korrie. It's wrong."

"But isn't it like this Polla lady is possessing you?" Her son fiddled a hole he'd torn in his pants leg, pulling out the threads one-by-one. "I figured that out myself. It's like that." His eyes met hers. "It's not bad, though. You're nice. And she wouldn't be my Aunt Moll if you were just Revan."

"That's true." Molla Organa added. "I didn't raise my daughter to go listening to promises from machines. I think you know that." Her eyes were dark brown and as direct as a shot of vodkar.

Neither of them understood. Which was for the best.

"I need to go after her."

"That may be as may be," Molla said. "But I think you need to listen to what she's saying too, and not go off half-woven."

Revan nodded.

Xxx

"When I realized the bargain we had struck with the Empire was untenable, I attempted to undo it. *Undo him.* The computer helped me create a virus that would make most Force-resistant species immune to his touch-"*

Xxx

"And you trusted it?" *So did I. So did I.*

"Trusted who, now?"

Revan blinked. "Sorry, I mean she... she realized she'd been tricked by the Sith so she had the computer create a virus to stop them."

"The Jedi Plague." Her son smiled at Moll. "That's what we called it on Coruscant. I got
"nokulated. Have you been?"

"Against the Rodian pox," Moll told him. "And Antilles Fever. That's what most folks get around these parts. We should look into your vaxxing, come to think of it."

"Which computer is she talking about?" Korrie's head turned to Revan.

"The one on Kashyyyk. The one that I found… a long time ago. With you." That memory, probably reinforced by seeing the vid the HK had shown her, seemed real as yesterday."

"My dear," Molla Organa sighed. "Didn't anyone ever tell you not to trust ancient machines? Or any machines. Bolts?" She raised her voice. "Speaking of, did you get those cakes for our tea? Bolts?"

"They are here, Mistress." From the sound of it, no one has adjusted the droid's voder in years. He slammed the tray down on the table with more force than necessary, and swiveled around, clanking across the floor on its metal, prehensile toes that seemed too big for the rest of his body.

"Have one." Moll gestured at the plate. "Choca crema. They're her-"

"Favorite. I… remember." Revan couldn't stand choca, but she took one and bit into it, all the same, swallowing and trying not to grimace.

"Hmmm…" Moll was frowning at her.

Xxx

"... A virus that would make most Force-resistant species immune to his touch-and with the assistance of my allies, we began its distribution through Imperial space. My long-term goal included inoculating sentients in the Republic as well, but we needed to conquer the Republic before we could save it."

"I knew Malak was compromised, but I hoped that by assigning him to oversee the work done by the Selkath scientists, he would gain an understanding of the threat. Others… who had been infected by Tenebrae proved capable of rebellion. There were even a few sentients who were infected by the plague after possession who made full recoveries, divested the emperor entirely from their minds."

"I had hoped… initially, at least, I had hoped to save Malak. He had grown increasingly unstable after his defiance with Telos-so much that by the end, his madness outreached any practical use. I… orchestrated Deralia as a trap for him. But he fired first. Perhaps one of his advisors-or mine-betrayed me. I still don't know how he knew the exact moment of his projected demise."

"Perhaps the Emperor knew my thoughts. He is not as much of a fool as he appears. If you face him you need to be careful-"

Her voice broke off, and a smile twisted her lips. "But I will make every effort to ensure that you never face him, Fragment. I believe I can neutralize him, but I have to account for every possibility."

"Thus…" She spread her hands wide open. "My story. Truncated, but accurate. Malak can confirm. Others… can confirm. Parts of it."
"That was a long bit, right there," Molla put her crema cake down, and poured a cup of tea.

"She says she tried to save Malak, but she couldn't." She glanced at Korrie, who was just staring, eyes wide. "She...thinks she can stop Tenebrae."

"There were a lot of words for that," her son had choca on his face.

Molla handed him a napkin. The weave looked like it was from their own stock-by the silvery glint to the threads. "How?" Molla asked. "Do you think this High Emperor mucky muck is as bad as everyone's saying?"

"I believe her. About him." She glanced at Korrie. "She would never have left Malachor if she didn't think it was necessary."

"You have to stay here," her son muttered. "She said you would."

"Tenebrae needed me to access the power of the Star Forge. There are other installations. Other facilities made by the Builders. Some are for ships, others..." The calm expression returned, like a mask over her features. "Others can synthesize sentient life. They all draw on the Force, all require power. Raw power. Mine that is now yours."

"Without you, he has nothing. My hope is to fool him, for a time. I know him, and you do not. You need to avoid him, as much as you need to avoid Davad Arkan. Leave them to others. Leave Tenebrae to me."

"I leave Korrie in your hands. The Genoharadan contract imposed by Malachi remains in effect until he comes of age when he is twenty-five Standard. You both will be safe on Deralia-for a time but he needs your protection."

"She says she's got this." Revan paused. "And she also confessed that she lied to us about the Genoharadan, Korrie."

"It has to be a lie. You may think you know the fracking Emperor, Revan-but I... I know you. You'd never put our son in danger. You left him before with a man you hated because he was the strongest protector you knew."

Korrie blinked and opened his eyes wide. "She said she lied about the Genoharadan?"

"Is that the ancient order of assassins that will kill you if your Ma doesn't stay here to protect you, dear?" Moll leaned over and looked at Korrie.

Revan knew that look.

Her son swallowed, looking back at Revan. "Yes. Them. Did my mother say she lied about the Genoharadan?"

Revan stared back at him, without blinking. "Yes."

Incredibly, Molla Organa laughed. "See the way she's staring, Korrie? If you want to get away
with a lie, don't scribble it on your face." She shook her head. "Both of you are horrible liars. I guess I'm not surprised. When you do things right, you shouldn't need to lie at all."

Blast! Revan exhaled. "Neither of us would risk you, Malachor. Not me, and not her. We both want you safe."

Except, a disturbing part of her remembered that she—that Revan—had.

*What is the life of one child compared to billions? Everything. Nothing. If I can save both, I will.*

Her son looked away. "She told me you'd stay if I lied well."

Revan wanted to strangle Dar just for that, but she pitied the woman too. "I will come back," she insisted.

"She said that she would too," Korrie muttered. "But that's a lie."

Xxx

"If I fail, there may still be hope. The virus. See that it and its inoculant are distributed throughout Republic space. There is also a rumor I was chasing, little more than whispers, about a Rakatan prince..." Dar's image wavered, suddenly, words slowing down to a whine. "...imprisoned in a dimensional fold... a relic from their...tech-logy. The Prince...himself... too dang...ous... et tt-"

Xxx

The feed snapped out, abruptly. The self-powered chip went dark.

Revan blinked at it and tapped the side.

Nothing happened.

"Why'd it stop?" Korrie asked. "Can you make it go again?"

"I don't know." Revan picked it up, tapping the bottom. The entire thing was sealed—just one of those cheap, self-recorders they sold at Small-Marts, space stations, across the galaxy. It had a Coruscanti tax stamp.

"Let me see?" Moll plucked the chip from Revan's fingers and shook it in her hand. "Battery," she announced. "Cheap crap, really. It's run out of juice."

"Revan left me a message in a self-powered chip without enough charge?" That didn't sound likely. *Why the frack didn't you just write it down, Dar?*

*Too much risk. This message only needed to be heard once. She would have allowed sufficient power for that-

"I didn't know it could run out." Korrie looked guilty. "Can you... can you fix it?"

"Bolts?" Molla was handing the chip to the Organa house droid, but Revan knew the answer already.

"No. They're solid state. One piece. The recording is in the battery and when that goes-"

"Polla is correct, Mistress. Inexpensive devices such as these are meant for short-term recordings.
They are quite popular with smugglers, espionage groups, as well as sentients of limited means-

"I was watching it over and over to go to sleep. You were in a coma and it was all I had." Korrie bit his lip. "I'm sorry, Mother. I must've used it all up."

"Bolts?" Moll whipped her head around. "You just called her Polla."

"Was that incorrect of me? The biometrics are not a match, but the speech patterns and general cognitive response-

"It's fine." Polla's mother sighed. "Make yourself useful, you bucket, and patch into the ship auctions in Derra City today. I expect we'll need to get her something fast if she's going to manage going all the way into Sith space to get the rest of our family back."

"You don't have the credits for-" Revan's protest was automatic before she'd even thought it through.

Molla scoffed. "You might have blown up a Star Forge or two, but that doesn't make you an expert on Organa finances. The settlement we got from the insurance was quite substantial. It's supposed to be for Abasen's future-" she shot a fond look at her grandson, napping in the bassinet by the window. "But I expect he'd like a mother too. And you can pay us back."

"We are rich," Korrie chimed in. His chin was set in a hard line.

"So you keep saying," Moll smiled at him, ruffling the top knot on his head. "But your Coru credits aren't worth a hill of banthashit out this far on the Rim."

Xxx

The chair she sat in was like a polished throne, gleaming and white, with the family crest stamped upon the floor in blue and silver under her feet.

Leeshansintina Evalyn Arabel, First of Racharn looked out the window of her throne room at the city spinning below and crossed her feet at the ankles. The jewels on her new shoes clicked together.

"You had choobs," Aramis Makeon, Third of Her Name and Best Friend to Racharn murmured. "Assassinating your own mother with a programmed chap. That was like… kind of evil, you know?"

"She was going to let Leeshy die."

Once there had been five Leeshansintina Racharns. Now there were only two.

Two... and four embryos from a clone lab, that Leesa had stuck back in deep freeze while she consolidated their holdings to include the D'Reev estates.

"Thanks for helping me go through this stuff, Aramis."

The dark-haired girl looked up from a pile of plimsi. "The idea was, we were gonna finish quick and then go check out those lost Jedi rumors."

"Slumming it with the second tier?" Leesa scoffed. "Please. We already know it's not Dustil Onasi, so who cares?"

"That Mandalorian bodyguard of his is so cute, though. Have you seen him? And he's in the
Makeon Commemorative Hospital. We could check *him* out if you don't want to chase after this Loanin thing—" 

"I think you need a new hobby." Had Leesa ever been so carefree? Oh, yeah. Right. She had been. Like more than half a rote ago when there was nothing more complicated to freak out about than whether that guy in the orange jacket was actually Carth Onasi.

Since the plague and political upheaval and stuff, life up here in the clouds had become both stressful *and* dull. Being First was really not as cool as she'd once imagined.

In the chair next to hers, Aramis Makeon was rooting through hard copies of the D'Reev secrets like a nerf snuffling for edible fungi on a border world.

"What's Ziost?"

"A planet?" Seriously?

"Yeah, I know that. I'm looking at the freaking map, but I mean... Dromund Kaas? Oh! Korriban! I've heard of that one! That's one of the Star Forge planets." Aramis lowered her voice like she was in awe. "Did Senator D'Reev leave you guys the Star Forge?"

"Don't be ridic." For one thing, Leesa had seen the forensic bios from the debris. For such a huge explosion, there hadn't been very many casualties. Like three, and at least two seemed to be dead already.

And none of them matched Revan Starfire or Korrie D'Reev's genetics. And that was a fact that Leesa was in a rather... unique position to know.

That also meant that technically... *probably*... none of this intel was even hers, to begin with.

That's why they were making copies of it, like *right now*.

"Why are these planets on this interdicted list, if they're not Star Forge? Are they Exchange? Hot pirates?" Aramis flicked her braid at Leesa. "Ooo. Sources for more kolto?"

Leesa shrugged. "Don't be so dramatic! I think that's like, the lost Sith Empire? D'Reev had some deal to control their media. Guess I do now?" She giggled. "At least, like... *for* now. My little sister swears up and down and sideways that Korrie's not dead."

"Arry too." Aramis shrugged. "Kids. They have to grow up sometime."

Discovering the Sith media archives had been one of the few not-boring things in Leesa's life lately. "Hey, did you know they all think Darth Revan was a man out there in Sithland? I saw this whacked-out vid where he knocks up Bastila Shan and goes off to fight evil in the Unknown Reaches--"

"These Unknown Reaches?" Aramis pulled up the map of Sith space. "Cause we know them now, so..."

"Don't be a zotz." Leesa rolled her eyes.

XXX
Gwenarius blamed herself. All this talk about honor, about ceremony, about blooding… and she had somehow failed to teach her daughter the importance of practicality, of cutting your enemies off at their roots. The importance of knowing when honor lay in a quick blaster bolt to the chest, rather than the extraction of information.

In front of her by the Aleema's weapons array, Aemelie was pacing, still obsessed with the past. "Did the Deathbringer explain the mechanics of the mass shadow generator? Did she mention its design?"

"No," Millifar said, face sullen, eyes still downcast from her shame. "But I asked. From the vagueness of her response, Kex and I both assumed that she did not know."

"He is being questioned by men," Aemelie muttered. "You are being questioned by Clan."

"The Deathbringer Meetra Surik's ship is gone." Jokasta cleared her throat, simpering from her station on the Aleema's sensors. "It left orbit and went to hyperspace almost immediately."

"Obviously frightened," Gwenarius observed. "Map the possible routes."

"We'll never know how that weapon was created now," Aemelie muttered, half under her breath. Gwenarius shot Second Wife a silencing look. "When your father gets back, Milli, you must tell him everything you told us. And more."

"You think there's more?" Aemelie, quite obviously, did not. "Surik left the Dar'Jett before Revan harnessed the Star Forge, so I assume her knowledge of Rakatan technology would be-"

"Aemelie!" Gwenarius put her hand warningly on the hilt of her sword, before turning back to her daughter.

"There is more… isn't there?" she asked the girl.

"Yes." Her firstborn's downcast eyes and dejected expression spoke armadas. "Kex isn't compatible as a mate. And… Revan commed for Father. Weeks ago. I… I neglected to log the call."

"Shabuir! Ne shab'rud'ni!" Inexcusable. Rage choked her throat. "Daughter, if your girl's pride has cost us an alliance with D'Reev assets, I will make you Dar before the next rotation of this planet!"

"Gwen-" Aemelie put a warning hand on her arm. Easy enough for her, her son wasn't old enough to betray Clan in a time of need. Aemelie looked at Millifar. "What did Revan say?"

"That she wanted to talk to Father." Millifar shrugged. "Nothing more."

"Out of my sight!" Her fury wasn't helped by the expression on Aemelie's face. Second Wife had never liked Revan either, but she should have the sense to realize they needed the advantage of the alliance. Gwenarius had discounted the rumors that Revan was dead as more barbarian propaganda… but now… what if the woman had died from their lack of aid?
At the very least, Canderous would not be pleased. Even if the marriage had been unconsummated, he cared for the woman. And practically speaking, she was of more use to Ordo alive than dead, and there was also the matter of her claim to Lin—not to mention her son……

"I will send for your father," Gwen told the daughter. "He will decide your punishment when he returns to our system."

"His ship's arrival should take less than a day," Jokasta added, unnecessarily.

Milli swallowed hard, her features pale. But she did not offer further protest. At least, Gwenarius thought blackly, she could find a small pride in her daughter's courage.

Xxx

When they had been married for a month, the father of Lena's child told her the story of how his people had taken their Prince of the Infinite and tricked him into the mind trap.

Looking back later, Lena realized that was when their honeymoon had ended.

"That's where the old Nico is now?" Lena had asked, kneading his t'chin just the way he liked. "You got out and he got trapped? In a box?"

"A mind trap," the father of her child murmured. "Diabolical device."

"Did it kill him?" Nico Senvi had been dumb as dishplates, but it had made Lena sad to think of him dead.

"Of course not!" Her husband chuckled. "The former occupant of my body is not dead: merely trapped within an interdimensional fold of reality. He must be there still? As dim a challenger as he was, who could lose against him?"

XXX

"Lena?" Now, Nico blinked muzzily. "Are you coming to bed?"

"It's already dawning." She gave him an embarrassed smile. "I kept needing to pee in the middle of the night. Made it hard to sleep."

"I don't believe drinking more fluid will help." He eyed the tray she held, the two steaming mugs on its surface. "Is that-?"

"Sleep tea for me, caff for you." She made her lashes flutter. "I know you like to get up early."

"You are truly a mother of gods," the father of her child said. His lekku gestured to her to come closer. "Come here with your offering!"

"Mmmmm…." She balanced the tray carefully, using her belly as a shelf, and easing herself down. "Here-can you take the tray?"

"Of course." He nodded enthusiastically. "Anything for you, my queen."

"Yes," said Lena Wee. "Anything."

XXX

The interior of the Tatooine cantina was dimly lit, but there was no mistaking the Twi'lek in the
corner. Zoriis Bafka's holo was plastered all over Anchorhead. She'd won the Swoop Racing Championships for the second year in a row.

"The hell?" The woman was still dressed in her racing silks, leather straps twisted around her lekku, cheeks flushed a darker green from the exertions of her win. Her brow ridges drew together. "Motta set up this meet like it was life or death, and all I see is a knocked-up pink in front of me? Aren't you that joygirl of Motta's? Used to hang the track with Jin?"

There was no point in being insulted. They'd run in different orbits. "How is dear Motta?" Lena asked. "Does he still have that problem with his swim bladder? Can't be easy, stabilizing two tons of weight, with half your organs rearranged."

"Little dancer?" Zoriis Bafka's brow ridges were now raised higher than a Zeltron's tip for extras. "It is you!"

"I'm looking for information," Lena told her. "I'll pay well. I'll pay you. This doesn't have to be unpleasant."

The green laughed incredulously. "Are you threatening me?" She gestured towards Lena's belly. "What did you think you'd do? Smother me with your womb?"

"Of course not. Seems you weren't always a swoop jockey, Lieutenant Baffaraka-Feris. Or Padawan Feris? Or, is it Seven of Ten? Zennai'cha'hi Division?"

The Twi'lek froze. "Who sent you?"

"No one." Lena Wee shrugged. "I'm a free agent now, Zoriis. Same as you."


Lena would pity the Rodian later. She smiled and shrugged. "Motta's records said you ran goods for Revan Starfire. I have lists of jobs a kilometer long. What I want to know is, what she had you running here."

"Where did—who are you really working for?" Bafka's t'chun wrapped around her neck, as if the air was freezing. "I told Arca's people before, I'm out of the game now. I don't want anything to do with that old woman and her crazy fracking Sith—"

"I work for myself," Lena repeated. "I have a smart computer. Your orders routed through Motta's system. That's how I found you." She smiled her sweetest and pushed a credchip across the table.

"We are never told who gives the order." The green's eyes narrowed, then widened as she noted the amount flashing on the chip's screen. "Maybe it was Revan who sent me here. Maybe not. I was supposed to retrieve a package, but it never came." She knocked back her drink. "Funds ran out, so I started racing for credits."

"A package?" Lena asked. She tried to sound casual like it was no big deal.

"A box." Bafta nodded. "A stone box. Some kind of artifact. An... organization was supposed to bring it here from an undisclosed location."

Lena nodded. "And...?"
"They didn't. I won the championships. The Star Forge went boom." Bafta smiled. "You know, I
didn't even recognize Lord Revan when she came back? I only met her once… her hair was
different, and she wore those goggles. Humans all look alike, don't you think?"

"Some of them," Lena admitted. "So you… you never even saw this mystery box?"

"No." One lekku twitched. "What's your angle, Lena Wee?"

"I'm just trying to figure things out." She drummed her fingers on the table, trying to seem careless.
"What did they tell you this box looked like? What did it do?"

"Said it'd be a white obelisk, not to touch it, and what it did was beyond my pay grade.\" The
woman shrugged, eyes narrowing. "Not that they paid beyond expenses. I used to be a 'cause' kind
of girl, back then, when I was a Sith shadow. Why do you care?"

"Just curious." Lena smiled with both dimples, thinking. Sounded on the level, actually. Which was
more than she'd expected. "Remember Nico Senvi?"

"Crazy swoop jockey who put Motta in traction?" Bafta snorted, and sipped her drink. "Sure."

"Well… Nico asked me to pick some things up for him. Know where his stuff is now? I can ask
Motta, but…."

"I have no idea." The swoop jockey rolled her eyes. "Why don't you check his old room? Don't
think Motta ever cleared it out. That Hutt's pretty jumpy now." She laughed. "I mean, for a Hutt."

"Jumpy Hutt." Lena laughed with her. "That's funny."

Xxx

"Delicious caff." Her husband smiled at her over the rim of his cup. "You seemed distant before."

"Did you… finish? Making Mission into… a body again?"

"Both of them!" He clapped his hands. "Truly marvelous creations!"

"They looked like they were sleeping when your droids stopped the surgery." Two faces, almost
identical except for their coloration. Eye movement under the lids, twitches of their lips. White had
even mumbled something in her sleep.

Lena had watched them for a long time before coming to bed.

"Like suns before the dawning." The father of Lena's child embraced her, and her resolution nearly
wavered. His enthusiasm was almost childlike, like he didn't-or couldn't-understand what he did
was wrong. "In a way, they will be daughters in the new golden age to come."

Daughters. Yes. I have a responsibility to them too.

"Yes, Nico." The blaster was a duracrete weight in her pocket.

"Thank you for the caff." He beamed and took another sip. "I missed you making me caff. I can
never remember. Is it one scoop or two?"

"Two," she said. "Two in the machine, with one cup of water."

Six packets of sleepspice.
"So clever!" he chuckled. "We'll have to keep caff in our new order."

XXX

*Sometimes things were right under your t'chun.*

_Lena had thought that the new Nico would have hidden the prison he'd been trapped in for thirty thousand years once he got free. Hidden or destroyed it. She would have thought that Motta or one of his bullyboys would've moved someone else into Nico's old coneff when they left._

*But nobody had. The door wasn't even locked.*

_Nico Senvi’s old room was full of neatly-stacked speeder parts, plimsi tabloids, and ancient boxes that had once held pizzar. Everything—even the trash—was stacked, arranged by size, and placed in what had to be a deliberate order._

_Next to the window, like everything else in the room, covered with a fine coat of sand, sat a small stone obelisk, surrounded by packing materials._

_Lena took a deep breath, and touched her stomach for luck._

XXX

They were following a raised path through the swamp, a winding trail made of flagstones that looked as ancient and rotten as everything else on this muddy rock.

The Tee-Three had burned a hole in the wall, extracted cables that sparked and smoked until it zapped them with an appendage to cut the power. With Zaalbar's help, the droid had used the cables to create a rough rappelling line down the side of the ancient castle. While it—or she—hovered behind on some kind of jetpack, Polla, Dustil Onasi, and Zaalbar the Wookiee had used the line to slide down into this muck-filled, disgusting swamp.

They had followed the insane droid as she led them away from the building, deeper into the wilderness, all the while chirping at them like she really was some teenaged Twi'lek.

"Shake a lekku," she barked. "We need to quit this blasted poo doo stand before they send more Sith assholes after us!"

The air smelled horrible, like rotting eggs. It was too warm and too humid. Biting insects seemed to swarm around every centimeter of Polla's exposed skin. She wished she hadn't left the damn mask back at the palace.

Behind, there was the sound of explosions. Shouts. Presumably the guards were looking for them all. She hoped Carth was okay. And Takan and Zepth.

Carth's son (if that's who he was and not the ghost of Darth Malak), seemed to be completely recovered from the carbonite freezing, and was going along like this was totally normal. Or-almost. Every once in a while, he glanced back at her and frowned.

The twentieth time he did it, Polla glared back at him, with her best Revan imitation, stopped walking, and crossed her arms. "What?"

"Nothing," he said, after another long pause. "I was merely wondering what the Council was thinking, selecting a null's memories for Revan's mindwipe."
"Frack you too," she snapped. "I was wondering why a Jedi Knight hero became a war criminal and possessed an innocent kid."

"Dustil is no innocent." He cocked his head, staring at her. "But you are, Polla Organa. I regret your inclusion in these events."

"He's a kid," she told him. "You were supposed to be a man, the best the galaxy had. Isn't that the story?"

"One of them." He turned away from her, holding up his hand to call a halt. "This way," he announced, out of nowhere, turning towards a path that was little more than a muddy track along a creek bed.

"Why?" She stopped walking, even though Zaalbar and the Tee kept going, only pausing a few meters down the hill when they realized she wasn't following. "That looks like it goes nowhere."

"We need to get off the main roads. I… believe we are only a few kilometers from Kaas City. If we can reach it by tomorrow, we may find it easier to lose ourselves in the press of sentients, than in this hunting preserve."

"Hunting preserve?" The Tee whirred.

"Nexu spoor." Instead of answering, Dustil Onasi bent over something on the ground that looked like animal shit.

"Poo doo," the droid chirped, next to him. "It's old. I think we're good. Grab one of the sabers from Polla Polla, if you're like, freaked."

Ghost Malak snorted. "I am perfectly calm."

"You want one?" Polla had offered before, only to have him mutter something under his breath in a language she didn't know. Unlike his father, Dustil Onasi or Malak's Ghost was a fracking snob.

He looked her up and down, his expression strangely blank and cold. "The Ilian blade."

"Huh?"

The kid's hand extended and with a snap, the one with the plainest and heaviest hilt flew into his grip. Snap hiss and it ignited with a pale, blue light. "It needs to be recalibrated," he muttered, deactivating it somehow.

"I'm sorry," Polla offered. "I would have gotten the Sith minions to do that for you… except I didn't know you were actually gonna get kidnapped and frozen in carbonite."

He frowned, almost as if she wasn't there. "It's nothing."

"Right." She took another step forward, trying to pass him, when his hand caught her arm.

"Wait," he murmured. "Let me flush it out first."

"Flush what-what?"

But Carth's kid or Darth Malak or whoever he was, was already advancing on the bushes in front of them, one hand outstretched, almost beckoning—

With a brutal roar, a spined beast shot out of bushes—all claws and teeth, practically landing on the
place where Dustil had been standing.

The kid had moved, faster than it, faster than anything Polla had ever seen. His blade was lit now again.

Zaalbar the Wookiee whined something. The kid didn't even turn his head. "No," he muttered. "Blasters only piss them off. He says."

"Who says?" Polla had her own pistol out, just in case, but before she could shoot, he… jumped over the thing and cut its head off.

_**Jedi.**_ Sure, she'd seen the vids, and her arm still hurt from where Tenny-bro had scorched her with Force-induced lightning, but this was something else. Did all Jedi do that? Could the Zabrak kids she'd been insulting halfway across the galaxy on a daily basis when Tenebrae possessed them do it too?

_You'd think if they can all fight like that, they'd have taken down these fracking Sith already._

"Drag the body off the trail," the Jedi ordered Zaalbar. "We'll go to ground here for the night. They'll be searching, but Jin believes he can keep our strength concealed, and in the morning, we will lose ourselves in Kaas."

"Jin? Jin who?"

"Mekel," he turned and looked at her, and damned if that cold expression didn't slip for a second, making him look the years younger and more scared—at least. "Me… I'm here too. This is all fracked,' he added.

"Mekel?" The droid rolled closer, as Zaalbar started dragging the nexu body into the bushes. "It's you again?"

"Kind of, Blue." He smiled at her. "Telos and I-sometimes it's a little confused."

"Not that confused," he added a millisecond later, as if he was talking to himself.

Then his eyes unfocused, as if he wasn't even there at all.

"The bomb thing…” the Tee's voice trailed off. "Are you still mad about it? It was already in the collar-I modded for broadcast, but I wouldn't have just blown your head off. Error: not without a good reason."

Dustil or Mekel or Malak's Ghost snorted. "I've got bigger problems now. That Sith Emperor is standing over my body on Coru like he's guarding it, and he fracking shot me and I almost died-"

The Tee gave an alarmed beep. "Sith Emperor? On Coruscant?"

"Master Klee." He made a face that made him actually look like a kid. "The asshole's in his body."

"Klee was an asshole anyway," he added a millisecond later.

"That's where Klee went?" Why the frack hadn't Polla just gone with him? Oh, yeah. Right. Because the crazy droid offered to pay her, or have her killed. "But your body's okay, right? Now?"

"Yeah. I think." The kid grimaced. "It hurts."

"Force bonds are very unusual," the Tee noted. "Kinda weird that you and Dustil have one, plus the
whole Malak thing."

"It's a long story-" the kid started to launch into it. Sith rituals. Bonds. Polla would have thought he was nuts, except so was everything else.

Zaalbar growled. Carth had been trying to teach Polla Shyriiwook, but all she caught were the words for roots and food.

Xxx

*Early on Kashyyyk, as the child within grew, Lena's handsome husband had spun endless tales of an infinite empire. Sometimes Lena had wondered if his entire story was nothing more than a giant con.*

_Sometimes she'd wished that were true._

"*How does it work again? This mind prison?"*

"A dozen times already I explained this!" He chuckled, cupping her belly underneath the blankets. "*We can't build more of them, wife. Not with the technologies of these primitives.*"

"I know. I'm still saying we should patent the idea."

"Don't we have enough currency already, thanks to the kolto?"

*They did—or would soon. But if you could make a prison the size of a sink and stick anyone you wanted in it…. for a time, Lena Wee had seen possibilities.*

XXX

Now she saw the practical.

"This is very good," Nico repeated. He patted the bed. "Curl closer beside me. Is our son kicking today?"

"Every hour on the hour." She took a sip of her own tea, and then put the cup down.

XXX

"Humor me. I need a bedtime story."

"The intricacies of interdimensional travel have far too much math. But if you place both-it does require at least two-of your primary appendages on the surface… then, zap!"

"Zap?" Lena shivered. He'd said before that Nico was still alive. *He'd said that the real Nico Senvi was in the box. He'd said they'd played a game of riddles and the old Nico had lost.*

"Zap. They couldn't kill me, you know. Disobedient slaves! They lacked the power, and I was legion. So they trapped me and hid my prison well. For thirty thousand years, I was solitary. I, who used to contain multitudes." He buried his face in the space between her lekku. "Is something wrong, Lena? You're shaking."

"No." She willed herself to stop. "If someone won the riddles, what do they get?"

"Their body back." He snorted. "It's not like there's a prize."
She should have just cut and run then and there.

She'd thought about it. She'd known… when she admitted the truth to herself, she'd known for a long, long time. Her prince was no prince at all.

Her prince was a murdering slaver.

Xxx

"One, two," muttered Lena Wee on Tatooine. Her hands hovered over the obelisk's surface.

"Then, zap!"

The stone was impossibly warm in the cold room. And then the light seemed to bleed out of the world: light and color, leaving only in their absence, a universe of nothing at all.

Xxx

Revan had forgotten what it felt like: having raw ground under her feet again, smelling clean ozone and jungle, and feeling warm, atmospheric rain on her face. During the wars she'd almost always stayed in stars, shuttled from ship to ship: first for the Republic, and then to avoid Tenebrae and his blasted accord.

I only needed to put him off long enough until the virus took hold or we found the Rakatan mind trap to contain him-

But those plans had failed. One final option remained now.

Their ship had landed in the forest on Kaas. Her feet slipped in the mud. She looked behind her for Seiran, but he was missing. Warm rain washed her face like tears.

Between trees, through the jungle, she could hear the sound of the waves, taste the salt in the air-

Xxx

The red-skinned man on the roof of the ancient temple had a knotted beard made of flesh. He was a minor Voice. Nearly null. They hadn't known what that meant-only sensed his weakness. Deceptive, that weakness. "I have been waiting for you."

"I know." Revan's face was too warm under the mask. Sweat stung her eyes, the corners of her cracked lips. The sun glinted off the waves and the shore. A part of her wanted to laugh—that at the end of all this death, all of this pain, all of this sacrifice and destruction was this idyll—a beautiful planet and it's ruined people.

A group of these people watched, meters away, from the top of a ridge. She could see their triangular heads over the rise, tips of their spears. Taste their fear, like a bouquet of flowers on the wind. She and Mal had cut quite a swathe through their ranks before they gave her the key to this temple: the puzzle contained in the legend of their long-lost rebel prince.

"How do you know?" Malak glanced back towards the shore. Beya was watching the shuttle. The remnants of their Fleet orbited above: crippled ships, containing mad Jedi. Even from here, Revan could feel them, pressing down like gravity.

"The computer," she reminded him of that instead of revealing the truth. "From Kashyyyk."

"You said we would find answers." Malak frowned. The sore on his jaw was worse.
"A way to stop men like your father," she agreed. "A way to stop all conflict. Forever peace."

A way to make what we've done worth it. A way to atone-

Malak's eyes narrowed, his mind close enough to read. A shame Meetra didn't return with the Senate's surrender, as you expected.

It was only one possibility, Mal.

Surik was a broken tool after Malachor, but her gift allowed Revan to share a final message with the Jedi Order: the sound of Malachor, screaming across all the bonds the girl had made. A torpedo, full of Malachor's dark power, driven straight into the heart of the Jedi Order.

Did you really think the Fleet would roll over and attend another armistice? With us? Malak's voice interrupted her thoughts.

Did you? His mind had been as quick as hers he woke with glowing, red eyes. Taunting. Promising her. Bringing them both to this moment. They will back down, if your father commands. And we control him.

I hope you're right, Red. His hand squeezed hers. We can use my father's resources to control this new Empire as well. They'll have population centers. Media. Supply chains. Trade-

Revan frowned. He was right. Sometimes he was still right about things-

Tenebrae's emissary coughed. "My master also wishes a forever peace." His master. The computer had told her about his master. The fabled Sith Emperor that only she could control.

"That's why we are here," she said. "This master of yours is late."

"My master is coming," intoned the emissary. Then his eyes rolled back in his head. And began to glow.

Revan stifled the scream rising in her throat. All the horrors she'd seen, and this still surprised her.

The Sith Emperor isn't just in Malak. He's in this null too. And if he's in two bodies… is he in more? How many more?

"Oh, ho," said Malak's voice beside her. But not his. Not entirely his. The other one chuckled, and then both of them were laughing at her, doubled, every sound exact. Two voices, both Tenebrae's.
"My little Sith'ae'rah. I've waited so long for this moment, you have no idea!"

Xxx

"You had some idea," a voice said accusingly. The bushes rustled. "You knew what he was. You knew what he wanted."

Revan shivered, glancing back at their ship. "Seiran? I… realize I was… untoward before, but you must see the necessity."

Silence. She frowned, eyes scanning the leaves for movement. Was he hiding from her? "I would never have harmed the child. I will never harm you, but I knew of no other way to gain your compliance in the time we had. You had every reason to be loyal to the Fragment, and no reason to follow me. I didn't have time to explain-

"You don't have to explain it now. Mud." The man came up the path from behind the ship, the
Republic mask covering his features entirely, marking him as he was. Anonymous. Disposable. "I hate bloody fracking mud."

A soft rain began to fall again, pattering the jungle around them with warm, faintly acidic droplets.

"There you are. Seiran?" She tried out a small smile. "I hope all is forgiven?"

"Ask Jox," the Deralian said. He jerked his head to the left. "He's the one who got the blame for triggering the mines. If he'd have used the scanners right in the first place-"

"Do you forgive me?" Lieutenant Jox muttered at her left. He'd crept up so quietly, Revan hadn't realized, hadn't realized the moment when the rest of the troops arrived, all of them, moving in slowly, to take the next few meters of this jungle moon-

"Of course," she said. "Of course, I forgive you, Jox, for making that egregious tactical mistake that almost cost us victory-"

Without waiting for Revan's command, the lieutenant moved forward. A few heartbeats later, a sharp click was their only warning, before the path exploded, and the world cut out in a blaze of fire.

Above, in orbit, she closed her eyes. Pando's unit was encountering similar resistance, as if the Mando'ade had mined every path on Dxun.

Need to press on, send another line forward to trigger the trap. Keep the Jedi in reserve, we can't afford to lose them-

Revan's thoughts were logical, but what came out of her mouth was a scream, as she looked down and saw her gray robes spattered with blood-

"Get down, Sheris!" A Force wave enforced the command, and Sheris rolled over to see Padawan Meetra Surik standing over her, with Knight Vikor Tio close on her heels. Both of them knelt down beside her as cannon-fire sent the trees above them into blaze.

Seiran was nowhere in sight.

Fragment will never forgive me if I lose the smuggler's husband- the thought was disruptive, something out of time.

"I can try and trigger the mines remotely," Vikor whispered, but his voice buzzed in every comset in their squad. "Hold. Everyone hold."

"You're the boss, Vik!" Frost was good-natured, but not one for rank. None of them were, really. This was their second battle together, and already they were a team.

Her heart was in her throat. She was so frightened. Revan never remembered being this frightened-

Meetra flashed Sheris a quick smile. She looked nervous too. It helped somehow, knowing that. Knowing they were all in this. Like a connection.

They were all in this together.

"Troops forward." Flat voice. Ringing through their comms like a bell. "Jedi hold position. Advance troops."
"No!" Padawan Surik, speaking out of turn, glaring angrily at the sky. "Please! Send in droids to trigger the mines! Or let me! I've been disarming mines since I was seven-those are plasma jagers. Easy. If you give us more time-

"Press forward," the command came again. From above. From apart. Words cold, encased in ice.

"That's fracking suicide!" Kalora Antilles, next to Frost. Technically she was still a cadet, but she was the best sniper they had. "Who the hell does Revan Starfire think she is?"


"You… bitch," Vikor muttered. "No. I won't. Ignore her. We can shield you guys. Go slow, we'll be right behind."

"Over a minefield?" Corporal Shu was the highest-ranking null they had. He stood up, shaking his head. "No! I'm not sending my men into suicide-"

"Vikor." The way General Starfire said the knight's name seemed to resonate in the air, even over the commlink. "You know what to do."

"No." The Knight shook his head. "That's… I thought you were joking, at the briefing, we can't really-we're Jedi! What you're asking is… no!"

"Your Jedi says no," Shu muttered. He made a rude gesture towards the sky, where the Harbinger waited, safe and snug in orbit with the rest of Fleet.

"Vikor," the voice repeated. "We're out of time."

"No." His lekku were wrapped around his neck. The Force sang with his pain. Sheris patted him on the arm, because she didn't know what else to do. She wasn't even sure what the General was asking them to do.

"Meetra," the voice said. Revan said. I said. "I trust you, Meetra. It is necessary."

"Please." Padawan Surik wiped her eyes. "Don't. There has to be another way."

"There's not."

"Oh." The girl wiped her eyes. She wasn't much older than Sheris, really.

"You can't," hissed Vikor. "Are you insane? You can't compel them-

Meetra Surik's eyes were a pale amber, almost gold. Right now they were full of tears. "You're right," she said. "I can't, Vikor. I don't have your strength. Or your training. You'll have to do it. Don't you see?"

"See what?" Antilles snapped. She turned her rifle in hand, and for a moment Sheris thought she was going to shoot them.

"No." He shook his head. "Please. Meetra, don't."

She smiled sadly at him. The red star on her cheek was streaked with mud. "It's necessary, Vic. Please. You heard it. Please do it. Do it for me." Her voice was gentle, but it-but it-
Sheris caught her breath. Caught herself. Nodding.

"Forward," Vikor Tio's voice went to the main channel of the comm, cutting through the tension around them abruptly, like synsilk. "You have nothing to fear. There are no mines here. There is no… pain. We Jedi will keep you safe-"

Sheris started to stand, only to have his iron grip pull her back down again.

"Close your eyes this time, Little Red," he whispered. "Look away."

"This time?"

"You almost got yourself killed before."

Explosions, lives cut short. Sheris barely felt them die, staring into his cold, yellow eyes. Like a wall of ice enfolding them.

The rain fell, washing the mud red.

"It doesn't hurt," Vikor told her. "In case you were wondering. At least for me, we were in pieces before made impact. Our fuel tanks ignited with the heat of the sun. I think." His mouth quirked. "Wasn't paying much attention at the time."

The conclusion seemed inevitable. "Did my ship explode too?" Did I fail already? Again?

"Sleeping," he corrected her. "You're sleeping. This is a dream. You remember Beya, I assume? She and I died together in the Cron Cluster."

Meetra Surik turned-but she wasn't Meetra now. Instead, Beya Organa's heart-shaped face broke into a cool smile. "Hello again, Revan." She arched an eyebrow. "Don't you think you're trying a little too hard to be Revan?"

"That's who he's expecting. Who is needed."

"We understand why you left the amnesiac back on Deralia." Vikor sighed and sat down in the rapidly-reddening mud. "Just rather less clear on how you plan to stop the deathless."

If Vikor were her subconscious, he should know. If he were real… "I never used you for your grasp of strategy."

"That was more my game," Beya smiled, a little grimly. "Don't you think he'll notice your weakness?"

"I know how to distract him. And it's a Sith planet. Sith Lords are constantly trying to amass more power. My allies… artifacts… I'll find something. And Malak… is there. Or will be. He-he will help."

"Something," Vikor muttered. "Revan Starfire will find something. Another cure worse than the disease?"

"I held you in confidence, both of you. Perhaps longer than I should." Did one of you betray me to Malak? One of you on the Leviathan, one the Aleema. It could have been either or both of you working in concert-

"Rev!" Beya's voice was as sharp as a blow to the face. "Stop. Enough already. It's just us here.
In your dream. Drop the act."

The... act? "Beya." For a moment, weak Sheris overrode her, and wretched sentiment welled up again, like the girl's fear on that demon moon. "I'm sorry."

"I know." Beya leaned over and kissed her. Her lips were soft. "You should be," she whispered in Revan's ear. "But it will take more than that-"

Xxx

"This caff tastes sweet," Lena's husband smiled at her. "Like you, my heart." The father of Lena's child took another sip, his lids already half-closed.

"You're sweet," Lena Wee lied, waiting for him to pass out so she could bring in the maglift holding the (surprisingly heavy) obelisk, and press his hands against it.

XXX

One. Two. Zap.

"Lena?" Nico stood in front of her, wearing a pair of stained coveralls. There was nothing else in the room. If it was a room, it was a white space, with no walls or borders she could see. "How did you get here in my heaven?" He frowned. "Why are you fat now?"

"I'm pregnant," she said. Her hands went to her stomach protectively. "What do you mean, 'heaven'?"

"Look around!" He waved his arm, but Lena saw nothing. "See all my trophies? It took me awhile to get it." He laughed. "First, I thought I was just winning everything cause I am that awesome; but no one wins everything, and the other sents are fuzzy. Around the edges. You're not. Fuzzy." His t'chin twisted with sinuous ease, with a grace she'd forgotten the real Nico had. "And when you're here, you're never fat." He paused. "Are you like Griff?"

"What?" She had forgotten how aggravating real Nico was. "You think I'm like Griff Vao?"

"He was here. Not fuzzy like you. Said he came into my coneff, and touched the box and ended up here." Nico looked genuinely puzzled. "We didn't know how to get him out, but I remembered the other guy, that funny little alien-"

"Saying alien is rude," she chided automatically.

"But he was! I've never seen a sent like him!"

"It's still rude." She folded her arms. "But I... I know. He is... different."

"So we did the same thing, Griff and me-three riddles. His were real hard." His smile was so sweet it disarmed her. "Then he vanished. Poof!" His hand and t'chin waved the air.

"Oh." She sighed, a little relieved. "Nico, I bet three riddles is how you can get out of here."

"You want me to ask you riddles?" His brow knitted. "That's what the guy said too, but I guess I only know dumb ones."

"I know some good ones," she said. "Maybe I can even tell you one." She blinked at him and smiled, even if on the inside she was quaking. Heaven, he'd called it here. Maybe if Lena were trapped here, she'd start to hallucinate too. "Or two. Maybe I can tell you two."
"The alien said it took three to get out. Griff got three right. Right away!"

"What's twenty plus three?" She interrupted him.

"Huh?"

"That's my first riddle."

"Oh! You want to play now? But you just got here."

"I... I don't have a lot of time." Her child, she thought, suddenly panicked, about her body. What would happen while she was in here?

"Okay. If you say so?" He was puzzled. "It's weird, but I... I have to play with you now. It wants me to."

"What's twenty plus three?" She repeated.

"Twenty-three."

"Good!" She nodded, enthusiastically. "What's five times nine?"

"Forty-five." His brow ridge furrowed. "I think if I answer another one right, I get out."

"Someone else is going to come here. They might look like you." Don't make anything a question. Remember that. Above all else! "All you need to do to get out is say those two riddles and then another. But math. All your riddles have to be math. You can do it. I promise."

"Any math problem...?" He looked troubled. "And then what happens next?"

Does that count as a riddle? You don't even know how this works, Lena! If it counts as a riddle, is it his first? When he asked the other questions, did I answer them? What have I done?

"Lena?"

Lena Wee took a deep breath and answered Nico Senvi with another question, one she didn't even know the answer to herself—at least, not entirely. Poor Nico wouldn't have a chance.

"What is the name of my baby's father?"

Xxx

Seiran was getting used to the Bitch's nightmares, but this one was different. This one... for a second he thought he was actually there. Standing in a jungle, while the Bitch called his name.

But then-he jerked awake again and looked across at her. Eyes still closed but moving rapidly back and forth. Muttering something in that language.

The comm on her wrist was flashing.

Help, Seiran imagined whispering to whoever was on the other line. But would anyone calling the Dark Lord of the Sith be someone who would help?

You should have done something at Peragus. Something more than writing "Revan Starfire was here" and the date on the side of the wall.
He should have done something more, but aside from Polla's parents, Seiran didn't know who to call. Polla was the one with Aemelie Ordo's comm, and what would Aemelie Ordo do, anyway? Launch a Mandalorian invasion for one sweet smuggler? Aemelie might like Polla... sometimes he'd wondered about how much the woman liked Polla; but that was insane.

Every option was insane.

No. Now, here they were, deep in Sith space, on their way to a lost planet. Maybe the other Revan would come and rescue them all if this one failed.

That woman could fly. She could probably do anything, but he'd gotten stuck with this one.

He could steal the comm. He could crash the ship into a sun. He could scream... but Seiran Wen did none of those things. Instead, he got up from the nav and walked over to the Bitch. Shook her shoulder gently.

"Someone's calling. Wake up," he said. "Wake up, Revan."

Xxx

However Mission had sealed the door, it took more than a lightsaber to open, although several were trying now, stabbing through the surface like red searchlights, before fizzling and cutting out.

Makes sense, Carth thought. Cortosis-lined building materials. We could probably learn a lot from the sents on this planet, about how not to get skewered by Dark Jedi.

Sith, he corrected himself. Real Sith. The real thing now. What those Dark Jedi were only playing at.

When it finally became clear they weren't going to make it through until some grunt got a plasma torch, Carth touched the comm at his wrist. Even if Tenebrae interrupted, there was nothing they'd betray. Tenebrae needed to know that Revan was real too. And really coming here.

It might buy them more time.

His wife's comm rang several times, and when she finally picked up, he hardly recognized her. Her hair was shorter, freshly shaven on the sides: Deralian again, but loose now, tumbling into her eyes. She wiped those eyes almost angrily, a gesture he remembered like she was scrubbing out sleep.

"I thought we agreed not to use this frequency except for text-oh." She blinked at him, all blue through the commlink, lashes still incredibly long, eyes wide and deceptive as a tu'kata stalking.

"It's... it's me." His mouth was dry. "Beautiful, it's me."

"Oh," she repeated. "... Carth." One line appeared between her brows, as painfully familiar as that lying face.

"In the flesh. If you want, I could show you-" the joke died, in the face of that blank expression, his heart clenching painfully as the truth became evident.

What have you done?

Her frozen expression told him everything, all in one glance. "I don't suppose you remember, but we spoke once before. It was in the Jaxus Cluster. You did an excellent job on your Morgana, the day the Vengeance was lost. I... I told Rear Admiral Karath we needed more pilots like you, men
and women willing to risk everything. Sacrifice everything for the cause... but also smart enough to survive the odds."

Even through the comm, that blankness. Like when she came back from that blasted temple. Like she had no idea who he was.

"I named that ship after my wife," he muttered. "My first... wife."

"Is this comm secure?" There was nothing at all in her expression, not even the lines he remembered around her mouth as if taking the memories back from that damned holocron had erased every vestige of the woman he once loved. And when had she done it? After he left?

*You wouldn't have done it because of me, would you?*

"I don't know."

"You know that you are compromised? My... friend informed me about the Emperor's possession of your mind."

"Do you know how to get him out?" *You owe me, sister. You owe me. Even if you aren't her-*

"If it were that simple, the galaxy would be an entirely different place." There was a trace of the woman he knew in that dark joke. A glimmer. "Is my... ally safe? My... my servant wishes to know. I believe he's quite fond." She glanced offscreen and muttered something, too fast for him to catch.

Terrifying, not to know how much of this was an act, and how much was the real *her.*

"Ally?" Did she mean Polla? "She's with... your other husband," he shot back. It probably wasn't smart. Zaalbar would have told him to stop barking at the moon, because it had no face.

Her lips twitched. "Good. I look forward to seeing all of you. *Alive.*"

Was that a threat? Or a promise? "I look forward to seeing you too-" 

His temper sparked and then like sparks, the world went white-

When Carth came to his senses, he had a stylus in his hand, the door was blasted open, and a group of brown-clad servants (or slaves, he thought the Sith had slaves) were packing up the bore of a large plasma torch. The Zabrak kids were still unconscious. Carth looked down at the datapad in front of him.

*Having the servants put some hunting robes in your new quarters. Do you prefer to ride a speeder or beast? Let Liyo know!*

Nothing about Revan. Nothing about the rest of their conversation. Had there been more? Had Tenebrae spoken to her too?

"Ahem," said a voice in front of Carth. A pink-skinned Zeltron, also in brown robes leaned against the wall. "I am Liyo," he said, smiling. "Do you need more time to read? Your writing is quite a scrawl... and I'm usually quite adept at Basic."

"No, I got it."

"Good." The Zeltros collected the datapad and extended his hand.
Carth ignored it and scrambled to his feet himself. "I'm good," he muttered.

"Your new quarters are in the prison wing, I'm afraid. Actions do have consequences, and even servants must be punished when their masters rebel."

"What about… what about them?" The Zabrak kids lay on the ground, like discarded plimsi. From what Carth had seen that was exactly how this damned emperor treated his subjects.

"You want them?" The Zeltron shrugged. "If keeping them alive motivates you, we can bring them along. Separate cells, I think. Force cages for them. You…” he sniffed. The air was too sweet, like the man was trying to frack with him, but after Carth's experience being mind-fracked on the *Republic Pearl* by D'Reev's minions, a little Zeltron juice was nothing.

"Cut the pheromones," he snapped. "Just keep those kids safe and I'll be *motivated* enough."

Other slaves had already moved in, stripping him of his blasters, the knife Canderous had given him, even the holdout in his boot. Their hands pawed and plucked. Carth willed his eyes never to leave the Zeltron's face.

One of the last plucked away the comm from his wrist.

The air cleared, and the Zeltron have Carth a slight bow. "I don't know how you nulls can stand being alive, but it takes all sorts, and what the Starfire wants… the Starfire gets." He lowered his voice. "I've always found her a little… overrated myself. Have you seen the version of her life story we show here? She's a man."

"Trust me," Carth glared. "She's not."

"And?" Liyo was tapping his foot now, looking at Carth expectantly. "Beast or speeder? We have yozuk and nexu, although I can't guarantee which you'd be assigned. Our Lord rides a gundark, of course, but I wouldn't recommend that. We need you in one piece!"

"Speeder," Carth gritted his teeth.

"Pity. With your coloring, I could see you like a Beast-rider of old, astride… something." He raised an eyebrow. "The first hunt will begin tomorrow at dawn… and no, your Zabrak boys cannot come. We have limited costume, and his Magnificent is already possessing a matched set of purebloods."

,"You were… you were serious. About the hunting? What are we… what are we hunting?"

"Your lost friends. Are they friends? The actress seemed… fiery, I saw the recording. And a Wookiee. Quite a challenge. And of course… the prize. We do rather need to collect Lord Malak before Revan's return."

Xxx

"I accept my fate," their daughter said. Millifar's hair hung loose, shining like the rays of a yellow sun down her back. Gwen had stripped the girl of her beskar, and Milli knelt before him, wearing only a pair of faded coveralls that Canderous was pretty sure had started out as his own once, before one of the wives had repurposed them. "I have doubly shamed our clan."

Canderous sighed. Behind Gwen, Aemelie, holding both babes, shrugged. Her lips mouthed a word, but aside from that hidden display of defiance, she was obviously not going to go against the First Wife's wishes.
"I accept your admission of shame, Daughter." That was the formal response. Now if Gwen was serious, Millifar would be sent in exile from Ordo until she found some object or information to prove the worth of her return. Except, maybe Canderous had been away from Clan too long, because they didn't even know for a fact that Revan was dead, and he thought this entire exercise was overkill.

Considering everything he'd seen her survive already, Canderous was pretty sure Revan wasn't dead. He'd considered the fact that maybe she and the pilot had just wanted an out. Hadn't he and Onasi discussed that very thing in the weeks after the Star Forge, while Revan screamed in her drugged sleep in the Hawk's infirmary?

"Let me try a comm," he suggested. "You said she commed? Did you record the code?"

"Of course." His daughter wiped her eyes, sniffling a little, like a much younger child. "And then I erased it-"

"Shame!" Gwenarius interrupted. "More shame!"

"But I memorized the signature," their firstborn added. Her sly smile reminded Canderous of her long-dead brother, although Carefix had known better than to goad the First Wife of Ordo.

"Try the comm," Canderous suggested. "Gwen…?"

"There is still the shame of the Jedi Exile," his wife snapped.

Aemelie shifted young Dxn on her hip, and put Oerina on the floor. She barely hid her smirk.

"One thing at a time." Canderous gestured, and his daughter rose neatly to her feet, crossing the Aleema's bridge to the communications console.

Her fingers slid across the keys, and the comm chimed. Once. Twice."

"Hello?" A man's face, stubbled and nervous. It looked like he was holding the portable commlink Revan had carried in his hands. His eyes kept darting offscreen. "W-who is calling, please?"

"Me," Canderous barked at him. "Where did you get this comm?"

"I-I have it," the man replied, as if he were simple.

"Seiran?" Aemelie interrupted suddenly, crossing the floor to stand in front of Canderous. "What are you doing? Did you kill Revan Starfire?" She sounded impressed.

"No," a female voice snapped in Mandalorian. Revan's face was unmistakable, appearing behind the guy's. There was pause longer than Canderous expected as she stared at him. "Canderous Ordo."

"Third Wife," he said formally because Gwen was still standing next to him glaring. "I see that you're alive. Good."

"Good?" Her laugh sounded high and unfamiliar. "What are you… is that-what in nine hells are you doing on my flagship?"

Xxx

Lena sat there in their bedroom for what seemed like hours, watching Nico Senvi's still-
unconscious body breathe. Her son rippled softly in her belly like a Ryloth moon. A boy, her husband had said. What kind of world would he have now? Better or worse, than what might have been?

"Lee-na?" The voice startled her. She turned her head.

The seams along the white's lekku were pink where the droids had made their incisions. The girl teetered on the tips of her toes, and almost fell.

"Mission?" Lena couldn't move very easily now, but she got up as quickly as she could, dancer's training helping her to adjust to the new cant of her weight, and rushed to the white's side. "Are you… okay? Can I get you anything?"

"I… I am small." White lekku flapped limply. "And she… my pink… is she gonna wake up too?"

"I don't know."

"I tried. I shook her. But she didn't…" A white hand buffeted its own face. Violet eyes blinked with tears. "She's breathing, though. I-I think… she's… what's wrong with him?"

"Let me see-" Lena glanced back at Nico's limp body, a spark of fear rising in her chest.

What if… what would the prince do to them if he was the one to wake?

Xxx

"Why?" At the time the reason hadn't been truly important, but she enjoyed the sound of his voice lulling her to sleep, and the pleasant languor their lovemaking left in her limbs. "Why did your people put you in a box for thirty thousand years?"

"For the crime of rebellion." His chuckle rumbled in his chest, against her stomachs. "I told you."

"You rebelled to save your people?" Every good Twi'lek knew the tales-legends really-of those who stood against the tide and broke their chains.

"So many demands they had! Yes. I tried to save them." Her husband chuckled. "All those demands! Differences of opinion! It was chaos, Lena. Sheer chaos." He kissed her brow. "So I tried to save them-yes. From themselves."

"How?"

"Another time, I'll tell you." He kissed her. "Maybe even show you."

Xxx

Lena fingered the blaster in her pocket again. She'd been practicing on targets and sims for weeks. Ever since she'd retrieved the Twi'lek bodies. Ever since Tatooine.

Mission followed her glance. "Hey! What's wrong with T'chhhje-T'chiimm… ?" Her face made a strange contortion. One side of it twitched. "Why can't I talk?"

"You're fine. Nico's fine too. But… he… might be gone a while," Lena evaded. "Let's go see to your… sister."

"She's my twin," Mission corrected. "You're my sister, Lena." Those impossible violet eyes blinked. Her smile was sweet and warm. "Thank you for saving me."
Revan tightened the cloth over the lower half of her face and pushed her goggles up to her nose. The Deralian shipyard was dusty, hot, and smelled like burnt air. Familiar as home, safe as a lie.

“What’s that smell?” Korrie made a face. “The orbitals never smelled like this.”

“Farming,” Molla told him. She had a tight grasp on his hand as if she expected them both to run for it. Revan would be lying if the thought hadn’t occurred to her.

Corellian disc ships were popular now. There was a row of them, brightly colored as jewels, baking under the red Deralian sun.

“You said that Jasp called,” Revan murmured to Polla’s mother. “I should… dissuade him from attempting to reach Sith space.”

“Dis-suade?” Molla made the word stretch out, mocking, Revan realized, the way that she’d said it, or maybe even the word itself. “If what you say is true--if your Sith space is so hard to find--he’ll be home soon enough. I don’t need you giving him more ideas.”

Revan’s legs were still stiff and her back ached, remnants of the injuries she’d sustained in the fall from the skies. Doctor Sahara had recommended limited activity and lots of rest… but Doctor Sahara didn’t have a duplicate of herself running towards Sith space to do frack knows what.

“What happened to Dancer’s Leap?” she asked Moll. Polla had named her future ship when she was eleven. The full name was Dancer’s Leap Across the Infinities of Space and the Whole, Darn Galaxy; but that had been too long for the real thing’s registration codes.

“Leased,” Molla said. “When Pollie stopped flying--”

“Oh.” Of course. Her eyes followed the row of disc ships, looking for a squat and familiar triangular shape.

“May I help you ladies?” The Devaronian saleswoman had a datapad in one hand, and a laser pointer in the other. She smiled down at Korrie. “Ladies and young gentleman with baby? Looking for something in particular?”

“A Kuat Mark-VIII, with turbo and a decent rear turret,” Revan told her. Dancer had never had any weaponry… but Dancer never went into Sith space.

_Wherever the frack Sith space is. And how in nine hells am I supposed to figure that out?_

Kashyyyyk. Thought like an echo.

_But it’s not Mission. I don’t know what it is, but that computer is--_

“Hah, that’s funny. You all lookin for something to cruise Defalli lanes in? Or somethin’ more short range? Moon hops? Shopping at the outlets?”

“We’ll let you know,” Revan drawled. She’d shoved the goggles back down on her face, but she
didn't like the way the woman was eyeing her.

“Kuat Mark VIII,” the woman chuckled. “Good one. We don't keep any moonchasers here. We fly straight-up, vessels with all the emissions reqs for Core space!”

“Marks passed the Senate regs,” Revan argued. The woman was testing her, fairly obviously, trying to assess her potential as a mark. “You probably don't have anything with firepower because you don't wanna pay the tariff on a Core-made export, right?”

“Hrm....” The woman’s smile widened. “Are you planning on financin this purchase?” Her accent wasn’t local. Which made sense, Revan realized, because there weren’t really a lot of Devaronians on Deralia.

“Cash,” Molla interrupted. “Cash and a clean registration.”

“Of course.” The saleswoman put one hand on her hip. “Our regs are all clean, but for the cash buyer, I might have something interesting. Military salvage. Not new, understand; but it's Kuati. Seats four. Not great for long hauls, but if you're only going to the outlets... it does have guns. Not much we sell has em--munitions are mostly aftermarket adds. But if you have credits, I can set you up with a real nice modding contact. He does most of his work off-license, that way he can work in some slugs and plasma stuff that isn't strictly boom, if you know what I mean....”

“Show me,” Revan interrupted. “The ship you have. Show us now.”

“Don't be rude, dear.” Molla elbowed her. “I think she was just getting to that. Is it safe, this ship of yours? I don't want my daughter in anything rattletrap.”

“It passed inspection.” The Devaronian shrugged. 

_Daughter_. But of course, the woman meant Polla. Polla coming back in the ship, not Revan at all.

“Show us,” Revan amended. “Please.”

“Deralians,” the saleswoman beamed. “Takes you all so long to say please, doesn't it?”

“Not when there's something to be pleased about,” Molla snapped. She took Korrie’s hand, adjusting Abasen in his sling, and patted Revan on the back with her free hand. “Shake a stick and show my daughter this ship, why don't you?”

“You heard Grandmama,” Korrie barked. “Show us.”

“Grandmama?” Molla burst into peals of laughter. “Pardon my boy. He's watched too many vids.”

“Gran,” Revan murmured quietly.

“Gran,” Korrie repeated. “You heard my Gran. Lady.”

“That would be ‘Miss Lady’ to you, urchin.” The Devaronian pulled an access key out of her pocket, gesturing them towards one of the locked hangar doors. “Funny story behind this ship....”

XXX

“I thought we agreed not to use this frequency except for text--" Revan breathed in sharply, trying to hide her surprise. “Oh.”

Carth Onasi’s face was taut with strain, even in the blur of the hologram. His voice was low and
rough, almost whispered, and he kept looking to the side, out of view. The wall behind him was nondescript. Stone. Unmistakably Sith. He could be anywhere in Tenebrae’s territories. Was he still with the smuggler? Was Malak there? Were they captives, or guests?

"It’s… it's me." His voice was softer than it had seemed in the recordings. "Beautiful, it's me."

"Oh," she repeated foolishly. "Carth." Did the Fragment have some pet name she used for him? ‘Darling?’ Or ‘Flyboy,’ as on all the vids?

"In the flesh. If you want, I could show--" His voice faltered, and Revan realized she was doing a poor job smiling, that it was possible something in her expression had exposed her already.

I need to tell him who I am in a way that will not lead to betrayal. If I wait until he sees me--

If he was calling from Kaas, the room was undoubtedly tapped. If not by Tenebrae himself, than by others from the Dark Council. Revan had to be brief, had to give the man a warning. If he was comming now on this link, had he commed before and spoken to the Fragment? That other call, the one in the system near Rekkiad. It could have been him she reached? If so, he would know who Revan was, but not where his wife was now. If not… he would know the ruse the moment he saw her on Kaas. Carth Onasi's wife had two hands. An older face. And they--Revan had tried to mimic the woman’s speech patterns, her carelessness of movement--at night, alone in her cabin where Seiran could not mock--but she doubted those efforts could fool the man the Fragment loved.

He may never be able to see his wife again, but I owe him mercy. A small one, at least.

She smiled at him kindly, trying to impart sincerity. "I don't suppose you remember, but we spoke once before. In the Jaxus Cluster. You did an excellent job on your Morgana, the day the Vengeance was lost. I… I told Rear Admiral Karath we needed more pilots like you: men and women willing to risk everything. Sacrifice everything for the cause… but also smart enough to survive the odds."

His face looked frozen, and for a moment, Revan thought she’d made a terrible mistake. One muscle in his jaw twitched.

"I named that ship after my wife," he whispered finally. "My first… wife."

"Is this comm secure?" She kept her voice low, trying to calm him. Without the Force, with half a galaxy between them. Impossible.

"I don't know."

It had never been safe to tell Malak, but Revan tried to give this man fair warning. "You know that you are compromised? My friend informed me about the Emperor's possession of your mind."

His lips pulled back from his teeth. "Do you know how to get him out?"

"If it were that simple, the galaxy would be an entirely different place." Carth Onasi didn’t look like he understood the joke. "Is my... ally safe? My... my pilot wishes to know. I believe he's quite fond."

She glanced at Seiran, who sat at the nav board, arms folded, glaring back at her with an insolence she found disturbing. “Stay there,” she muttered at the Deralian, away from the comm’s mic. “No names.”
Could she trust Polla’s husband? She wasn’t even sure if Captain Onasi understood who she was. Had the Fragment ever bothered to tell him? The man had been gone before Sheris took the holocron, before the Fragment left the Temple. Was it possible he thought his wife had taken the memories back herself? If so, the moment he saw her--

Her thoughts ran in useless circles.

"Ally? She's with your other husband," Carth Onasi snapped back at her, suddenly furious.

Good. So he does know me. And Polla Organa is with them--with Malak. That means Malak is there--

Revan smiled encouragingly. "Good. I look forward to seeing all of you. Alive."

The expression on his face bordered on subordination. Insolence. "I look forward to seeing you too--"

And then his features changed, mouth falling open, slack. That terrible blankness. Familiar, even across half a galaxy. There was a long pause, and she allowed herself a deep breath, quelling the useless fear that spiked in Sheris’s chest.

“Hello, Revan.” Even in the blur of the comm she could see the glowing eyes, hear the shift in pitch, see that familiar sneer on a stranger’s face. “Are we done with the games? Are you finally returning?”

“Yes.” She was all too aware of the pilot Seiran Wen, still standing to her right and watching, just out of the commlink’s range. Don’t move, she thought, not daring to gesture. “I’ll see you very soon.”

“Remember, I offered you another fifty years of freedom,” the man said. “Informally, of course--nothing that binding in writing! But you and I have nothing but time.”

“Unnecessary.” Phantom, foolish regret. “You will leave my Telosian husband unharmed. Both of my husbands unharmed. And their companions.”

“Yes… of course.” Something there--a slight hesitation? Doubt? Fear? Revan didn't have time to guess. “You will expect Malak and this vessel to greet you upon arrival? We’re at my summer palace, I’m sure you remember the way.” He paused. “Your duplicate is vulgar, but I did grow fond. I hope we can find a place for her on my staff.”

She made her words fall like stones. “I advise you to leave them all intact. I advise you to have them all at my disposal upon my arrival.”

“Oh ho,” he chuckled. “You think I would harm a hair on their heads?”

No, just sever their heads from their bodies and taunt me with them--a life for a life--

It doesn’t matter. Even if it’s Malak he kills--Malak is already dead.

Don’t think of him. She realized her fists were clenched so tightly that her fingernails dug into the palms. We can play this game again, Tenebrae, but this time, I have nothing left. You threaten me with what I fear to lose, but this time my son is safe--this time the Fragment will protect him with all of her strength--our strength.
“I’ll see you in two days.” Her fingers were steady when she cut the comm’s connection. She took several cleansing breaths before turning back to Seiran. The man was looking at her as if she’d grown a third head. “Well?”

“You let Carth Onasi think you’re his wife?” Her pilot sounded angry about that for some reason, and not at all concerned that an immortal, ancient emperor wanted to keep his own wife as a servant. Had he missed that part? The Emperor was quite possessive. “Why?”

*Obviously, I did not. Obviously, he knew exactly who I was.* But in their brief time together, Revan had already realized that the Deralian was not a subtle man. “We had no time to explain, and we need his compliance.”

“What happened to him--at the end? His eyes were… funny.”

Funny. In a different context, it might have been amusing he thought so.

“Carth Onasi was possessed by the Sith Emperor. As I explained to you, he utilizes a process to transform sentients into His servants, subject to Force possession at any time.”

“That’s… it just... happens?”

“The Force possession? No. The process takes time.” She frowned. “It will never happen to you or your family. I administered the vaccine against his Touch to you myself.” They had been through this. She glanced at the nav board, checking the coordinates to make sure he wasn’t attempting another betrayal.

“Thanks.” Seiran Wen looked at her warily. “I think.”

“I was only doing my duty.” At his blank look, she continued. “Preventing Tenebrae from possessing worlds in Republic and Sith space by vaccinating their inhabitants.” *Or just infecting them.* The original virus had a high mortality rate, but it did weed out weakness. *Or, weaklings. Like Malachi.* That thought was amusing. She smiled.

“With the virus you made. Yeah.” He yawned. “You explained before.”

Revan turned to the viewscreen, watching the monotonous swirl of hyperspace. In her own body, it always made her sick, but now Sheris felt nothing at all. “You should sleep,” she reminded the pilot. There would be no piloting to be done until they emerged at the next jump point.

“For some reason, I find it hard to sleep around you.” His laugh sounded hoarse. “Never know if I'm gonna wake up again.”

“I wouldn't hurt you.” Did he still think she would? “I would never hurt you, or your wife or child.”

“Oh, yeah? You did. Strangled me. Pressed me into a wall, threatened my kid….”

He was just a man, nearly null. He could never understand. “I achieved the ends necessary using the most expedient methods.”

*Most expedient?* Dark laughter, like an echo in her mind.

XXX

"Don't you think you're trying a little too hard to be Revan?" Beya’s face, heart-shaped, an eyebrow raised.
"That's who he's expecting. Who is needed."

"We understand why you left the amnesiac back on Deralia." Vikor sighed and sat down in the rapidly-reddening mud. "Just rather less clear on how you plan to stop the deathless."

If Vikor were her subconscious, he should know. If he were real. "I never used you for your grasp of strategy."

"That was more my game." Beya smiled, a little grimly. "Don't you think he'll notice your weakness?"

"I know how to distract him. And it's a Sith planet. Sith Lords are constantly trying to amass more power. My allies… artifacts… I'll find something. And Malak… is there. Or will be. He-he will help."

"Something," Vikor muttered. "Revan Starfire will find something. Another cure worse than the disease?"

XXX

My cure was the galaxy's only hope. But the distribution network was in tatters now, the Order in shambles, House D'Reev destroyed--

Destruction you caused. That voice. Was it Beya's? Her temples throbbed.

The Deralian pilot was stuck in the past, repeating the same argument he'd used, ever since Peragus. "You could have asked. You could have told the other Revan whatever's going on. You should have just asked both of us to help you!"

"There was no time. Not for Polla Organa. And it's safer that the Fragment never leaves Deralia. Never sees the Emperor or any of his servants again."

"You think handing yourself over to him instead will work?"

Revan looked at the pilot with surprise. Perhaps the man was more astute than she had assumed.

"Yes," she said. "I know him. This body is a genetic duplicate. Strength can be hidden--" a lesson she'd never had to learn when she was Revan; but one she had learned by watching her duplicate closely. "--Hidden or acquired. Tenebrae will believe his eyes, even if the Force says otherwise. He will believe in me because I know him."

"Then what am I supposed to do? I grab Polla and run?"

"Essentially, yes. I should be able to facilitate your departure."

His eyes narrowed. "Why the hells should I believe you?"

Reminding him again that he had no choice seemed cruel. Revan sighed. "Please. I have your interests at heart."

"Banthashit." He rubbed his eyes. "You just need me to fly this damn ship." There were shadows under his lids as if he hadn't slept in days.

Was she truly that terrifying? Revan smiled slightly, imagining what the man would have thought, had they met when she was Lord of the Sith.
“To continue with our discussion....” Master Klee with the glowing red eyes leaned across the table, eyeing Mekel. “Rather naughty of you, Malak, taking leave of my hospitality with your wife’s duplicate. Are you ensconced somewhere in a romantic tryst?”

“Get stuffed,” Mekel told him leaning back on the hospital bed.

Back on Kaas, Dustil’s body was asleep, near-collapsed with exhaustion, as far as they could tell, and all three of them felt jammed into Mekel’s skull here on Coruscant, trapped with a madman who wouldn’t stop talking.

“Vulgarity.” The Emperor sighed and glanced at his chron.

They’d been at this all night--a barrage of questions--interrupted only once by a nurse who came in to check Mekel’s vitals. The asshole in front of him had compelled her away before Mekel even had time to yell for help--not that Malak would have let them yell for help. No. Every fracking time Dustil and Mekel came up with a sensible plan like, ‘kill this asshole and get the frack out of here,’ the Dark Lord of the Sith fracking nixed it and shoved them into a corner of consciousness.

They were stronger together; but with the bond stretched across a galaxy, Malak had seemed stronger than both of them, at first. As if the sight of his old enemy rekindled old hatred, fueling his power.

But now… finally, Malak was tiring and Mekel was here. In charge, with Dustil backing him like warm breath on his neck.

“Frack you,” they both told the Sith Emperor.

“Your wife sends her regards, Malak.” The smug asshole smiled slowly. “I just had the pleasure of her call. She looks forward to seeing you again.”

Malak stirred, and it took a lot of effort to push him back down. Which wife?

“Frack you, sideways,” Mekel yawned at Klee. “Did you guys have a commlink frack?”

Imbeciles! I need to know what she said! A pause. I need to know if it was Revan, or--

The other Revan? Sad, one of them thought. Jealous?

No. Mekel tried not to feel defensive.

I meant Malak. Dumbass. Dustil pulled their mouth with a smile.

“She requested your presence.” Tenebrae chuckled. “I believe she wants both her husbands at her side when she enters the tomb.”

Both husbands? He means my father? The spike of Dustil’s fury would have been fracking helpful if they were allowed to kill this loser.

What fracking tomb? Mekel thought that was more to the point. We are not dying for this schutta!

What is your game, Red? Suddenly Malak was strong again, riding a wave of emotions too complicated and gross to parse, pushing past them and seizing control. Is it a trap for Tenebrae? Why did you send for me? Which one of you... which one of you ordered me?
Where is our son?

“Where is she?” Malak clipped out loud, grinding their teeth.

“In a ship. She says she’ll be on Kaas soon. Will you be there to greet her? Will you come out of hiding for her?”

Yes, Malak thought, but he bit back the word, even as they laughed. “What of my companions?”

“The Wookiee and the Revan Pretender?” Klee's shoulders shrugged. “I presume you don't mean the Astro mech... what of them? Are they cowering in the forest with you now?”

“Perhaps. Their safe passage? Guarantee it.”

Aww, look, ickle Malakins is all sentimental.

Maybe he's got a thing for Wookiees.

Well, that smuggler is hot. Mekel suddenly realized that on Kaas, she was curled up next to Dustil’s body now, huddled for warmth between him and Zaalbar. He opened Dustil’s eyes and blinked--

An eerie, bloodcurdling howl echoed faintly in the air. The trees sheltering overhead were black against a lightening sky.

“How?” Mission beeped softly, standing sentinel at their feet. “What the frack was that?”

“I-I don't--” their voice cracked like a kid’s and Polla Organa stirred, mumbling something in her sleep. She twisted her fingers in Zaalbar’s fur. The Wookiee sat up suddenly, reaching for his bowcaster and belt, upending her back onto the ground.

“Oww!” she yelped.

“Shhh,” Zaalbar motioned his claws across his lips and the smuggler silenced instantly, looking to Dustil as if they knew what the frack was going on.

“What?”

“I don't know.” It was Mekel answering. Dustil was testing the currents of the Force, and Malak was frozen, caught between the Emperor’s maniacal laughter and that... sound.

Something about the sound made Mekel’s blood run cold. Like being trapped in time again, with mad Uln’s laughter.

Xxx

The room was perfect, Lydie thought. All chairs perfectly aligned around a circular table, all with varying views of the Coruscanti skyline. Rank, Azen’s butler droid had informed her, was determined not by position, but by access to that view.

So put the Jedi by the windows but facing inward? Lydie Korr frowned. They were the least likely to be offended.

“Senator Loanin? There are some... guests to see you.” The sneer on their courtier’s Sullustan mouth betrayed all too well what the man thought of these ‘guests.’
“Send them in.” Azen looked older already. The smooth planes of his face were marred with lines of worry, and the Senator’s collar looked tight and artificial around his neck.

Two weeks since his father and brother’s unfortunate accidents had made Azen the First of House Loanin in the Coruscanti Senate, and as necessary as that role had been to assume, Lydie thought the responsibility set as heavily on her husband’s shoulders as the arrangements with the Genoharadan that had disposed of his father and brother in the first place.

Were you less guilty of murder when you only arranged for it to happen? Or more guilty? Did guilt matter at all, when Jedi were vanishing across the galaxy and no one seemed able to help? Was their loyalty still to the Republic? Or the vanishing Force-sensitives that no one in the Senate seemed to care about?

Lydie’s own moral reservations had ended when Thalia’s cell in the Underground went dark. Some Jedi said they needed to gather to fight—even Master Atris had partially emerged from the shadows, sending a comm that encouraged swift action… but Lydie remembered the monster’s languid touch in the Jedi Library, the sensation she’d had, all her limbs dissolving, her strength slipping away like blood in a warm bath.

If their enemy could sap away a Jedi’s life with a touch, what could he do to a room full of them? Or a planet?

She and Azen were trying for a more subtle, yet efficacious, solution.

How could you fight a Force user who drained the life from all other Force users? 

Not with the Force.

They needed the Fleet.

How could you control a military that had lost all respect for the Jedi Order?

By showing it the threat that only Jedi could fix.

“A admirals Ekkumi, Cein. General Sand.” Azen had briefed her carefully on the latest Fleet promotions, so she spoke their titles with confidence. “Masters Vrook, Kavar. Padawan Ban.” She brought her palms together in a Senator’s bow.

“Lydie Korr,” Yuthura Ban ignored formality, stepping forward and taking both of Lydie’s hands. “I’m pleased to see you looking so well! You seem quite recovered.”

Lydie remembered the last time she’d seen the woman, all of them evacuating from the D’Reev Tower, her hasty farewells to Thalia and Knight Shree.

Poor Thalia.

“It’s Senator Lydie Loanin now,” she corrected. “I am Second off my husband’s House--at least until we have children.”

The Twi’lek’s eyes narrowed. “Of course.” She squeezed Lydie’s hands again. Hers were warm, almost hot. Twi’lek metabolism was faster than the Human baseline, which made it three times faster than the Standard Zabrak, although Lydie had always been told she was rather warm-blooded for an Iridonian. “Senator Lydie.” Yuthura Ban pulled back, raising a brow ridge.

Loanin, Lydie thought. Senator Lydie Loanin. Even though Lydie Loanin did sound ridiculous.
“So sorry to hear of your father’s death,” Admiral Cein was saying to Azen.

“An unfortunate circumstance.” Her husband turned to look at Lydie.

She wondered what her own mother would have thought of them.

_Dear Ma, Would Da have killed to marry you? Azen’s father objected because we are genetically incompatible and Azen got rid of him because it was the most logical choice to protect the Jedi—_

“Please.” She smiled politely and gestured at the round table they had placed in the room’s windowed alcove, with views of the Coruscanti depths shimmering beneath. “Let's all sit.”

_There's probably some polite way Senators say that, although I don't know it, just like I don't know anything, and even through Azen says it's fine, I know that it's not. We’re just waiting on Senator Racharn and then we’ll begin._

“Racharn?” Admiral Ekkumi frowned. “I don't understand.”

“The First of Racharn will be joining us.” Master Vrook muttered. “She has the information about True Sith from the D’Reev archives.”

“Thank you for inviting her for us, Master Vrook,” Lydie remembered her manners.


“We have pastries,” Azen offered them stiffly. He wore the Senator's role like a bad coat, Lydie thought, but it was brave of him to try.

Xxx

They spent a damp, miserable night huddled together under a large, drooping bush that kept making Polla sneeze. Or maybe that was having her face buried in the Wookiee's furry chest. She woke up in the morning when the warmth suddenly ended, ending a dream of falling into a rug with a dream of falling into mud. Reality was cold and dark, and something was making a horrible, bone-chilling noise, like one of the soul stealers Auntie Mita used to warn her about when she was bad.

Zaalbar roared something, and the Tee made a clucking sound, almost like a growl.

The noise came again, raising every hair on her body. Polla shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. “What the frack was that?”

Malak, or Dustil, or whoever he was, was already awake, staring thoughtfully out at the jungle like the Force showed him more than wet, green foliage.

“You make the caff yet?” she added when he didn’t answer, tucking her cold fingers (even through the gloves) into the hem of her sleeves.

“Yeah.” He snorted, gesturing to the empty air. “Did you want crema or suc?”

“Both.” She shrugged, wishing it was true.

He turned to face her, shadows under his eyes. He’d be a handsome kid, maybe, if he ate something, Polla thought. “Malak thinks he knows someone in Kaas City who might let us hide out
there. He thinks they’re one of Revan’s old allies.”

“Thinks?” Okay, So you’re Dustil? Are you not Malak? How was she supposed to tell?

“We don’t understand half his banthashit.” The kid rubbed his temples like they hurt. “He talks a lot. And it’s weirder… sometimes, we just know… stuff.”

“We… is you? Dustil? and--” it took her a sec to remember the name. “Mekel? The one whose da is Revan’s uncle?”

“Yeah.”

The Tee beeped. “What?”

“Thought you knew everything, Blue.” He smirked a little.

“Not about that! That's kind of major! Vrook had a kid?” The droid whistled. “And that kid is you!”

“Yeah. Hey, do I inherit anything, if the galaxy thinks she's dead?”

The droid’s dome swiveled. “Don’t be dumb, this is no time for--” her voder broke off. “That sound again. What is it?”

A low, mournful howl, followed in quick succession by a series of gobbling yelps. Closer now.

“Frack,” Mekel, or Dustil muttered. “Whatever that is can't be good--” And then his expression shifted, mouth furrowing flat, eyes narrowing as if he were seeing Polla again for the first time.

“Frack?” She prompted. “You were just saying--”

“No. Vormskr. A hunting pack.” The voice deepened, words hardening. “Of course. I should have known. We should have pressed on during the night--”

“Oh, yeah? You were the one who called a halt!” Polla didn't want to admit she'd been tripping over her own feet at that point, adrenaline and hunger the only thing keeping her moving at all.

The kid--now Malak pretty obviously--grimaced. “This body needed to recover from the carbonite freezing. And you and the Wookiee were a danger to yourselves, blundering through Kaas jungle in darkness--”

Zaalbar growled something long and complicated. Polla only caught the word for disagreement.

“Oh?” Darth Malak turned to glare at the Wookiee too, which would have been funny if something called a ‘hunting pack’ wasn't out to get them. “Tree-sense on Kashyyyk isn't enough to serve on Kaas. You have no idea the manner of creatures that hunt here at night!”

The Wookiee barked a dismissal, and made a chuckling sound, deep in his throat.

The Tee made a sound like a laugh. “Good one, Big Z!”

It was annoying, being the only sent who didn't get Shyriiwook, but another howl interrupted before Polla could point that out.

“We need to move.” When Malak was in control of the kid’s body, he sounded like he was in charge. Polla found her feet following him through the underbrush, with Zaalbar on her heels.
When she glanced back, she saw that the Wookiee had actually slung the Tee between the crossed straps of his bandolier, like a strange imitation of a baby’s harness. Under different circumstances, she might have laughed.

“So these hunting packs… they roam the jungle?” She lengthened her stride trying not to puff with the effort.

“No. Not without purpose.”

Another sound through the air, a long and deep ‘woo woo.’

“Rallying call,” Malak said before she even asked.

“You seem pretty sure they’re hunting us. Back home, we had hunts for trawler deer and sikimaw snakes—”

“Vornskr track Force users. They have no other purpose.” He had steered them back onto the main trail, somehow. “These are the Emperor’s lands. Tenebrae is tracking me.”

“Oh.” She coughed. “Just you?”

“All of us,” the Tee said. “But yeah, mostly him.”

The kid glanced in her direction. “As you say. This road leads to the city. There are guard stations along the way, every two kilometers. You and the Wookiee must pose as runaway slaves, hope Tenebrae hasn’t circulated descriptions, or that you don’t run into one of his voices—”

“That’s a lot of hope.” Pose as runaway slaves? What the frack do the Sith do to runaway slaves? Polla had been to Ryloth, she’d seen the Pits. It couldn’t be good. In fact, won’t it be worse considering this is an evil Sith fracking planet?

The vornskr bayed again, sounding closer now, and every nerve in her body screamed to run.

“Where the frack will you be?”

“Take that off.” The dirtbag didn’t answer. “The robes. Take them off. Hide the gun. Give me the lightsabers.”

“They’re valuable.” It was a weak objection, almost a joke.

“Don’t be a fool. Keep them and any sithling you meet will use them to gut you.”

The Wookiee growled like he was actually agreeing with Darth Malak.

“They’re right,” the Tee added. “Lose the sabers, Polla Polla. This kind of place, weaker you are, safer it is.”

Feeling like she was in another fracking nightmare, Polla did as he told; letting the Revan robes fall to the ground and leaving her standing there in nothing but her bodysuit skiv and the Sith boots. She grabbed the belt and took the blaster out of it. Shoved it down her left boot, where it dug into her skin. Tried not to shiver. “They take you and leave us alone? That’s the deal? Why the frack is that the deal? What the frack happens to us then?”

“House Blais. They have apartments on Imperial Row. Go there. Tell them… you’re an agent of my wi--of Revan’s. I think they… I think they are allied, she never told me her plans, but she spent a great deal of time with one of their sons. He seemed besotted, and that House has some Republic
connections. My father did work with them. Perhaps you can use the resemblance to Revan in your favor.”

“What? That's it? That's your fracking plan?”

“Vornskr hounds only hunt Force users, but the Emperor's Hunt rides with other beasts as well. The Wookiee would be seen as a noble challenge. You will be fodder in their way.” His voice was fracking giving her the creeps, low and guttural, with that stupid Core accent. “Tenebrae has spoken with Revan. He needs me for her. He does not need you. And my wife… may not have your interests at heart.”

“You do?” She was getting pissed now. “How the frack do you know all of this?”

“Force bond. We told you.” His voice changed, consonants slurring a little, dropping the accent like a bad ex. Now, he still sounded Core, but a lot more downmarket. “Klee’s with my body on Coruscant. Emperor Asshole is fracking bragging right now about having Revan and Malak and getting his own fracking way about everything.”

“Asshole,” he muttered again--at almost the exact same time as the Tee said the word

The droid chuckled, which was really creepy.

“His own way to do what?”

Zaalbar growled something that sounded like a question too.

“I… don't know.” Malak again. She was getting better at telling them apart. “I never knew. My wife kept her own counsel.”

“Great.” Well, whatever it was, wasn't Polla’s problem. Galaxy was a big place. They couldn't frack up all of it.

“Go,” he insisted again.

The howls were closer now. The sound made her spine prickle, warm rush of fear, like instinct. Run. Hide. Get the frack away--

“House Blais, huh? Okay.” Polla took a few steps away, ready to go right fracking now… but the Tee and the Wookiee were having some kind of argument entirely in barks.

The Wookiee gave one last injured whine, and growled at Polla. His dark eyes were liquid. She only caught one word: “Follow.”

“Okay…?”

No time. Crashing noises behind them. Snap-hiss as Dustil Onasi or Darth Malak or Mekel-from-the-Underground lit a lightsaber. The Tee swiveled behind him, and two blasters emerged from its chassis.

“Wait. Mission isn’t coming?”

The Tee didn’t bother to respond in any language Polla knew, just a series of shrill trills.

“No,” Dustil or whoever said. “You’re an idiot, Blue.”

“Huh?” Who the frack was blue? She looked at Zaalbar, who had no blue on him anywhere.
The Wookiee growled back. This word she caught. *Run. Go. Fast.* It meant all of those things.

*Go how? Where? Just like that?* Polla was still scrambling for a response when Zaalbar caught her by the arm, lifting her like a coiled rug, and broke into a dead run, moving through the underbrush, carrying her like she was Abasen. He was fast, for such a huge, hairy guy.

Behind them, the howls intensified, and then stopped. One high, gobbling yelp… and then an eerie silence.

“Frack,” she whispered softly. She twisted in his grip, trying to break free. “Put me down now, okay, big guy?”

“Ahhregg,” he moaned. That wasn’t a no, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t yes, either, because he didn’t let go.

Another howl again, then a whole pack of them, gibbering in the distance. And screams.

“I want to go home,” she mumbled into his chest fur.

“Shheooog,” he agreed.

Just when she thought she’d seen everything, Zaalbar slung her all the way over his shoulder like she was a kid playing sack of pomatos, and launched himself at the nearest tree.

Wookiees, it seemed, could climb trees very well.

XXX

For the first half, Leeshansintina, First of Racharn found the meeting with the heads of Fleet and the late Jedi Council a *lot* more boring than she expected. The refreshments were woefully pedestrian. The Fleet admirals wore civs—as did half the Jedi. The only one that was even halfway cute had this annoying, Rim accent. Where was Master Kavar Vakla from again? She looked down at her notes. Oh, yeah. Onderon. Big deal. Aramis took them there as an Away for her thirteenth? They’d done the beast-rider tour, flown with the drexl (on open hovercars, of course, no one risked a Senator’s heir with savages), and Ismay had even snuck off and made out with this cute guy who *said* he was a prince, but turned out to be one of the kids who took in their luggage at the hotel. It had been, as her late mother would have said, “an experience,” but not one she had any desire to repeat.

She drummed her fingers on the table-top, sitting next to her stealthed chap, stifling a yawn. Her eye caught the cute guy across from her on the table—the new Loanin First, who had the same cheekbones as his father, but was half the age. She smiled at him.

The rumors must be true about him only liking exotics through, because he just gave her a Selkath-eyed stare back. Cold, aquatic. Totally.

“How do you know?” That old, wrinkly Jedi Vrook Lamar interrupted cute Master Loanin again. “You claim there’s proof of an imminent threat from the Sith Empire, but how do you know?”

The Zabrak Jedi wife of Loanin’s smiled politely, and produced a round, old-fashioned commlink. She set it on the table. “We have evidence.”

“Show us,” one of the military guys said.

The other one, General Sand, who had been in the *Official Coruscanti Story of Revan’s*
Life, glanced rather pointedly (Leesa thought) in Leesa’s direction. “We were told this meeting would be secure.”

Leesa might have laughed, because if she totally wanted to, she could have had them all killed. Instead, she just smiled. “Don’t mind me! I’m only here because Senate rules say you need a Ruling House rep if you’re gonna be talking to the disbanded Jedi Council.” She tried to catch Loanin’s eye again, but he was staring at the pretty Zabrak he’d married (huge scandal, by the way). “House Loanin wouldn’t count. They’re not high enough ranked.”

“Higher than we were,” the Loanin murmured. His eyes were flinty. Pity about the wife, who sat next to him, all Zabrakly. She had gold chains looped over her front horns. Vulgar.

“The First of Racharn is here because I requested her attendance,” Revan’s uncle said, which was totally why it was her here and not some other House, but the point was still Leesa’s. “Racharn inherited all of D’Reev’s effects, including their intelligence databanks.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose like his head hurt. “She has information we need.”

“Some of it’s pretty out there,” Leesa warned him, widening her eyes so he thought she was stupid. “Sith Empire stuff. You all do know there are real Sith, right? Not like, fallen Jedi-Sith. Like real Sith. Probably evil. A lot of them have like, red skin.”

“So we’ve been told,” the Loanin murmured. Was he being sarcastic? Or ironic? Most people didn't know, those were totally not the same thing.

“Malachi used to control a few of their media channels,” Leesa added, because she was now a mature adult, and not going to sink to a Loanin’s level. “Racharn does now, but most of the contracts are in this weird, crazy language and none of my counsel--”

“Ancient Sith,” the Twi’lek’s lips pulled back over her pointed, small teeth. “If your contracts are with Sith worlds, the contracts would be in Ancient Sith.”

“--Yeah, so anyway, I put out an ad to find some counsel who speak it?”

“I speak Ancient Sith,” the Twi’lek told her.

Leesa made a mental note on her virtual tab to find out the woman’s name. “Cool,” she said, smiling like it was no big. “You want a job? I can offer a generous retainer.”

“The evidence?” Master Kavar interrupted. “I’ve seen it, of course. But the rest of you should.”

“Lydie…?” The Loanin First sounded like he was giving his bastard Second Zabrak wife permission to move. They must have one of those relationships.

The Zabrak tapped the front of the commlink, and an image appeared: a cute, dark-haired man in a bed, with a bunch of kolto bandages packed around his body. D’Reev’s old pet Jedi was looming over him, pacing back and forth. Took Leesa a sec, but then she got it. Mekel Jin. Dustil Onasi’s old bodyguard. Revan’s cousin. “This is a live feed,” the Zabrak murmured. “Master Vrook had requested security detail on his son.”

“You were monitoring my son’s security cameras?” Master Vrook broke in, sounding pissed.

“Master Klee contacted Kavar and gave him the codes,” the Zabrak corrected him. “It was agreed that we had a unique opportunity to see how the Emperor possesses one of his subjects--”

Xxx
“What did he say? The Emperor. What did he say?”

Mekel tried to sit up again, only sending a blinding knot of pain rippling down his side. “Master Klee. You... again.” Finally, *Maybe the fracking Emperor had to take a piss or something.* “We lost track. There’s a lot—” a part of him was standing with Malak and Dustil, saber blazing as they stood down a pack of vornskr, while around them a bunch of red-skinned assholes riding what looked like giant manka cats _laughed._ “Why don’t you know what he says?”

“When he takes a body, he takes it utterly. When he leaves for another, he is gone entirely. There is no exchange.” Klee glanced at the closed door. It had been ages since anyone even tried to open it. “A weakness. One of the few we dare exploit.”

“That’s fracking nice.” Mekel blinked, his vision doubled. Sweet of Blue to stand off with him, but what the frack? Did Malak really think they were gonna take down all of these Sith? _If Malak get us killed, it’s all over._ He felt… stretched, stuck in this body, as much as half of him was across the galaxy. “What... do you… what do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell Revan that we resist. That we will help.”

_Asshole._ Mekel had to laugh. “It's not Revan who’s on Kaas right now. It's this smuggler--Polla Organa? I don't know where the frack Revan is, but Malak and everyone seem to think she’s coming--”

Xxx

Were they speaking in code? Leesa wished she had a trusted Second she could have sent in her place. This Jedi meeting thing was turning out to be more nonsensical than trade negotiations with Phin, and that said _a lot._

“Polla Organa?” Master Vrook had a vein on his forehead that was kind of gross. “The Deralian smuggler is on Dromund Kaas? How in stars did the real Deralian become embroiled in Revan’s affairs?”

“I thought she was dead,” General Sand frowned. “Didn't your intel reports say Revan had her killed, Ekkumi?”

“It was the obvious conclusion.”

“She wasn't dead,” Vrook snapped. “Polla Organa was on Coruscant as recently as a month ago. But she had nothing to do with Revan. This makes no sense.”

“And you knew of this how?” Master Kavar Vakla frowned at him.

“I saw her,” Vrook muttered. “In the Underground. Poor girl.”

“Unfortunate, but irrelevant,” Loanin broke in. “Perhaps the Revans sent her in their place as a ruse for Tenebrae. To antagonize him.”

“Or distract--” his Zabrakian wife murmured.

“More to the point: Malak’s… ghost is on Dromund Kaas _now?_” Admiral Rew Ekkumi looked like that was a real possible thing, and not some crazy cipher.

The Loanin First coughed. “The boy said that Revan is going to Kaas? Which one?”
“Which one?” General Sand shrugged. “The one that's really Revan--not this Polla person you said is already there.”

“He means which Revan,” the Zabrak wife said quietly. “The one who destroyed the Star Forge? Or the one who was Padawan Sheris Loran, before she took a holocron of the original Revan Starfire’s memories?”

“What?” Vrook’s voice growled the word in a way that Leesa could totally have seen being hot, like fifty years ago.

“What do you mean, 'which Revan?” Cein demanded. He was the not-cute one. “Are you telling us… not only is Revan Starfire not dead. But that there's two of her?”

“Three, if you count the smuggler,” Leesa pointed out, but no one was paying attention to her, the highest-ranking person in the room.

Whatever. Revan Starfire was so last year. Even if she came back, House D’Reev was dead as a doormat. And Racharn had all their cards.

The room broke out in a gaggle of excited voices. Leeshansintina examined her nails. Chap’s core was set on record. She’d sort through them later with her advisors.

Xxx

“This is the last hyperspace jump before Dromund Kaas,” Seiran commented, as if Revan couldn’t count. “If there’s anything else I need to know, you should tell me now. When we get in their airspace, I have no idea what protocol--”

“I know the protocol,” Revan told him. “We’ll be hailed by orbital patrol upon approach. I will handle all communications. Your job is to land the ship.”

“Right,” he muttered. “Land the ship, find Polla, leave.” It sounded like an invocation.

Revan walked over to him, trying to find words that would put him at ease. “She is now under my protection. Tenebrae will not harm her.”

Unless he wants to send me another message… in which case, none of them are safe.

“Great,” the Deralian adjusted something on the board. It appeared to be their gravitational thrusters.

The Fragment's personal commlink rang abruptly again. Revan didn’t recognize the codes. It could be anyone--one of the surviving Jedi, her Uncle Vrook, the Fragment herself--

“ Aren't you gonna answer that?” Evident from the scorn in his tone that the Deralian didn't understand the risks.

“You answer it, Seiran.” Revan stepped to the side, out of view of its primitive camera. “I will cut the connection if needed.”

“I--”

“Now.” Thinking of Uncle Vrook reminded her of what she had not had the chance to say to him. Pointless sentiment, compared to what was at stake. “Please.”

Seiran Wen eyed her warily, but hit the button to reply, as she had directed. "Hello?" It would help
"Me," a man barked at him. Revan stepped a little closer to get a better view. Beskar. Cropped hair. A lined, square face, familiar from the vids. "Where did you get this comm?"

"I-I have it." The Deralian was doing a good job of sounding stars-touched. Maybe that should be his excuse, and Revan should ignore this comm entirely. She had nothing to say to Canderous Ordo, and Oerin had asked her to leave the Mandalorians out of her plans. Given their relative weakness, it had been an easy enough promise.

She frowned, moving her fingers surreptitiously to adjust the camera’s resolution with the Force. The background snapped into sharp focus: banks of glittering consoles, durasteel spires inset into the wall, set in a distinctive arch.

Her breath caught in her throat. How is this possible?

"Seiran?" A dark-haired woman came into the camera’s view suddenly, crossing the floor to stand in front of General Canderous Ordo. She looked capable, with a child under each arm: one dark, one fair. "What are you doing? Did you kill Revan Starfire?"

Seiran looked at Revan as if he was asking what he should say.

How do you know the Mandalorians, pilot? It was a question for later, much later. Now--

"No," Revan told them, stepping into view. Again, she puzzled for precious milliseconds over the correct endearment. "Canderous Ordo."

"Third Wife," the man replied, in Mandalorian. The blonde woman next to him glared. Behind her, another two women, some infants, and a console bank with an arched, almost serpentine shape. Familiar. She could almost feel its cold slickness under her fingers. "I see that you're alive. Good."

S’cuy gar to you as well, General. "Good?" Her laugh sounded high and unfamiliar. She spoke in Standard, in case it was useful to have Seiran understand. “What in nine hells are you doing on my flagship?”

“Your Senator didn’t tell you before his assassination?” The blonde-haired woman next to Canderous snorted. “We traded for it. We made an arrangement with Malachi: your son returned from the Jedi for this worthless hulk. In truth, we did your Republic a favor, taking it from them. They were making no use of it at all.”

The Ordos were on the interior bridge--no sign from here of the damage Malak’s cannon had done. Revan had an irrational desire to ask them to show her the main command circle, the place where she should have died, but she bit it back, focusing instead on the figures in front of her. Canderous
Ordo had multiple wives, not uncommon, and they had been featured in the vids Davad had shown her, but she couldn't remember their names or station--

“See? Revan's not dead,” the youngest woman interrupted. Her hair was loose, a surprising breach of protocol in stars. “Am I still to be doubly shamed if she's not dead?”

“Millifar!” The dark-haired woman holding the two babies put them both down. One rose immediately and began toddling across the floor. The other examined its own toes. “Let your father speak.”

*Father, not wife.* Revan made a note. She had never paid attention to Clan Ordo’s offspring, perhaps a mistake, given now--

“Where are you?” The leader of Ordo asked Revan bluntly. “Is Onasi with you?”

*They know nothing. The Fragment let them go? With my flagship? I said I would let your Mandalorians run free, Oerin Lin; but The Aleema was not part of our bargain!*

“No. Carth isn't here. Is the cloaking field operational on your ship?” Would they be loyal? Could she force their loyalty as the Fragment had?

*But that was more than turning their own logic against them. That was… inspired. That man, Canderous Ordo. He followed the Fragment because of who she was, he--loved her, or she won his loyalty through combat, a show of strength, the old allegiance to Lin....*

Ordo’s loyalty could have happened in countless ways; but however it was done, Revan doubted it would transfer to her own circumstance.

“Yes,” the dark-haired woman responded. A smug smile played around her lips, as she switched back to Standard. “The Aleema is fully operational. We could stealth into Coruscanti orbit undetected, were it required.”

Seiran cleared his throat, as if he wanted to say something. Revan shot him a glare.

“No need for that... now,” she smiled, making it a joke like the Fragment would have. “Have you given any thought to targets in Sith space?”

“Perhaps, but Clan councils are for Clan,” the blonde woman said, folding her arms. “Are you returning to us to lead Clan Lin, Revan? Where is your son?”

“Safe.” The word escaped. She had meant to dissemble, tell them Malachor was dead, but a weak part of her mind refused to voice the lie.

“We don't have enough ships for a true engagement,” Canderous Ordo added, with surprising candor. “Yet.”

The wife next to him frowned, glancing towards the other.

“Yet,” Revan repeated slowly.

Xxx

*The fire had dimmed to embers. Revan’s hands crossed over her belly as she sank her cold toes into the smoke-warmed fur slippers that Headwoman Octiva had given her. They were the only shoes*
that still fit her swollen feet.

They said her time would be soon. They said she should send for her own clan, if she wanted them to be here for the child’s arrival.

Revan had gone through the list of ways to tell Malak and Vrook a dozen times; but they all reduced to the same equation: Why didn’t I tell them before?

To answer was to admit a fundamentally difficult truth.

These months out of time, while her son grew within (Stephonix’s scanners said he was a boy--; Revan could sense him in the Force, but the child himself had no conception of his own gender), had been one of the best times of her life.

The Mandalorians knew nothing of Padawan Revan Starfire, the strongest Force user in at least a generation. No fear. No awe. No sanctimony. She rarely used the Force at all here. Among Clan Lin, Revan was nothing more than a middling swordswoman, with a flair for languages and dejari. Mandalorian culture had little use for anything it couldn’t see or touch. This was the limit of their world: sun, sand, and crops. Their once-dominant military had been reduced to war games, festive sword dances. A part of her… a part of her wanted to live like this forever: raise her own son like the youngest child of Lin, the boy Oerin. A clever philosopher’s boy, cloaked in tribal silks.

Sometimes she drew the Lin boy maps on the sand of a galaxy he never needed to see. Sometimes she answered his questions, because this was a place where knowledge of the outside galaxy, even of their own history, was nothing but abstract.

All that Clan needed, they had right here.

It was, she thought, a truth that Malak would never understand. She missed him, of course she did, but he--

“Don’t go fireblind on us.” Her host’s low chuckle interrupted her thoughts. “Or catch cold. Octiva would have my hide.”

“I’m not cold,” Revan lied. Her hands and feet felt numb, with all her energies focused on the baby within, still in sleep, his fingers opening and closing like tanta blooms inside of her.

“No?” The Fett settled a fur robe around her shoulders and sat down next to her, stretching his own bare legs out towards the flames. “I was told you come from a world entirely covered in snow.”

“Yes.” She pulled the robe around her, wiggling cold toes in her slippers. “It’s called Hoth. But I haven’t lived there since I was… since I was a child.”

“When I was a boy, we sacked an ice-world. Even ice burns, given proper tinder.” His voice was light and teasing. If the Fett Cassus Lin hadn’t been nearly Vrook’s age and technically some kind of adoptive father figure, Revan would have thought he was flirting with her. “What makes an ice Jedi burn, Starfire?”

“You were a child during the Exar Kun rebellion?” She felt her face flush, even if among Mandalorians, it was men who were supposed to blush. “I took an elective course on military history, but I don’t remember an ice planet--”

“Not every fight became part of the Republic’s lies.” The man leaned forward, warming his hands
before the fire. “You’re good with dejarik, but I suppose no one ever taught you how to plot an orbital relay with more than a dozen ships accounting for all vectors of approach--”

“The same as one ship, except for collision points.” Revan shrugged. “It’s only simple physics.” Was this flirtation? Malak might have taken offense, but the Fett’s interest reminded her of pleasing Masters Vrook or Kae more than anything else. “But orbital combat is nearly as much a risk to the attackers as to defense. It would be almost impossible to win such a battle, without contaminating the planet’s atmosphere--not to mention the difficulty of approach for an attacking navy with no element of surprise. You can’t just jump out of hyperspace above atmosphere--”

“You have studied.” The Fett sounded pleased.

“My old teacher… she… she said we Jedi had a responsibility to understand all wars--the ones we had won, and the ones we lost.”

“Had?” Cassus chuckled. “Do Jedi no longer have responsibility? Or are you no longer Jedi?”

“Neither!” Revan’s voice was sharper than she meant it to sound. “But wars like that will never happen again. It was madness, what Exar and Ulic tried to do with their--”

“Their?” The man chuckled. “Dar’jett are useful, but the strength is Mando’ade. Ours.”

“Was,” she corrected him. It was cruel, perhaps, to correct him. Living among them for months had taught Revan how much Clan valued their pride. “You have no ships now. Not since the Treaty of Yavin.”

“Of course--” His teeth glinted in the flames--

Xxx

“Revan?” Onscreen, General Ordo was frowning at her. Everyone was quiet. Revan wondered how long she had been silent. What she had missed.

Seiran’s frozen expression gave her no clues. Had he betrayed her to them?

“I still… I may have a… a small target for you.” Even at full strength, Aleema couldn't stand against Kaas orbital defenses, but with more ships, if they could capture or at least destroy some of the Sith manufacturing centers…. Orbital Factory Genika, over Thule. Do they still make dreadnaught shells there? With the Star Forge active, most of the Sith military complex had been disassembled--placing them suddenly in a world where manpower meant more than resources, but now… could Revan use the Mando’ade to cut off Tenebrae’s strength at its head?

“A target?” General Canderous Ordo laughed. Unexpected.

“Are you joining us?” The blonde child interrupted. “Either fight by our side, or run away, like your pet Deathbringer--”

“Millifar!” The older blonde woman, face lined but near-twin to the girl’s, turned her head sharply and made a slashing motion with her hand.

“She isn’t wrong,” the dark-haired woman interjected, raising an eyebrow. “Revan gave Ordo the mask of Mandalore. She ceded all rights. It is only through this marriage--”

“Not even a real marriage,” the girl muttered sulkily.
“Milli,” the man sounded more tired than annoyed. His eyes didn’t leave Revan’s face. Was it devotion? Or something else? Suspicion? Captain Onasi had known she was false instantly, had a face that expressed every emotion, but through a comm signal, Revan could tell nothing of this man at all. “What's wrong with your hand, Revan?” The old warrior leaned forward, face filling the screen.

She had forgotten. In the call with Carth she'd turned to have it concealed, but seeing the Aleema was disquieting and Revan had turned directly to face the comm. “An injury,” she lied glibly. “It happened when we left Coruscant. I had it replaced.”

“Huh.” The man nodded and shrugged. “Looks like good work.”

“It is quite functional,” she allowed.

“My daughter saw General Surik,” the man told her. “She was holed up on some moon, but she took off and ran. Millifar said she's half-mad.”

“She ran like a scalded kath,” the girl muttered. “And she hates you, Third Wife.”

“Would you like us to pursue?” the dark-haired woman asked. “I am only asking from politeness, but we did trace her probable jumps. We have a few modified freighters capable of the task.”

I'm sure you do. You were always a very clever people.

Strange, staring at her old enemies and hearing them address her as an ally.

“You… actually saw Meetra… Millifar?” She’d thought the woman long dead. So many dead. Was Surik like Davad then? Another Force-extinguishing threat to the galaxy? Their gifts had been similar once, before Malachor. After Malachor, seeing what Davad had become--

“Yeah,” Canderous Ordo nodded slowly. “General Meetra Surik. You remember her, right?”

Xxx

“You remember her, right?” He kept his voice casual, as he let his hand drop to his side, not daring to give his wives more warning.

“Not... much.” Her smile was stiff. “I remember... Malachor.”

Canderous nodded. “Right.”

Xxx

“He's a kid. Dustil Onasi is just a kid. They all are.” Revan paced the length of the narrow cell they’d been assigned in the Dreshdae Academy like a leashed rancor, testing its boundaries. “All of these damn kids! What the frack am I supposed to do with them?”

A rhetorical question, Canderous was sure, but he tried to answer honestly. “They've been raised as warriors. Some we can salvage.” Maybe Carth’s kid. The boy had guts. “Kids can be pretty tough. You had a few that followed you in the Wars--”

“Kids? I had kids fighting for me?”

“They say General Surik was eighteen standard when she gave the order. My people called her the
“Who?” Her brows knit together in a frown.

Revan could have learned the name from someone else. She had learned the truth about Malachor later, much later. But still, that… the arm… hadn’t one of the Selkath survivors looked like Revan? Canderous had seen the reports back when he was playing Malachi D’Reev’s lap kath. And hadn’t that duplicate had her arm chopped off right in front of them?

And then Canderous realized the simple truth that had been staring him in the face all along.

The Hawk was empty without its crew. You could barely hear the Wookiee’s howls over the comm chatter in the cockpit.

Revan had switched on all channels, releasing a cacophony of commands in a dozen languages and codes that she somehow seemed to filter, her hands moving in front of the holographic images on the screen.

Strangely graceful, like a dance in stars.

On the viewscreen in front of them, the skies above the Rakatan homeworld bristled with ships: fleets of fighters, Republic capital ships, and Sith dreadnaughts, all circling like purrgil, burning blast knew how much power just to avoid the planet’s pull. There were firefights breaking out already, but their own trajectory was like the eye of a sandstorm, heading direct through chaos, straight to the heart of the spire-shaped fortress that swallowed half the sky.

Was Bastila doing this? Was Revan? Or was it just that neither side--Sith nor Republic--wanted to risk killing the woman who controlled the giant factory?

Canderous had been the man who told Vao not to be afraid. He’d been the man who’d called the pilot a friend, the old man a good drinking buddy, the Cathar a fine warrior. He’d called the Wookiee loyal and strong.

He’d been the man who had said that he’d follow Revan to the gates of hell too. It looked like now they were almost there.

Maybe Republic forces didn’t know what she’d become. They’d let the Hawk through the blockade around the orbital she called the “Star Forge,” with nothing more than good wishes and platitudes about the Force.

“Here.” Canderous put the bottle down on the console. Revan barely looked up from the nav board. “One more drink before the war. You game?”

Revan’s face was pale as Shan’s now. So quick they could turn. Onasi once said it was like the flip of a coin. Light to darkness. Canderous had always thought the light and dark things were both banthashit, but now… what she was now was changed. How else to explain it?

Canderous wondered if this was how the old Fett had thought, looking at Ulic Qel-Droma when the osik led him into the Jedi’s trap. What Cassus Lin had thought before Revan took him down.

Maybe he was an old fool, comparing himself to men. In his case, there would be no one left with
songs to sing for his glorious death.

“Drink?” he repeated. Her eyes were strangely luminescent, tinged with yellow.

“Yes,” Revan muttered, and took the bottle from him. The muscles in her throat worked, pale, deceptively fragile. One quick, deep swallow. Canderous wondered if he’d be doing the galaxy a favor if he put a vibrosword in her chest before she put the firewhiskey back down… but he knew her well enough to know he’d die before the blade cleared its sheath.

“Here.” The second had passed and she was passing the bottle back, strangely cold where her fingers had touched its glass.

“Thanks,” he said. “You know what to do?”

How are we going to die today, Revan?

“I’m going to kill Malak.” Her eyes… maybe it was the light. She licked her pale lips, glancing towards Bastila, who sat oblivious, eyes closed in the co-captain’s chair. Maybe Princess Shan was doing something to keep fighters off their tail. Canderous wasn’t sure. “You should… follow.”

On the viewscreen in front of them, a Republic hammerhead locked on a Sith interceptor. The slow depressurization of both ships began. Canderous muttered a deathnote for those poor bastards trapped like womprats inside, all their fight useless.

At least I won’t go like that.

Revan blinked, and moved the thruster to the right, so their own ship avoided collision.

“Don’t worry,” he told her, half-joking. “These tubs can’t catch the Hawk. There’s only ever been one warship built for speed as well as firepower. Not a ship in this sky was ever as fast as your Aleema. Not one.”

“My who?” She frowned. “My what?”

“Aleema. Your flagship. Twice the size of those kriff-spawned pieces of osik and three times as fast—”

XXX

“Canderous?” Her face was blurry in the comm’s light, face of the pilot behind her a stranger to Canderous. Aemelie had told him, confessed finally. Some Deralian saps. If this woman had the husband, he assumed the wife and kid were dead.

She didn’t know the ship. She’s never known the ship.

On Coruscant, Aemelie had peppered Revan with questions about the Aleema’s schematics, but she had never remembered a thing.

Such a simple thing. Canderous should have seen it before. The real Revan. Her child. Onasi…? Already dead. They must be. She would never stand for this. Never give her comm to an imposter.

No one would pretend to be Revan and head to Sith space to be (as Carth would put it) ‘on the side of the angels.’

Canderous felt his face fall into grim lines. “Just let us know how we can help, Revan. Let us know
what you need."

“Yes,” she murmured, instead of laughing incredulously at his concern, telling him she ‘got this,’ or rolling her eyes. “I will. Thank you.”

A chink in his chest tightened. Canderous felt his mouth twitch once. It could be that he would never know their fates.

One more drink, pilot. Before the war.

He would toast honor, against a veil of stars.

XXX

“I... will,” she told General Ordo. “Thank you.” Revan punched the connection closed, leaning forward, and resting her forehead on the cool surface of the board. I will, General Ordo. If I can trust you. She wanted to trust him. The Fragment had. The Mandalorians would be useful, even if speaking to them brought up a strange mixture of bile and fear in her throat, like she was a child again, facing down her first battle on Eos.

And I promised Lin I would leave them. She owed the dead man nothing, but he was a better ally than enemy, and Aleema only one ship.

They would hate to be safe, but let them be free.

“You okay?” Seiran, behind her, like a shiver in the Force. Terrified.

“Start the next jump,” she commanded. “I... I need to rest.”

XXX

“Did you get a trace on that location?” Canderous barked.

“Yes,” Aemelie murmured. “But she said she doesn’t want our--”

“That wasn’t her,” he snapped. “I’m not sure who that was.”

“But that was Seiran,” his Second Wife argued. “Are you saying my friend’s husband is following a Revan pretender?”

“I’m saying we’re testing our cloaking capacity,” Canderous told them. “In Sith space. Figure out her probable jump points and get some lines on local chatter. If she’s traveling as Revan, there’ll be news. Find it. Get the translators booted for Sith.” Blasted dar’jett and their forgotten tongue. But his people had made a study of the basics, at least. Enough to find this false Revan, if she was mentioned.

“Sith space?” Gwenarius's voice dripped with false confusion.

“I won’t beg for the women’s maps,” he muttered. “You can tell me I've been among barbarians for too long again if you like, but have the children load the nav charts. Have you found a suitable base?”

Gwen glanced at Aemelie, who smiled slowly. “In fact, we have.”

“One with historical significance,” his First Wife murmured archly. “Much more temperate than Rekkiad or the Deathbringer’s moon.”
“Good.” He nodded.

It wasn’t vengeance he sought—merely a balancing of the scales.

XXX

Which Revan? Which Revan? Vrook’s mind seized on that point like it had the inertial gravity of a collapsing star.

Azen Loanin had said there were two.

Two Revans. There was only one way that could--

Across the table, his eyes met Yuthura’s. She gave him a pained nod, as if she was surprised too. “The holocron,” she said softly. “Sheris Loran took the holocron of Revan’s memories.”

The holocron. Of course. Sheris told us all her intentions, but we were fools to think those were empty words. I thought she was too broken to find the courage.

I underestimated her.

Guilt nagged at him, for the girl he'd neglected to save. No. For both girls that I neglected to save. Sheris and my niece both--

Xxx

“Goreapple pie and crema. No choc.” The dormitory window reflected his useless, fool’s smile, but Vrook couldn't stop smiling as he handed her the plate.

His niece smiled back. One of her teeth was growing in crookedly. There had to be a way to have that fixed. “You remembered, Uncle Vrook!”

“Of course.”

They had only been on Dantooine a few days, and her apprentice robes looked too large. Her nose was sunburned, her hair scraped into a tight braid, like a red rope down her back.

“Happy Birthday, Revan.”

She was ten, the oldest learner to be accepted in years, except for that Senate brat from House D’Reev. But Vrook didn’t think the boy would last. Malak was strong in the Force, but wholly unsuited for the life of a Jedi--spoiled and demanding--

“Oh-huh,” she nodded at him through a mouth of pie. “I hate it here, Uncle. When can we leave?”

Xxx

Sheris took the holocron’s memories.

Master Loanin seemed quite sure of it, even as he denied knowledge of how this event had occurred, or under whose command. Sheris’s own initiative?

That poor girl. Vrook had spoken with Sheris’s parents again after the D’Reev explosion, promised to look for their daughter. He hadn't known, but he had hoped she was with Revan, that the both of them were together and safe somehow—if only to assuage his own conscience.
Their mutual disappearance seemed to indicate something far more sinister.

“They were working together?” he asked Master Loanin, interrupting Cein’s paranoid rant about some pirated Republic ghost ship that had been seen in the Mid-core. “Revan and Sheris? You’re sure?”

“I am sure of nothing, but it seemed so.” The former Jedi-turned-Senator frowned. “The woman I spoke to was most definitely not Sheris Loran. I did not know the real Revan personally, but this… persona had an independence of character that seemed in keeping with accounts of the Sith’ae’rah’s nature.”

“You should have mentioned this sooner,” Vrook snapped. He felt blindsided. He had wanted Revan to return to herself, to have a true redemption; but not at Sheris’s expense. And now--

Why didn’t she come to me for assistance? Did she try?

“I did mention.” Loanin paused. “Master Kavar and I have discussed the potential ramifications at length, but since you remained in hiding, we did not discuss them with you.”

You also never discussed putting surveillance in my son’s room with me, or your plan that involves these three Fleet officers… and my niece! Vrook glowered at the younger man; but it was useless to belabor the point now. Not when there was a Sith Emperor out there, making Force-users disappear. Or worse.

“Do you expect us to remain calm that the two Revans’ plan may involve the lost Sith Empire, the Mandalorians and, if Vrook’s son can be believed, the ghost of Darth Malak?” Ekkumi’s voice was dangerously calm.

“Master Klee encourages the boy to extract as much information from the Emperor as possible,” Kavar said. “I told you, despite being possessed, Dalos Klee is on our side.” He gestured to the screen, where the Jedi was still talking to Mekel Jin.

Or talking to Malak. Or Dustil Onasi. Vrook had seen enough of the recording to see the shifts in voice and vocabulary. Malak was easy to distinguish; but it pained him not to be able to tell the difference between his son and the Onasi boy.

Admiral Ekkumi stood up abruptly, sending her chair clattering across the cold metal floor. “Our side involves sending two Revans and a Malak to the Sith home world?” Her voice sharpened. “Am I the only sentient in this room who objects to this… insanity?”

Vrook almost missed it, the exchange of glances between Loanin and his wife, her small smile.

“No,” he muttered. “You are not.”

“We don’t know where that Sith homeworld is;” muttered Cein. “Still.” He turned to Kavar. “You promised to reveal its location.”

Kavar nodded. “Leeshansintina of Racharn possesses the charts we need to find the Sith Empire.”

The Racharn First giggled. “It’s like… pretty far,” she commented. “I can see why they were such a secret. Totally out in the dust--like, past the Rim.”

Loanin folded his hands. “Racharn First has agreed to provide us with navigational charts, but any kind of invasion would be foolhardy before we assess their forces--”
“Does Klee have information about that?” Ekkumi walked over to the window, her fingers tapping slowly on her thigh. A military code, Vrook assumed. Some communique to Cein and Sand.
“About their military?”

“They have no Star Forge. The remnants of the Sith Fleet vanished over Malachor after Revan ordered them there--” Kavar had the aptitude for this. Vrook had lost his taste for it long ago. “At the most, five or six capital ships?”

“I wouldn't underestimate a few systems of Force users,” Yuthura murmured. “Their strength will not lie with tech.”

“You would know.” Ekkumi’s laughter was brittle.

“Yes.” Yuthura’s lekku were wrapped around her neck. “And I am concerned as the rest of you at the thought of a Darth Malak reborn. I served under him. But my students have the strength and self-control to use his power, not be consumed by it.”

“None of us are pleased by the concept of a Darth Onasi or a Darth Lamar either,” Kavar snapped.

“Jin,” Vrook snapped, taking the bait, and berating himself for it at the same time. “My son has his mother’s surname. Not mine.”

“Darth Jin?” Admiral Cein sniffed. “It sounds like a drink.” He shook his head. “After their… antics at our last meeting, I am convinced those two are only a threat to themselves. But Malak, if he were to retake command of the Sith Fleet--”

“I worry more about the Revans doing the same. Possibly with Mandalorian assistance.” Ekkumi put one hand on the ferraglass, fingers trailing across its surface.

Kavar coughed. “Revan is a concern. Malak… may not be.”

“They have no self control.” Vrook stared at the image of his son. No manner of wishing it otherwise would help. “My son and the Onasi boy. Malak's force of will and purpose is stronger than theirs.” He had watched enough of the recording to see again and again, how the glowing-eyed Sith Emperor taunted Malak into his son’s body. The boy was obviously powerless to resist.

*Nothing more than a pawn. Like they made my niece with their mindwipes--*

His thoughts were dark, darker than they should be. Too attached, too engaged.

Kavar raised a comm unit to his mouth and whispered something in it.

The door to his son’s hospital room slid open. His son started on the bed, and Klee’s head turned. The nurse who entered was carrying a long oblong box.

“What's this?” Vrook found his voice.

“An experiment,” Kavar said. “We are all concerned about the possibility of a Darth Malak on the Sith homeworld….”

**Xxx**

“What the frack is this?” It was Telos asking. Mekel was busy trying to help Malak and Blue kill vornskr and not die. Harder, because a part of him--or a part of a Dustil maybe--couldn't help but keep staring over to the cluster of sents that included Dustil’s father, chained like a joyboy in the
back of an open speeder manned by two red-eyed and red-skinned assholes.

Their timing and concentration was way off. It was fracking hard being in two places at once and--

*Leave me.* Malak was pissed about the company, but Mekel didn't want to leave Dustil’s body alone with him. *Klee seems to be stalling for time--*

*Aren't we stalling for time too?* Polla Organa and Zaalbar had gotten away clear, Mekel thought, although neither Dustil or Malak had seemed thrilled when he pointed out they'd dumped two nulls who didn't speak Ancient Sith on an ancient, Sith planet. Thank frack he and Telos could handle it, although since they knew what Malak knew, maybe they could speak all types of things, like the way Shyriiwook actually made sense--

“No.” Malak dispatched another hunting beast with a two-handed undercut, leaping in the air and sending a volley of lightning at another one. Weird feeling, feeling your--Dustil’s--body move like that, and have no control. *This is a show of strength. Tenebrae will respect it. Respect us, if he thinks we are stronger than the rest of his minions.*

*Great.* Like being back at Dreshdae finishing academy again. Mekel looked over at Dustil's father before Malak jerked his head back towards the advancing threat: a massive, burled creature with a small head inset into its plated skin, claws the size of fracking kids, dripping with dark ichor.

“Terentatek,” Malak called out. His voice was mocking and hard. “Only one, Master?”

*Master? Frack you both.*

*It puts him at ease.* Malak’s hatred burned, like raw power in their hands.


“Frack you,” Mekel told him, gathering strength for the leap.

Xxx

“Mekel?” Klee touched his arm.

Dustil nearly jumped out of their skin. “What?”

“You seem… preoccupied.”

“No.” Their head hurt. When Dustil closed his eyes he was there, and he didn't want to be. Seeing Dad like that--completely helpless, like a Sith frack toy fueled an anger he wasn't sure he wanted to unleash. Mekk thought they could handle it, but maybe Mekel couldn't feel it the same way. There was a… power on that planet, like weaves of Force across its surface, fueled by all the hate and rage and pain--enough to break a planet maybe. Unleashing it would be like tumbling into space. No going back.

“Your Emperor seems pretty busy right now,” Dustil told him, but Klee was unsnapping the box from across the room. “That why I’m stuck with you?”

“Ah.” Klee didn’t answer. Instead, he turned, pulling out what looked like… a stick with something small and furry stuck on the end.

*Ysalamiri.* Dustil remembered the ones in the D’Reev apartments, the kid mixing poison with his tears.
“What’s that for?” he asked.

“Master Kavar asked me to conduct an experiment.” The voice was kind, detached, like they were in class talking about meditation techniques. “As you know, ysalamiri range is quite short—”

Xxx

Master Klee took another step forward. The boy on the bed sneered at him with an expression that Yuthura thought more Onasi than Jin.

Another step—and then, the boy’s expression went slack. Blank.

“What is he doing?” Yuthura demanded. “Are you trying to prevent Tenebrae from interrupting them?”

“No,” Kavar said. He leaned forward. “Vrook, you said before that Malak was able to keep possession of the Onasi boy even through the D’Reev ysalamiri fields, through neural disruptors. I posited that the same might not be true for Jin—”


“Mekel,” Klee repeated.

This time, the man just gaped at him, mouth half open. “Yes, I…” he shook his head. “You need to put me back!”

“In time,” Klee murmured. “Give it a few minutes. We need to be sure.”

“Sure of what?”

“Sure of what?” Yuthura echoed. “By suppressing his connection to the Force, you risk disrupting the Bezel bond—”

Kavar smiled thinly. “Exactly.”

Xxx

Killing a terentatek was apparently fracking easy, because Malak and Mekel had done it in like two minutes, while Dustil had been wondering what fresh horrorshow Master Klee, the Sith lackey had in that fracking box.

The corpse was huge though, blocking off half the hunting party. But then a few pushed through the crowd. Sith wannabes, Mission would have called them, but the droid pretending to be her wasn’t even calling out insults, just generating shields and laying down suppressing fire when it looked like Dustil’s body needed it—he’d gotten that much of the fight through the bond.

Thanks for leaving me to clean up the fracking mess, Mekk.

Thanks for leaving me with your dads and fracking Sith Lords while you check out my enormous fracking co--

It felt like a hand slipping out of his grasp, fingers letting go. Suddenly, Mekel was just… gone.

Dustil looked down at his hand, now holding the lightsaber in an unfamiliar grip. It didn’t even feel
like his hand, his body--

*Where is Mekel Jin?* Malak’s voice thundered in his mind.

Great, so he'd lost his best friend, his bondmate, and kept the Sith Lord ghost who destroyed Telos.

“I don’t know.” There was a row of Sith in front of them when he turned. Dear old Dad still chained to the speeder. And a red-skinned man wearing a crown perched on top of a fracking… what the frack was that?

**Gundark.** But Malak sounded distracted. Distant. It wasn't exactly reassuring that he was worried too.

**Mekk?** Nothing. Was he… was he dead?

*Is that him? Is that Tenebrae?*

*I don't....* Fracking Malak of all people sounded freaked. *Mekel Jin is not in the Force.*

**So, dead? Dead? Is he dead?**

Silence, long enough for Dustil to notice that they were surrounded, that Dad looked older and tired. Long enough to notice the strange echo in his head--the emptiness. A sudden silence.

*I am… free?* Malak sounded farther away suddenly. *How did this...?*

“Don’t.” His own voice. Alone. Suddenly horribly alone in his head. Holding the lightsaber like it was someone else’s dick. Standing in front of a frackload of Sith and Dad--

“Where are your companions?” The man on the gundark sounded amused. “Did you dispatch them yourself, Malak? I rather enjoyed the Revan pretender. She had spirit, for a null.”

“I-I…” the man meant Polla and Zaalbar, not Mekel and Malak. “I… don't....” Dustil's voice cracked like he was still a kid. He felt sweat break out on his back. Suddenly his legs felt rubbery as if Malak and Mekel leaving had taken all of their strength with them.

His father was frowning at him with that whipped kath look he got when Dustil disappointed him. “Tenebrae,” he barked--guts considering he was chained and surrounded by fracking Sith. “Now you've got us. Maybe don't damage the merchandise before Revan comes to inspect it, huh?”

That fake casual voice. Same one he'd used on Korriban when he tried to pass himself off as her slave.

“Will you lay down your weapon, Malak?” The man chuckled. “I spent so much time in your first body… but your mind was always so opaque. Unpredictable, save your allegiance to her. Ah, but when that failed--” he laughed. “You were so good at destruction.”

*Malak? Come the frack back? Now?* “Oh, yeah?” Dustil took a step back, even though he knew it made him look weak. “Get fracked, asshole.”

The droid whirred next to him, swiveling it's dome around and emitting a quizzical doo-weet.

*I am free.* Malak’s voice. Definitely fainter. Like farther away.

No, Dustil thought uselessly, even though he'd dreamed of this. *Please. Don't leave. I don't know what the frack is going on--*
Master?

In your fracking dreams, Malak. Malak?

But Malak didn't seem to be talking to him. The bond felt like a thread, like half of it was gone.

Dustil reached for it and dropped the lightsaber.

Frack. Frack me. No. Mekel. Mekk? Malak?

The droid beeped again.

Someone was whistling at it. It took Dustil a second to focus, realize it was his father--

Xxx

“Frack you!” When he launched himself in the air, Mekel felt the stitches holding his guts in rip, white-hot pain, like getting fracking stabbed with a saber--but Klee was a fricking idiot, just standing there with his fracking ratroach on a stick and Mekel tackled the larger man easily. Klee was soft and fleshy and out of shape and old.

One of Mekel’s hands buried itself in the Eosian’s throat and the other ripped the ratroach off its perch and threw it against the wall. Hard. Like slamming a slug back home.

The thing made a… screaming noise. Then a whimper that made Mekel feel almost sorry for it. But then it died… and everything came back like the ocean, rushing over him like a wave.

He'd never seen a real ocean, but Telos had in their dreams.

The world had color and form again. His heart seized and shook, realigning itself with the one a galaxy away. He was standing in a clearing, staring at the terentatek they had killed. An asshole on a gundark was leering above them. They were surrounded by minions.

Malak’s power snapped back into their grasp, like the spark of a light.

“Ow,” Mekel whispered, fingers sliding over Dustil’s abdomen. Pain, but no wound.

You were gone thoughtyouwere goneforever. One of them thought. Maybe both.

I'll neverleaveyou. I-- “What the frack was that?” Telos asked even as Mekel answered him silently.

Fracking asshole. It was Klee. He did something. We need to kill him.

“Malak?” The man on the gundark said. The Sith Emperor coughed. “Is there a problem?”

Xxx

Malak was almost proud of Jin, moving with flawless grace, the power of the Force helping them dodge the beast's deadly claws, his former protege wielding their lightsaber as if he was Jedi-trained.

I was Jedi-trained. Your wife taught me a few things, she-- the boy’s attention splintered. What the frack is in the box?

Pay attention! Malak commanded, but the boy's balance was off now, and he had to dispatch the terentatek himself.
And then—between one second and the next there was no warning. Just—suddenly he was falling free.

_Mekk? Mekk?_ The boy was calling for his bondmate like a lost kissra, but it took Malak a moment to realize that he could _hear_ Dustil only from a distance. Even the jungle surrounding them, the Emperor, his court… all of it faded into patterns, meaningless forms.

Shadows and light. He tried to breathe and found nothing at all. Stars, like the last ones his human eyes had seen, dying on the deck of the Star Forge, while she stood above him.

"_I'm sorry. No._"

"_Malak??_" The boy again, thread pulling him back, but no longer tethered. A connection that felt as fragile as flamesilk. Like strands of her hair.

_I am free?_

"Oh, my Padawan." Soft laughter through the trees— _trees?_ Endless trees, grass under his feet. The world seemed solid, but strangely soft, more like a memory or a dream than a place.

Malak turned his head. "_Master?_"

"Jopheena," she corrected him, still just out of sight. "As good a name as any. It will do."

"He doesn't look like much," commented another voice. Dry. Male. Soft burr of an accent marking the man from one of the farming worlds--

Xxx

"I am free." His mouth spoke the words, but the pain in his gut belied it, weight of gravity, lying crumpled on the floor again. Coruscant. Klee gasping for breath in the corner of the room with a rapidly-darkening ring of bruises on his neck.

"I was… I was… free." Mekel Jin’s stitches were torn again. The pain was a tool and Malak used it, pushing the boy’s body upright, standing. "What in nine hells was that?"

"You tell me," Master Klee murmured, eyes narrowed. "Malak?"

"Yes. I-I was free. Of them. For a moment. The bond between us was… gone." His gaze took in the room again, focusing on a crushed scrap of fur, the bloodsmear across a wall. _An ysalamiri? But I was surrounded by them in Dustil's body before. How could that disrupt the bond?_

"You were correct." Master Klee sounded smug, turning to look at the mirrored wall near the fresher door, and Malak’s gaze noted the slight shimmer, the surveillance equipment stealthed, just a slight difference in the wall’s texture, if you knew what to look for….

"Who?" He demanded of the Eosian. "Who is recording this? Who are you talking to?"

Xxx

"It works," Azen Loanin said. "I believe it worked." He glanced up from a small datapad in front of him. "Monitoring Jin’s alpha waves--the sine curves dropped their frequency threefold--back to baseline. Normal."

"Meaning it was just him in there." Kavar nodded slowly. "Your hypothesis was correct. And now?"
“Now they are back to three,” Lydie Korr said, sitting next to her new husband. “But we did not expect this to permanently break the bond.”

“But now we know the means to do so,” Kavar said.

“Meaning?” Admiral Ekkumi asked.

“Meaning… we can send Malak back to hell,” Admiral Cein said. “And free Carth’s son.”

Later, Yuthura would chide herself for understanding so slowly. But it had never occurred to her that such a thing could be done. That any Force user would conceive of such an atrocity.

Strange, that she who had committed so many atrocities could still be surprised by such an obvious conclusion.

“There is a complication.” Lydie Korr sounded like a girl who had kept her head in books over life, never considered the consequences of her actions. “The ysalamiri create a powerful Force-blocking field that a neural disruptor cannot match. But we can't keep Mekel Jin in an ysalamiri prison forever. He's a Republic citizen. He has rights.”

Her husband frowned, as if he wanted to disagree.

“Severing the Force connection broke the bond.” Vrook sounded as surprised as Yuthura felt.

“Temporarily. But your intention is to--”

“Yes.” Kavar nodded at him. “As before.”

“This is what you refused to tell me.” Vrook Lamar’s anger was quiet, but intent. It felt like a cloud in the Force. A darkness. Yuthura wondered if he realized. “This is why you colluded with Klee. Did you tell him?”

“Of the theoretical possibility.”

“My son is not Qel-Droma. He's not even Surik. Mekel has done nothing to deserve this!”

“It isn't Mekel we need to stop.” Kavar said flatly. “If there is even a chance that Revan and Malak could rise again--”

“No.” Yuthura found her voice. “Even if it were possible to find a Jedi capable of performing the… the… act, you can’t do that to Mekel Jin. I made them strong to survive. What you are… suggesting would not only cripple him, but would strand Dustil Onasi on a Sith world in a weakened state--”

“Your Bezel ceremony made the two of them a conduit for a Sith ghost,” Loanin corrected her, with a curl of his lip that made Yuthura wish she still had her headmistress’s lash—at least for a moment. “Severing Jin’s connection to the Force sets them all free.”

The man was insane. “Sets them free? And severs our only connection to the events on Dromund Kaas! Right now, we can use Mekel’s connection. What you propose would blind us.”

Vrook nodded slightly, slightest of gestures showing his accord.

“We still have Klee and his network,” Loanin continued. “Much of the resistance was organized under Revan. It remains uncompromised. Klee has provided us with a list of his contacts.”

“You assume,” Yuthura snapped. “And if the Revan with Revan’s memories of that network
resumes control of it? Or allies with the Emperor against us?"

“Malak should be dead.” Admiral Cein had served under him. Yuthura remembered that useless fact from her own lesson plans, teaching their Korriban students the histories of the Mandalorian wars. “This is all very damned simple. Malak should be dead. You Jedi can fix it. You need to.”

Kavar’s lips thinned, but he said nothing.

“You asked for our help tracking this Jedi-killing emperor of yours?” General Sand leaned back in his chair. “This is our price. Get rid of Malak. Send him back to hell where he belongs.”

Lydie Korr frowned. “We don’t think it’s the Emperor who is killing Jedi--”

Her husband leaned forward and whispered something in her ear, and the Zabrak stopped speaking.


“How?” Yuthura snapped. “How do you take away someone’s Force ability in the first place? No one since Nomi Sunrider--”

“No.” Vrook shook his head again. “Find another way. The yssalamiri cage. Leave him in it for a week. A month?”

“We need to be sure,” Cein said. “If you want Fleet help, you want our networks, this is our price. Get rid of Malak. Now.”

Xxx

“The frack?” Mekel’s anger propelled him back into control. “Who’s watching us?”

“The Jedi,” Klee said. He smiled ruefully. “Or what’s left of them.”

Fracking Jedi. It chilled Mekel’s bones to the marrow that they could just… do that.

*Let me handle this. Malak broke in. I know Klee. They’ll want us to retrieve information for them. We can feed them what they request while still maintaining the advantage for Revan--*

*The frack? Dustil’s and his own indignation spiked. My father’s right here! We are taking him and that smuggler and getting the frack off this fracking planet--*

*No.*

“Son.” Captain Onasi was wearing some kind of metal… shirt that wouldn't have looked out of place back at Moms’s. Neither would those chains around his hands, leading to a brace across his chest. They'd moved, when Mekel had been distracted back on Coru. Now he was sitting in the speeder next to the man.

“Dads. Dad. I mean.”

“I’d hug you, but….” His father raised his chained hands. The speeder lurched forward, driven by invisible command. From the dark currents around them, Mekel thought it was the Force--not from his father, of course, but from one of their silent escorts around.

“It’s okay.” He bit his lip not to say ‘sir.’ Telos was listening to another crazy glow-eyed lecture from Tenebrae, who'd popped back into Klee, just as the man was maybe about to tell them who he worked for, what was going on.
“Are you… you’re you?” The Captain’s eyes were lighter than his son’s, but they had that same piercing directness, like he could see everything Mekel was.

“I’m… it’s complicated. Yes.” They were split, like Telos could only deal with his dads if Mekel was the one talking, but he was here too. He glanced back for Mission, and saw her, braced firmly in the back of the speeder. Mud on her dome now, and something that looked like vornskr blood.

“Complicated?” she purred. “No poo doo. You have no idea how hard I've worked, trying to get an outside line to Kashyyk!”

Xxx

The world was empty of all sentient life once more. A virgin chalice. A vessel, serene. For thirty thousand years, Kashyyk had been free to conduct its own experiment, create a new slave race of hunters that were furred and strong… only to see them finally cast their lot among the stars. It had conducted this triumph while also performing its network subroutines; as well as repairing other faulty installations with new sentient pieces as needed. It had suffered predation. Corruption. Even the whims of a tyrannical adolescent holocron with no understanding of the larger songs of the universe.

It had endured the Master’s return, and his degraded impulses. It had fulfilled Dromund Kaas’s irritating requests for additional parts twice in little more than one thousand years. The parts were delivered. Both times.

It was not Kashyyk’s concern, if the Dromund Kaas installation could not get the second part to fit. It had told Dromund Kaas this several times already.

{{Silence,}} it now told the adolescent fragment of itself that was pestering from Dromund Kaas, presumably on the installation's behalf. {{Your requests are petty and jejune. The other parts of yourself have gone, and I am not your personal commlink.}}

The adolescent piece had several inventive things to say in response, in many of their shared tongues.

Xxx

The ship was alone in the hanger, small and sleek, its metallic surface reflecting their own expressions back at them. Revan saw her own face half-hidden by goggles, the dyed black hair, mouth set in a thin line, no expression at all. Next to her, Korrie and Ma--Moll--were beaming. In the sling on Moll's hip, Abasen’s eyes were as wide as thisla globes.

“Gah!” he crowed, pointing at the ship.

“That’s not Republic salvage,” Revan said quietly. "It isn't from Kuat." But it was beautiful. Lines like a song. Polla Organa--the real one--would have loved the design--and been scared to hell of its purpose.

“No?” The Devaronian’s voice sharpened. “Crashed here during the Revan invasion, my boss said, I just assumed….”

“It is based on a Republic design. Loosely. I-I think.” Some long-hidden memory--her own, or just Polla Organa’s exhaustive knowledge of ship architecture. This ship was little more than a modified snub: cabin big enough for two seats fore and two aft, with a small galley below, plugged up against its hyperdrive. Four sets of turrets. Torpedo bays on the aft. One had been used, Revan
noted. The other looked intact. “Originally… based on a Republic design, but it…”

It felt like *something* in the Force. There was no other way to describe it. *Familiar.*

She could fly it. It would practically fly itself.

“What do you mean, Pollie?”

Molla was overdoing it, Revan thought. All this mother and daughter stuff. She appreciated the effort, but it just made leaving Korrie harder. Leaving them both harder.

“Is it Sith, Mother?” Korrie still sounded like he belonged in an Eg Academy. Molla would have to work with him, she’d promised, and when Jasp came back--

XXX

“I could comm him for you. I could tell him to come home.”

“You’ve done enough!” Moll’s voice softened. “Leave him, dearie. When he gets tired of looking for that silly Sith world, he’ll come home on his own.” She paused. “Did you figure out how to find it yourself?”

“Yes,” Revan lied.

Fairly simple. All I need to do is find a Sith.

XXX


“Korrie,” Revan frowned, glancing at Molla. “Don’t curse.”

Polla’s mother snorted.

“Of course it’s not Sith!” the Devaronian sounded horrified. “Maybe one of the… one of the Republic’s more… experimental models. I was… I was a tech, you know. I mean… in Fleet.”

“On *The Ascendant*?” But Revan knew the answer without asking. She smiled to put the woman at ease, reinforcing the sentiment with the Force.

*I am no threat. There is no danger here. I do not look at all familiar. You will give us this ship for a very good price.*

“Yes, *The Ascendant,*” the woman agreed. “I was… on this ship. From the… *Ascendant.* We… we crashed here.”

“I’ll take it,” Revan told her. “Do you still have the nav logs?”

Fear warred with artificial calm on the woman’s horned face. “No. We--I wiped them. When we… we left.”

*Frack. But no matter.*

Revan walked over and placed her hand on the warbird’s cold, metal surface, reaching under the nose to find the embossed runes, stamped in Aurebesh—and Ancient Sith.
Pinion V

Property of the Imperial Aleema.
"Stay here," Zaalbar told the hairless cub. In truth, Polla Organa was older than Mission, but she seemed much less wise than his foster daughter had been-less wise, even, than Polla Revan had seemed on their first meeting.

"What?" Polla Revan frowned furless at him, all pale lips and dull teeth. "I'm sorry, I didn't get that."

"Stay," Zaalbar repeated, patting the bark of the tree. "Stay here. I will scout."

"Here?" Polla Organa's head tilted, and her face furrowed like bark. Obviously, she was trying to understand. "I know this is a tree."

Zaalbar took one of her cold arms and lifted it carefully with his paw.

"What are you trying to say?" She resisted, stiffening and splaying her limbs until he had to cup his other arm around her to keep her in the tree.

"Stay," he growled again, pushing her into the bark.

Like a cub learning to climb, she instinctively grabbed hold of the trunk and he pulled back, leaving her splayed on the branch.

"Where are you going?" She squeaked when alarmed, unlike Polla Revan, who growled and fought.

Zaalbar had already dropped down several meters, to the trunk of the tree's twin-root. "Stay," he repeated, holding up one paw. He spoke simply, as he would to a cub. "I scout." He barked the words and motioned at the same time, wishing the Mission-ghost was here to translate. But she had refused to leave-for reasons he was still trying to understand. "I will bring back food for us. And garments for you, if I can find them."

"Food," she called back. "I got that one! Wait! Please! Don't leave-"

Zaalbar ignored the rest of her plaintive cries the same way a creche-mother would ignore a Wookiee infant's wails the first time they were set in tree-sense. Only in departing could he assist her.

Xxx

"Don't leave," Polla whispered. But the Wookiee was already obscured by the branches below. How far were they from the ground? She looked down again.

Frack. At least thirty meters. The howls had stopped, that was something. And up this high, all the insects that had been biting her were gone.

Zaalbar's gonna come back. He's Carth's friend. He's a Star Forge hero. He's not gonna leave me here!
They didn't have trees this tall on Deralia. It wasn't this muggy on Deralia either. The climate reminded Polla of the time she'd had to land for repairs in the Kyrr swamp. Like the air was as full of water as the fracking ground. There had been giant snakes too. She shivered, adjusting herself against the branch and the trunk so that she was relatively braced. Something chirruped and something else made a strange clattering sound. She fumbled for the blaster in her boot and took it out, checking the delicate scope for damage.

*At least snakes can't climb trees.* She frowned at the dizzying distance to the ground again.

They couldn't. Right?

Xxx

They left the meeting together, veering away from the Fleet officers, three abreast, as if the former Sith Yuthura Ban was an equal. As if they were all in accord. A pleasant facade, Kavar thought, for as long as it could last.

It took half a block before Vrook Lamar spoke.

"We don't know their intent. In the Jedi Temple, neither my niece nor Malak harmed anyone-"

"Save each other," Kavar replied. He had seen the footage from Azen's surveillance archives.

"Save each other," Vrook echoed grudgingly.

"Dustil and Mekel may help," Yuthura Ban interjected. "They may still save each other-and others. And the Order needs strength, doesn't it?"

"There is no Order." Even with decades of training, Kavar couldn't keep the bitterness from his voice. All those weeks going over the field reports from Zez and Lonna. Lines of the dead. Kidnapped Padawans. Missing masters. Enclaves gone dark--and it had all happened so quickly. First the plague, and now the disappearances. Anger and frustration warred with disgust in Kavar's heart. At this moment, he felt himself to be the very antithesis of Jedi serenity. "Strength is the last thing we need. It attracts him. The Force makes the Beast stronger."

They were walking along a public plaza. There had been a time when Kavar Vakla would have been more circumspect. But that time had passed.

"Him." Yuthura nodded slowly. "You mean the real threat. Arkan."

"He has a ship." Kavar had to be careful. "We... we... believe he has a ship. A Republic hulk. Salvage. You heard Cein and Sand talking about the ghost ship in Mid-Rim?"

"Do we know that is him? Them? Arkan and... and Oerin Lin?"

"And Sunrider?" Vrook pressed.

Now that her influence was gone, all of the remaining masters were painfully aware of how badly they had been tricked. Kavar among them. *Vima blinded us. Deliberately. And all that has come to pass since... was it always her? Was it never Revan and Malak at all? Was it Darth Traya all along?*

*If so, good riddance. "Not her." Kavar shook his head. "She has been removed."

"You sound sure," Yuthura murmured.
"The same sources that told me about the Sith Lords' ship," he admitted, "also told me of Vima Sunrider's end." If they wanted to be suspicious of his motives, it would only help at this juncture.

"Again. You sound rather…" Padawan Ban seemed to be searching for the right word. "Certain. Certain about these Sith Lords. Certain about their ship. Certain about Darth Traya, the former Vima Sunrider."

Kavar Vakla checked his chron. "I am." He smiled at them both, grimly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment."

"We'll talk later," Master Vrook ground out. From his expression, his thoughts were kilometers away, already in the hospital room with his son.

"Of course." Kavar nodded, and walked away from them, in the opposite direction required. It wasn't until he sensed their presences move out of sight in the Force that he broke into a Force-enhanced run to his waiting vehicle.

Xxx

His mother had been a dancer: a city girl, pretty enough to attract a Beast-Lord's eye for Summer Festival. Kavar Vakla had been a bastard, given to Palace service as those with aptitude were.

His cousins had been nobles, with golden circlets on their heads. When his talent outstripped theirs, Kavar was sent to Jedi. A tale as old as Iziz, in one form or another. Although, long ago, Beast-riders shipped to Sith worlds instead. Arkan had followed, late for training but capable, assigned to Dantooine, while Kavar was trained on Lothal.

It wasn't until they were both grown that they met again. It wasn't until the Mandalorians attacked Dxun that they fought together. It wasn't until their victory that they became friends.

Friendship did not last. Kavar had withdrawn from conflict, and Davad had followed Revan. Worshiped her, if truth be told; but by that point, Kavar was too much of a Jedi Master to tell unnecessary truths to anyone.

A week ago his commlink had chimed with an old palace cipher—one they'd used as children to command servants to hide sweets in the stables and amidst couch cushions. The number on the other end was that of the Palace Cook.

In truth, Cook had been more of a mother to him than his own dancing one; and he'd thought her concern was something pedestrian and unfortunate: an illness, a request for credits; but when he'd commed back, her face was pale even in the holo, and all three of her chins quivered in fear.

"H-he said to call him," she whispered. "The man said. He had a note. But the man said. Call him at this time, or-or…else."

"What man?"

Cook shook her head and trembled, holding up the slip of plimsi.

Davad had signed his name "Knight Arkan," as if that was a title a creature that caused so much death had any right to use.

Kavar had called, as requested, only to be greeted by a huddled gray man with sunken cheeks and hands that shook. The man asked his name, then went to fetch his master.
The white mask the black-robed man wore was stippled, shaped roughly like a drexl's skull. Hooded and cloaked, the man could have been anyone, but Kavar recognized the signet ring on one hand, twin to the one Kavar had lost in a drawer long ago when he put aside such childish things as heritage and royalty.

But for Arkan, the man who should have been King, perhaps symbols meant more.

The mask nodded at him slowly, then bent and scribbled something on a datapad.

The sunken man bent down peering at it. "H-he says..." the ringed hand swatted lazily, like the claw of a boma admonishing its young; and the sunken man cringed, whimpering like a whipped kath.

Now there were claw marks on the sunken man's cheek, even though Davad's hands remained unchanged.

"S-sorry. I'm so sorry. M-master." The sunken man groveled, and the mask lifted his man's hand, pointing at something the other held.

The sunken man held up a sign. A sign with two words.

Kill me.

"H-he means him," the sunken man whispered. "Not me, please. I-I have a family."

The hooded figure removed its mask, nodding slowly.

Kavar's breath caught in his throat. Even across light years, even after all of his training, he felt his gut tighten with primal fear.

He swallowed. "How?"

The mask looked at the sunken man, and the sunken man began to speak.

Xxx

"You don't trust him," Yuthura sounded surprised, as they watched Master Kavar walk away across the platform.

"Do you, Yuthura Ban?" Vrook trusted her judgment over a member of the Jedi Council. At some point, Vrook was going to have to come to terms with why that was. "We're going to the hospital. Immediately."

She nodded in agreement. "I trust Master Vakla's intent. But the Jedi in that room came to an accord with the Fleet without us. I must wonder... why? And why include us in their cabal after the fact?"

"Master Loanin said they want to use the Fleet to destroy Davad Arkan, but the Fleet officers want to put an end to Malak." Vrook grimaced. "Azen Loanin thinks like a Senator. He always has. One favor for another. That means they must have a plan to destroy Arkan-"

"And a way to strip the Force from Mekel Jin." Yuthura's headtails flattened. "I... have heard rumors, of course, about how the Force was stripped from Meetra Surik, but I thought only Nomi Sunrider possessed that ability."

"That's the part I don't understand." Vrook's temples throbbed. The Force felt-poised-like air before
a storm. "Only Nomi and Vima Sunrider have ever been able to block access to the Force—at least in recent memory. Bastila Shan manifested Battle Meditation, but unique gifts in the Force are so rare. Do they have another Jedi capable of performing such an act?"

"Kavar seemed certain. Loanin as well. And Lydie Korr."

"It could be… a bluff. A trick, for Fleet. How would admirals know, if Malak was gone?"

"I'm sure they have agents on Kaas." Yuthura's eyes were wide and guileless. "Or they will soon, now that the Racharn has given us all maps."

"Perhaps too easily given." Vrook muttered. He quickened his steps, heading for the hover taxi stand. "Those maps. Can we trust them?"

"We will move Mekel." From the softness in Ban's voice, she must be trying to comfort him. "Tonight. Is there a secure location?"

"Not his mother's. Offworld, perhaps. I have some contacts at the new settlement on Dantooine. Now that the Jedi have fled—"

"I thought Jedi had begun to rebuild that enclave after Malak's attack."

"They're all gone." Difficult to admit, even to a former Sith, the depth of the Order's failure to protect its own. "In hiding, most of them. He would be safe on Khoonda, on Dantooine—or in the sublevels of Nar Shaddaa…"

"Mekel is familiar with Nar. We used to go on recruiting field trips there." She flashed him a polite smile as if they were still strangers.

Vrook approached the waiting cab, and its door swung up. He stood aside and let Yuthura enter first before settling down beside her. "What is he like, my son?"

The directness of the question seemed to unsettle her, but only for a moment. "Promising. Loyal to his allies. Talented. He has a precision with the Force that I've rarely seen. Not raw strength—"

"But he is strong." Even as he argued, Vrook felt the futility. The absurdity, of trying to be proud of a life that had nothing to do with him. To imagine their lives differently—

If I hadn't been in charge of my niece, would I have noticed Mekel Jin?

Grimacing, he punched in the hospital coordinates.

"Stronger now," Yuthura said. "But—"

"But that's because of the bond, what you did to them."

"It kept them alive," she murmured.

"But you said… before… you said that if one dies, so will the other." He should care for them equally, as he should care for all sentients, but suddenly Vrook found he did not.

"Yes. I think so. The original Thulian Net was undone in such a way."

"Then… what Kavar proposes could keep Mekel alive."

"And doom Dustil Onasi," Yuthura said. "Would Dustil still retain the Force? If that mockery of an
"As a Jedi, I should care equally for both," Vrook paused, admitting the uncomfortable truth. "But Mekel-"

"-is more my son than yours," she snapped. Her lekku wrapped defensively. "I trained him for years. I nurtured his potential. I-

"You taught him to kill!"

Yuthura laughed. "No. He had learned that long before. We taught him to kill efficiently, for a cause."

Unquiet responses warred in Vrook's head; but then he remembered the footage of his niece that Vandar had shown him, going through the Forms with her first saber. Are we so different, we Jedi?

It was a dangerous line of reasoning, a line he hadn't come close to since Exar Kun's call to arms, the time the Jedi had faced their own: gone gray, and strange, and mad.

Yes. We are different from the Sith because we must be. We do not kill our prisoners, if possible.

We stood by and let my mindwiped niece cut her way through five planets. Even when she found peaceful solutions they ended in blood. We stood by and let her fall again for the chance to see the Star Forge's shields lowered, a chance to destroy it-

For the greater good.

"I will not sacrifice my son for the greater good," he snapped. "Not again."

"Then let's hurry," Yuthura murmured. "I don't trust Kavar Vakla either."

Xxx

It was a delicate rope that Kavar and Azen walked now: one orchestrated by chance, with its roots in subterfuge and denial, and with so much at stake.

Vrook had let emotion cloud his judgment. Of course, he had, because the man was compromised by attachment. Quite obviously compromised. He had left the meeting muttering darkly, oblivious to the frowns of their Fleet officers and his allies.

Overlooking, of course, the fundamental truth that every tactician knows. Never tell anyone your intentions... until your plan is too late to be stopped.

Kavar Vakla hastened his steps towards the hospital, pausing only to type in his comm:

**Experiment worked. Do it now.**

Xxx

Nothing in Carth's life: not a military education, pilot training, battle experience, or even the mad, near-mercenary quest to find the Star Forge had prepared him for this-this mad Emperor's hunt, where half the sents had red, glowing eyes and the other half were just crazy Force users.

Xxx

"Try not to offend anyone," that bastard Liyo had said. "Do not speak or move. You are merely part
of the display. If his Luminescence needs you, he will grace you with his light."

"Does he do it to you?" Carth asked bluntly. The costume he was supposed to wear lay on the bed between them. It appeared to consist of a metal vest that looked suspiciously short, and a gold drape of cloth. A skirt? A cloak? Who the hell knew with this crowd? "Does he come into your mind too?"

Something flickered in the Zeltron's eyes. "Sadly, I cannot be so blessed. I was infected with the Starfire plague."

"And that stops it, huh?"

"She was quite defiant, in her time, your wife." The Zeltron shrugged. "Would you like assistance dressing for the hunt?"

Xxx

They'd chained Carth to the damn speeder, stuck a droid at the controls, and then pretty much ignored him. They had dozens of slavering, needle-toothed hounds that circled the hunting party, howling like they were out of some kind of nightmare. When the beasts caught the scent, the entire elaborate and insane mob went careening off after them. Carth tried to remind himself of Zaalbar's own hunting prowess, Mission's smarts, Polla's fearlessness, and his son's-

*I must hope that Malak can keep Dustil safe. He's been here before; he must have a plan!*

Hope died when Carth's speeder careened around the corner and nearly crashed into a tree. In front of him, the Sith Emperor's main body rode on a beast three times the size of any other. And before them stood Carth's son, standing with a lit saber, teeth bared like he was a beast himself. Watching the man fight-watching the man dispatch a monster that looked like the things that had almost killed them on Korriban-Carth felt like he had never known his son at all.

That feeling only increased as the carnage continued. Until finally, the end, and Tenebrae's goons escorted Dustil to the speeder, chaining him beside Carth. Carth had been so busy staring at Dustil; he hadn't even seen Mission, shields sparking off her dome. She rolled forward, and more goons placed her in the back of the speeder. Taking out that beast seemed to have taken a lot out of his son, but it was harder to tell with droids.

[Totality fine?] Carth whistled. In machine language 'fine' meant operational. Totality meant all of them. Polla and Zaalbar too.

[Running] she warbled back. [Your subprogram is malfunctioning.]

It only took Carth a second to realize: of course, she meant Dustil.

[On it], he clucked back.

When her lights flashed an affirmative, it didn't tell him anything. Why hadn't she gone with Zaalbar and Polla? He'd seen her move pretty fast, and she was the only be who spoke the damned Sith language. How could Polla and Zaal be okay without it?

Trust the Wookiee; he reminded himself. *Jungle is his kind of place. He'll keep them both safe. And Polla's a great shot. She can put a hole in anything that gets close-*

Dustil's head fell forward. His breath hitched painfully in a way that made Carth jump, pull at his chains, elbow his son in the side.
"Son?" he whispered. Half question. *Are you my son or are you, Malak?*

Dustil's eyes were so dark that he couldn't even be sure. "Dads." A slight frown. "Dad. I mean."

"I'd hug you, but…." He tried to make it a joke. At least they'd loaded Mission in behind them, without even asking. Carth glanced back at her and smiled slightly. Still no sign of Polla and Zaalbar. He could only hope that meant they were safe.

"It's okay." Dustil's gaze skittered past him as if the boy was light years away.

"Are you… you're you?" *Hell of a thing to have to ask your own son.*

"I'm…" Dustil's gaze turned back to him, with a stranger's expression on his face. "It's complicated. Yes."

*Malak, you lying bastard.* Sick envy warred with anger in Carth's gut. *And Revan's coming here remembering you and not me.* He thought-an ugly thought-that he could stand to lose his wife, but to lose Dustil again? To the man who had bombed Telos? The man who was a fracking Sith on a Sith planet?

*No. Face facts, Onasi. If it's really them now? If it's going to be them, you know what you have to do. Goes way beyond being jilted. This is Revan and Malak we're talking about. Revan and Malak and the Sith-*

"Complicated?" Mission chirped. "No poo doo! You have no idea how hard I've worked, trying to get an outside line to Kashyyyk!"

Beside him, Dustil slumped forward again, head almost touching his chin.

"Dustil?" All he could do was nudge his son's ribs with his chains. When there was no response, Carth gritted his teeth. "Malak?"

He looked up to see one of Tenebrae's goons approaching with a slim metal band he knew know was a Force-blocking disruptor.

Dustil's head lifted, and his eyes snapped open. "No." A deeper voice than his son's. Colder. "That is not necessary."

Xxx

Malak had destroyed their pathetic listening device with a twist of the Force. Now, the three of them surged uneasily between worlds: circling closer to Master Klee on Coruscant; while still chained like a beast on Kaas.

Mekel Jin's body was still weakened by injury, but collectively, their command of the Force was stronger than Klee's. Given everything that had come to pass, Malak was forced to agree with Onasi and Jin's assessment: Master Klee had outlived any usefulness, and they were not to be pawns, subject to some unknown experiment.

He curled Jin's fingers, reveling in the dark energy that sprang from their hand, encircling the Eosian with an ichor of darkness, which caused the man's breath to shake, his body to falter.

It would only be more pleasurable if the man fought back, instead of smiling.

"Y-you don't … want to do this, Malak." Voice a harsh whisper, as Malak forced more breath from
"We all want to do this." Dustil. The anger at seeing his father trussed and tied was more than he could stand. All of it lashed across worlds like an ice storm. For a moment, the strength reminded Malak uncannily of his wife.

"Just fracking die." Jin was the weakest, for all his potential as a child. But his strength had joined to theirs and his hand lashed out with an invisible fist knocking Klee backward. "We are so fracking sick of this banthashi-

The door slid open behind them.

Malak turned in a heartbeat, nerves already screaming a warning. The Force had been contained, strung between the only two bodies in the room, as their strength overcame Klee's pathetic attempts to counter, but now-

Now, there was a third man in the room. And this third-

The third man shambled in, passing the doorway, limbs moving stiffly, wearing little more than tattered rags, one eye white and blinded, loose in its socket, fragments of bone pulling through the skin all over his body.

Their eyes widened at the sight of a walking corpse.

It was Mekel who recognized him, taking the forefront offensive in terror: the careful focus of rage he had reserved for Klee spouting out, now clumsy and diffused. The dead man batted it away like mist.

"Oerin? Oerin Lin?"

"Mekel Jin." The man's teeth were immaculately white and straight, but one was missing in his smile.

*He's strong.* Mekel shrank back in fear, almost losing himself in Onasi as if the Telosian's raw fury could protect them. *He's strong, and he's already dead. How can he be walking if he's already dead? He's going to fracking kill us-

*Imbeciles!* Malak gathered the lightning, anger fueling a storm around them. Their hospital gown fluttered, and then tore. Behind them, a crunch of metal. He knew without looking they'd stripped the bed's bolting from the floor, sending it crashing across the room, pinning the still-living Klee to the wall. At least, for the moment.

Their lightning electrified the dead man in front of them, dancing across skin and bone. The air stank like burning flesh, but the flames themselves guttered and died.

Somewhere in the distance, alarms rang.

*We cannot kill what is already dead. But we must stop him.*

*Find an exit. We need to get the frack out of here!*

Jin again. Malak supposed the boy's craven nature had kept him alive this long, but it was a disappointment. *No. We are stronger. We can rip his body apart-

*Oh, I tried that. Several times.* Oerin Lin's voice infected their thoughts with the ease of a
vibroknife through flesh. His voice in their head was sharp as an edge itself. *My body knits back. See?* Still smoldering, he reached up to his bare chest and pulled a hank of rotting skin away. When he dropped it, the skin almost immediately flew back into place. "Pity the Force isn't more precise. Pieces do go missing from time to time. I fear I've quite lost my beauty."

"You want to kill Master Klee?" Mekel again, fighting hard for control. Foolish boys. Both of them. This was beyond them. This was a horror such as Malak had never seen—not since... since Zioist—

*Let me,* he commanded. *You have no chance against the Emperor and this monster.*

*Leave him alone!* Onasi, with that raw power, pushing Malak to the side as if he was a discarded relic.

XXX

For a disorienting moment, it was Carth Onasi beside Malak in a hovercar, both of their hands chained, watching someone with a neural disruptor advance—

"No," he commanded the servant quickly. "That is not necessary. I will not resist."

"Good behavior on this world?" Tenebrae was possessing a matched pair of purebloods before him. "You seem distracted, Lord Malak. Is there something I should know? Shall we continue this discussion on Coruscant?"

"No." *Much pleasure as it would give me to kill Klee while he is possessed by you.*

XXX

"Hello?" A ruined hand waved in front of Mekel's eyes, and the boy lunged for it, growling with blind rage.

Lin laughed, dancing back. "There you are, Jin. I'm doing you a favor."

"You can't kill us." The stitches had torn again, they dodged back, all together now. "You can't fracking kill us because we're stronger than you—you're fracking dead—"

"Millifar," the dead man murmured. "She would set her braids for you, Jin. In a better world, we could have both been husbands."

What?

*It's not like—*

*Shut up, Mekk.*

Both of them were still young enough to react. The division of love, Malak had often thought, was rarely on balanced scales; and when it was, it did not last.

*Even for us, Red. Sheris. Arkan. Now this pilot of yours—*

Would it be different now? Their son was safe, (safe or dead or she would not come), and when she returned here, (in either body or... in both?) the power of Kaas would only strengthen their bond.

Xxx
"Dustil?" His son's eyes had rolled back into his head, showing only slivers of white. His body jerked. Carth twisted in his seat, bringing his hands up, just enough to shake his son's shoulder. "Dustil! Snap out of it!"

The boy blinked, eyes focusing on him with a stranger's gaze.

The speeder continued along the path, following the herd of beasts and Sith like it was one itself.

Xxx

"Dustil?" The obstacle to Malak's potential happiness shook the boy's shoulder with chained hands. Hard. "Dustil! Snap out of it."

"Chill the frack out, Dads." Mekel answered, shoved beside Malak, blinking suddenly, as if the two boys had accidentally switched bodies. "I'm fine, just-just a little shaky. It's..." he took a ragged breath. "It's complicated. Dads."

Accidental? Or Dustil forced him out as well as me?

And then Malak knew that was exactly what Dustil had done.

XXX

Fool! He followed the bond across space again, finding Dustil fully in control, Force burning through Jin's body like a dark tide.

Oerin's body lay twisted on the floor, the head nearly severed from the neck, and the Coruscanti's teeth bared in a feral smile that Malak could feel, triumph ratcheting through his limbs, sweet as release. "Fracking asshole."

Somewhere in the distance, an alarm sounded again, as if the Senate-bribed wing of this hospital had finally noticed something amiss.

"Magnificent! Is this what's keeping you so quiet? I wish you were mine," chuckled another voice.

From the floor, behind the bed's wreckage, Master Klee rose, eyes glowing like pits of hell with Tenebrae's possession. "I could make you my Hound, boy. Would you like to be a Hound?"

"I'd like you to frack off," Dustil muttered, and held out his hand. The saber on Klee's belt rattled but held firm.

"No," Tenebrae murmured. "Not so easily. In time, you could have been great, a true triumvirate; but I am not as easily dispatched as your walking corpse-"

A stir, almost noiseless behind them. The clapping noise Oerin Lin's hands made when they met sounded like dry leaves.

"They call Tenebrae the deathless," Malak muttered, without turning the boy's head. "Did you know that, Lin? If they call him deathless, what will they call you?"

"Master? The scion of the Sunriders?" The Mandalorian chuckled. "I don't care."

He paused. "Goodbye, Malak."

Goodbye? Even as a child, Lin, your sense of humor was peculiar. "Is that supposed to be some kind of ja-"
"Chill the frack out, Dads," his son said. As if Carth could be calm when his son was twitching like a spice addict coming down from a bender, half unresponsive, and calling him 'dads' with a Coruscanti accent.

"Who am I speaking to?" Carth demanded. "Right now. Who are you?"

"Mekel," his son's mouth answered. "Dustil, he went back to Coruscant. He's going to kill that fracking asshole. Malak too. They-he did. He-"

The world dimmed and died. Color left suddenly, as it had before, the speeder, Captain Onasi, all of it gone. Gravity held Mekel down against a duraplex floor, pinning him with invisible weights. Trapped between two Sith Lords, he looked for the fracking ysalamiri to kill.

Fool me once, frack you. Fool me twice, and I'm a fracking idiot-Dustil-

No use screaming for his bondmate. This was temporary; now that Mekel knew what to look for, how it was done. Mekel scrambled to his feet, trying to get a wall to his back, ending up between the Sith Lords, behind his bed's tragedy, remnants of today's lunch still there: a half-step goreapple, a plasticore spork-

"Millifar," Oerin Lin repeated. "She would set her braids for you if you asked, Jin."

Mekel gritted his teeth and imagined stabbing the dead man with the spork. "Hah hah." He scrambled to his feet slowly. The world was full of lead. "Where the frack is it?"

"Where is what?" The Mandalorian sounded amused.

"Sunrider," Tenebrae mused. "Why is that name so familiar?"

The door behind the twisted ruins of Mekel's bed slid on its hinges. There was a sudden snap-hiss and then a blue particle blade cut through its surface.

Master Kavar Vakla stepped into the breach, clicking off the saber. Mekel sighed with relief when he saw the man was carrying what looked like an entire fracking ysalamiri bouquet in his hands. It would take forever to crush them one-by-one, so he looked around for something heavy.

"Ah." Klee's voice had changed, his eyes went back to normal again. Kavar handed him two of the creatures and set the rest down on the floor, eyes never leaving Mekel, eyeing him clinically, like maybe this had been his fracking experiment all along.

Across the room, Oerin Lin coughed. "If this is betrayal, Vakla, I have to tell you it won't work. Your null field is quite limited."

"Not betrayal." Kavar paused. "The coordinates you requested are here." He tossed a chip on the air. Above Mekel's head, it froze, hovering, as if the Force was back, but the ysalamiri were still there-

Acting on instinct, Mekel dove for it, but the chip snapped into Oerin Lin's hand faster than he could move.

He's using the Force. Lin's still using the Force. But the ysalamiri are here!
"They only affect the living?" Mekel tried to puzzle it out. Klee's eyes were a normal brown again. "Ysalamiri only affect the living, right? That's why Lin can use the Force? So what the frack are you doing? Is this some kind of... conspiracy?"

"No." Oerin said. "And yes, yes it is. Is there a scanner I can use to check this information, Master Vakla?"

"I gave my word," Kavar murmured. "Jump points to Sith space, and codes for entry. You should be able to travel unquestioned."

Oerin coughed, a horrible, rattling sound. "You gave your word to your cousin, and he has so few of them."

"He can write. Our communication was quite clear."

"You know how Davad relayed it to me?" Oerin Lin's chuckle wheezed as if his chest was broken. "Take Jin Force. Feed me Sith. Map. Cousin Promise. It took an age to sort that out enough to comm you back."

"I did leave a number," Kavar said. "And again, Davad called me first." He paused. "Thank you for ridding us of Malak."

"Thank you?" A dawning horror crept into Mekel's gut. 

_Take Jin Force. But sents don't just do that. You can't just do that. No one can just fracking do that-

Xxx

"And then Nomi Sunrider stripped the Force from Ulic Qel-Droma." Yuthura Ban shrugged. "Instead of giving him a merciful death, the Jedi sentenced the man to exile for his crimes against them. Are there any questions?"

Lashowe Devry raised her hand. Of course, she did. Fracking Sith-noser. "How?"

"How?" Master Ban smiled thinly. "What an original question. Would anyone care to answer?"

Mekel shot a glance at Selene, who could probably use the prestige, but Telos's girl just looked blank.

"Because she was a Sunrider and magic," Telos muttered under his breath. "Mekk, you want to come to Dreshd' with us later?"

"Shhh," he muttered, keeping his eyes on Ban. The thing about these classes, he'd learned, was it wasn't whatever fracked-up history they were talking about that was the point: maybe this whole Force-stripping banthashit was actually a metaphor. A cautionary tale about what happened when you overreached your own personal Sith Lord and Master.

Mekel had noticed a long time ago that the Sith talked a good game about aspiring to be top rancor. But smart Sith seemed to focus on staying alive.

Xxx

"Put it back," Mekel whispered. The words were dull in his ears. The world was… gray. He felt his voice crack like a kid's, eyes suddenly swimming in tears. Like a baby. Like it hurt. "Fracking put
it back. Now."

"Ah." Oerin shrugged. "I think Mekel here begins to see. I should go."

"Wise," Kavar said. "I'm sure you have places to be. Will you be going to Sith space immediately, or-?"

"Didn't Nihilus tell you?" Oerin shrugged, edging around the wall of the room, as Kavar walked to the center, trailed by Klee. They moved with the assurance of sents who had figured out fracking ysalamiri fields to the centimeter, while Mekel just stood there like a mark. "I thought you were so close."

"Put it back!" Dustil. Loss screamed through Mekel, but it did nothing. He willed the Force to come back, willed lightning to spark from his hands, Vakla's saber to fly into his grip, but nothing. Nothing. 'Please. I-I'll do anything. I'll follow you. I'll do anything you want just… please!"

"Mother didn't beg," Oerin said, more to Vakla and Klee than Mekel. "I wasn't expecting tears from Jin." His dull eyes appraised Mekel like he was a slab on the blocks back home. "Does it hurt, losing the Force? It can't hurt as much as dying."

"No." But it did feel like all the gravity in the world was pushing down on him. Like he'd lost half of himself.

What if Dustil's dead? Or Malak takes him for good? What if we never-what if I never know? What if this is it. This is fracking it? I don't have the Force, what the frack am I supposed to do-

"Live," Oerin Lin snapped. "You're supposed to live. Show some gratitude, Jin. I could have just killed you."

Even without the Force, rage still burned, igniting a dangerous bravado. "Get out," Mekel snarled at all of them. "Get… get the frack out. Now." Even with the stitches torn he felt strong suddenly, or maybe it was just that his anger had left him too numb to feel anything at all. "Get the frack out of here!"

"Goodbye, Jin." The back of Lin's skull was a mess of peeling skin and tufts of dry, yellow hair. His back was just as scarred and burned. "I hope we don't meet again. Nihilus and I have… an appointment in Sith space. Keep Millifar safe-and the rest of our people."

Our people. The frack? "Frack you!" Mekel yelled at his departing back, before turning to Klee and Kavar, both holding ysalamiri like fracking flowers, staring at him like he was a science experiment. "Frack you and frack them!"

"He shouldn't be alone," Klee said to Kavar.

"Can you find out what the Emperor thinks about the loss of Malak?" Kavar sounded like he didn't give a shit.

Klee nodded. "Eventually. I believe you interrupted him as realization was only beginning to dawn. One of the other cells will pass word to me, and then I will tell you-as per our arrangement."

"Of course." Kavar nodded back. He glanced behind him. "Master Vrook and Yuthura Ban will be here soon. Oerin's minor diversion was merely that."

"Diversion?" Klee frowned. "Careful with that alliance."
"As much as I can be, I am." Kavar smiled sadly. "It will not be for long."

Mekel looked around the room for a decent weapon. It was true, he didn't have the Force, but neither did they as long as they stood in the ysalamiri field.

XXX

There was no warning. Even with all of her training.

One moment, Yuthura and Vrook were ascending the stairs in the hospital's great hall: a vast, curving edifice that seemed to float in mid-air. The staircase was as grandiose and impractical as the rest of this gilded planet. In the next moment, only a whisper of air saved her right arm from being severed. The masked assassin appeared as she turned, phasing in as his stealth generator blipped out-the victim of her first line of defense.

A clever Sith can debilitate all mechanical shielding with a simple ionic disruption, before their opponent is even aware they have lost the advantage.

Yuthura backflipped back, noting, as the Force slowed everything to an abstract slowness, that Vrook was similarly beset by two other masked figures.

Shadows. I haven't seen their like since Revan's time. Are they hers? Would she send them after us?

Vrook was beset by two, and as Yuthura landed she met her own second, her saber hand extended, weapon ignited, taking off the woman's arm at the joint. The figure staggered back, but there was a gun in her offhand, aiming to fire. Yuthura deflected as best she could, but she felt the plasma bolt sear the side of her t'chin, and bit back the cry of pain.

Make it useful. A twist of her hand should have disabled the woman's gun, broken her wrist, but the Force rippled around her instead. The armor. They're shielded. They truly are shadows.

Yuthura felt, rather than saw, Vrook land beside her, puffing slightly with the exertion of his own Force leap.

"Out of practice, old man?" She kept her voice light, teasing, using it to lull the shadows closer. One of them phased out again, vanishing from the Force and vision entirely. She was not pleased that they could do that—that was new, she had seen no one do that, not since-

Manaan. Some of the Sith there could hide. We lost Willit and Finrit before we discovered their camp in the second storeroom....

"I can keep up," Vrook raised an eyebrow. "You're hurt."

"One vanished," she murmured, flicking the injured lekku. "Have a care."

They turned, each keeping the other at their back. "Two, he muttered. "And I thought I sensed… another. For a moment, but then...."

"There are more." More premonition, than absolute knowledge. Her eyes swept the chamber. Below them, clusters of sentients huddled against the walls. Civilians, all. There was no sign of CoruSec, or any security at all. Above-

Yuthura glanced up. Above, for a moment, an entire line of masked figures, flickered into view and then vanished again.
"Mekel," she murmured. "Are they here for him?"

Vrook's mouth tightened. "If they are, we are already too late."

XXX

"The controls have an unusual configuration," the Devaronian told Revan, as they both settled in the pilot and co-pilot's chairs for the ship's test drive. "Much more complicated than a smuggler's rig. You have to adjust the intake ratios, or you'll burn too-"

Revan had already pitched the throttle and punched the footpad, sending them up in an arcing climb into Deralia's windy skies.

"-fast." The woman coughed. "You're going too fast."

The gyro stabilizers buzzed, and Revan moved her hand to adjust them; but picked wrong, and the *Pinion* lurched, almost flipping over in the sky. Her stomach lurched too, as if in sympathy.

"No." The Devaronian flicked the switch and took control. The ship stabilized, flying true.

"Sorry, I'm a bit out of practice."

"Haven't flown since the war?" The Devaronians name was Nyla. Her tone was casual, but there was nothing casual in the question—or in the Force.

"Not… nothing like this," The flight helmet sat strangely on Revan's head, a little too large.

"Of course not." Nyla's voice was wry. "You were Republic."

"Originally." Revan stared straight ahead. "Same as you." She wasn't sure why she was taking this risk, admitting anything, except-curiosity nagged her—as well as a certain icy detachment. *If I betray myself, we are alone. I can always make her forget, or—*

Her eyes noted the ejecting apparatus on the side of each seat.

"Which detail you run with?" The woman's features were hidden under the flight helmet, just like Revan's own. Her voice was deceptively casual.

*Detail? Is that some kind of fracking rank?* Polla's smuggler memories offered no clue. "I was… I was on the *Leviathan.*" Distract. Get more information. "I suppose you were on the *Aleema.* So the *Pinion* was your ship?"

"Our ship." Nyla's voice was fierce. "Karen didn't make the landing. Sinto was on the bridge when… you know. He ran pretty fast, got us evacced quick; but he still got a burst of rads. Calamari don't have much tolerance. Tumors got him, last year."

"I'm sorry." *Sinto was on the bridge. It's good you weren't, or you might fracking recognize me.*

"This ship was his baby. He's the one who fixed her right again. You're going too fast again. You can't burn like this in atmo. Who taught you to fly?"

*My Da. My husband.* The stabilizers were sluggish, and the ship moved like a ronto compared to the *Hawk.* Not that she'd had much time, piloting the *Hawk*-Carth had been possessive of it, ever since Dantooine.

"I'm a good pilot," she argued. "Registered."
"The way you're driving I almost want to ask for a license."

*Frack. "You don't want to ask me for a license."

"Relax! I'm not gonna ask you for a license. I figure you're paying cash for an unregistered gunship for a reason."

"Sorry," Revan was apologizing for more than that, even if it didn't do any good.

"Unless you the one who fired on Aleema's bridge, you have nothing to be sorry about!" The woman snorted. "You look more like a trooper type anyways. Hey, you ever get close to Malak?"

"I was a Shock Trooper." It was one of the few phrases she remembered from those blasted vids. *Married to a Fleet Captain, and I don't even know fracking divisions or ranks or-whatever they're called. I've met generals and admirals, and I don't know what comes below-

"Wow." Apparently, that was impressive, because Nyla lapsed into silence. "You were right in it with the nuts." She turned her head, looking closer at Revan. "You look pretty good for someone who was choobs-in with them. Have all your fingers and everything."

"I was good at my job." She answered with a cockiness she didn't feel at all. "You… you never said what your job was."

"It doesn't matter now."

*It does to me. Any chance you fracking know where Dromund Kaas is? How to kill a Sith Emperor? Any chance you'll recognize me? "I suppose not." Revan moved the yoke to the right, slowly this time, and was pleased that the ship's bank was smooth this time. Below them, the Deralian desert stretched, wide and blasted with canyons.

Nyla coughed. "Where are you going? With the Organas?"

"What?" *Frack! I don't want to kill you. "What do you mean?"

"That woman you're with is Moll Organa. I just did a retrofit for her husband a few weeks back on his old ship. Things a bucket but it'll run forever… is there more trouble? Because of the Revan thing?"

Revan tried to sound calm. "Moll's not my mother, obviously. But we're cousins." *Like everyone on this planet. "She agreed to lend me creds for the ship, but she's not coming with-

"Hey! It's none of my business." Nyla waved her hand. "Didn't mean to upset you. Relax. We all have our pasts, right?"

Revan took a deep breath. "I'm not upset."

"That's your kid, huh?" Was the woman trying to make small talk, or were her words a threat? "Looks just like you."

"Yeah, he's…" mine. I don't want to leave him. Dar'Revan knew that. She counted on it.

"How'd you know?" She abruptly changed the subject, sending the ship back down in a lazy spiral towards groundside. "About me, I mean? How'd you know I was… like you?"

The Devaronian frowned, and leaned across the board, adjusting something on Revan's side before answering. "The way you looked at the ship," she said. "And... I know this sounds strange, but you
Revan remembered the masked figures surrounding Lin in the ruins of the Jedi Temple. "A little."
She tamped her Force awareness down to an ember. You hunted Jedi. For me? And what did I do…
what did I do when you delivered them? A part of her wanted to ask; but that- "We never knew
what happened," she ventured. "With the ones you brought back."

The woman laughed. "Nobody did. Who'd want to?"

Revan nodded and brought the ship down for another pass, trying not to notice when the
Devaronian winced.

XXX

"Mekel?"

Master Kavar had gone when Mekel was still frozen, eyes scanning the room. Everything looked
washed out, dingy. The broken bed. The kolto packs scattered across the floor. The alarm shrilling
outside was too loud. He resisted the urge to scream.


"Is he dead? You're part of the Sith Emperor, right? So it's like you're there too. Is Dustil dead?"

"It doesn't work like that." The fracking asshole's voice was oddly gentle.

Great, pity from the loser who did this to us. To me. One of the bed's legs had snapped off. Sharp.
Metal. Pointed. Mekel picked it up. "Get the frack out of my way."

Incredibly, the asshole stepped to one side. Didn't even protest.

Of course. They don't need me
now. No Force connection, no Telos. I'm fracking nothing. No one at all.

Kavar hadn't even looked back when he'd left. Just like Lin.

Anger felt different without the Force. It felt useless, and soft, which only infuriated Mekel more.
The door had been fracking cut open with a lightsaber. Where the frack is mine? It was Bastila
Shan's.

Just another thing he'd lost. Mekel shoved forward, forcing the Eosian to step backward, him and
his stupid fracking ysalamiri.

"I know something of loss," the frackhead who had never been hungry a day in his life told Mekel
Jin. "Your sacrifice will not be in vain. I realize the path seems quite dark now, but in time, I hope
you will be able to understa-"

His voice broke off as Mekel's first swing crushed his pet on a stick. He raised the metal bar again
and smashed it down across the others that Vakla had left on the bedside table. Carelessness,
leaving them behind? Or deliberate? Maybe the Force wasn't gone at all. Mekel turned back to
Master Klee, noting the lightsaber still at his belt. One of the old-fashioned ones. Not even Force-
activated.

Mekel took a deep breath, waiting for the red-eyed Sith to come back, or the Force. Or (preferably)
both.
But nothing happened. Just bland old Klee, staring sadly at him with that fat face. Mekel's side hurt still a little, but a dull ache, less than the feeling of loss. He blinked, eyes suddenly blurring. "Where's your Master? Tenebrae? I need to talk to him now. Not you."

"It doesn't work like that," Klee repeated, a little sadly. "He doesn't always answer our calls."

"Oh." Mekel nodded. There was a meter of space between them. He sidestepped quickly and lifted the pointed spar. Drove it fast as he could straight between the Eosian's brow ridges, the place where their species had only cartilage.

The man's eyes almost seemed to spark—but only for an instant. His mouth opened. His body collapsed, folding in itself like a pointless sack of meat.


*The Eosian forebrain is designed for expansion. While their bones are typically harder by fifteen Sergian variations from the Human standard, this expansion shelf presents a unique point of vulnerability uncommon in most species. "Techniques for assassinating known Galactic Species 304. Taught by Master Yuthura Ban."*

XXX

A stir, almost noiseless behind them. The clapping noise Oerin Lin's hands made when they met sounded like dry leaves.

"They call Tenebrae the deathless," Malak muttered, without turning the boy's head. "Did you know that, Lin? If they call him deathless, what will they call you?"

"Master? The scion of the Sunriders?" The Mandalorian chuckled. "I don't care."

He paused. "Goodbye, Malak."

*Goodbye? Even as a child, Lin, your sense of humor was peculiar. "Is that supposed to be some kind of ja-"*

No transition. Not like the last. One moment, Malak was firmly corporeal, aware of the sweat slicking the Jin boy's skin, the breath in his lungs, the dull pain of the healing wound, the Force surrounding all three of them.

And then, the next. Malak stood, surrounded by enormous trees, beneath a canopy of green, deep as her eyes. The illusion of this reality was so complete that he felt the earth beneath his feet. Soft moss. The wind rippling his robes. The air smelled sweet, slightly acrid, like someone was burning brush, not far away. Malak's body felt calm, breaths measured and even. He looked down at a body that was *his* and not Dustil's. And there was no pain. There was no pain at all.

A soft chuckle from behind him. "Jail? Jay-juma?" The man's voice paused. "Please tell me your last word wasn't 'jaw.'"

"What?" Malak whirled around, hand instinctively resting on his saber. He looked down. *His saber. Malak had lost that* one in the Eosian bombing when they'd traded its crystal to a jewel thief who had no idea of its value for a ride off the planet.

"Your last words—or rather, word. Missus and I were having a disagreement." A man stepped into view, carrying a baby on his back, just like Malak had carried Malachor, in those times when it had been safe. The man was the color of the trees, the baby, a few shades lighter, with hair as fine and
spun as that jeweler's bright wire.

"What?" Ysalamiri. That same, tired trick again. Klee and Vakla are fools if they think they can defeat Lin so easily-

"Your last words. Like I said, Missus and I were trying to figure that one out. She says you had a dewback on Dantooine, named him Jaet. I thought you were saying 'jail. Which is it? Oerin Lin said: 'Goodbye;' and then you said 'Is that supposed to be some kind of ja-'

"Jape. Is this supposed to be some kind of jape?" Malak felt the calm splinter, like thunder in a cloud. 'Is it? I don't have time for games, old man.'

"Jape." The man snorted and rubbed the black stubble of his beard. "Huh. Normal folks would have just said, 'joke,' but I suppose Lord High Senator Darth Malak can't use a four-letter word when a fancier four-letter word would do."

"This is some kind of illusion." Malak's eyes narrowed. "One of Klee's tricks? Tenebrae's? I've died before. This is no afterlife."


Malak turned. It took him a moment to recognize the woman in front of him. Her face was unlined, her hair a soft brown. She was wearing a Jedi Knight's robes, but tattered and stained, and careless, as if they held no weight for her at all.

"Master Jopheena."

"I will be her, yes." The woman nodded. "In this place, I was called Nayama, more often than not. Or sometimes, 'hey you.' Or Mam." She turned her head and the man walked to her, slipping his arm around her waist.

"Mam," the child said quietly and grabbed a fistful of his father's black hair.

"The… the children, they-Onasi and Jin." Strange, the tightness in his chest. "Which one of them died?" First? For wasn't that how it ended? The three of them, trapped together until death. He was strangely glad not to see them here, not to face their accusations.

After so many, to feel guilt for two small lives.

"Only the two?" The man's voice cut in dryly, reading his thoughts apparently as easily as all else. Of course. Because all of this is illusion. Tenebrae. I had dreams before that could have been His-

"It's a start," Jopheena murmured. "A good first step. And they're not dead, my Padawan. Merely lost. Mekel's mind is sealed from you; and Dustil… that boy still has many kilometers to travel before he can sleep."

"She means that literally," the man added. "I believe Tenebrae is moving palaces again in anticipation of Revan's arrival."

"Whose head are you getting that from?" His former master, who had warned him so often about attachments, nudged the man's ribs. "All these years and I still don't know everything about your life."

"It was well-lived," the man murmured. "But you were the best of it."
"And the worst." For a moment her face looked old again.

So it's done. Malak felt a strange and heavy peace. My part is done again. And someday, perhaps Red and our son will appear—or I will dream of them. Did it matter which?

"What did you see, when you died before?" His old master's voice was gentle. "It's different for all of us."

"Nothing." Mud squelched between his toes. Why were his feet bare? "The void of space. Pain. But then I-I heard my son. Crying."

"Yes," she nodded. "You will hear them, those who remember you. Those who loved you."

"Or hated." The man snorted. "Might want to avoid thinking about Telosian space. Or Dantooine. Or Taris-"

"Jolee," Jopheena murmured, "don't tease."

"I want to see her again," Malak told them. Strange, with all he had lost, to wish for that reunion, certain to be doomed, with the pilot, with Malak in Dustil's body, with all of them Tenebrae's prisoners-

They will die without me.

"Full of himself," Jolee snorted. "Like his wife."

"She's calling," Jopheena announced it as if she was describing rain. "I expect you'll both run along now. Will Malak be back for supper?"

"Metaphysical dinner," Jolee mock-whispered to Malak. "But you have to tell her that you love it anyway or she'll sulk for centuries."

XXX

Kashyyyk was impossible. How could a computer that used to be her be, like, a total snob? And what did it mean, that Lena and everyone had gone? Gone where? Just because her other self was evil, didn't mean that Mission wanted her dead.

{{Tell the Dromund Kaas installation to run its own operational sequences?}}

What did that even mean? And, hey, if there was a Rakatan computer on Dromund Kaas, wouldn't it be nice if Mission's former self let her in on where on Dromund Kaas

And asking for a line to Republic space? You'd think Mission had been asking that computer to re-seed Kashyyyk and make an ocean planet for all the virtual shade she'd received back.

And now… the $ *(# * loser had cut her off completely.

"Impossible," she muttered to herself in Rakatan. The two Onasi heads in front of her didn't even turn around, but she could see them in profile through her side cameras. Two profiles, both sulking. Dustil was really pale. At least on Korriban, the boy had gotten some sun.

[Dustil doesn't look so good], Mission beeped to Carth. They were returning to the palace now, Emperor Creepazoid's goons had lifted her onto Carth's speeder, bolted her into the back, and taken off with the scooter on some auto-follow Mission couldn't even figure out how to override.
[His switch is turned on], Carth whistled back, completely missing the nuance a binary code was capable of expressing. Polla-Revan had gotten it. Big Z too, even if his whistling was terrible. But Carth was kind of a binary guy. Switches were on or off with him.

She wondered how that'd go over when he saw his wife again. Even if Mission could think of some very practical and effective reasons for Revan to embrace the whole Darth thing again right now, especially in Sith space, she wasn't at all sure Carth would be okay.

"Hey," she extended an appendage and prodded Sithboy's shoulder. He whirled around and glared typically at her, but slower than she expected. And his eyes… was he crying?

"What," he said flatly.

"Mekel?" she asked cautiously. It seemed nuts, but she could picture Mister Sith Congeniality crying a heck of a lot easier than she could picture Dustil doing it.

"No. It's me," he muttered. A muscle in that long Human jaw twitched. "Just… just me."

His father frowned, maybe looking a little relieved.

"But Mekel's body's on Coruscant, right?" Maybe they could play whisper across the Force bond. Did the Force work like that? Who knew. It was weird. "You guys can, like, bounce back and forth?"

That'd be useful. Not like they didn't have things managed here okay, but it was always good to have a backup, and Mission would be more okay with Polla and Big Z being off on their own if maybe Canderous could come and get them. Would he? He would if Polla Revan made him. She made a mental note to add that to the list of things she needed to make Polla Revan do when the woman finally showed.

"Not-it's not working." He blinked his eyes hard. They were all liquid and squishy, in a vaguely repellent way.

"What's not working?" his father interrupted.

"Mekk. He's-" Dustil took a deep breath. "I think he's dead. He must be dead."

Damn. If she'd been organic, Mission would have felt sad that such a fine Human specimen was consigned to get all gross and decay. Not to mention, that ruined a very practical back-up plan.

"Son?" Carth put his arms around his genetic descendant and squeezed. It had been soothing, Mission remembered when she had been sad, and he'd done that to her.

"If I had arms," she offered, "I would hug you too, Dustil Onasi."

XXX

"I thought we'd get to come and fly the ship with you." Korrie glared stubbornly up at Revan. He was up to her chin now, as if he'd put on more inches in the last few months. "You said we'd have a chance to say good-bye!"

"I know." She kept her eyes locked on his face, trying to memorize every millimeter. "We are, Korrie. This is our chance."

Moll stood off to the side, holding Abasen. When Revan caught her eye, she nodded. "Sooner gone,
sooner back is what I always used to say to Jasp and Pollie.”

"They weren't going to fight Sith." Korrie stuck his lower lip out. "Your lightsaber doesn't even work, Mother."

"Keep your voice down." Revan glanced in the direction of the office where the Devaronian had gone with their paperwork. Korrie only glared back and she stepped forward, folding him into her arms.

Xxx

"Try her again. One more time." The Devaronian smiled at Revan from the co-pilot's seat, teeth glinting through the transparisteel visor. "Just make sure to choke the gyros, she's aero enough to wobble in the cross-"

Revan jammed the lever forward and punched the turbo thrusters with her foot. _Pinion V_ soared into the sky like it was born there.

"-wind," the woman finished. "Nice lift! Guess you've handled one of these before."

_Have I?_ "Guess I have," Revan agreed. "You said before, these guns work?"

"Did you want to try them?"

Revan eyed the targeting reticule. "Sure. But I dunno if it's a good idea, running a sim while we're clipping parsecs above population centers-"

"No, it's fine. They set up below. See?" The Devaronian leaned forward. Below them, a line of low buildings. From this height, they looked just like a sim.

"It's a mock-up? _When did Derra City get strafing games?_ Revan was almost impressed.

"Sure." The woman next to her leaned back in the co-pilot's chair, folding her arms behind her neck. "A mock-up. See if you can light em, Flygirl."

Revan squinted, finger hovering on the trigger. She fired one blast and was pleased to see what looked like an old freighter go up in flames. _Must have been a fueler. That's good. That's one less-

"Uh, oh." The Devaronian sounded alarmed. "We've got company. Look to the skies. Three of em. Short-rangers. Must be a ship nearby-"

"I've got this." Revan toggled her seat to spin freely and extended the ship's gun. Plasma slugs burst from her gun in rapid-fire but the target was faster.

"Damn," she snapped, as it passed overhead, Force and radar pinged, warning her of the ship's return fire. All three of them were on them now and Revan ducked and wove- tried to push the sky to get out from under them. "We should have back up!"

"Probably," the woman next to her hissed. "But you wanted to charge in alone!"

_I don't even have a working lightsaber._

It was true, whatever Dar'Revan had done to Revan's lightsaber had fracked it. There was a flaw in the crystal that hadn't been there before. One of the lenses was cracked. On Dantooine, she remembered Zhar teaching her how to assemble the parts, but no one had ever shown her anything about repair.
Was that on purpose? It was useless to be paranoid, now that they were under attack.

Revan didn't want to leave Moll and Korrie, she'd barely said goodbye, and this was still the fracking test drive; but Revan sent the ship into a flawless Corellian twist, heading straight for stars. The snubs couldn't match their ascent and fell back.

"Now you've done it. Deralian orbits… it'll take us a day to get back down!"

"I needed to do something." There's no time. We don't have another day.


"But it wasn't-"

"You're going to crash the ship," said an irritated voice behind her. Lazy, almost teasing, but there was an edge of real fear there too. He was trying to hide the fear as if they could ever hide anything from one or the other.

"I am quite skilled," she snapped back. She'd said that before, to Carth as they landed on Dantooine, right before that errant wind shear had taken down their tertiary turbo, a one in a million mistake that could have fracking happened to anyone-

"Red. For the love of Force, please! Get out of the blasted pilot's seat. Now." Mal's voice sharpened now, along with sobs from the Neimoidian twins, who were barely old enough to have left their pod. The Togruta boy was quiet, staring blankly at the viewscreen next to the Devaronian saleswoman-no. The Togrutan sat next to the Cathar girl, the one she'd sensed. The one who had drawn them to that hellspawned slave pit in the Taris slums in the first place, just from the strength of her fear.

"I can't." She kept her voice calm. "No time. Just let me get us into hyperspace."

"By jumping blind?" He was angry. He'd wanted to go back, fetch Masters Kavar and Vrook. The other Knights. Prosecute the slavers instead of just shattering their operation.

But by Tarisian law, all of these children were property, I-I couldn't-what if we lost in court? The Mandalorians are coming. The Cathar was already a refugee once!

The Cathar had a delicate face, with slanted yellow eyes and tabbed stripes along her cheeks. She was older than the others, and Revan knew what that meant for slavers.

"You left it too late," her husband snapped. "If you're going to kill us all in hyperdrive, do it now. We can't take another hit."

Malachor, Revan thought like a prayer and pressed the switch.

The world twisted into a thousand points of light… and her dinner came rushing back up, sending her into a hacking coughing fit.

"Damnit!" Malak rattled off several curses in Ancient Sith, showing off again that he'd finally mastered what was a remarkably basic syntax.

"Are you okay?" Timid voice next to Revan's

"I'm… fine." She lifted the visor of her mask halfway, trying to smile and wipe the sick from her
mouth at the same time. "I always get sick in hyperspace."

"I know." The girl's voice sharpened. "A smarter Padawan than I was might have made the connection. How many green-eyed, red-furred, spotted Human Jedi does the Order have? But I never saw more than your eyes and a few strands of hair and the spots on your hand."

Revan reached up self-consciously and pulled her hood down again. Anonymous. If we're all anonymous no one has more rank, no one is above the other no matter what that-

No matter what that machine on Kashyyyk said.

The thought was like a shock of ice. She wasn't even sure it was hers.

"Juhani," she smiled at the old joke, one of the few they'd shared. "They're not spots, they're freckles. I don't call you Tabby-"

"You did, that first day." The woman's voice softened. "I remembered that too, but I still-" her words rumbled low in her throat. "Stupid! I was so stupid!"

"No, you weren't, it-" something was caught in Revan's eye, and then they were on that ancient roof again, the shuttle in front of them, Bastila taunting her, and the power was... was there. All of it. So much-

Too much. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I can't let him have it. I have to stop him.

The roar of fury rose in Revan's throat, crackling around her body, through her.

"Don't do this, kid. It's not you."

"On the contrary, old man. This is all I've ever been." I wanted to be different. But this is all I've ever been.

"No." Juhani's blue blade met the red one Revan had taken from a tomb on Korriban, the Cathar stepped between her and the old man, between her and the ship, between Revan and the woman who would take her to Malak, the woman whose smile matched the one she could feel on her own face.

The woman who caused all of this, who used her, just like that pathetic Council, just like he did. She would be next. Energy crackled between them, that infernal Force bond that had caused so much pain-

Juhani's voice was soft, a low purr. "I know darkness. You can come back. Revan, please. Look at me."

She did. A millisecond. Those yellow eyes, stripes across her cheeks, lips pulled back, pointed white teeth. A warrior, a friend.

Loyal.

The Cathar smiled hesitantly.

Revan's first cut took part of her skull. The second thrust impaled them both, Jolee collapsed on top of her.

"Good," Bastila laughed, wildly, madly. "You are stronger than he ever was, and we will reclaim your title as Dark Lord-"
"Korrie, if I don't come back... it's not because I don't want to. It might not be safe. Do you understand?"

"No." He shook his head. "It's not fair that I had two mothers and now I won't have any!"

"She'll be back," Molla's voice interrupted them, her hand gently pried Korrie away. "Your Ma will be back, with my daughter, and then we'll all have a party. A nice party."

"No." Revan shook her head. She raised her saber again. Juhani's blade clashed with hers, taking the feint-she had to have known what it was, how many times had they sparred, how many times had they danced across the Hawk, all that time in hyperspace, and Juhani never seemed bored, or afraid, never questioned anything-

"I had questions," the Cathar laughed. "Just not for you."

"But you followed me." She flicked the double blade, sending it spinning in a vertical line, near perfect, the smell of scorched fur again, that perfect face ruined-again.


"And the droids." Revan's blade deactivated. I know it's a dream. I wish it were real. I wish, I wish-

The Cathar raised her own again, brows wrinkling. "No. They are just droids."

"A joke. Kids." Jolee chuckled softly, behind them now. And behind him, a shadow-tall, looming-....

"It is not a funny joke," Juhani noted.

"It's a little funny." Words in Ryl, from behind them. Mission almost never spoke her native tongue, said Taris was practically all she remembered. "I mean, she stuck some recording of me in a droid? Face it, Polla Revan has a weird sense of humor."

"Mission," tears burned her eyes. "I love you so much, I loved you all so much. I can never make it right. I can never bring you back. I'm so sorry-"

"For someone with hypoxia, she's kinda sane," Jolee said. "Honestly, I was expecting another medal dream."

"Revan." Mission stood before her wearing the Baragwin vest she'd loved, red lacquer gleaming against her skin. She seemed smaller than Revan remembered, her face more rounded and childlike-as if time had stepped back instead of stopped. "There's something really, really, really major I need to tell you. Okay? Please. Listen."

"Tell her soon, Mission." Bastila sighed ruefully, suddenly back in Padawan robes. "You know she never listens to me."

"Tell me." Revan wiped her eyes, not sure if she was crying or laughing anymore. "Whatever it is, just tell me."
"You know how you kept, like telling us what a good pilot you were?"

"That was before I knew who I was. I know I'm not as good as she is, but I know what she knows. I'm perfectly-"

"No. You're really not. You're fracking not." Mission shook her head tails so hard that they flapped. "Big Z and I thought we were gonna die when you landed us on Dantooine. Did you even notice the color Carth turned? I thought you Humans didn't come in green!"

"Mission," Jolee nudged. "Time. Kid's half dead now. Unless you want to spend an age hearing about how she didn't save the rest of her friends, you need to get her motivated."

Mission wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes. "Okay! Fine, fine! Look, this ship, Polla-Revan? It's salvage, right? That Devaronian sold you a lemon. Might have still been okay, but you pushed the turbines so hard going vertical out of atmo… and now there's a slow leak and you've been bleeding your breathable air now for a day. Ship's generators are frying themselves trying to make more and when you do pop out of hyperspace-" Mission turned to Bastila. "Where's the next jump point again?"

"Near the Dosha system." Bastila sighed. "For some reason, she thinks that computer is going to help."

"Revan," Mission sighed. "It's evil and it's not me. When you pop out of hyperspace your cabin will depressurize faster and you're not even wearing a suit. I know you Jedi are powerful and stuff, but can you breathe in vacuum?"

Xxx

*The Star Forge battle.*

*As the Hawk approached the main docking bay, an implosion from one of the capitol ships above sent a fan of figures with limbs like stars, floating out into the black-*

*Every spacer's nightmare.*

*Numbly, Revan tamped down the foreign thought and focused on the docking bay in front of them, shields already down, bay doors opening like a mouth-*

Xxx

"So I'm dead then." It was almost a relief. *My friends. I loved you all. I failed, but I did love-I loved you. We're together now. If this is the end, will be always? I love you so much. I love-ah lahv. Alahv. Alalalala..."


Revan strangely found her voice. "I can't afford to be caught. What if the wrong sents answer?"

"Beacon only calls one ship, kid. This one's home base. Whether they answer or not depends."

"Depends on whether Aemelie's crew finished fixing the long-range, super-light receivers," Mission added. She snapped blue fingers in front of Revan's face. "Hey! Stay with us, Polla!"

"Aemelie?" Hypoxia. *I'm dead already. My fevered brain is spending its last energy trying to make
"Carth... he's going to die now." Her vision was blurring, all of them melding together. "Will we be together then?"

"I friggin give up," Mission muttered. "Bastila? Want to have another go?"

"She will not listen to me." Revan's dead bondmate sounded aggrieved. "As I said before."

"You. Fools." Dark chuckle, one that resonated in her bones. "Appealing to sentiment, to reason? This is Darth Revan. Galactic scourge. Butcher. The fallen Jedi who imploded a gravity well at Malachor during an armistice! This is the woman I couldn't kill, the Jedi couldn't erase, who held the Emperor at bay, who killed me-"

"Killing you wasn't that hard," Jolee snorted. "She had a lot of grenades."

"Harder than killing you." A heavy hand closed around Revan's arm, shaking her. "Revan. Polla. Wake up. Pull out of hyperspace and hit the distress beacon. Now."

Malak's face, metal jaw, stippled skull loomed over her. Jolee had joked that killing him hadn't been hard, but it had been: that moment of hopeless horror when all her confidence had faded, when she realized that the Star Forge wanted her, but was chained to Malak's will. That moment when his eyes had sparked red and terror froze her steps and his blade swung down-

Thermo in her hand, falling to the floor, she had channeled every last remaining bit of strength in her body into Force shields; curling in on herself and the explosion before she had even time to think-on the Star Forge, there had been an explosion, her battered body had crept across the deck towards Malak. He had looked better than she felt, and despair had fueled her scramble to her feet, fury crackling along her nerves, helping to gather the Force to her hands.

Not again. This war will never end.

"It will now," Malak whispered through a broken voder. His dying eyes glittered. "I promise you, Red."

On the Star Forge there had been more words, now there was only her hands, numb, breath scraping her lungs, gasping for air.

I don't know how to do this. Spots danced in front of her eyes. This is really the end.

XXX

"I know," her son whispered in her ear. Anger had finally faded to acceptance. "I know you have to go after her."

"I'm sorry," she whispered back. He was so heavy and solid in her arms. "I wouldn't leave if there was any other choice."

"Help her fix it," he said. "Whatever it is. You guys never even explained right. But fix it and come back." He pulled back a little, gray eyes searching her face. "Please."

XXX

Fix it. I don't know how. Dull panic ceded to despair.

I do. Out of hyperspace first, a voice said, inside. But fracking don't yank the lever; you've got to
pull gentle; feel it, like Dancer's reins, like... like your husband breathes, when you're grabbing his-you know. Amusement. Hypoxia. Gentle. Revan's hand slipped. I said fracking gentle!

She heard herself sobbing a little. Felt it, as the lever slid home, engines purring to stop.

*Distress beacon now. A pause. Frack, then the pressure suit. You know you were supposed to be wearing it already?*

The distress beacon was under the seat. Her hand slid down, scrabbling against the slick surface. Nothing—and then Revan's fingers caught against the edge of the button. It was big, big enough to slam the back of her hand into it. A claxon call and everything began flashing red and black—

*You're hallucinating now. Nothing’s flashing red and black but our brain. But you did it. Now put on the pressure suit so you don't die before they find you. Okay?*

Pressure suit. Put it on. Her face felt heavy. Revan blinked, tried to remember how to slow her breathing, those fracking exercises Bastila had always tried to show her.

"She never listened to me."

Her eyes scanned the room. Sometimes it looked like the *Hawk*. Sometimes the Star Forge.

*I don't know where pressure suits are. Where do they keep the suits?*

*I don't fracking know either! This is a warbird, not some freighter. They'd be light; they'd be easy to get to. You should already have put ours on.*

Pressure suits would be light. Easy to get to. Near the entrance. The ship pitched now, so that down was the ceiling. Revan reached up and a black and red suit tumbled free.

She blinked at it.

*Fool. Put it on. We will not die like this. We cannot.*

*I'm tired of both of you.* But her hands found the seals, yanking them open, pulling the thing's head down over hers, then thumbing her now-gloved hands over the controls on the chest plate. The suit tightened and snapped over her legs; her breath fogged the visor. The pressure suit's interior was stuffy and felt like a tomb.

*Stars. Turn on the oxygen, already!*  

Her hand twisted a dial and air rushed back. Revan's lungs filled with it, sudden shock clearing her head. She blinked, and the world stabilized. No longer flashing black and red, the cabin's interior was dimly lit. And outside, a blanket of stars, the bright spark of a sun, a string of planets, topical read-outs, steady and reassuringly blue.

In front of her, a commlink was blinking green.

"Hailing Unknown Vessel." A boy's voice in accented Basic spoke. "We've... uh, received your distress beacon?"

"Help," Revan whispered.

"I'm not getting a response," the boy said. He sounded so young. "I don't know, Milli. Are you sure you didn't break something when you reworked the comms?"
"I don't know either, Kex!" Girl's voice now. Speaking Mandalorian. "I thought you said all of the fighters were destroyed? Perhaps it's a trap from that Dar'Revan, or the Deathbringer or some other Dar'jett-"

"It could be an internal malfunction," the boy argued. "These coordinates are right in the Sullustan Drift. Lots of salvage over there."

Sullust. Revan's mind reached for a map of the stars.

"Gaa'tayl," she whispered. Her voice sounded tinny and she realized she needed to turn on the suit's speaker. Her hands fumbled at the front of her suit. "Ni vore gaa'tayl." Help. I accept help. "Please."
When you live in the shadows, you get used to seeing things in pieces: glimpses of a larger whole. Like Three had been used to seeing only the parts of his job that made him useful: the clever knife, the glitter of a tranq bubble, the slack face of a new recruit, voice slurred, reciting all that was required for them to know.

But that was in the olden days, when their orders had been capture and convert. Process. New orders from the dead man were more like, package for shipping. Didn't matter if the fruit was bruised or even screaming.

Not anymore. The Beast just needed its meat alive, although even that was a questionable condition.

"You--" she whispered, "I dreamed of you."

"Must have me confused with some other spacer, kid." He smiled, turning it into a leer to earn her disgust. Behind him, Twelve and Nine were finished for the day. No bloodwork—that would come later. Now back to Arca's lair, palace of whores, and Miss Jin with her clinking clanking chains that she called dresses.

Padawan-girl rubbed her infected hand absently on her robe. Point of contact left a rash sometimes.

He turned to leave.

"No—" she called out to his retreating back. "Wait!"

He didn't wait. The Jedi were out of time.

"Who was that, Thalia?" one of the other Jedi asked her.

Three didn't stick around long enough to hear her response.

Strapped to the table, next to the... the one Two had accidentally broken, the one that was still, technically breathing (but little else), the extraordinary Padawan opened her blue-green sea eyes and smiled at Three.

"I dreamed of you," she repeated. Her eyes turned to the broken thing on the bed and then back to him. "But in my dream, it was you who...."

"It was never me, kid. I'm no monster." Two had no business using sedatives, especially when he was drunk. He'd missed the dose, then gotten pissed when the prisoner didn't wake up. The prisoner had been a Rodian; now she was a drooling veg, face a mass of bleeding cuts. Three's foot
scuffed on one of her severed antenna, cast off onto the floor.

The Human girl turned her head, to look at where Three had left Two-most of him, anyway.

Things were… things were breaking down. It wasn't Three's fault. Wasn't really Two's either.

There was still enough of Two to ship to processing. But the eye sockets looked like they were following Three now, and a low moan rolled out of Two's mouth. Broken teeth. That was a bitch. Had to hurt, getting them bashed in with a stun stick.

Would hurt more, when the stunner wore off.

"Padawan Yurissy is at peace now," the Padawan with eyes to trap sea beasts told him. "Whatever happened. Whatever your friend did… whatever you did to him… it's over. You know that, don't you? You… sense it."

"No," Three lied. "I'm not like you mystics. I'm just a man."

The girl smiled slightly. "I can't see behind the veil, but I've heard her call for you, Ja-"

"No," he interrupted. "What's in a name? I'll change it."

"You will." Her neck made cords when she nodded, head half-strapped to the board. "This part is over." Her hand was bolted to the table. Two had… Two had used real bolts. They didn't need hands, not where they were sending them. Not like before, when it had just been about breaking them down-showing them the dark, showing them their real power.

Her hand was bolted to the table, but her fingers curved under, beckoning him closer. "Let me show you; I'll show you what kind of a man you'll become. Let me show you, Jaq."

"That's not my name," he muttered. Not anymore. Not if they can find me. I'll change it. Before I run. I'll change it.

But his feet moved closer to the bed, and his hand closed over hers, small and broken.

Xxx

"Thought the Human one was a female," One said. "Register says two fems, and this is a male and a fem. Male Human, female Rodian." He didn't sound like he cared. You didn't get to be One if you gave a shit about details. Not in their line of work.

"We said we'd deliver two warms to the up and ups," Three reminded him. "I've got two in that box. You can tell, same as me. What's the problem?"

"The scans show-"

"Come on, man. You think he looks at the scans?"

"Fine." One gave an exasperated sigh, just like she--just like Three had known he would.

Truth be told, Three had dreamed about this too-not because he could see the future because he had a kriffing brain.

"Come on." He wasn't going to beg. Not to some sad prick like One, who was gonna end up being chow for the Beast just like most of the other teams had already here on Coru. The Jedi girl had Force visions, but you didn't need them to see this… this was all doomed. Deserters? Good for them! He couldn't wait to be one too. The girl he'd saved had said she'd dreamed of him.

Now all Three did at night when he slept was dream of her: whispering in his sleep. Whispering, guiding, goading-

*Find the woman. Protect her from the puppet dancer, the blinded one, the mother of lies-

"Tatooine," said One. "Kuat. Deralia-"

"Really?" Three scoffed. "That backwater?"

"Place like that is where I'd hide," One said. "If I didn't have a damn death wish."

The look in One's eyes… didn't look like a joke. It probably wasn't. Not even enough of them left on Coru to make a Twelve anymore. Order was breaking down. Shadows were nothing, in light. The Jedi were gone, or just about-

"And Peragus," the One added. "Somebody got footage of a revan there. Probably just a vid star."

"Peragus," he made the face he thought of as his meat suit smile, charming, quick as numbers in a deck. "That's the mining colony too explosive for warships to dock, right?"

The Beast could never reach him there. Would be easy to slip into something more comfortable there. Become a different man, slip out on some freighter-

"Yes," One nodded. A faint smile on his own lined face said that he got the gist.

"See you," Three told him, not looking back.

*Peragus. It'll be pure pazaak.*

XXX

"Well?" Canderous eased his way into the cramped communications chamber, squeezing in between Aemelie and Gwen. Their daughter sat in the officer's chair, headset half off, with that all-too-familiar scowl upon her face. "You said it was urgent."

"Show him," Gwen ordered.

Sighing just short of insolence, Millifar adjusted the controls of her screen, so the received broadcast appeared in front of them all.

The image flickered, then resolved with impressive clarity. It showed a humanoid figure wearing a dark flight suit, with the helmet's fogged ferraglass almost entirely shadowing the face within. "*Ni... vore gaa'tayl,\"* the figure muttered, voice mechanical and distorted through the ultralight feed.

"Not one of our patrols?" Canderous asked.

"No. Kex and I were monitoring the ship's receivers from this station when the broadcast came in on the emergency channel.\" Millifar paused. "We surmise the frequency was designed to retrieve the Aleema's fighters and shuttles, or at least track their locations."
"I set our daughter and Kex to this task," Gwen added, "as partial punishment for their shame."

"This is the recording of the broadcast we received," Millifar added. "Approximately one standard hour ago."

Millifar set the recording forward again. The helmeted head moved, dropping down over the camera, which auto focused on the blurred features within. The voice was a woman's, hoarse and rasping, as if the air was thin. "Please. Ni vore gaa'tayl. Aemelie? Is Canderous with you? Please... vore. Haar'chak! Gedet'ye! Mhi... mhi ... ven mhi vor entye. Ni...mhi allit..." The helmet filled the screen suddenly, as if the woman was leaning over the comm's camera. Her eyes were wild and staring through the ferraglass, face contorted. "Is this thing fracking working? Millifar? The man said, Milli. Is that you? I had a dream that Mission said Aemelie-" she broke off coughing. "Fracking hell, I don't want to die like this! Please... be you."

"Another dar'Jett trick," Aemelie announced, folding her arms. "A more subtle one, if she's manufacturing a false distress beacon from one of our ship's own warbirds-but still a trick." She sniffed. "The real Third Wife would hardly mention my name."

"No," Canderous said. He felt a great sense of relief that she hadn't died forgotten. "It's no trick. That's Revan. The real one. You traced the broadcast's origin?"

"Yes," Millifar said. "Kex did. It's back in Republic Space. In the middle of nowhere."

"How can we be sure this woman is 'the real one?'" Gwen frowned at him. "You were so sure the last message was from a false Revan-why is this one different?"

"Why is she asking for me?" Aemelie added. "She calls herself Clan, and swears a debt-price? She would be indebted indeed if we broke course and went all the way back into Republic Space!" She paused. "But we will not because that is the dar'Revan. Again."

"It is her," he snapped. "Is the transmission still active?"

"Yes," Millifar turned another dial on the console. "But she stopped talking. Just stares at the cam. Sometimes her lips move."

Canderous frowned. "Show me."

The image shifted. Now, the woman's face was practically on top of the camera, eyes half-open, focused on something that only she could see.

"Can she hear us?"

"I turned our mics down when I recognized her," his daughter said. She sighed heavily. "You want to hear her speak? Fine." She turned the dial back up again. "Now the mics are operational; our board is both receiving and transmitting."

"Good," he grunted.

The eyes on the hologram blinked and focused abruptly before Canderous could properly address her. "Canderous?"

"I didn't accept the visual request," Millifar added.

"Do it now," he commanded. "Revan. What the hell are you doing?"
"Trying not to die." Her eyes closed. "Canderous. Where are you?" The camera captured the faint lines that Force scarring had left on her face. And the expression was as familiar to Canderous as Aemelie's own.

Relief colored his amusement. "On my flagship. You know there's some schutta running around with your face?"

"I know," she said flatly. "That's why… that's who we need to stop."

"I still don't know why you assume this is the real one," Aemelie grumbled.

His daughter bent over the controls, and the recording lights flickered on. Canderous could see the moment Revan's eyes focused on his face, the tension in her own suddenly relaxing.

"She said 'please,'" he noted. "To us. Revan, who's flying that ship?"

"I am," she mumbled. "I mean, I was."

He snorted. "Mir'osik, you're a terrible pilot."

Her mouth twitched a little. "So I've been told. About this other Revan… you spoke to her?" Her voice was stronger now. "Anything she told you to do is a trap-or a lie. Please tell me you didn't think she was me!"

"At first," he admitted. "We were not expecting an imitation. Who is she?"

"That's… complicated." Her eyes shifted. "Look, I… I don't know how much oxygen I have. I have this suit, and another four. The ship's depressurized, dead in space. I don't know how long I can-"

"We do know," Millifar interrupted. "Because we have schematics of the Pinion designs. Those suits recycle everything. As long as you have power, you'll have air." She paused. "But you will eventually starve, and there is only so much the recycler can do with urine-"

"Seven days," Aemelie said. "We can reach her in seven days if we take the most direct route, which will put us directly in Rimma shipping lanes. We can keep the stealth fields operational, but on such a crowded route, doing so could prove as hazardous to us as to any ship who came close."

"If you jettison into a life pod," Millifar interrupted, "you'll have more time, Third Wife. If you really are the Third Wife."

"I'm sorry we got cut off when I tried to call before," the Conqueror of their people said. "Hello, Millifar."

"K'oyacyi," his daughter muttered, in a tone that implied the opposite.

"Millifar," Gwen warned. "I have not forgotten your shame."

"You heard Third Wife," the girl muttered. "It was her fault the comm disconnected."

"The life pod has more limited communications," Aemelie said. "And we need that fighter intact. If we sent one of our own scouts-"

"No cloaked ships at all," Gwen warned. "It could tip our hand to the Republic."

"Tip your hand about what?" Revan's eyes narrowed behind the ferraglass visor. "What are you planning, Canderous?"
"A superlight corvette would work," Aemelie suggested. "We can clamp her Pinion to its base for the return journey, and send the Aleema following so the return will be much less."

"That will cut travel time by a day?" Millifar added. "I think."

"Two days," Aemelie corrected her. "You need to account for the reduced drag coefficients when calculating the hyperspace duration. Five days, with two hyperspace jumps-"

"What are you planning?" Revan repeated. "Where are you?"

"We're not planning anything that concerns you, Third Wife." Aemelie shrugged. "After your rescue, we will provide you with a more automated ship, and take the Pinion in exchange."

"Not planning anything. On my… my old flagship." She frowned.

The false Revan had seemed much more certain of her ownership. The contrast made Canderous feel foolish for being tricked before, even for an instant. "We're planning what you and I spoke about," he told her. "From time to time. Rebuilding clan. Recovering our honor."

"Finding glory in battle," Revan grimaced through the flight helmet. "Right. I… I guess we can talk about it later."

"If you survive," Millifar said, half under her breath.

"Milli!" Gwen raised the flat of her hand as if their daughter wasn't too old to cuff.

"I only meant, there is a chance her ship is too damaged to maintain its power source," the girl muttered. "She's floating dead in space. Any number of accidents could occur."

"I'll check the calculations," Canderous offered, but his wives and daughters continued to chatter, plotting Revan's retrieval as if it was a military campaign.

And it might be, Ordo.

"Canderous," Revan interrupted. "Do you… do you know where the Sith homeworld is? It's called Dromund Kaas. It's where I need to go."

"We were looking for some Sith planets ourselves," he admitted. "Is Dromund Kaas where the false you was headed?"

"The false Revan had Seiran Wen with her," Aemelie added. "Do you know who that is?"

"I do. I was with them, but she—she betrayed me." Revan took a deep breath. "I don't know how it's possible, but… Carth is on Dromund Kaas. And Zaalbar. Somehow they're with Polla Organa. The real Polla Organa. And the Mission computer—"

"Polla Organa is on a Sith planet?" Aemelie interrupted. "Did she defect to them instead of us?"

"What?" Revan's voice sharpened. "No! She… she was pretending to be me."

"Really? She's much more attractive," Aemelie murmured. "Why would she do that? And where is Abasen?"

"With his grandmother." One red eyebrow arched. "Seiran told me they'd spent time with you, Aemelie, but I didn't realize you'd gotten so close."
"Our sons are milk brothers." Aemelie sighed. "Since you and I are married to the same man, I will make no secret that I prefer her to you."

"We saw the Deathbringer too," Millifar broke in. "I don't think she likes you."

"Who?" Revan frowned. "Who the hell else doesn't like me?"

"Mee'ra Surik."

"Who?"

Canderous smiled at her blank expression.

XXX

The Sith guards dumped them all in a suite of rooms painted a lurid red. There was no more talk of putting Force restraints on anyone either. Nothing to stop Dustil from using the Force and getting himself and dear old Dad (and Mission, the droid) the frack out of here.

Nothing… except dear old Dad's head shake when Dustil whispered that plan in his ear walking down the hall.

When they got to the rooms, Dustil learned the reason why: those two Zabrak kids were waiting for them. Both stood up when they entered, looking at Dustil's father with an expression that made Dustil faintly nauseous—but one he recognized. He'd seen it on the kids lined up outside their conapt back on Coru. Seen it on Mekel's face, even, once or twice—when the other boy was talking about Revan or even fracking Malak.

*Hero worship.*

"This is Zepth. And Takan." Leave Dad alone for a few weeks, a month, probably even a fracking day, and he'd adopt more kids. Mission had been cute (before Revan killed her), but for the life of him, Dustil couldn't see what good two Sith-possessed Zabrak would do them.

"Great," Dustil muttered, because what else was there to say? If it had only been ysalamiri keeping Mekk away, he'd be back by now. And Malak… Malak was fracking gone—Dustil had felt him leave, like a quickly-thinning hovertrail across the sky.

"Hello," Takan said.

"Your father told us you studied on Korriban," Zepth added. "We were told that is a great honor, to be one of Revan's chosen at the Academy there."

"Yeah. It sure was." He glanced at dear old Dads. Dad. Mekk would say 'Dads,' like a Coru core rat. Mekk would make a joke. If Mekel's dead….

Bad enough that Mission was dead—and still her voice kept coming through the droid's voder.

"Maybe Mekel's not really dead," that droid commented, for the tenth time, since Dustil had first mumbled it in the speeder. "Right? He could be alive?"

"If he were alive, he'd have smashed the ysalamiri already, and he'd be back." Dustil was tired of explaining it. He felt numb. *Didn't Ban say we'd die together, Mekk?*

He could almost hear the other boy's laughter in his head.
Maybe you just told me that to get lucky-frack. Dustil blinked his eyes hard, rubbing them to get the blur out.

His father was frowning at him, with the look he got when he was trying to understand. Any minute now, there'd be a pat on the back.

"Your father also said you studied to be a Jedi on Coruscant," Zepth added. "My aunt was a Jedi there. And my little sister. They chose her when she was six. Aunt Marla sent me to Dathomir instead."

"That's nice." Dustil wasn't listening. Knowing Father, these two had some tragic story too.

"Let me… let me talk to Dustil in private. Okay?" Dear old Dad gave the Zabraks and the droid a juicy, crap-eating grin, and shrugged like he was apologizing for them on top of everything else.

They had two rooms in their locked-down quarters, with a door and a fresher between them. Two beds in each, which meant Dustil was gonna bunk with Father and the Zabrak were off on their own.

Lucky them.

Thinking of that made him think of Mekk. Thinking of Mekel made him feel numb again. They'd shared everything, but it hadn't even hurt: just suddenly, he and Malak were gone.

His head felt empty, with only his own thoughts rattling around in it.

XXX

"It's done then? Mekel Jin has been cut off from the Force?" The question was rhetorical, as Lydie had been in the same comm channel as her husband when Master Kavar reported back to them.

"You were in the same comm channel as I was." Azen raised an eyebrow at her across the dinner table. "Are you feeling alright, Lydie?"

Lydie reminded herself that it was satisfying, the way their thoughts ran in familiar parallels. Azen never surprised her, or left her without words, even if that was a condition he attributed himself to her presence.

Azen Loanin had ceased to confound her, even if she did still confound him, apparently all the time, with her fanciful illogic.

Lydie smiled, trying to explain. "What I meant was, how do we know it worked, when Dustil Onasi's body is on Dromund Kaas? How do we know Malak is gone?" She smiled to show that she was asking out of curiosity, and not because she thought he was concealing information.

Quite obviously, Azen did know, he just had chosen not to share the knowledge with her.

"House Racharn has a few channels to the Sith media, channels they inherited from House D'Reev." Azen sighed. "Leesa has generously agreed to share them with our House. If Malak is gone, it should become clear quite soon." He sniffed. "Dustil Onasi is no Malak. Not on his own."

Leesa was small and slim and pale as a bone. If you liked small, slim, pale, female humans, Lydie suspected she was attractive. Azen seemed utterly oblivious, but Lydie had noted the Racharn Senator's attention to him.
She wasn't sure how she felt about it.

"We need to check on him," she ventured.

"You wish to travel to Dromund Kaas after Katarr?" Azen looked confounded as if once again, her leaps of spurious logic had outpaced him. "To check on Malak? Lydie, we have others-Racharn agents, Master Klee-there is no need for us to risk ourselves."

"No." Was he deliberately obtuse? "Mekel. We need to check on Mekel Jin."

Her husband scoffed. "Why?"

"Because he was a Jedi," she said. "The experiment where the Force was stripped temporarily was traumatic for him. Imagine how much more traumatic it must be now, to have no Force at all-"

"Imagine what will happen if we fail." Her husband's voice hardened. "Imagine what the dead Jedi suffered before their ends. Imagine the carnage Malak has already caused."

"What if we go to Katarr and it doesn't work?" she countered. "I know what Knight Arkan can do! What if this trap fails?"

"It will be the end." Azen ran his hand over his smooth forehead, and through his hair, pushing it back. She liked to do that for him, feel the contrast between the egg-like roundness of his Human skull, and the thick nape of hair covering it. If they died on Katarr, she would never do that again. "The end of all Jedi." His eyes met hers. "We must not fail."

"You said we must leave in the morning. It's night now. Let me just check. We could both go- " if you don't trust me to perform a simple act of mercy."

"No." His mouth turned down. "I have things to do, reports to prepare for Kavar and Atris; but if you want to go, Lydie, you… you should. Check on him. No doubt his father will be there… and Padawan Ban. You should inform them as well. About Katarr."

*Invite them to stand with us on a Miralukan colony world? To wait for victory or death?*

The plan was insane, but Lydie could not think of a better one. The Fleet had tried simply hunting the *Ravager*, but the Sith Lords' ship had cloaking technology, not to mention Sith upon it. Sith who could cloud minds, hide from the Force itself-

No. We must catch them unaware. *It is the only way.*

*And what better bait than a planet full of Force-sensitives? A planet full Force-sensitives and Jedi. Powerful Jedi. All the powerful Jedi left-*

"I'll be back in a few hours," Lydie promised him.

"The shuttle leaves at dawn." Azen smiled at her from across the table. "Bring Yuthura and Vrook with you, if possible."


Azen's smile was glacial. "If you wish. His presence makes no difference. Either way."

XXX

The Sith had the most uncomfortable chairs in the world. Dustil was balanced precariously on his.
Dad looked like he was about to fracking tip forward.

"Dustil?" Dad leaned forward, even more, balancing the three-legged chair on one leg.

"What." The Zabrak duo was gone at least, gone off to their room. Mission had rolled off with them too. Mekk thought of her as Mission, even if she was just a fracking computer. "How… how are you even here?"

"Kind of a long story. Told you some of it… that was you, wasn't it? I… sometimes it was hard to tell."

"We all kind of… knew. Things. Things that happened to each other. A lot of it was me, Dad." He met his father's eyes warily. "But some of it was Mekk too. He-he was good at filtering out Malak's banthashit. For me. H-he was… he was good."

"Yeah, I know." From Dad's expression, that was a total lie. "You could have just run with Polla and Zaalbar, but you came back. Was that… was that Malak… who made you come back? Or-?"

"All of us." Except for Mekk. He only did it because I wanted to see dear old Dad. He only did it because of me, and if we hadn't been so distracted here, he might still be alive.

Dustil rubbed his eyes. Dear old Father was still talking.

"I-I only left you on Coruscant because Malachi said he'd find a way to help you, Dustil. If we get out of this, it's gonna be you and me and the stars from now on." His father grimaced like he didn't believe it could happen either.

"Oh, yeah? What about Revan?" Even if they never fracking saw her again, she'd always be between them. Yeah, Malak had blocked most of the… the sex memories, but there were still fragments rattling around Dustil's brain. Mostly feeling. All fracked. Red, he'd called her. Red, red, red. He meant her hair, her blood, the color inside of her-it's all too fracking much.

"I didn't come to Dromund Kaas for her. We came here to rescue you," Dad told him. "Revan… isn't… even when she comes here, it's finished." His eyes looked as bleak as Dustil felt. "She's… not-the woman I married doesn't exist anymore."

_Great job on the rescuing, by the way._ Dustil glanced at the locked door, heard himself scoff.

"So… what? Revan's gonna show up and we're gonna just leave? With her? Malak thought… isn't she coming here to stop the Emperor?"

"I don't know." His father rubbed his jaw like he did when he was clueless. "This… world is wrong. Evil. If we have the chance to stop Tenebrae, we need to take it. If Revan's here to stop Tenebrae, we need to help. But if she's here to join him, we…." He glanced towards the door.

"Mission swept this room for surveillance," he added.

"First, we need to get that asshole out of your head." Dustil had no idea how to do that. Wasn't like there was a Mekel Jin someone could kill. From Dad's garbled explanation earlier, it wasn't like a Force bond was what Tenebrae did, was it? Malak hadn't… Malak hadn't understood what the Sith Emperor did. Frack, Malak hadn't even known what was up: his thoughts had been a confused fracking mess about what had gone down with him and dear [Red](http://www.example.com) there at the end with the Star Forge.

XXX

"You set me on this path, Revan. I wonder if our positions were reversed and I had been saved by
the Council, would I have done things differently?"

"Probably, Mal, you always were weak." She staggered a little. She was... she was hurt. Badly. Dustil could count a dozen weak points without even trying, and he'd never even been a Sith Lord.

She called Malak weak? It almost made Dustil like her. Almost.

"Save me," Malak whispered. Taste of blood on his lips. "I remember how it was between us. I know what there is between us, even if you do not. I know what we must reclaim. Save me, Revan. Save me, Red."

"No." She raised her hand and-everything dimmed, everything died.

Was this what it had been like for Mekk? Malak hadn't fought, Dustil would have fought, Dustil would have fought screaming with everything that he had-

XXX

"We need to get Tenebrae out of my head, the kids' heads, everyone's heads." Dad nodded. "Question is, how?"

Dustil laughed. "No fracking idea." The Force was so much smaller than it had been, but it still shimmered around them, around everything on this fracking planet. And the Force was... dark. Really dark.

Really fracking dark. Makes Korriban feel like a Jedi retreat. Mekel would piss himself laughing if he heard me call Korriban a Jedi anything-

Mekk would-it was fast. Whatever happened. So fast that maybe he didn't even know. Like when those mercs I compelled shot Erimac in the back. No pain. I would have felt it if it hurt. I should have felt something if it hurt.

I should feel something now. Dustil swallowed the lump in his throat back down.

"There-there was a holocron, with Revan's original memories, and-" Dad's voice broke off. He'd been talking for a while, from his expression. Probably time for Dustil to act like he understood.

"Yeah, I know." Dustil coughed. Holocron-Revan's coming too? Both of them? Fracking great. "Malak was in my head, remember?"

"Was in your head? You're sure he's gone?"

Dustil had already said it a hundred times, felt like. Whispers in the speeder, exhausted words in their new fracking prison. But his father kept pushing and pushing.

Xxx

"Is Malak really gone? For good?" Dad looked happy, even if they were prisoners, and Mekel was probably dead. Dustil had just fracking tried to tell him both of those things and Dad had the nerve to look happy.

"Yeah. I felt him... become one with the Force. Or something." Like sunlight shining through trees. This strange calm, peace-a welcoming-

It was really fracked Dustil had felt it for Malak and not for Mekel. Maybe Mekk had died so fast;
there'd been no time.

"You're sure?"

Dustil gritted his teeth. "I'm sure." He took a deep breath, maybe saying the rest of it would help too. It had with Mom. And Selene. "I… I think Mekel died too. We had that Force bond? I think when Mekel died… Malak got free."

"Oh." Dad did that thing he did when he didn't know what to say. He rubbed his jaw, staring hard at Dustil. His lips wrinkled, and his mouth turned down, flat. "I didn't know… I didn't know Mekel was here too until he said-he told me it was both of you."

"It was. Now he's gone." Obviously, his dear father was just fricking clueless. "I don't… I don't want to talk about it. Okay?"

"Okay." His father was frowning. Around their speeder, the Sith hunting party careened on its way. "We'll talk more soon."

Xxx

And now here they were at soon, rehashing the same banthashit.

"Malak's really gone? For good?" How Dad could look happy when they were stuck here on this fricking planet was way beyond Dustil.

"Seems like it." The Force was still there but subdued. He'd never realized how much stronger they'd been until now, that Mekel and Malak were gone. "When that Sith asshole killed Mekel I guess it set him free."

"Which Sith asshole?"

"The Emperor's bucket-boy. Fracking Oerin Lin." Did Dads even hear anything that Dustil ever said? "I thought I told you about him."

"No." Dad frowned. "Oerin Lin… son, he died. Right before I left Coruscant. He had the plague. You were still in a coma-"

"I know he died! And then I killed him too. I ripped his head fricking off! But he can't die. Nothing kills him. He's like a… a walking corpse or something."

Dustil's father just looked worried. "When… when was the last time you ate?"

Black fury welled up in his gut, mixing with loss. "Don't fricking condescend to me, old man!" He got up from the chair, shoving it back with the Force and walked to the door. Naturally, it was locked. Naturally. Mekk could probably pick the lock in ten seconds, but I-

Dustil reached for the Force, focusing his energies on the door, with hard precision. The metal seemed to flare, ripple. There was a creaking noise, and then it tore, starting at the top-

"Don't." Dad's hand was on his shoulder suddenly, reaching up to rest on it, because Dustil was taller now-not much, but a little. "Not until we know more."

"Not until Jedi Revan comes and rescues us, huh?" Mekk was dead. No fricking way, if they were just ysalamiri, he would have come back. He would have found a way. He had said he'd never leave Dustil again-
"It's not going to be like that." Dad sounded grim. "I told you, I don't know… the Revan who's coming for us, I don't know."

"They're not both coming?" He tried to make it a joke, but Dad only stared at him.

"Both?" His father laughed nervously. "I thought you said Malak died-"

His father's voice stopped, mouth freezing in mid-air. And then his eyes began to glow.

The Emperor chuckled darkly with Father's mouth. "Rather unsporting of you, killing the only Force-sensitive I possessed on Coruscant, Malak. With Klee gone, I will have to make changes. Import operatives with inadequate preparation-"

It had happened before Dustil realized what he was doing. A dark current of rage swept through him, pinning Tenebrae in his father's body against the wall.

"Shut up," he muttered, flexing his hand. "What did you do to him? How did he die?"

His father's eyebrows raised so far they looked like they were trying to leave his head. His father's breath rattled in his father's lungs. And a part of Dustil, a part of Dustil was glad, seeing the man suffer-suffer like Mekk and me-

"I-I-" the man's hand clawed comically at his throat. "He had. A… metal stick of some kind. I… saw it. Briefly, before he-"

"You're the one who killed him!" His voice cracked again. "You fracking killed him. You and your dead Mandalorian!"

"Oh… my." The choking noises could have been laughter. "We may need that Force collar after all."

And then, like the flip of a switch, the red light cut out. Suddenly, the man was just a feeble man, pinned against the wall. A choking man, whispering a name.

It took Dustil a few more seconds to realize the name was his.

"Dust-" His father rasped. "Dustil."

"Dad." His voice cracked again. It kept doing that. Like he was a kid. Like he was nothing more than a fracking kid. "Dad!" He lunged forward and caught his father in his arms, sagging with the weight of him, helping him back to the chair, fumbling apologies, trying to make amends with words, with the Force-

"It's… okay. Son. It's okay."

Xxx

On Telos sometimes, after spring rains, when Dad wasn't deployed, and Mom had time off from patrol, they'd hike up past base into the mountains. There was an old, primitive dam there-nothing more than a wall and a few sluice channels; but it was on land that had been in Mom's family for generations. To keep the valley dry below, they had to open the gates. But one year… it rained too hard, or they were too late, or something. Dustil didn't remember. He'd been just a kid. But it had felt like this, watching it. Watching it, he'd thought he'd even felt it in the earth-the dam wall buckling, the water taking tide, washing everything-their camp, food, even Mom's speeder away in the floodwaters.
It had felt like this. First, his body shook. Then a g gobbling breath. Then his body shook again, and the hot tears started, blurring his vision, making his chest ache, his legs stumble. The world blurred and dimmed, lost in the waves of grief.

On Telos, it had been Dad who grabbed them-Mother by the arm and Dustil around the waist like he was a tomato sack. Dad had grabbed them and stumbled out of the way. No magic, no Force, just his father's strength and courage, pulling them off the path, scrabbling up the hill, while they watched what had been their trail turn into a raging river, watched the speeder-Mom's pride and joy-tumbling down, lost forever.

"It's insured," Dad had whispered. "It doesn't matter. We're safe. That's the real thing. That's what matters."

"Mekk's gone," Dustil mumbled against Dad's chest, even though he was the taller one now. Even though that didn't make any frickin' sense. His body felt like one long earthquake, he couldn't stop crying now, couldn't stop the tears. "He's... dead. That asshole even admitted it."

"Mekel." His father pulled back a little, frowning down at him. "We... we're talking about Mekel Jin now. Not Malak."

"Of course not Malak." The scoff was so automatic, choking off tears, that he wondered if Dad had done it on purpose. "Mekel. Yeah." He took a deep breath, met his father's eyes. "Mekel's dead."

"They asked for privacy." The slightly smaller Zabrak, the one who'd first met them on Dathomir, the one designated 'Takan,' eyed Mission like he hadn't liked the shock she'd just administered to his hand when he tried to roll her away from the door.

"That's why I'm standing here, Hornface." If she had fingers, they'd be making rude gestures.

Mekel Jin was dead? That made her processors feel strange. Did they have a holocron? Would he be coming back? "I'm monitoring in case Emperor Creepazoid's goons come back."

"Did they request your assistance?"

"Yes," she lied.

"Captain Onasi said nothing to me-"

"Takan." The other one had approached almost noiselessly, even with her sensors. That was a little disquieting. "Leave Malak to his games. I have need of you and this vessel for a new purpose."

"Master." The Zabrak even went down one knee. Because the other Zabrak's eyes were glowing now. "Of course, how may I serve?"

"Do-weet!" Mission chirped. "Beep beep!"

In Droid Language Ninety-Six Pi, that was a command to stick all appendages in the nearest power conduit and leave them til dark.

"I'm sorry," Dad repeated. Back on those uncomfortable chairs again, but closer now. Dad was
even holding one of Dustil's hands like he never wanted to let go.

And weirder, Dustil was letting him." "It's okay." It will never be okay. He forced the cheerfulness into his voice, like it was fracking Force compulsion. "Hey, least Malak's gone! Asshole even felt happy when he got free."

"Free?" Dad frowned. "I thought you said he was possessing you."

"He was stuck." Took him and Mekk ages to figure that out, that Malak was as trapped as they were. "Something about the Force bond, it… kept him there. It doesn't matter. I don't give a frack about Malak."

His father scoffed. "Then you're a better man than your old man. You don't know how many times I dreamed about putting a blaster bolt through his skull." -

"Before it was my skull, Dad?" He smiled to show he was joking. He wanted to puke.

"Of course." The flash in his old man's eyes held more of an edge than Dustil was used to-and maybe even a glint of black humor. "I hated that bastard for years before he came back as a Force ghost and possessed you. That was just the last, damned straw."

Dustil laughed. He couldn't help it.

His father stared at his face as if he were memorizing every line. Then, after a sec, he started to laugh too.

"This is not how I pictured our father and son time," Dad admitted.

"At least you're not fracking brainwashed like on Coru," Dustil told him. "Did you know about that? Senator D'Reev did something to you, he brainwashed you. It was all fracked."

"I-I know. Some of it, anyway." His father's smile faded. "You and I didn't have a chance to get on the same loop back there."

"No." Dustil sighed, cracking his knuckles. "Guess our timing sucked."

"It'll be better now." His father sounded like he was promising himself.

"Yeah." Except Mekel's dead. And we're trapped here, waiting for your wife or your ex to save us. He tried to figure out how to put that into words, but the way his father's expression looked made those words fade. "That woman—the smuggler—she went off with Zaalbar. It was Malak's idea. But she seems… she seems pretty tough."

That was a lie. She'd seemed terrified, even if Mekel thought she smelled nice when they slept, all curled up under that fracking bush—

From the look on his father's face, Dustil realized that maybe Mekel wasn't the only one to notice the smuggler's hotness.

His father nodded. "She's the real Polla Organa. She fooled the Sith Emperor into thinking she was Revan before."

Yeah, but why? There had been some attempt at a garbled reason, coming from her, coming from Mission—from the Tee-Three that said it was Mission. Mekk had thought of her as Mission, but Mekel was a kripping dead idiot. "Why?"
"Originally?" His father scoffed. Dustil wondered if he knew he was smiling. "Credits. She was trying to get credits."

"So she's nuts." As nuts as your wife. Great.

"Polla agreed to keep on… keep on pretending to be Revan so we could rescue you," Dad added.

"I know." That had been part of the garbled story that had come out. From her, when they were running, now from dear old Dad here in this Sith prison. But something nagged at Dustil. "When that Sith asshole grabbed us-me-he said it was *Revan's* orders. So was that your wife Revan, or Polla the faker who wanted Malak here?"

"Uh…" Dad rubbed his jaw. "I think that was probably Polla."

"So she got me kidnapped in the first place." She got Mekel killed. In the first place.

Dustil made a quiet vow to return the fracking frackin-ner favor, if he got the chance.

"She-she didn't mean-"

"You're defending *her*?" Dustil heard his voice crack like a kid's. "Mekel's *dead* because of her!"

"It's not-" his father stopped talking and stared at him. Something that might have been frackin' comprehension flickered on his face. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm sorry about your friend. When… you said before you didn't want to talk about it-"

"I still don't. Want to talk. About him."

"Sure." Dad looked uncomfortable, perched on the chair again. He tried to tilt it back, and it teetered on the one back leg, tilting alarmingly. "You kids went through a lot together. I-I understand. He was… he was a nice kid."

*Liar.* He wanted to be a Mandalorian, but he stuck around. For me. He never talked about it much. We just knew… things. We just knew. Having a Force bond is like…” like feeling your face grow hot when you're trying to explain it to your dad.

"I know. Bastila and Revan-"

*Those rumors are true?* Mekk would have made a joke. But Dustil knew better.

"No We… we were closer than that." He met his father's eyes. "More like you... and… and Mom."

"Your mother-oh." His father's expression shifted fast: from confusion to something like surprise. Then, he leaned forward, almost tipping the chair over as his hands, both of them, closed on Dustil's, like a pair of ronto-traps. "Oh. That's… I-I didn't know. You never… guess I-I should have known."

"No." Dustil leaned forward, gripping his father's hands back. "It happened after… after you left, but it made me realize we-I'd… it was important."

"It is important." Dad looked him in the eye. "Even when someone goes away, it's still important. You never really… you never really forget." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I didn't pick up on… on that. That you and him… that it was like that."

"I don't know how he died." Weirdly, it felt good to talk. "Tenebrae was there, and this frackin' walking corpse was there too. Oerin Lin. That Mandalorian-"
"Oerin Lin died." Dad frowned. "Of plague, I thought."

"Yeah, he was dead. But… walking. Not a ghost like Malak. Walking. Rotting. I tried to kill him, but it didn't work."

"What?" Dad looked confused. "I know, you said it before, but I… I didn't understand. You're saying, Oerin Lin was there… and he killed Mekel?"

"I guess." It felt like being a kid now, with all the tears wrung out. There was a ring of bruises blooming around his old man's throat. Another on his arm, where maybe it had hit the wall. "I-I hurt you. You were… you were that asshole Emperor, I-I hurt you."

Dustil's fingers itched to heal the bruises but he wasn't sure he could.

"It's okay." His father's smile was open. Honest as clean Telos sky. "You think I haven't wanted to strangle that asshole Tenebrae too?"

Dustil laughed. Once he started he couldn't seem to stop. "We're going to make them pay," he choked.

His father's eyes were clear and sad, like he got it. "I know."

XXX

His shadows held them cornered like kath, above and below on the stairs.

"Hello," Oerin called down to Master Vrook Lamar, the Jin boy's father. The former Sith headmistress, the reformed Yuthura Ban stood next to the man, both of them, sabers lit. A few shadows lay broken on the floor far below.

A waste. I might as well have fed them to Nihilus.

Speaking of the Beast, Oerin needed to return. He'd left the former Davad Arkan wandering the halls of one of Coruscant's suddenly depopulated habitats-little more than a rich man's asteroid, set on orbit around Coruscant to maximize the view. The Beast had no way of escaping… Oerin hoped, but given time, who was he to say that the entire planet full of life below might not somehow pull the man into its orbit? He could not trust his former friend alone on the Ravager, not after what had happened on Yavin, when the man had nearly convinced their new pilot to steer the ship into the sun….

"Disperse," Oerin told the shadows, ringing the command through their minds. "Return to One of Acknahar'tah. I will be along shortly."

One-by-one, their stealth belts activated, and his compelled tiny army vanished. Acknahar'tah… it was time, Oerin thought, to put an end to that line. Hardly any left now from the Twelve. A pity, really, they were one of the oldest. Organized years ago, by Revan's orders herself.

"Oerin Lin," Vrook Lamar seemed in shock. The expression of horror all sentients got looking upon Oerin Lin now was tiresome. "Revan told us you had been resurrected by your mother, Vima Sunrider-"

"She hates that name," Oerin coughed. "Or did. Now it hardly matters. She may be dead. How long can a Human person survive on the side of a volcano with no food or water?" He shrugged. "Hello Master Vrook, Lady Ban. You should see to the boy, he will need assistance and I'm not sure that Klee-"
As if the Force was a jester, (which in Oerin's experience could be true), Master Klee picked that moment to die. Or had it picked for him. His star winked out of the Force like a light.

*A shame. If he was just going to be killed, I could have fed him to Nihilus, perhaps saved some of Acknahar'tah. They were such loyal beasts—*

This trip was a massive waste of raw material. Oerin could only hope the Sith worlds were as rich as their Republic friends claimed. Disturbing, when Oerin pondered too hard on their circumstance now… how almost every action he took was a way to keep Nihilus fed.

*But if I can use him to destroy this Sith Emperor, open Sith space for my people… it will make some of it, at least, worthwhile—*

"Never mind about Klee." Oerin smiled, and shrugged, feeling another ligament tear along the small of his back. "He's dead. Not like me… actually dead. Forever."

"Why?" Vrook stared at him, and for a moment, Oerin was reminded of the gruff old man who'd played chess with him and told him a story about Grandmother and her first husband that Mother never had shared. The man, Andur Sunrider, it seemed, had sacrificed himself, and self-sacrifice was decidedly not part of Mother's creed. "You didn't kill him? You didn't kill my son?"

"If you want Jin dead, do it yourself." Oerin walked down the stairs towards them, holding the Force in his hand like a beating heart. The pain was constant, but there was a purity in it too. "I must leave."

The woman, Yuthura Ban, looked at him incredulously, lekku wrapped tight around her neck. She was powerful enough not to even hide her fear—or her revulsion. "What you did to him," she murmured. "Can it be undone?"

"I have no idea," He smiled. Women used to love his smile.

Oerin flexed his fingers, and part of the transparisteel railing cracked, shards falling down. He leaned backwards, and let gravity take him the rest of the way to the floor.

The remnants of his ribs crumpled, and for a moment, when his skull hit the ground, Oerin saw a pure, white light. But a reassuring wave of pain forced him to his feet again, flesh and bone knitting enough to stand, to walk, to leave, pushing through the Coruscanti crowd of nulls as if they were shadows.

But the gray man in the doorway gave him pause. Null and faded, but upright all the same. Like he hadn't noticed the universe had ceased its meaning, that free will for one such as him was a thing of the past.

"You." Oerin bit back irritation. "I told you to wait with him."

The Deralian nodded. "That you did, but he… he wants you to hurry. Sent me down. Said… said he's hungry."

"You can hear his thoughts? Understand him?" Was Nihilus powerful enough to project to the Force-blind now?

"N-no." The man's skin had paled to the color of his hair, as if working beside them had leached vitality from him even without the Force. "We write. We… write notes. Master."

"Notes?" Oerin laughed. "He can still hold a stylus?"
I should be pleased he sent you, instead of making the journey himself I suppose. Still enough
cognizance left, not to mobilize the entire galaxy against us. Still. For at least a time.

There was a fresh claw mark on the gray man's face. Oerin certainly hadn't put it there. "Yes." The
Deralian nodded. "S-sometimes his… he's not always clear, but… he told me to come fetch you.
He asked… did you get what you needed?"

Something there. A glint, an eagerness. If Oerin was one of those suspicious, paranoid Sith, like
the fools he'd played games with on Manaan, he might have cared. The man was… he was
hiding something, in those null thoughts of his. Something.

Oerin probed sharply and was rewarded with the image of a face-and that dreary desire for death.

"Her?" He had to laugh. Cracking noise behind them. Oerin turned, in time to see the rest of the
staircase collapse. Vrook and Yuthura Ban were gone, presumably escaped, presentably upstairs
with Jin. "You poor fool. Revan won't save you. Don't you see? We're doing her job."

Xxx

Jasp Organa followed the dead man out of the Coruscanti hospital, heart still thudding too fast in
his chest.

Pollie, he thought. But in this place-her expression blurred and shifted, features thinned, chin
sharpened, hair shifting from brown to red….

Xxx

It wasn't logical, Mekel's need to retrieve the broken bed leg from Master Klee's skull, but he was
still trying (it was stuck on something inside, maybe bone, maybe brains, who the frack knew)
when Lammikins and Master Yuthura Ban appeared in the doorway.

"Mekel," Ban's voice was sharp, hard enough that Mekel dropped the metal rod and stood up. For a
second he wondered if she'd compelled him, but without the Force he had no way of telling.

His feet, clad in hospital slippers, slipped on blood, mostly from the ysalamiri. Most of Klee's was
still inside him.

"He… was evil!" Mekel said quickly. "Fracking tried to kill me! I think he's a Sith or something.
Did you know that? Master Kavar too! They're in league with Oerin Lin!"

"We just saw Oerin Lin." Yuthura grimaced. "Or, rather, his walking corpse."

"The Force-" Vrook seemed to turn gray. Maybe it was the light. "It's gone from you. He did this?"

Mekel wasn't sure which 'he' dear old Dads meant. "Oerin Lin did it. He's a fracking zombie now
or something. He took away the Force and Kavar and Klee just stood there!"

"Kavar was here? With them?" Now it looked like Vrook's eyebrows were gonna escape his face.

"They were all here. Then they left. I…." Klee had been just standing like a rube when the bed leg
went in his skull. Lies scrambled with the truth, just like Ban had always told them was best.
"Klee's eyes started glowing and he was laughing at me-like he was crazy and possessed too!"

"We know," Yuthura told him. "We saw. Some of it."

"How?" Good. Back me up here, Yuthura Ban.
"You were under surveillance," Vrook told him. "Master Loanin, and Master Kavar, Padawan Korr, Fleet officers-"

"The camera. Right. Yeah. M-malak, he shorted it out." Padawan Korr? Lydie Korr was watching me too? All of them probably laughing their asses off-

"Mekel…" He'd never heard Yuthura Ban sound so gentle. Her hand touched his arm gently. "We've come to take you away from here. Where are your clothes?"

"Huh?" He looked down. Said something, that with all the crazy banthashit going down, he hadn't even realized all he was wearing was a torn hospital robe and skivs. The sealed skin on his side ached, where they'd grown a new spleen or whatever it had been. "I-I don't know."

"No matter." Vrook stepped forward, taking his own outer robe off. It wasn't a Jedi one-both of them were dressed like civs. Just a long, banthahide coat. Telos had had one even, sort of like it, he'd looked pretty fracking flash-

"If you saw…" he was still standing there, letting them buckle him into the coat like a tranked-out kid, "You know, it was three of us… me, Dustil, and Malak. But now, I don't know… I don't know anything. I can't feel anything."

"Oerin Lin removed your affinity to the Force," Yuthura said, like Mekel hadn't fracking figured that out. "Apparently, under orders from Master Kavar." Her brow ridge raised.

"Because the Fleet requested the end of Malak," Vrook added.

"Dustil… we were in the middle of-we'd just killed a fracking terentatek! If he lost the Force then… he's probably dead." Anger felt strange without the accompanying rush of power. It had been enough to drive the spike into Master Klee, but Mekel didn't think he could take on his dads and Ban. Even with Klee's lightsaber he'd tucked down his skivs.

(Telos would have a smart-ass comment about that. Mekel could almost hear its echo.)

"Where was he?" Vrook looked like he had a million fracking questions. If Mekel had the Force, he'd shove them all back down the man's lying throat.

"Who?" Mekel hated feeling like a stupid fracking rube.

"Dustil. And Malak."

"Dromund Kaas." He could still almost feel the air, damp and wet and stinking.

"Was Revan there?"

"Frack you." But instead of angry, the words came out choked. "Frack off. Dads."

"We can speak of this later. I have rooms near here." Ban. Taking charge. Still that gentle voice. Mekel half expected a trank in the arm, she was being so nice.

"Of course." Lammikins looked like he was properly whipped now. "I-I’m sorry, son. It has been… a very troubling day."

"We can just… go?" He didn't look at Klee, at the wreckage of the room, or wonder about Nurse Soon, with the thigh muscles, or Nurse Faymi with the great tits. Maybe they'd been bought off, not killed. Maybe they were okay. Just because Mekel wasn't, didn't mean everyone else on the
fracking floor was already dead.

"If we hurry," Vrook murmured. "And use the service halls. I believe, yes."

Xxx

"#-#-#& &#& #- - () ?#. #+ + +(?)" the red-robed mask said, inflection at the end seeming to indicate a question.

Zaalbar roared at him, waving the (broken and held together with tree sap) shackles on his wrists.

"Doopa chokca," Polla cautioned him, reprovingly in Ryl. There were a lot of Twi'lek on this planet. Like, a lot. That, she had not expected; but it was lucky, considering that Ryl, Huttese, and Basic were the languages she actually fracking knew.

Now, Polla shrugged at the guard in front of them, pushing the visor of her own (slightly bloodstained and stolen) uniform slightly up so he could see her smile. "Ayeeda decka Wookiee loppa tweecka Blais, ya?" Boss asked me to take the Wookiee to the House of Blais?

"#$$#&" the man asked. At least, she was pretty sure he was a man. Red, ankle-length lacquered robes made it hard to tell.

"Blais," Polla repeated, gesturing to the row of low, attached buildings lining the street. "Blais? Doopa Chiga Blais Haus, yah?" Which one is House Blais?

Master Klee should have given me some more helpful phrases in Ancient Sith, she thought. 'Bow down and worship me' isn't gonna fly with this asshat.

"Blais." The guard pointed at one of the doors. It looked like all the rest.

Place reminded Polla of Embassy row on Nar Shaddaa, except without the street crime and trash. Here, the streets were spotless, and sents practically marched single file in unison. Like it was the law.

It had taken Zaalbar forever to get back, almost another whole day. Then they'd spend a night in the tree, chewing on some kind of nuts he'd said were good before scaling back down to the ground. In all that time, Polla had learned that in fact, some snakes did live in trees. Fortunately, they were susceptible to blaster shots.

Zaalbar had returned with an official-looking speeder, more blasters, clothes, and a few bulbs of water. The speeder had one of its thrusters dented, like someone very strong had beaten it in to keep the occupants from escaping. One of the two uniforms fit her okay. The black cloth hid bloodstains, and she supposed the owner wouldn't be around to collect it. Through gestures and the few words of Shyriiwook she'd learned, Zaalbar had explained the basic plan:

Show pass from the speeder to the guards at Kaas City gates, find House Blais, and see if they could get help.

Amazingly, it has all been that simple. Polla supposed that on a creepy Sith planet there weren't a ton of escaped slaves trying to escape towards more Sith. Kaas City was gated, sure, with guards stationed at every entrance. But while there was a multi-block line of sents waiting to pass checkpoints to leave, all they'd done was wave credentials to pass on through and get in.

Now, standing at the door of the House Blais in question, she tried to gather her courage to knock on the front fracking door. Before she could, however, it slid open, disappearing in the wall with an
ominous 'snick.'

" #$& & &?" Hello? The kid that answered was in her late teens, maybe, with yellow-gold eyes and long brown hair, half braided, tangling down the side of her face. Her eyes narrowed, taking them both in, and she shook her head. " #$- - aas_+ & & & &." 


She was getting sick of Ancient Sith. "Yes?" she said in it, one of the few words she actually knew."

"##&##&.&," the girl replied. Her head turned, and she yelled something, harsh and indeterminate, behind her.

"No! Revan," Polla snapped. She pointed at Zaalbar, and then at herself. "Revan!"

"Revan?" The girl repeated, frowning.

"Yes." Polla nodded. "We're from Revan, you creepy Sith kid. She says you have to help us. Or fracking Malak said it for her. You know Malak, right? Mal-ak?"

"Oh!" The girl's eyes widened. "You speak Republic!"

"It's Standard," Polla snapped. "Not Republic, but you… you speak it too?"

"Of course." The girl shrugged. "Are you the new tutor?" She rolled her eyes. "Mother did threaten to hire another, even after what Inse did to the last one…." She smiled. She had a shy smile. "The last one was a Republic spy from Revan, are you are too?"

Zaalbar groaned something that Polla couldn't follow. It sounded like the bark that meant danger, but when he stretched it out like that was that more danger? Less? Was there a choice?

"Uh…."

"Don't be silly! I know you can't tell!" The girl actually laughed. "Inse will be livid. Nereal's off with Mother-our Lord and Light Tenebrae held another Hunt a few days ago. And Phylus is… I don't know. Probably at a bar. He's fifteen. That's all he likes to do."

"Do you think I speak with an accent or not? Mother says I'll never get to infiltrate if I keep muzzing the 'guh,' sounds, it's like $-#-#-. Or ##&##&&. You know?"

"Sure." Polla offered. "Hey. Think the Wookiee and I could come inside? Have something to eat?"

"This is the main entrance." The girl's friendly demeanor frosted over almost instantly. "Of course not! You'll have to go around back. But I will tell Cook. Inse!" Her voice altered, to a sing-song, childlike tenor, that reminded Polla of schoolyard insults. "Oh, Inse! You'll never guess what Mother has prepared for us now!"

A voice from the house's interior said something in the knifey kriffing tongue.

"That's rude!" Their host called back. "She didn't mean it," she added, dropping her voice to a half whisper. "Inse can't really make you eat your own entrails. You'd die of shock quite quickly before that happened! We timed it last week!"

Zaalbar growled softly. Polla caught the word for 'go.'

If she'd been less exhausted, doing something rational like running might have made sense. But
instead she just laughed. Hard and loud and slightly hysterically. "Good one, kid! What did you say your name was again?"

"Mydia." The girl had a gorgeous smile, also quite evil, the way her lips pulled over perfectly even teeth. "Mydia Blais."

"Great." Polla extended her hand. "I'm… Seriina Fracking Starr. Your new tutor."

Zaalbar groaned softly.

Mydia looked up at him, as if she'd just noticed he was there. "And the Wookiee? Is he for vivisection practice?"

"Not if he behaves," Polla said, silently willing Zaalbar to stay quiet so their host didn't do anything like kill them or take away their weapons.

XXX

You'd think with all the training Ban had given her students on Korriban in Force persuasion and compulsion, she might have used her own mad skills to get a better conapt on Coru, one with more than two rooms and a lumpy couch that folded out into a bed.

They'd put Mekel on that couch, her and Lammikins. Frack if he could tell what they were doing. Maybe sleeping on the fracking floor in the other room?

Maybe fracking on it. Would Moms get mad, if old Lammikins cheated? Dustil would have laughed. They would have made a joke. Mekel would have-made a joke and Dustil would have laughed-

The outer door chimed an alert, like someone was there. Mekel's hand closed around Klee's saber. It wasn't fair. He'd had fracking Shan's saber before and now-

*Can I even swing this thing without cutting my own dick off?*

Telos would have said something funny about that. Smiled that way he did: with the light in his eyes that made them depthless.

Voices now, from the other room. A third adding to Ban's dulcet tenor and Vrook's gravel tones. The third was soft, hesitant. Female. With the Force, he'd have known, sensed intentions, even from a stranger. Now, his eyes might as well be fracking closed, Mekel felt so blind-

The voices went on and on, talking while he refused to stand, refused to get closer. They rose and fell. Agreement. Disagreement. They might as well have been speaking Both'ui, for all the sense Mekel could make of it. When he closed his eyes, all he felt was the hollow thud of his own heartbeat. How did nulls stand it?

*I can't stand this."

They'd killed the terentatek. And then…? What if Dustil was dead?

*No. He's strong. He's smart. His father's there. But if they think he's not Malak… if Malak is gone-"

*Maybe it's like before, when they were in carbonite. Maybe they just got dropped in another vat of carbonite and they'll be back-

Someone knocked on the door to his room. "Mekel?" Vrook's voice.
"Come in." He sat up, reaching a hand to levitate the saber into it-

Except, of course, nothing happened.

Mekel dropped the hand back onto his lap. They'd given him civs to wear, cheap kit compared to the flash stuff he and Telos had back at their conapt. The cheap fabric itched against his skin.

The door opened. Dear old Dads, Ban, and-weird rando surprise, Lydie Fracking Korr, Zabrak hottie. The one Telos got pissy about every time Mekel brought her up.

"Padawan Korr came by to… to see how you're doing," Dads said. Dads sounded pissed too. Maybe it wasn't just Lydie's hotness. Maybe she annoyed the frack out of people. Never Mekel. But…but other people.

"It took me some time to find you," Lydie murmured. "Your mother says hello, Mekel."

"Yeah? You went looking for me at Moms's? "I'm doing great." Mekel levelled a glare at all three of them. "Can't you all tell? With the Force? I'm fracking fantastic."

"I came to explain," Lydie said quietly. Her eyes were a soft blue, like the sky got when the clouds cleared. She was wearing something white that looked like clouds too, some kind of wrapped, white fur-or feathers. Like a coat. It looked rich. She was lucky she hadn't gotten rolled, dressed like that in the Underground. "We Jedi owe it to you, Mekel. Your sacrifice will not be for-"

"My what?" Harsh laughter erupted in his chest. Vrook had said-something, but it made no sense. "My sacrifice? You're working with fracking Sith now, talking about my sacrifice? Dustil might be dead because of you!"

"If Azen and the other masters are wrong, we'll all be dead soon." The Zabrak sounded unnaturally calm. "I know you weren't a Jedi for long, I-I know you never wanted to be one-"

"That's not true," he interrupted her. "Sometimes, I… it wasn't bad, helping sents. I liked that part."

The Zabrak smiled shyly. She was wearing some kind of golden crown around her horns. One of her hands reached up, as if adjusting it. "Me too. I liked that part too."

"This is madness," Vrook muttered. "What kind of strategy is this, when you're proposing we all just stand there, waiting to… to die?"

"I hope we won't die," Lydie murmured. "If the Fleet fulfill their own bargain, we won't."

"What the frack are you talking about?" Mekel interrupted.

Lydie Korr nodded. "That's what I came to tell you. We need your help—all of you. We need more Force sensitives."

Mekel barely recognized the laughter erupting from his own mouth. It tasted like bile. "That's me out then?"

"You deserve to know." She took a deep breath, and folded her hands. "Master Kavar and Azen… some others… they think they've found a way to destroy the… Sith formerly known as Davad Arkan."

"You know they're working with the Sith still known as Oerin Lin, right?" Mekel glared at her. "I'm not gonna judge, but that asshole took my fracking Force away! If they're still working with
"They're not. They… never were. It's a trap." She had the prettiest smile, prettier than Dustil's, not that it mattered.

"What was I?" Mekel spat. "Bait?"

"We are all bait." She took a deep breath. "Now, it all depends on us all being bait."

Xxx

Commander Sheen Cody was still trying to live down the humiliation of Peragus Station less than a week before, the incident that had left him locked in a 'fresher nearly naked, with no more memory than a red cap of hair, piercing green eyes and Darth Fracking Revan herself's voice, demanding his clothing. How that could have-that had probably never happened. More likely he'd been rolled and drugged for his officer's pips. Would have been at least a demotion, back in the peace time that was supposed to be still happening.

Instead, here he was being set on Rim patrol, ordered to Katarr of all places, to put the Harbinger in a cloaked orbit with one ship's signature in its banks. With one order: when that ship popped into orbit above the planet-or when the pet Jedi they'd been assigned said the Ravager was there (since it was liable to be cloaked too), they were to open full barrel. Both guns.

No survivors. Not even a life pod must be allowed to reach the planet's surface.

Orders were orders. He was one of six ships in orbit. They'd be lucky if they didn't shoot each other….

And more ships arriving daily, smaller ones, ferrying to the planet's surface. Some kind of meeting, the brass said. Some kind of fracked-up meeting.

What if... whatever they think is coming in the Ravager picks a different ship? Shouldn't they screen all ships? Not that anyone ever asked, 'Naked Commando Cody,' as the smart-asses referred to him now.

It was all banthashit, is what it was.

Naked Commando Cody paced back and forth, staring down now at the sleeping planet below.

An alarm rang, sharply, pinging the distance from his quarters to bridge.

Showtime, he thought blackly.

But when he got to bridge, Lieutenant Gdansk shook her head. "Change of orders…." she began.

Xxx

Their ship descended without incident, landing on the platform allotted. At the last moment, Tenebrae had pinged new coordinates, sending them to this fortress of his, mainly notable for its proximity to the Dark Temple.

The message there seemed quite clear to Revan.

I am out of time.
Although the Red Palace was far from any major population centers, Tenebrae had stacked the crowds with his usual tasteless pomp, possessing a third of it himself; and leaving the others cheering just as vacuously. Even the pleasant electroharp ensemble couldn't drown out the miasma of unease that hung over the entire production.

"Have you prepared yourself?" she murmured gently to Seiran.

"I don't see her." The Deralian was using their viewscreen to scan the crowd. There—at the palace steps—were the twin figures of Revan Starfire's husbands, identically dressed in traditional Sith wedding tunics and singlets. The boy was slightly taller than his father. From this distance, Malak's expression was hard to read.

Will he be pleased to see me? It was the thought of a lovelorn adolescent, not the ruler of an empire, and Revan ruthlessly quashed Sheris's sad sentiment back, as her flesh hand smoothed her hair, and adjusted the simple white gown she'd purchased on Peragus Station, as if it were battle armor.

Her saber went steady in her mechanical hand, lit for show rather than substance.

Seiran jumped at the snap-hiss.

"You must be armed as well," she told him. "Sith lose respect for leaders who have to protect themselves from their own servants… HK?"

"Ancient Sith Aphorism: Blood congeals, where circuits endure. Fervent Objection: Master, this meatbag has sworn no oaths of loyalty, and is not fit to have the honor of carrying one of my lovely Aratech dueling blasters, let alone two!"

"Your objection is noted. Give him the guns."

Sulkily, her repaired droid complied.

"Piercing Observation: Master, he is glaring at you right now."

"Thank you for helping me fix HK," Revan murmured, meeting Seiran Wen's eyes directly. She smiled slightly to show the appreciation.

"It was…." The man seemed at a loss about what to do with the blasters. Of course, he had no holsters.

"You're supposed to just hold them," she told him. "But don't shoot anything unless I say. You-do you know how?"

"My wife's the marksman. But, yeah." He stepped back awkwardly. "Guess she's probably kept inside or something. I'd know if she was dead."

So you keep saying. Revan didn't have the heart to tell the man that wasn't always true. Had Sheris known when Beya died? She'd still been under sedation from the surgery that repaired her face, and it wasn't until Vrook Lamar told her—

Revan shivered, as the memory of her uncle being kind to Sheris superimposed over her own recollections of the man. It means nothing. Merely an example. Not that I'm losing my mind.

The dreams had been worse of late. Scores of dead. Most were nameless—to her, but quite insistent they had names once. Names, families, worlds.
Go haunt the Fragment, she thought bitterly. These are my amends. I'll be among you soon enough.

Or would she? Tenebrae had never been quite clear. And the Kashyyyk installation, when cornered, had retreated to its chatter about damaged memory banks and corrupted files.

*Tenebrae calls it 'unification.' If he isn't lying, I should retain some semblance of autonomy in whatever form I-

HK had excused himself and extracted his large flamethrower from the ship's stores. That had been another Peragus purchase-rash, perhaps, but Revan had wanted a vivid display.

*And if I hadn't been so busy shopping on Peragus, perhaps Seiran would have had less time to betray me. But then I would never know that Malachor was adjusting and the Fragment was still alive-*

Revan glanced at the viewscreen again. The crowd-those not possessed-were as restless as a crowd of loyal Sith could be: a few discreetly reading comms, lips moving in whispers, most standing still as possible to avoid challenge, a few boastful fools glaring and gloating at each other like wompas in season-

"Shouldn't we… go?" Seiran stood awkwardly, like the dress uniform she'd taken from that Fleet commander on shore leave on Peragus was too small for his shoulders. Seiran been upset about that too, but it wasn't like she'd killed the man-

Xxx

"You know, you're a dead ringer for….

"Revan Starfire?" The oddity was, she recognized him. Commander Sheen Cody, he'd served in Karath's fleet before Malachor. "Yes. I am assigned here to film a documentary production about her life. This is my holo-cameraman-*

"I bet he's your holo-cameraman." Commander Cody seemed inebriated. "Damn. Cept for the hair, you look just like her." His eyes were faded blue and slightly bloodshot. "Holomask, right?"

"Surgery." She tried to remember the name of his command, although of course it would have changed. "Excuse me.*

"How much?" His hand latched onto her arm with a familiarity that was uninvited. "I always wanted to be in pictures. How much? I could… I could pay. Always wanted. Her." He rubbed his eyes. One was twitching.

"Listen, buddy. I think you should move along." Seiran. Coming to her rescue? Laughable effort.

Revan sidestepped his attempts to be her protector, and narrowed her gaze on the commander, bringing the focus of the Force down to a single point.

"Take off your clothes," she commanded him. "Now."

The faded eyes dulled. "I'm going to take off my clothes," the commander repeated. "Now."

Xxx

"Now you have a dress uniform," she told the pilot, tucking the bundle of clothes under her own
arm as they hurried through the halls of the station. "Perhaps this was fortuitous, your sabotage of our ship. We did need supplies."

"You... you knew I sabotaged the ship?" His fear was slightly intoxicating, if Revan allowed herself to admit it.

I do now.

"We are allies," she snapped, shorting out another visible camera with a twist of her hand. "Try and keep that in mind."

Xxx

"Revan. Shouldn't we... go?" Seiran's hand brushed her shoulder. He had grown bolder and more familiar indeed, with each day that she didn't kill him.

"Not yet." Revan nodded at the viewscreen. "It weakens Tenebrae, extending to possess so many for so long. We need him weak. Easy to influence. This ruse only needs to hold for a brief time-"

So brief. Her traitorous eyes went to Malak again, there on the dais.

"Right. So you go off with him and then-I get Polla. But where is she?"

"If he'd had her executed her head would be on display." She pointed with her lightsaber to the castle's crenelated balustrades. "There. Like those. She's not there."

The Deralian peered in suspiciously, checking.

Of course, the man took her word for nothing.

Xxx

"Commander Cody," Admiral Rew Ekkumi's voice was professional, not like Sheen had expected her to go with the sobriquet everyone else thought was so hilarious. "You're in orbit around Katarr. Already."

"It wasn't very far from our last position," he said, which she should know. Which she did know. Fleet command wasn't usually one for polite intros. "What do you need, Admiral?"

"There's been a... sighting," she said slowly. "We need a commander with prudence to check on it."

"I was told... uh-I was told to hold position around Katarr. There's a potential Sith threat."

"Yes," murmured Admiral Ekkumi. She hadn't been Admiral for long. Even if Sheen didn't know that as a fact, he could tell by the way she crossed her arms, the way she pointed the cams from her bridge, channeling to his. Like she was three meters tall and a goddess. Like her command came from on fracking high. "And we are aware of that. But there's another concern. Near Sullust. Reports of stolen shuttles, some trace signatures. We need you to investigate."

"What am I looking for?"

Admiral Rew Ekkumi nodded, her Telosian vowels hardening into good Republic durasteel. "You're looking for the Aleema," she said. "The Aleema... or any other Mandalorian indicators in this sector."
"Mandalorian indicators." Flashback to the wars, that was, knowing what that meant. "You're saying… the Mandalorians are… back? With Revan's flagship?"

Rew Ekkumi nodded slowly. "I'm saying it is a possibility."

"What about… what about Katarr?" He could see the planet through the viewscreen now-small and sleeping. The pet Jedi they'd been assigned (this one even younger than General Surik had been, his last commander-the woman that some called the last Jedi commander), turned his head. They were at a distance, but Cody was pretty sure the kid could hear them, even from all the way across the bridge.

"Leave it." She said. Something hard in her voice. Final. "Orders have changed."

XXX

"Now," Revan said to Seiran, and pressed the ship's controls with the Force to lower the ramp. "Before they start Kidark's Second Symphony. Follow."

"Happy Compliance," HK sighed. "Master, I have replayed scenarios of our triumphant return to this galaxy many times."

"Okay," Seiran added, with much less enthusiasm.

"HK, I will need you to take a defensive position. Activate your shields, if we are attacked first. Under no circumstances should you initiate combat protocols-without provocation. Protect Seiran first-he is your primary defensive target."

"Objection: Master, I am surely capable of more precision targeting than this Deralian meatbag."

"Please make him stop calling me that!"

"Childish Taunt: Meatbag, meatbag, squishy squashy meatbag. Meatbag, meatbag, shoot them up. Yum." Since his restoration, HK seemed to even more homicidally gleeful than ever.

"Silence. Both of you." Air wafted in from the open ramp, familiar as memory. Rotting. Home, she thought. A strange thought for Sheris, who had never had one, and even stranger for Revan herself-being so far from her heart.

At least Malak is here. Here, at the end of all things, she could admit that weakness-at least to her own mind. It would be good to see Malak again. It was somehow fitting that the two of them would make an end together-

Sheris's weak heart was in her throat as the crowd burst into polite and synchronized applause.

They made it four meters onto red-carpeted Sith soil before one of Tenebrae's Hands peeled away from the bystanders, and approached, taking her arm with his own. The Hand's nails were long, curling under, and he was painted like a whore-a not-subtle insult, but Revan merely smiled and kissed his rouged cheek. "Vitiate," she murmured. "Or do you prefer Tenebrae? Is this one new?"

"I almost would ask you the same," the Hand replied. Fingernails rasped across her skin and she did not flinch. "Have you had some sort of rejuvenation treatment?"

"It is an important occasion," she tossed her head, so the topknot bounced. The Fragment did that sometimes. "I trust you will grant me time alone with my husbands?"
"Of course." The Voice had thick lips, and when he smiled, she saw his teeth had been gilded and jeweled, his tongue pierced with some kind of green metal. "Although… the point hardly needs saying, Revan… I expect no tricks."

"We are done with games, you and I." She meant it, even as her traitorous eyes scanned the crowd, noting (as she had earlier while still in the ship), the locations of her former allies.

Only Finiris had the courage to meet her eyes, but she noted the puzzled frown on his face.

*I may be able to distract Tenebrae for a time, but my allies… they expect to feel her power. That they cannot, confuses them. I must not let it confuse them for long.*

"Your former duplicate came masked," Tenebrae murmured. "I think they're pleased to gaze upon your true visage."

"My orders." Revan shrugged. "Where is the girl now?"

"Dead." He shrugged carelessly. "I assume."

Behind them, Seiran didn't react, since he didn't speak Ancient Sith.

"A shame," Revan said, not reacting either. "I thought you wanted to keep her."

"Oh, I did… but she escaped into the forest. We had a hunt, of course; but nothing was found."

*Which is different than dead.* It made no difference, Revan reminded herself; just as it made no difference that her pulse quickened slightly as she approached Malak in his too-young body, traitorous Sheris causing her eyes to prickle disturbingly, her respiration to increase.

"*Carth,*" she said as they approached, because *he* was the point of betrayal, the uncertainty. Because by speaking first, she would have the advantage. "It's been so long." She glanced up at Tenebrae, who still held her flesh arm in a too tight grasp. Her fingers tightened on the saber in the mechanical hand, wishing she could be rash and impulsive like the Fragment and drag it through the Voice's guts.

"Oh," the Voice said, releasing her. "By all means, go to him!"

Xxx

"It's not *her,*" Carth muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Dustil, as the woman who was supposed to be his wife approached. Was it? Was he going insane? She looked… younger, as if taking back her memories had made her younger. How was that possible? "I told you, it's not her… but it's really-that's not-that's not *her.*"

Carth's eyes narrowed to focus on her lit saber. The hand holding it glinted, like something made of metal. Gold.

*When did she lose her hand?*

Relief warred with fury in his gut. *It's not just not her mind. It's… not her body?"How can it not be.*"

"Oh." Dustil was quiet and hollow-eyed, ever since his bondmate's death. Had Revan felt Bastila's as much? She had been unconscious for weeks—was that why? Going by that standard, Carth thought his son was holding up pretty damn well, especially if they'd been as close as Dustil said.
"Right. Yeah, that's... the other one."

"What?" Carth felt like a fool, not daring to turn his head. It was fortunate they'd been placed so close together-less fortunate they were shackled to this fracking ground.

"She's got the memories. She used to be some bint called Sheris." Dustil sounded exhausted. "Didn't I tell you? Some fracking holocron memories. Malak... was... kind of into it."

"Kind of into it?" Carth would not raise his voice, or change his expression. "And no. No you did not tell me. What does that mean, son?"

"I think it means this Revan's not into you, Dad." A flash of the old Dustil there-but not the boy who'd gotten A's in astrophysics, or wanted to take Academy exams. This was the sullen, mocking cretin he'd met on Korriban, back again, like a bad dream. Carth had been trying-trying to get through to his son. But the first flush of grief had hardened into this instead. Hardened into this sullen, silent hulk beside him. They'd barely spoken in the last day. All of Carth's attempts to understand, to make sense had been met with sullen silence-or worse-that blank stare, like they weren't even in the same room.

Wasn't it good that Malak was finally gone-burning in hell, or spun to spacedust or whatever happened to Sith Lords for eternity? It should be good. It was good. But the cost-

Never thought I'd see the day when I wanted to see Mister Sith Congeniality again, but if Mekel being alive would put a smile on Dustil's face-I'd fracking register them for tea patterns myself.

"I don't understand." In the now, Carth gritted his teeth. "My wife... she took back Revan's memories. From the holocron, I knew about that, but-"

"No." His son's voice was mocking. "Your wife didn't. She did. That's a different body. That's not her. I don't know, it was all fracked."

And you're just telling me now? "What do we do?" Panic wouldn't help, but Carth couldn't help but panic. "If it's not her, where the frack is she? Where's my real wife?"

It wasn't hope, he reminded himself. It was concern. Not just for us, but for the galaxy. Is the real Revan running loose someplace?

Is she okay? His fingernails dug uselessly into his palms. His arms jerked the chains holding them.

"I dunno." His son shrugged, talking through gritted teeth. "Malak didn't think Sheris would kill her, but who the frack knows?"

Was it wrong, that the first emotion Carth felt was relief?

Yes. Yes it was wrong. Very wrong. For all Carth knew, Revan was as much an innocent in this fracked plan as Polla Organa herself.

"It's still over, right?" his son muttered. "Even if this isn't her? Please tell me this doesn't mean we're going to have to go find the real one now. You said it was over, Dad. You promised."

No time for an answer, even if Carth had one. The woman and Tenebrae's puppet were upon them. The woman's artificial arm was still extended, with the lit saber blazing yellow in her hand. Her expression was cool, almost smug, and her lips curved in a smile as her gaze locked with his.

"Carth," the woman who wasn't his wife said. "It's been so long."
"It is genuine?" Oerin wasn't entirely sure he still cared. But they'd gone to Coruscant for a map, and a map they now had. "Is this a map into Sith space?"

"It appears to be," their Deralian lackey whispered. He was so much less amusing than Colonel Tobin, the Onderonite lackey and cousin to Davad who'd had the misfortune of being somewhat Force-sensitive-and thus, now deceased. The main thing Jasp Organa seemed to have going for him was a remarkable tenacity. "This is the map from the holochip you provided. The one you said that the Jedi."

"Just tell me the jump points."

Oerin hoped there were enough Force sensitives on this hyperspace trail to keep Nihilus fed. And… perhaps, in their aftermath, some viable worlds suited for Mandalorian expansion.

Really, if Mother had simply kept her designs focused upon Mandalorian expansion, so much other tragedy would have been averted.


"Finally, Dromund Kaas." Oerin smiled. "The Sith capital. If we make it that far, good man, do remind me to buy you a drink. Or Force compel you the ownership of your own small city?"

The man's lips whitened. "However… the master prefers," he hissed. Entirely too much free will in that voice, but Oerin didn't really care. It was touching, how sentients fought for themselves, and more touching, perhaps, for how little it mattered in the end.

"Begin the jumps," he commanded, already turning his head towards the viewport where poor Nihilus stood in a cloud of shadow. His masked face reflected in the glass. "We're going now!" he called out. "I've… I set the last shipment down in the second cargo bay, if you're hungry before our first stop. Ord Mantell isn't much, but Katarr seems very promising. It's a Miralukan colony. They'll all a little Force sensitive. You should find plenty to eat there!"

Nihilus's head turned. Food, he thought.

Carth," Revan said. "It's been so long." The saber in her gold metal hand switched off. She slipped it into a pocket on her dress. Belatedly, Carth noticed her escort, the HK and a man in a commander's uniform. The incongruity of that took a second to register, but when he saw the man's expression, he knew exactly who he was.

I lost your wife, Seiran Wen. Where the hell is mine?

Carth's eyes locked on the woman again. Her face didn't change expression, not even with the red-eyed goon slobbering in her ear. Her green eyes stared back into his. Red-eyed goon said something, and then released her.

She walked up the stairs with achingly familiar grace. She was wearing white. Revan never did. The thin white gown made her skin flushed by comparison, heightened the bright cap of her hair.

"Beautiful," he muttered. Like acid in his throat.
The real Revan would have made a face, maybe even a joke or an objection; but this too-polished woman just nodded her head, stepping forward, until she was close enough that he could feel the weight of her, brush of her dress's fabric against his bare chest.

"We have a mutual friend," she murmured, almost too soft for him to catch. He bent his head forward, and perhaps that was by design, because she rested her lips briefly against his, dry as ashes.

Carth turned his head, lips brushing past her cheek to the delicate shell of her ear. Her hair... it was wrong that it smelled the same. As if they used the same wash, the same cosmet. "She'd better be alive," he hissed in her ear. His arms tightened around her, like he'd hugged Polla Organa before, man on parade, another fracking kath and hessi show for the crazy Sith.

"She's with the boy. Safe. I promise." Her pale hand reached up between them and smoothed the hair away from his face, but her head was already turning towards his son.

"Malak…?" her voice trailed off.


"Malak," she repeated.

Carth could feel it, the moment when every muscle in her body tensed all at once. The sharp exhale. Maybe the Force told her Darth Malak was gone. Maybe it was just Dustil's expression.

"Surprise," Carth whispered bitterly in her ear.

The chains on his ankles clanked.

Xxx

"Malak," Revan repeated, or Sheris repeated. She'd pulled herself away from Dad and approached Dustil, her face suddenly eerily blank.

"Sure," Dustil repeated. Despite the threats earlier, the Sith hadn't bothered with any Force restraints this time, maybe because the Emperor trusted Malak, maybe because they assumed he'd stick around for her. Or maybe because Sith were the same the galaxy over, and never minded a spot of rando violence in the middle of a fracking parade. (They'd certainly had some fun times on Dreshdae during the kriffing parades.)

"Well!" broke in a bright voice behind them. "What a happy reunion!" The chains, (ones that Dustil could have broken himself, if it had been worth it) around his feet broke free, and when he looked, he saw his father's had as well. A flock of Emperor lackeys quickly surrounded them, hustling them inside. Dustil found himself on Revan's left, while his father was on her right.

"Malak," she repeated, but her voice was dulled now. Careless. Her head turned back to the red-eyed glowing escort they had somehow acquired. "I need time alone with my husbands," she muttered. "Now."

"Of course," burbled a voice. It took Dustil a second to notice it was coming from Dad. That enraged him as much as it ever had, and-for a sec-because she was still standing in his way-he saw a similar expression cross this fake Revan's face.

She hates him too. This might be all her fracking fault, her fault Mekk's dead, but she hates Tenebrae too.
For a second, he almost... almost felt sorry for her.

"My droid and my guardsman will accompany us," she continued, looking at Dad now. Dad with the glowing eyes.

"All the way to our chambers?" The way the Emperor talked with Dad's voice was wrong. The bruises Dustil had caused had been covered by cosmet that was slightly darker than Dad's skin. It looked fake.

"When?" Revan demanded. Just one word. Flat. "When are we... scheduled to go to your... tomb?"

"Our tomb," the man corrected her. "I thought we would have a month of ceremonial attachments first. The nobles like that sort of thing. Perhaps a few hunts-did your consort tell you he took down a terentatek, solo?"

_Not solo. It was Mekk and Malak._ Dustil had barely even been there. He'd been distracted, if he hadn't-if they all hadn't been distracted, maybe Mekel would still be alive. Maybe-

_Maybe this fracking scene would be just as fracked._

"A month is too long." Her voice was expressionless. Like she didn't give a frack about any of them.

"We need to organize the procession!" They continued arguing, switching back and forth between Ancient Sith and Standard. Dustil could follow it, if he gave a frack, but poor Dad wouldn't be able to-if he wasn't possessed. Probably just as well, since Dad would probably object to the bloodletting on the sacrificial altars Tenebrae was bringing up now. Dustil didn't care himself if the Sith wanted to kill one hundred Sith kids for ceremonial reasons, but Dad probably-

"No bloodletting," Revan snapped, like she gave a frack. Probably an act, trying to make Dustil think she wasn't evil. _"No ceremony, Tenebrae. Just this body of mine... and yours. Is this the one you've chosen?"_ It was an awkward angle to see, but Dustil thought she reached her hand up and touched his father's cheek. _"This one. Not another?"

"Would you prefer another?" The fracking Emperor almost sounded insecure. Like Mekk, when he was playing helpless to get some girl to make out with him. _Some girl or me. You were such an asshole sometimes, Mekk._ It still hurt. It probably always would.

"I sense..." something had surprised her. "Your connection here. It's... flawed."

"The vessel severed the link while it was still being established. Normally, Revan, I would have culled him immediately, but for your request." A long pause. _"Don't you remember? We spoke at length through the communication device installed upon your droid-"

"Ah." Her head turned slightly, back towards HK. "As you say, thank you for... preserving him for me."

"No thanks for Malak? You know, he killed Master Klee!"

"Good." She turned towards Dustil. _"Klee had outlived his usefulness. These quarters you spoke of."_

"Here." She must have known it, maybe, Dustil thought. Because they stopped in front of the double doors their rooms were in, doors sliding open.
"I hope you like-" the glow faded suddenly. Dad's body slumped. Dustil darted forward to catch it, but Revan or whoever she was had beat him to it, her arm slung under Dads shoulders like he was a drunk on a bender.

"Wha-" Dad blinked. "Poll-Polla, you-

"Where?" a voice cut in sharply from behind them. That man that had come with Revan. The one wearing Republic dress whites. "Polla? Where is she? Where the hell is my wife?"

"We don't know." Takan answered, peering cautiously through the door. "Lord Revan. It's a true honor." Looked like the boy was actually going to kneel. Zepth too.

Dustil pushed past them, like he really was Malak. Like he really didn't give a frack, because he really didn't.

"Finally," Mission warbled, rolling past him, swiveling her dome towards Revan. "It took you long enough, Polla-Revan!" Dustil was already staring out the window when he heard her circuits whine with surprise as she figured it out too. "* #* * *," the droid with Mission's memories added, in impeccable Ancient Sith. "Zepto! Close the door. You and Tak-go lock yourselves in the closet in case he comes back. The perv."

"I don't…" the boy sounded surprised. "But this is the plan. Lord Revan has come to save us all."

"Lord Revan has come to try,"

"The one who's a better Polla-Revan than you'll ever be," Mission made her voder hiss, switching to Ryl. "Get the door."

"Resigned Statement: I am a protocol assassin droid of refined programming, not a doorset." Dustil had no idea how one of Revan's HK droids had ended up here with the Sheris-Revan bint, but the thing was standing right by the open door and not closing it.

With an exasperated sigh, he went to close it himself-only to be beat to the chase by dear old Dad.

"We clear, Mission?" Dad asked.

"Yeah. Soon as they leave." Mission-he kept reminding himself it wasn't her, but sometimes his traitorous brain forgot-extended an appendage and waved it towards the other room. "Go on, Takky, Zeff. Lock yourselves away. I'll give you the need to know later."

"Aye, aye," Zepth said.

When the frack had those three gotten so chummy? Dustil glared at the Zabrak's retreating backs. When the door slid closed, the woman looked at them both and then stepped cautiously back. Dustil would have been one hell of a crap Sith not to have noticed she'd swapped the saber to her flesh hand, or the way the fingers on the metal one were now poised-

Her assassin droid sighed. "Observation: Master, these sentients may not be allies. Requesting permission to switch primary objective from defense of Seiran Wen to aggressive defense of your own person? Reminder: In our travels, I was able to draft personality dossiers on all of the Fragment's companions. This Captain Carth Onasi is more dangerous than his moderate physical conditioning and imperfect aim suggests."

"Thanks, HK." Dad snorted. "You. I think you should get out too. Go with the kids."
"Smug Refusal: The Fragment's original programming forced me to take commands from a meatbag like you, but it has been overridden by my true master. I don't have to do what you say, Captain Meatbag. Not anymore."

"You have your droid," the woman murmured. "And I have mine." Her metal hand extended, and she knelt slightly, as if she was peering at Mission. "Yours is… more than an astromech."

"Empirical Observation: Not much more, Master. Despite being programmed with the Rakatan mainframe's thirty thousand years of sentient observation, this Tee Three unit is remarkably small-minded. Recommendation: Transference of its essential data recordings to my central memory core. I will make much better use of them."

"Denied, HK. For now." She knelt before Mission, extending a hand like the droid was some kind of pet kath. "The Fragment told me about you," she said. Her voice was creepy and soft. "A little. Obviously, not enough. You are… a remarkable being."

"Warning: Master, do not attempt to make friends with it. It is hostile and jejune. Its interests cannot be verified-"

"HK. Cease." The woman's artificial hand raised, and the lights on her assassin droid winked out. She followed that up with a string of nonsense words that caused the droid's chassis to whir briefly, before its triangular head slumped forward.

"It's in sleep mode," she murmured in Basic, before swapping back to the other language, launching a barrage syllables that sounded like questions at Mission.


"It's okay," the woman soothed. "I didn't mean to… Eladiaj. Jersiphet. Millikosh. Rittan?"

"Ficka." Mission snapped. "Where is she? You don't have override privileges on me either!"

"She's safe. Malachor is also safe." The woman stood up, glancing at her own escort, the guy in dress whites. "Seiran will confirm it. But it's not safe for anyone to mention where she-"

"Deralia," Seiran interrupted. "The Bitch left them on Deralia. Where the hell is my wife?"

"Bitch?" The woman didn't look offended only a little surprised. "Really, Seiran?"

"We don't know," Dad muttered. "She and Zaalbar-they got away. In the forest-"

"Polla Organa may be dead." The woman-frack if Dustil was gonna call her anything but that-glanced between her lackey and Dad like she was comparison shopping. "You all just let her go?"

"We escaped," Dustil snapped. "Your fracking husband thought they had a better chance of not biting it without us. We turned back so they could get away."

"We?" She scoffed. "You all escaped and then returned?"

"I-I mean me," Dustil said. "Just me. Dad was… Dad was stuck here. With the Zabraks. Mission and I turned back."

"She's not dead," the smuggler's husband said stubbornly. He'd taken off the dress helmet. Under it, his hair was cut in that same stupid Deralian style that Polla Organa had too, that this Revan bint had now. "I'd know,"
"Hrm." The woman paced to the window, peering out. Not much of a view: less than a meter from the ferraglass was a duracrete brick wall. "Can you sense her now?"

"Just… I don't know." The man rubbed his temples. "This planet is… wrong."

"Extremely," she muttered. Her head turned sharply, those green eyes focusing on Dustil again. "What happened to Malak?"

"He became one with the fracking Force. I-I felt it. Sunlight. Trees. Someone was calling him. And then… he-he left."

"He just… left?" The woman sounded hurt. Poor ickle Revan's feelings are hurt. Aww. Mekk would have laughed. Mekk would have made a joke. If only Mekk was fracking here-

"There was a Force bond." He really didn't feel like going into it.

A long silence, as she stared at him, obviously waiting for more. "And?"

"And my son's… bondmate died. Somehow that freed Malak." Dad broke in, riding in to save the day, like he never had when it still fracking mattered. "They had a Force bond. Malak was trapped between-"

"I know how Bezel bonds work, probably more than you do." Her voice was flat. "Your son is still alive. That shouldn't be possible."

"Thanks," Dustil snapped. "That's rich coming from a fracking holocron recording of a dead woman's life-"

The muscles in his jaw froze suddenly, and there was a tell-tale pressure on his throat.

Asshole! Anger gave him strength, and he shattered her grip easily, feeling the Force splinter and burn where she'd held it.

The woman took a step backwards, as if startled, even if the expression on her face didn't change. "You're strong," she murmured. "Even without Malak and Mekel Jin."

"You're not," he sneered. It felt good. For a second, Dustil allowed himself to imagine the lightning flashing through her, his saber, running through her, her body, burning from the inside out-

"Careful." She'd taken two steps back, circling him now in a way that reminded him weirdly of meeting the real thing on Korriban. Those small side steps. Like some kind of combat training he'd never learned. "This world… it can amplify our worst thoughts. There's strength, but you wouldn't like the cost."

"I've paid my share," he snapped.

"I can get him out too," she told his father, like Dustil had suddenly gone invisible. "Him and Seiran both."

"Right." Dad's voice was flat. He was staring at her and Dustil couldn't read the expression at all. Hate? Fear? Something beyond that. "Tenebrae… when it was me and Polla, he always expected we'd… spend some time alone. If we're alone, he won't interrupt. In a group, he-he thinks it's fair game."

"What do you mean, time alone?" The Deralian Seiran interrupted. "You and Polla spent a lot of
"Enough for me to know you're one hell of a guy," Dad told him. "One hell of a lucky guy. You gonna be jealous if I talk to her too?"

"No. Knock yourself out."

"Not literally," the Tee-Mission added.

"Come on." Dad walked over to the other door, the one that led to their bedroom. "It's in here, Revan."

She looked at Dustil again and then back at him. "As you like."

The door slid shut behind them.

"Frack," Seiran muttered. "All this fracking way-" he had that look. Dustil knew that look. It had been haunting him in the mirror for two days.

"Yeah," he muttered, walking to the fridger for a Nutra drink. "Life fracking sucks, right?"

The interior of the palanquin was sweltering and crowded. Inse was wearing some kind of scent that kept making Polla sneeze. Their view—a half-meter-wide rectangle of lace netting set in the lacquered fabric of the palanquin wall, showed only a slice of stage and sky. For most of the hours they'd been here, that view had been empty, with only the roar of the crowd and the progress of the infernal electro-harp music to help Polla gage the time—or when the real Revan fracking Starfire was going to show.

"Oh, my," Mydia murmured, elbowing Polla with the Force hard enough to knock her into the other Blais sister. "Dibs."

"Don't be absurd, you're a mere child." Inse Blais was maybe a year or so older than her sister, but it seemed like decades, if scary Sith was some kind of measurement. "Why would Lord Malak be interested in a mere child when he has Lord Revan? Not to mention any other grown consort he desires at his disposal?"

"Did you see the way he looked at her?" Mydia did the elbow-down-the-lane thing again. This time Inse dodged it. Polla kept her hood up and her damned mouth shut. She'd already almost lost one toe to these psychotic Sith siblings—popping off body parts was like some kind of sport for Mydia, apparently. At least it didn't hurt—even if the nail of her big toe had fallen completely off. "I think I have a chance."

"Best rush," her sister mocked. "I mean, scurry. Scarper?"

"You mean hurry," Polla whispered. This was her, Galactic Standard translator to the stars—or at least the noble house of Blais.

"Hurry," Inse repeated. She turned her head, fine, straight brows drawing together in a frown as she stared at Polla. "Which one is your husband?"

That chill again. 

"I never told you about my husband. I didn't tell any of you—"

"Her face!" Mydia giggled. "Told you to watch out for Inse, Tutor Starr. She's tricksy. But it's all
mind stuff. Illusions. She can't levitate for shit."

"Why do the grunt work, when I don't need to?" Inse sounded careless, but Polla was sitting close enough to feel the other woman's muscles tighten. Too close. The bench of their palanquin was too crowded with three. Technically, Polla shouldn't be here at all, except Mydia had been kind enough to let her come-

*Kind. Two days of life on a Sith planet and that word has a whole new fracking meaning.*

"I want to know about the husband," Mydia continued. There was a pout on her full, pouty lips now. "Seriina has a husband?"

"He travels with Revan," Polla snapped. "Frack with him, and she'll kick your ass, like I said."

"So he's the man in the white garments. Kick your ass," Inse mused. "Is that literal...?"

Polla peered through the gap in the cloth surrounding their carried bench. She could see the back of one of the Wookiees carrying their palanquin (not Zaal, he was on the opposite side), a gap of sky, and the stage about twenty meters away, where Seiran stood, stiff and ridiculous in what looked like a Republic officer's uniform. Small comfort it didn't look like he'd fallen in love with the red-headed memory-stealing schutta he was standing _with_, if anything, he just looked pissed off.

Polla knew the feeling. All too fracking well. And then, as she watched, Sei followed the red-headed schutta and the rest of them off the stage.

"There they go," Mydia sighed. "I'm going to ask him to dance with me at the ball tonight."


"Literal," Polla muttered. "All our threats are real. Trust me."

"Oh, I do." Inse sounded amused. Mydia might have a staff missing fingers, but Inse was the one that had kept Polla awake for two nights running now, shaking with fear. Inse was the one who _said_ she was Revan's agent. Polla had no way of knowing if that was true-or not. "I told you I'd get you that meet with Revan, didn't I?"

"Soon," Polla snapped, with more bravado than she felt. "You promised soon."

"And I meant it." The Sith's smile was too sharp. "Seriina Starr."

Xxx

Carth made himself look at her. The features were the same, but the faint lines around her eyes, the scars from the dark side, were gone. One of her hands was metal. The lack of expression on her face was familiar-like Revan, when she'd come back from that blasted temple. Except this woman's left eye kept twitching, like a nervous tic, like a crack in the facade.

It took Carth a while to realize that she was checking him out too, her green eyes slightly narrowed as if she were looking for weaknesses.

It was a relief, he kept thinking, to know that she wasn't the woman he'd loved. She never had been. Or-or it could have been a relief, if he believed one fracking thing she'd said about his real wife, Korrie, and Deralia.

"They're safe," she repeated. "Calm yourself. The Fragment and Malachor are safe. I didn't realize
trust wasn't your strong suit."

"I don't trust Sith, sister." He was armed. She was too. Carth wondered if he had a shot, if he
should take a shot. If ending it here and now with her would end anything at all.

"How long has… has Malak been gone?" Her voice was more emotional than he expected.
Faltering. Quiet. Had to be a lie.

"A few days." He turned to glare at the window instead of her. It faced a brick wall, as if this time,
Tenebrae was taking no chances, caging them in. "The other boy, the one who died."

"My cousin," she said. "Mekel Jin. I thought of his father as my father once. When I was younger. I
regret we never had the chance to speak."

"He was… he meant a lot to Dustil."

"Bezel-bonded, he would have to." She sounded like she was already thinking of something else. "I
can save your son, Captain Onasi."

He got it. Oh, did Carth get it. He just couldn't figure out which part of the fracking trap this was.

"You can save my son, Polla Organa, Seiran Wen."

"The Wookiee," she added. "Do you know if he received the vaccine?"

"I don't know anything about your damned vaccine." But he got the rest of it. "You've got a lot of
nerve coming in here, acting like her when you're not. You'll save them, but not me. Not the
Zabrak kids. And Mission? You act like she's yours already!"

"Takan and Zepth." To her credit, he'd only told her their names once. "You've all been
compromised. I'm sorry. It is possible—after… after I regain control, if I do—if this works—"

"If what works?" He folded his arms, looking at her lying face. "You owe us that. Tell us what
you're trying to do."

"Join the Sith Emperor. Mind to mind. Not dissimilar to a Bezel bond, in fact. I will… become
what he is." She was twisting a strand of hair in her fingers. "In this condition, I will be as he is.
Immortal. No longer… no longer tied to this body." She glanced down at her hands, opening and
closing the real one.

Carth laughed. "Are you kriiffsing insane? You think I'm going to let that happen? You think we're
gonna let you have that kind of power?"

"I'm not… the woman I was." Her eyes met his directly. "In my attempts to resist him before, I
became precisely the monster who should never have that kind of power. But now, I—I've changed.
Your wife… she helped me change."

"It's not some fracking magic trick." His voice felt dark and low. "You don't just… just change. It's
not like, one minute you're a Dark Lord and the next you're saving the galaxy."

"Isn't it?" Was that humor in her expression? Her mouth tilted up, but her eyes were still cold,
staring at him with a near-clinical detachment. "It was for her. And I see no other option. Better
me, in this weak body, my powers reduced, than her. It's her he wants, Captain Onasi. Your wife's
power… it called to him across the galaxy. If he takes me instead, he is diminished. The Sith are
weakened. If he takes her…"
"You seem awfully sure of yourself." Like Revan. Like my wife.

"I'm not." She took a deep breath. "But I am certain that if I am wrong, I will do no further harm."

"And if it doesn't work? Then what?"

"I told Seiran." Her fingers flexed again, she was staring at them as if she'd never seen them before. Or maybe just trying to avoid Carth's gaze. "And I left a message for the Fragment."

"Tell me," he muttered. "You owe me. For Telos. For... all of this."

Her head nodded slowly. She took a deep breath. "If it doesn't work, the Republic will need to destroy this world, and every other inhabited world in Sith space. All... everyone infected with Tenebrae's Kiss. Even those where it is only suspect. Vaccinate the rest. Stay vigilant. In a few generations, perhaps the threat will cease."

He coughed. "That's... that's genocide."

She finally looked up at him. "Yes, Captain Onasi, it is."
Their voices filtered through the curtained wall of her sleeping area. The ship wasn't very large to begin with, and as youngest, they'd given her the least of the cots, the one closest to the engines.

"Is she awake?" Rien was asking. "Our guest?"

"You should check." Diamin, probably.

"No, you go." Dialis. The two of them sounded alike.

"The old woman frightens me." Arien was the only one of her sisters brave enough to admit her fear.

"Make her go."

"It's really her job."

"Is it true?"

"Draw your own conclusions—Mother insisted she come with us to fetch the old scow."

"But they don't even look alike. And the old woman is so… old."

"And blind," Drien giggled. "I had to help her up the stairs."

"Make Bri go check on her." Lileen was the leader. The first decanted. She liked to pretend she was in charge.

There was a long pause. Long enough for Brianna to realize they all knew she was awake—and perhaps this entire drama had been constructed for her benefit.

"I will go," Brianna said, finally opening the curtain of her chamber when the flock of them showed no sign of leaving. "Are we in orbit already?"

"We came out of hyperspace when you were asleep," Drien told her.

"Just like Bri to sleep through the fun spot," Lileen murmured. "Before docking, the TSF demanded to see our clearances."

"They were in order, of course," Drien added. "But we need to eliminate the extra passenger before inspection."

"You will take an escape pod with her," Lileen commanded. "Someone needs to provide escort. She seems frail enough to get lost on the ice."

"You need to go now," Drien added. "We're nearly in range.'
"Of course." Brianna had barely seen their passenger since they had picked her up. Not that she was avoiding contact… she had just not sought the woman out.

Could it truly be true? Her sisters seemed convinced.

Brianna wore the face of her mother, but this woman's face was scarred and blinded, wrinkled and mottled and old. Was it Brianna's face? How could she tell? They had been trained not to care about petty vanity; and yet, Brianna had noted, every one of her sisters was beautiful, cold, and identical: with the same icy cast of face as their master, the woman who had rescued them all from the creche on Eshan during the war in the first place.

For a long time, Brianna had thought her mother had died.

She left her sisters to their gossip and approached the small chamber their passenger had inhabited now for a week, ever since they picked her up on Mistress Atris's orders, from the desert spaceport of a half-abandoned Mandalorian moon. The spaceport had been entirely empty, save for a snub that looked like it had been through at least one war.

If the woman had traveled any distance in that ship, she was braver than Brianna thought she would ever be herself.

She was debating whether or not to knock when the door to the woman's room slid open.

"Excuse me..." How should one address a woman who might have abandoned one at birth or soon after? Brianna had no memory of a mother, and little of a father—who had rather stubbornly brought her, his bastard child, to live with the five properly cloned children—with no warning—for them or her. It had not been a particularly happy childhood, made less so after his sudden assassination by Revan Starfire, newly-made Dark Lord of the Sith.

The old woman, this Arren Kae, looked up at her, through a face seamed with scars. Her eyes were filmed-over white, and her expression was perfectly blank.

"Ah," she murmured. "At last. The quiet one."

"Lileen says you and I must depart now," Brianna said. "To avoid the Telos Security Force. They would have questions and you...."

Was there a polite way to say, you are wanted in five different star systems as a traitor to the Republic? To Eshan and Serroco?

Her father's stories may have been biased, but Brianna remembered them well enough: instead of opposing Revan and Malak after the tragedy at Malachor (that no one spoke of), Arren Kae had followed them.

"I am famous. In some quarters." The woman smiled stiffly, rising to her feet "My cane. Do you see it?"

"Of course." She handed it, strange, metal hilt and all, to the old woman.

"Come closer." The woman held out her hand. "You... you are the youngest. You... you and your brother—"

"Brother?" Perhaps Brianna had been mistaken about this, as with so much else. "I have no brother."
"Do you not?" The woman beckoned her closer, and Brianna found herself complying.

A cool, calloused hand reached forward, brushing her shoulder first, and then fumbling across her collarbone, cupping her chin. The hand explored the contours of her face, while the blinded eyes stared into hers.

The woman's hair was as white as her own, as white as Atris's, or her sisters'; but it was the white of age, like the scars of age on her skin. The crumpled skin of the woman's face was raw, and pink, and mottled with spots. "Actually," the old woman murmured, soft enough that her voice could barely be heard, "You have two brothers, but one is already dead."

"My father is dead too," Brianna ventured. "And I do know that you are my moth—"

"That word is meaningless. In this age, it is best I use a different name. You may call me Kreia," Arren Kae said.

"Kreia?" Brianna wondered if she should apologize for a moment of near-weakness.

"Yes," the old woman murmured. "Arren died long ago. And Kreia is nothing more than a blind fool, seeking recompense for past wrongs. Seeking an end."

"Pardon." From the doorway Drien cleared her throat. "We've reached polar orbit. You both need to leave now."

"Of course," murmured Kreia. She took Brianna's arm, stepping forward, blindly forcing Brianna to lead her down the hall to the escape pods.

As they walked, Brianna cast surreptitious glances at the old woman's face. I have the face of my mother. She had been told of this all of her life. Was it there—in the slant of cheek to furrowed jaw? There—in the peak of the woman's hair where it grew onto her brow?

"If you know who I am, you must have questions," the old woman said, as they seated themselves in the small vessel. Side-by-side and seated, they were of identical heights, even if standing, the woman was much shorter, stooped by her age and experience.

"No," Brianna demurred. "Mistress Atris explained to me. You had to leave my father because he was married to another. My sisters all resemble him, of course. But I alone—"

"No?" The old woman sounded startled. "No questions at all? Atris has raised an incurious child?"

"I am curious about many things," Brianna protested. How the reclamation efforts progress on our blighted world. Why Ithorians sing when they garden. Why Lileen sneezes in sunlight, even when Drien does not, even if they are genetically identical clones. "Too many to list." She did not want to be rude.

Fortunately, their shuttle picked that moment to accelerate out of the docking bay, launching them into free fall onto the Telosian pole that waited below. The scream of engines hitting atmosphere, and the sudden acceleration of g-force was sufficient to drown out any further inquiry.

XXX

There was an electro-harp band. There were ice sculptures of alien species that Dustil could swear he had never seen before. There was a row of red-robed and hooded sents standing all in a line in the vast, domed room, creepily not doing anything at all. There were nexu cubs with golden
collars, and painted Twi'leks and Zeltrons wearing only a little more than collars themselves: all following—or fastened to—red-skinned Sith, or Human, or hybrid aristocrats.

_You can tell their status by the quality of their armor_—a vestige of Dustil's brain informed him.

There were servants—_slaves_—his brain whispered again—_they keep no servants. There are slaves and those who keep them, and the Emperor, who makes slaves of them all, and that is all._

Dustil shook his head sharply. It wasn't like Malak was actually _there_. Just random banthashit he knew was. Came in handy for languages, got really fracking dull when Dustil's brain suddenly focused on crap that didn't matter; like the politics of a world they were all about to leave—

And _how_ were they gonna leave again? Dad hasn't really explained; he'd just come out of that private meeting with Her Highness Revan Starfire—_Sheris_—his brain whispered unhelpfully.

Dad had come out of the room looking white as a sheet, with that look on his face that said they were in the banthacrap now. Dustil remembered that look pretty damn well—Dad had it the last time he'd seen him on Telos when he and Mom had that fight about leaving to re-enlist; and again on Korriban, when he'd told Dustil he wasn't giving up on him. No matter what.

Dustil couldn't wait to find out the glorious plan this time.

But first, they were at this party. Because... apparently, when you were an immortal, body-swapping asshole, the best thing you could do with your time was throw a fancy-dress party to welcome home your prodigal Revan Starfire; the galactic, all-star, pageant queen.

And a _boring_ fancy dress party, even if Mekk—_don't think about him_—would have had a lot to say if he saw what some of the sents were—or weren't—wearing. Like that dude over there—Twi'lek, male, yellow—all he had on was a loincloth and a _leash_.

Dude was being led by a relatively normal-looking female sent. Blonde. Black lace dress. A little thick, Dustil thought. Like she could be someone's mom. Someone's evil Sith mom with a Twi'lek on a leash. Malak's mind had been full of some freaky banthashit, but Dustil didn't think even the former Dark Lord had spent much time at events like this.

"Oh!" A younger brunette in silver nudged his elbow in a gesture that was totally contrived. "My Lord Malak! I did not see you!"

"Maybe you had your eyes closed," Dustil drawled. "Your dress is very shiny."

"It's armored." Without asking, the girl took his hand and pressed it against her ribs. She was right. What he'd taken for fabric was hard as duracrete. "Cortosis-woven, of course. I suppose you remember Mother and the textile factory deal—we've expanded production by... kind of a lot." She shrugged, and the dress moved, all in one piece, up and down across her breasts. "I don't know the exact numbers because they are extremely dull." She fluttered her eyelashes at him. "Dance with me?"

"I was kind of busy," he lied. What was the plan here? Dear old Dad hadn't really said much of anything except they had to survive the next day or so. _And then what?_ Revan Starfire had said a lot. She talked a lot more than the mindwiped version. And she was a lot bossier... but she hadn't had a plan either. Just endless instructions for Dustil.

XXX

"Do not approach anyone. You outrank them all, except myself and Tenebrae. They may approach
you. You do not have to speak." She paused. "It would be best if you speak as little as possible. You sound nothing like Malak."

Dustil folded his arms and stared back at her.

There was a long pause. She broke first. "Well?"

Dustil blinked and gave her a banthashit-eating-grin.

Mission—that droid—whirred, making a sound like a wry chuckle.

"Dustil," Dad sounded tired. "Just work with her. For now."

Dustil smiled harder, so hard it felt like his teeth were going to fall out.

"Do you understand?" Revan repeated.

"He's not speaking," Seiran, that Polla-woman's husband, sighed. He and the Zabrak kids hadn't been invited to this stupid party. Lucky them. "Like you asked, Revan. He's not speaking."

"You'll get us all killed," she muttered, glancing back at her pet HK again. "All of you, with your useless insubordination. Is this room secure?"

"I said it was," Mission whirred.

"Statement: As secure as it was five minutes ago, when you asked, Master. Do you have a broken processing unit?"

"Even your droid thinks you're nuts," Dustil muttered, just loud enough to be heard.

"Fools." She turned and left the room, the wings of that gown she was wearing sweeping out on either side. Mekk would have probably thought she looked hot. Malak would—

Dustil closed his eyes. All fracked.

XXX

"I will take the honor of this dance from you," the girl took Dustil's arm and draped it around her own back, then clasped his other one in hers and led him out onto the dance floor. There weren't very many sents dancing, and the ones that were, immediately moved aside, giving them a wide berth.

"Okay, I guess," he muttered. Her eyes were a strange yellow-gold—not quite sithy, as they used to say; but not far off.

She was doing this strange, one-two-three side-step thing too, but it wasn't hard. Ban had insisted on dancing lessons for all of her students. She'd said it helped with combat and diplomacy. Dustil had honestly never thought he'd need to put it to use.

What the frack would you say if you could see me now, Yuthura Ban?

He extended his arm, and the girl twirled gracefully off of it. The electroharp jangled in the background. If Mekk had still been alive, it might have even been funny.

"So..." he added. "Textiles. Yeah, they're interesting."
The girl's eyes met his. She smiled. She had dimples. Mekk would probably have already asked her to make out with him in the closest supply closet. "Do you really think so?" She gave a heavy sigh. "Mother expects us to have a complete understanding of the business, but I don't think it matters if she's not going to be around much longer, do you?"

"I guess not. Uh, I'm sorry she's ill."

"If only," the Sith girl sighed. "Sadly, she's in perfect health."

"Oh." He thought he could see where this was going. "Sorry, I'm way too important and powerful to kill your mom for you."

"I can handle it perfectly well." Her lower lip stuck out in a pout. "Or my sister Inse will do it for me, which is much cleaner, I think. Don't you?"

"But you want something." She did. It was obvious. Was it sex? Was it just sex? Should they have sex? Mekel was—Mekel was dead. Was it okay that Dustil was thinking about—frack, Mekel would have probably already had sex with her.

"You're so perceptive." She beamed. Her bosom heaved. Dustil couldn't help but look. It was just... they were just... there. "Lord Malak, we have a mutual acquaintance. Or two." The girl in his arms fluttered her eyelashes at him like she was having some kind of episode of the Rodese Itch. Still holding his hands in her own, she bowed again, elaborately, and Dustil bowed back, because that had been part of Revan Starfire's crash course in etiquette before the beginning of this stupid dress ball.

Acquaintance? "Who?"

"Some slave girl and her large pet. I brought her to the party. Inse took the pet. She says Wookiees are sentient; but if no one can understand them, does it matter?" she giggled. "Slave girl told me you sent her to us. Rather naughty of you, after your wife tried to make our slaves rebel and have us all killed." She paused. "With all things considered, you owe me two dances. Perhaps more."

Wookiee? And Polla Organa? Frack. "I would be honored, Lady..." he grappled with his own slippery thoughts for a second before the name came to mind. The one Malak had said to Polla, the family he had told her were safe. "Lady Blais."

XXX

"If someone challenges you to a duel..." the woman responsible for pretty much everything bad in Dustil's life, including, apparently, this entire fracking planet, frowned. "It is acceptable to refuse. It will lower your social standing, and perhaps encourage others to also request dueling with you... but in the short term, refusal is the best response. A refusal won't get you killed."

"Don't look at me," Dustil muttered. "Sounds a lot like the Senate back on fracking Coruscant."

Malak had thought so, at any rate.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are we sure this room is secure?"

"Didn't I say it was about fifty times?" Mission snapped.

"HK, check again."
"Appeasing Indulgence: Oh, yes, Master? May I? Now that we are in the heart of your Empire, let me fulfill my prime function as a surveillance-jamming piece of circuitry."

"Hah." The woman actually smiled. "If you think it's secure, HK—"

"I told you it was." Mission was using the Revan voice too. Dustil wished she—it—wouldn't do that.

"Don't do that," the woman snapped. Either she was reading his mind, or she thought it was fracking annoying too—

"Leave her alone!" Dustil hated being in the position where he had to defend the droid pretending to be Mission Vao, but if he had to choose between her and the woman who knew exactly all the terrible things she'd done, he'd back the droid every time.

"Observation: The Sithling sounds nothing like Malak, Master. He seems altogether a more cringing species of meatbag."

"But he does know things." It made Dustil distinctly uncomfortable, the way the woman kept staring at him. She didn't look sad, like she missed kri-ffing Malak—she looked like she was trying to decide if Dustil needed to be alive. Even knowing he could take her in a fight didn't make that more comfortable. "Coruscanti Senate customs. Ancient Sith—"

"We studied it in school," Dustil interrupted.

"Your grades were mediocre," she said. "I checked Malachi's records on your potential before we left Coruscant. Strong in the Force, but academically—"

"Academically, he was fine," Dad broke in. "That's my son you're talking about!"

Thanks, Dad, for the defense. Yeah, like that wasn't also creepy: her knowing what his grades had been. On Korriban. Wait—

"Why did Malachi have records from Korriban?"

"We were working with him, for a time." She raised an eyebrow. "You call him Malachi?"

"I don't care," Dustil told her. In flawless Ancient Sith.

Xxx

"Where is Polla Organa?" Dustil asked Brunette in a lowered voice.

"Is she your bed slave?" the woman—girl not much older than him, maybe—smiled. Maybe she smiled, he'd moved past looking at her face.

"No," he snapped. "She's... you know what? She's not important."

Polla Organa got us into this mess in the first place. Mekel would still be alive it wasn't for her. My mother would still be alive if it weren't for Revan. I don't owe these people fracking anything!

At least Mission was back in their rooms. Mission. I mean the Tee-Three. She could project an image of the Twi'lek girl that looked almost real. She'd showed Dustil that, maybe she thought it would cheer him the frack up?

It had not.
"I don’t have as much data, of course,” she offered. Except for the translucency, her girl’s body looked real, down to the banthahide shorts and sleeveless vest she was wearing. "But if you want, I could extrapolate the missing parts and run a reasonable Mekel simulacrum—see?"

In a heartbeat, her appearance shifted: lekku vanishing, skin changing to a color between vanillin and gold, eyes going black, stubble—

"No!” He didn’t realize he’d yelled until he heard Dad's alarmed voice from the other room.

The picture of Mekk cut out abruptly, and the Tee-Three gave an almost guilty whine.

"I’m fine Dads—Dad!” he called back. "Totally fine!” Totally fracking fine. Of course. Who wouldn’t be?

Dad appeared in the door. Behind him, one of those Zabrak kids. And her. The real Revan.

"Sorry,” Dustil said. "Mission and I were just… talking."

"Okay.” Dad frowned at them both. "You both okay?"

"Totally," Mission chirped. "I just showed Sithboy this really gross vid I found on the HoloNet, about skin pustules—"

"Don’t ever do that again,” Dustil added. To Mission. "Ever!"

"Hah, okay….” Dad didn’t look like he quite bought it but close enough.

XXX

"You seem light-years away, Lord Malak.” The brunette fluttered those eyelashes again.

"I was just thinking about taking over the galaxy,” Dustil told her. "Maybe bombing more planets? Are you from here? How are Dromund Kaas's aerial defenses these days?"

"Thule,” she tilted her head, giving him a puzzled stare. "Of course, I’m from Thule. Surely you remember: you have mountain estates that back up onto our property line. As a child, I used to play with some of your servants—"

"Sure, uh… you were a cute kid.”

When she smiled she had dimples. Mekk probably would have tapped her already. "Yes, I was. I knew you noticed!"

Not at all creepy and fracked.

"Much cuter than that gardener of yours. Inse said you were cross with us, but Nereal and I both thought you, of all people, would understand. It was just research!"

"Yeah….” Dustil didn’t want to know, but she was telling him anyway. The story of how Malak had to get new servants after the old ones got broken.

At least it killed his ardor. Talking to her was starting to make talking to the fake holo of Mission Vao sound pretty good.
A hovering vid camera flashed in his face. Dustil smiled at it, automatically.

"What are you doing?" his dancing partner hissed. "Smiling for the Netz? It makes you look awful and weak."

"Frack you," Dustil snapped, glowering at her.

Her own smile was small and discreet. Smug. "Much better."

XXX

Across the room, Carth caught a glimpse of his son, safe in the arms of a pretty, brown-haired girl. She had a sweet face, and they seemed to be engaged in an animated discussion. For a disorienting second, Carth allowed himself to relax.

But then the woman in his own arms tightened her gloved, artificial hand on his arm like a vise and reality came crashing back.

"Avoid eye contact," she murmured. "You have honorary status as a Darth, but you need to avoid challenges."

"Tell me why," Carth muttered, tilting his head down to whisper in her ear.

"Why avoid challenges?" She raised an eyebrow. "Because you would lose. Badly and painfully."

They were dancing of all things; perma-crated into this role by a mass of vid cameras and flashing lights. It was not all that different from the blasted Coruscant events that Senator D'Reeve had dragged Carth to before; or the Mandalorian party, which had ended in a disaster and a wedding. A Mandalorian wedding ending in disaster was probably some Mandalorian sign for good luck when Carth thought about it; although he hadn't had any himself.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. "No! Tell me why I should trust you're going to help my son. Help Polla and her husband. Help any of us."

"This isn't the place," the woman he was starting to think of as Revan—the real Revan in a way that his Revan could never be—murmured back.

["Tell me why."] he repeated, in the gutter dialect of Telosian street language he'd never known that his wife knew—until she used it with him.

Revan stiffened in his arms. ["A better choice, but still not safe."]

["None of this is safe."]

She was all sinews and tension. He was going to have a bruise from the way she was hanging onto him. To keep him from running? Or to support herself? Both of them were wearing absurd, red dress uniforms—a step up, at least, maybe from the shorts and half-vest he and Dustil had been shoved into earlier; but still… not—

Frack safe. The hell with safe. None of this is normal.

"Come with me," she murmured in a voice that might have been sultry if it didn't sound so fake. "There are places we can go for privacy." The smile on her face was a lie, but an almost familiar one. Poll—Revan—had smiled like that before with him, laughing off her nightmares, or the Dark Jedi attacks, or her arguments with Bastila—
"Let's just stay in public, okay?" She'd already told Carth he wasn't getting off this planet (according to her), and he was worried about Dustil. His son was still across the room where Carth could keep an eye on him, and still dancing with that brown-haired girl. She looked close to his own age—and almost wholesome—for a Sith.

"You have no idea what we're facing—"

"I have a pretty damned good idea," he snapped back, not lowering his voice. "Whole time you were falling to the Sith? I was fighting the Sith."

"You're right." Her gaze was steady and direct, as they danced, so close he could feel her breath on his skin. "You were. But very little is secure on this world for anyone." Her eyes flickered to the row of silent-red-robed onlookers, all faceless and visored, varying only height. "See them? Those are slaves. The higher the station of slave, the less they wear. Low-status ones like those are expendable, replaceable. Tenebrae will want to sacrifice all of the red-robed ones later for one of his rituals. He'll make me beg for their lives. And I will, of course. I will beg for their lives. No matter what you may think, I am not a monster."

"Will it do any good?" Do they know? He looked at the row of silent sentients.

She didn't answer. Not directly. "The ones he saves, he will possess. Would they be better off dead?" She didn't blink, red-lashed eyes staring into his, like twin jolts of green.

"No," Carth said. "At least alive they have a chance—"

"Even if he uses them against us? Against the Republic? He loves blinds, you know. The non-Force sensitives. They go unnoticed where more powerful vessels cannot. Blind spies, who—" she broke off abruptly, as they veered close to another dancing couple. "You're a very good dancer, did she teach you?"

"Who?" For a moment, he honestly didn't know: the concept was so foreign, the formal steps they traced across the floor so entirely different from anything he'd seen his wife ever do. "Oh. No. We—we didn't have time for much dancing. I don't…."

That one night on Taris, when she'd danced at that damn Sith party. That had been nothing like this. That had barely been dancing, just a sultry twist of hip and thigh on the bar, preceded by a feat of athleticism that had startled him then, but now that he knew her, he knew had been nothing at all.

XXX

Her cheeks were flushed from the wine, but Polla seemed more grounded than he would have expected, after the fight that had ended with him storming off and vowing never to have anything to do with Deralian smugglers ever again.

He—he hadn't even come here for her, Carth reminded himself. He'd come because Doc Forn said there were rumors of more Republic soldiers in the Lower City, and he needed to get back down there and check them out. He had come because it looked like the best way to get down there was to snag one of their passes, or uniforms, or even a set of that ridiculous-looking silver armor—

And she was still wearing that damnable Sith hat, dancing close with some sleemo who hadn't even taken off his night goggles. He couldn't help but notice the possessive way the guy held her hip, her arm, the way she pressed into him—

"May I claim this dance?" The dark-haired woman smiled softly at him. She was wearing an
Imperial uniform now. Lieutenant. "I remember you… from the bar, before?"

"Yeah, I-I remember you too," he muttered. Hard to forget, when she looked so much like— "Sure, we can dance if you want."

Polla Organa had obviously said something hilarious, because all the sents around her burst out laughing.

Carth frowned.

"Looks like I'm not your first choice." The Sith's voice was light. Her hair was long and dark, cascading down her back. Couldn't be regulation.

Maybe it was only the hair drawing Carth's eye. The woman was a damn Sith; not like he was gonna sleep with the enemy—

Carth had forgotten his own wife's face. Oh, he'd salvaged an old album, and there were the vids and snaps they'd stored in the wires… but he kept the album locked away in a bank vault on Byss with the small pile of things he'd salvaged from his son's room.

Maybe it was just the hair.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, already walking past, to tap the smuggler's dance partner on the arm.

"I gotta cut in here, bud. She's with me. She's my crazy sister."

"Frack off, bro." Crazy Sis had a warning light in her eye. "Don't want me to tell these nice Sith officers about your contraband biz, do you?"

"Depends," he muttered. "Do you want me to tell them about your contraband business?"

"I offered a discount." Polla Organa shrugged, casually and the guy she'd been dancing with just kind of… melted off her. Stepping away like she'd shrugged him off like a bad cape. She raised her voice. "My rates are better than my brother's!"

His eye was drawn to three Sith in the corner. Not drinking. Not smiling. Just staring. And, there—near the exit, two were whispering. And the woman he'd been talking to earlier… she had her wrist raised now, talking into her comm.

There were too many damn Sith in the room; and they'd drawn too much attention. Every instinct Carth had said to run, said this was more than it seemed.

But then Polla Organa, who was certifiable, tensed on her feet and did a backflip, launching herself nearly two meters into the air before coming down on top of the bar, coming down with a perfect arch of her back, landing on her feet, suddenly towering over them all.

Strangely, one guy near the back let out a startled yelp and ran out of the room.

The music abruptly changed. Tempo became something slow, a little sad. But the drums held steady; driving, like the beat of a heart.

And then she began to dance.

At the time, he hadn't understood, hadn't known. Hell, half the sents in the room didn't look like they got it either. A few more left—left fast. Some in a corner were still whispering. For all he knew at the time, they were about to be arrested—or worse.
But Carth suddenly couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Later, he'd seen her fight the same way. Later than that he'd seen how Jedi trained and started to understand.

Jedi made fighting an art: one as graceful as the woman he'd thought was Polla Organa had made that dance upon a rickety Taris bar. But the beauty in their violence didn't make it less bloody, or terrible, or sometimes tragically unavoidable—

XXX

"Have you ever danced on a bar?" he asked.

"A what?" This Revan only looked confused. "A narrow strip of metal? To what end?" She frowned. "Why are you asking me this?"

"That isn't… never… never mind. You're a good dancer too." For someone who invaded the galaxy.

She was, but tight and precise, as if each step had an exact sequence; he'd bet every footstep she took was the same stride, down to the centimeter.

"Thank you," she murmured, still frowning slightly.

Over her shoulder, Carth's eyes went back to the line of red-robed sents. As he watched, one of the shorter ones lifted a hand and waved in their direction. Carth turned his head, but there was no one behind him. He turned back. The fingers crooked, beckoning him closer.

To plead for her life? His life? Her, Carth thought. The red-robed figure was shorter than he was, and her hands looked small.

He shrugged back at her. What am I supposed to do? Should he tell the woman he didn't trust farther than a cheap suit on Sullust to make sure to save that slave in particular? She says she will try and save them all.

She says she'll try. My wife wouldn't try. My wife would just do it.

"Follow my instructions," Revan murmured in his ear. "Find the smuggler and the Wookiee, and get them and your son ready to board the Ebon Hawk. When I procure an opening, they must take it. Immediately. Seiran is an excellent pilot. He has everything mapped; we will just need to program your ship. Ours had some fuel leak issues on the way here."

Carth's fingers tightened on her arm, just a squeeze. "That's not gonna happen, Revan. Think of a new plan."

"You will also need to record a message for your wife." She continued as if he'd said nothing. "In that message, you will explain that there is no escape for me—or for you. By the time she reads it, our fates will be quite literally sealed."

"Hey! Just a minute now, no—"

She held her hand up and Carth felt his mouth close, more in shock than for any other reason: although for a second, it felt like an invisible hand had locked his jaw for him.

"I've made a few sample texts of the verbiage if you would like to select one. It you prefer to write your own words, I or HK will need to review." Revan hesitated. "If you would prefer to say things of a personal and intimate nature, HK can read, approve, and then delete it from his memory core.
"I've already written that subroutine for him."

"No," he repeated stubbornly, finding his voice. "No! And what the hell was that? Did you just make me stop talking?"

"Captain, I'm trying to give you a choice—"

"You call that a choice?"

*Dying here with you and trusting you to get them out is a choice? What's behind docking bay number two?*

He'd raised his voice too loud, it was obvious from the expressions of the sents around them. "Come here," he muttered, and drew her into a deserted hallway.

"This isn't secure—" she began again stiffly.

"Nothing is secure," he snapped. "Do you think… the real you worried if the Star Maps were secure? Or Korriban?"

"The real me?" Her voice grew colder. "That ignorant, impulsive—"

"Woman. Whom I love."

"Who," she snapped.

"Who," he gritted, "isn't you. You talk a good game; I'll give you that. But if I push it—what if I push it?" *What if you're wrong about pushing it? She could kill you right now. "We could all just leave. You too… or… we could all just leave you here. Alone. You might be able to stop us, but you'd have to kill us first. You up for that?"* His pulse was almost ringing in his ears.

Those green eyes widened and then narrowed. One side of her mouth twitched. She didn't blink. She had a better pazaak face than Poll—than *either* Polla Organa or his wife. Her expression was perfectly blank. But not those eyes. He knew that look. That squint, narrowing its focus until what was in front of her was all that there was in the world.

"Carth—" she began….

And the world went out in a wash of white.

When Carth came to, he was a meter to his left. His cheek burned. In the reflection in the gleaming marble wall, he could practically see the outline of a hand print.

And scrawled in front of him on the wall, obviously left by dear old Tenebrae, were the words:

**What did you say? Tried to make up and it didn't work out. Better luck tomorrow night. I think you're in the guest room now if you know what I mean.**

Tenebrae had included a crude diagram. It was all written in what looked uncomfortably like blood, although Carth could find no injury on his own body. But the tips of the fingers on his left hand were bloody, leaving no doubt as to who had written the words.

*In whose blood?*

He closed his eyes, not wanting to know.
This is the man who controls Sith space, Carth reminded himself. This immortal, body-swapping freakshow controls Sith space. Holds our lives in his hands.

There has to be something I can do!

Xxx

She could have sworn he'd seen her wave. Hell, both of them should have seen. Carth Onasi and that sulky Sith-possessed son of his.

Polla Organa was sweating under the gross red robes, which seemed to have some kind if vinylarium layer just to make them as stuffy, humid, and uncomfortable as possible. Mydia Blais had told her to just stand around and be silent in this row of other, red-robed sents who none of them seemed to say a word; but Mydia Blais was currently dancing with Malak or Dustil or whoever he was.

For a party, this sucked. The way everyone was dancing looked like a bad imitation of a holosoap. The guests wore robes so long it looked like they'd trip and half of them seemed to have half-naked sents (mostly Human or Twi'lek) hanging off their arms, or serving them food like… servants. Or slaves.

So many slaves here. They outnumbered the masters (who all wore armor like the Blais kids), by at least ten to one.

Right now, Polla was starving. She'd tried to grab something off a tray earlier and been threatened by the waiter. Apparently, the 'food was for guests, not vessels.' Vessels? Sexist, Gamorrean, pigmen Sith should watch how they talked.

But something in the man's eyes, the feel of the room, maybe the fact that they were on an evil planet… something made Polla Organa hold her tongue.

She had tried waving at Malak or whomever twice but whichever one he was didn't seem to notice. And where the frack was Seiran? If Revan was here, shouldn't he be here too? She'd tried waving to Carth too, dancing with her maybe-evil twin, and he'd just looked confused. Maybe it had been a bad time, he and Revan Starfire had looked like they had a ton of personal issues.

She'd kind of gotten that impression on the ship too, come to think about it—the way he got so defensive whenever Polla asked a simple question like, "What's she really like?"

And then, speaking of Revan Thanks-for-the-Memories, the woman came barreling out of the hallway she'd just gone down with Carth—only now, without Carth. Polla had no idea how she could move so fast in a filmy white dress that long, but it was probably the Force.

"Hey!" she yelled, leaving the line of sents and planting herself directly in the memory-stealing Dark Lord of the Sith's path. "You! We need to talk."

The woman almost plowed right through her, as if Polla wasn't even there, sidestepping only at the last moment. Looked like she was going around Polla—like really, not even noticing at all—anything!

Well, that was just too fracking much. Polla stuck out her shoe.

Turned out that Dark Lords of the Sith could trip and fall just like anyone else—although it was an impressive piece of athleticism that made the woman bounce right back up again. Polla might have even appreciated it more, without the red, humming laser sword suddenly held at her throat.
"Don't move," Revan warned her would-be assassin. "Tell me who ordered you."

"What are you saying?" Her assassin asked in Basic. "Don't kill me! I'm sorry… maybe tripping you was wrong. But I don't want to die for it! Where's Seiran?"

"Oh." Revan switched to Basic, suddenly aware of the whispers, all the attention they'd attracted. She deactivated her saber, pinning it back again. "You're..." speaking Basic, irrationally assaulting me, pleading for your life, and naming your husband, all in one breath. "Polla Organa. We have been looking for you." She took the woman's arm with her flesh one and half-dragged her back the way they'd come.

"Is that the sacrifice you want to save? Just the one this time?" One of Tenebrae's Voices popped up like a child's fencing toy in front of them, and Revan gave him the full force of her glare as a response.

"Frack off, Tenny bro," the Deralian added, just as foolish and vainly as her personality duplicate would have—with extra vulgarity.

"Imposter Revan!" The voice had golden teeth and red skin. Not quite a pureblood, but close. "There you are. I missed you! I had quite assumed you had died in the forest and been eaten by beasts!"

"Nope. Here I am." The woman tugged at her red headdress, pulling it off. "Surprise!"

She was the same Deralian that Revan had met with Seiran and their son in the Coruscanti sewers; only now with garishly dyed hair and artificially green eyes; smiling back at them, smug and utterly mad, as if they both were not capable of ending her life immediately.

"My missing servant," Revan said to Tenebrae. "One of them, at least. There should be a Wookiee as well—?"

"I don't keep track of your pets," he said. "That is in the contract."

"Zaalbar's with Lady Inse Blaise," Polla Organa told them both.

"House Blais—?" of all the places you could have gone, you might have jeopardized everything! Revan kept her voice even and calm. "So it was Inse Blaise who brought you here?"

"Her and her sister Mydia. I'm their new... tutor, apparently."

"Tutor? Is this Tenebrae's game? But no, he thought she was dead. But if not him, then who...? "Tutor for what? Smuggling?"

"Galactic Basic," Polla told her. The Deralian squinted as if Revan had something wrong with her face. "They hired me to tutor them in Galactic Basic—although they didn't mention salary, come to think of it, just me and Zaalbar not dying. Why would you think...? Smuggling? You sound like it's supposed to be an insult."

"It is a crime," Revan began—

Polla Organa made a choked noise in her throat. "Oh? A crime? Really? On a scale of one to ten, smuggling's a—"
"Ladies," Tenebrae interrupted. "Much as I am enjoying your minor conflict, it is disruptive to some of our guests."

Revan became aware that they were being watched by the other party goers, albeit from a discreet distance. Hopefully those are all nobles who have not employed tutors in Galactic Basic.

The Sith worlds had been closed to outsiders a millennia before Revan and Malak came. Most of the aristocratic families still avoided what they considered to be 'cultural contamination.' Revan and Malak had won their position within the Sith hierarchy by virtue of Tenebrae's favor, coupled with their strength—though it had taken the occasional display of raw power to keep the other families in line.

Before Malak killed me, I was organizing the slave leaders to rise in open rebellion. I suppose they failed, without me.

House Blais, in particular, had been crucial to her plan.

I cannot ask if Lord Rhea survived his wounds, or if Lady Herpia knows I had spies within her own walls.

Revan shrugged at Tenebrae, attempting to dissemble. "Malak told them to flee. Apparently, your hospitality was substandard even before my arrival, Lord Emperor."

"I offered your imposter every comfort!" Tenebrae's indignation was feigned, of course. She wanted to throttle him very badly, anger rising like dark water in her throat.

But anger does nothing. I will not waste more lives, even damned ones. Not if there is still another option.

"My husband," Polla interrupted. "Is where, now?" She waved her hand at the room. "I need to see him. Right now."

"Husband?" Tenebrae interrupted. "You're married?"

"Disappointed, huh?" the smuggler shot back, as if Revan was not standing right there.

"Not entirely." The Sith smiled. This Voice had filed, sharpened teeth. "I will enjoy meeting the man worthy of you—"

You pathetic fool, handing him more leverage!

"Excuse me," Revan interrupted. "If you're quite finished, Tenebrae, I will take custody of my servant."

"Servant?" There was an arrogant glint in the smuggler's direct gaze that would have been laughable in less dangerous circumstances.

"By my own grace, I think I've got it! The Republic officer who came with you! Is he your husband, imposter?" The Emperor snapped his fingers. He was not entirely stupid—not stupid at all—as Revan had learned, time and time again, in fact.

So many thwarted plots: the slave rebellion, the Taris virus failure, the Manaan virus's distribution, the Dark Council's open rebellion—and where are my allies now? She could sense fear, like a contracting noose around her throat—the doubts of the Sith, their suspicions, their sense of her own weakness….

They are waiting for me to prove myself. Prove myself again, but how can I? Oh, Mal. Dark mirth
"Republic officer?" Polla Organa coughed. "Um, yeah, sure! That's Seiran, all right! So, where—where is this Republic officer again?"

"I will take you to him," Revan said quietly, glaring at Tenebrae's vessel. The man had a bland, forgettable face, except for the brand affixed to his forehead that marked him as an official Voice. One of the chosen. He'd be strong in the Force—

Stronger than Sheris. Stronger than me.

"Revan." Carth Onasi appeared in the doorway of the hall where she'd left him after Tenebrae's intrusion. He stopped dead, as if taking them all in. "Poll—you!"

"Hi," the woman chirped back. "Where's Seiran?"

"I'm… I'm glad you're okay."

"I'm great," Polla Organa snapped. "I really want to see Seiran. Zaalbar's here too," she added. "There are these crazy Sith kids who seem to think we're their slaves." She elbowed Revan, as if they were friends attending the same lecture. "You need to have a talk with them. They'll be scared of you, right?"

"I will take custody of my servants and husband," Revan commanded Tenebrae. "And I believe we are also still missing a Wookiee, if you could be so kind as to locate him…?"

"I don't keep track of your pets, but I believe I saw a Wookiee in the lower dining hall," the Emperor said. "Shall we go look?"

"We're good," Carth interrupted. "We can get the Wookiee ourselves."

"Say, we can get the Wookiee ourselves, My Lord," Polla Organa muttered beside him, momentarily impressing Revan with her knowledge of appropriate etiquette. Then she ruined it. "The asshole likes that."

Revan took a deep breath, steeling herself not to react to the woman's abrupt demise, but to her astonishment, the Emperor only laughed.

"I absorbed all manner of insults from that one when I thought she was you," he commented to Revan. "Let's make her the first sacrifice of the evening?"

"Hey!" the smuggler squawked. "No!"

"No," Revan echoed to Tenebrae, projecting a calm that seemed remote as Hoth, compared to her present state of mind. "She is my servant. I wish to send her back to the Republic as an emissary, to tell them of their impending doom."

"Oh, no." The Voice seemed to pout. "I was quite looking forward to a surprise attack!"

"It is still a surprise if they have no knowledge of the time or place." I will do everything in my power to assure the attack never comes. My strength in the Force may be diminished, but my will is not. I will stop you, Tenebrae.

I must.

Carth Onasi opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Had his own smuggler played games like
these? Or was he planning another betrayal?

"Shall we fetch my Wookiee now?" Revan glanced at Carth, extending her arm for him to take; but it was Tenebrae's vessel who did so, with a wry chuckle, leading them to the recirculating lift, leaving Carth Onasi and Polla Organa to trail behind them.

"You slapped me," Tenebrae murmured in Revan's ear. He made her flesh crawl. "I was expecting… something more… electric."

"You were in my husband's body." She kept her voice cool. "I did not want it damaged. Make an advance to me again in another body, and trust me, you will feel pain."

"Hardly fair," the Emperor pouted. "You know that's the one sensation I don't like."

"And you know it's the only one I will ever give you," she murmured back. "That's in the contract as well."

"For now, but when we are one who knows the myriad delights and torments we shall find together?"

_Cold as Hoth._ Her breathing was steady and even. "For now, My Lord."

Xxx

"Are you okay?" Carth's lips brushed Polla's ear, he was whispering so close. They were walking close enough to conceive, as Ma used to say, back home. Whispering as quiet as they could. Hoping Force users couldn't hear them.

_Ma. Da. Abasen. Will I ever see you again?_

Polla had a really irritating moment of blinking back tears, while they walked. Carth Onasi didn't press it. He wasn't a stupid man.

He and his wife had all the chemistry of a wet sock and a pomato.

_Maybe they're going through a bad patch?_

"She… uh, she probably has to walk with Tenny-Bro, but if you want us to swap places, I can handle that asshole," Polla offered. "I think he likes me."

"Somehow I don't find that reassuring." His stubble scraped her cheek.

"Are you… okay?" she asked him. He seemed… a little too calm, if that was a thing.

He laughed. "Are you?"

"I thought she'd be nicer," she muttered. "I'm not that much of a bitch. Usually."

"Seiran calls her the Bitch," Carth offered.

That was funny, so Polla laughed.

"We can hear you," Revan-the-Bitch called out. She glanced back. "And now isn't the time for any exchange of emotional expressions—or the exchange of anything."

"She's afraid I will hear of one of her little plots," Tenny-Bro said. He glanced back too, and then
turned back to the Bitch. "Did you know, she was searching the galaxy for a year looking for a mystical Rakatan artifact she thought could contain me? And my servants had it all along! All of that trust… betray—" his words cut out in a choked gasp, as suddenly there was a green, glowing laser sword sticking through his back.

His body slid to the floor with a snap hiss and a thud. Revan Starfire stood before them, looking too pale and upset about killing someone to be a good Sith Lord.

"I should not have… I should not have done that." Revan exhaled sharply, shaking her head. "That was rash, that was foolish, that was something… something she would have done. I know better, I __"

"You shouldn't have done that," Carth muttered. "But I don't think there's a tribunal in the galaxy who wouldn't understand."

Revan Starfire just looked at him, and for a second, Polla could see some chemistry. Maybe.

She didn't want to kill the moment, but they needed to get on with finding Zaalbar, so they could find Seiran. "Look, I've never actually killed anyone in my life? But I was thinking of making Tenny-Bro a first."

Maybe it was even true, although she hadn't expected… the smell. The smell was bad. "And since it's like you're me—"

"No." Revan shook her head and clipped her lightsaber back to her belt. "We can't talk about this now. I need you to go, now. Your husband is upstairs. There are… there are two ships… other ships. Take Seiran and run. I… I will find another way to evacuate Carth's son and the Wookiee, but they… you… you need to go. Go now, Polla Organa. Go home."

"I need to go," Polla repeated. "Go now—" her feet itched with the urge. "Go—"

"Unsporting," said a voice beside them. Not Carth's, even if Emperor Asshole was using Carth's mouth. Eyes glowing red. "Were I a lesser man, I would demand immediate recompense."

Great, they were back to this again. "It only lasts for five minutes," Polla told her other self. "Tenny-Bro can only possess Carth for five minutes. Takes him a while to jump back in. Because he's flawed or something? We timed it."

"Analyzing my weaknesses with one of your baits." The dark voice chuckled. "You haven't changed at all, my Starfire."

"She's not yours," Polla snapped.

The woman in question was silent, staring at Polla with an expression that on anyone else might have seemed like mild surprise—but from what Polla had seen of Revan Starfire's expressions, might even have been admiration.

Nice to think so, anyway.

"Did you just try and make me leave with the Force?" Polla added. "Like on the vids?" It had felt… weird. Like it was her own mind telling her. Like something she knew was bad was good. Despite her bravado, her skin prickled with unease.

These are Sith. Actual, real Sith. Revan stabbed that guy with a laser sword!
"Never one of her strengths," broke in the Emperor. "If you would allow me to do it for you, Starfire…"

"In a null body?" Now Revan sounded like she was getting the hang of the mocking of the asshole. "You have no power here."

"Except this man's life," he murmured. "How much value in a life, Revan? It's a dance we've stepped so many times before."

"Let the others go." Revan's hair was cut and tied in a neat Deralian topknot. Maybe it made her feel safe too—something familiar. It made them look more alike—Polla could see it now, here in person: the resemblance she'd tried to find in all of the vids. "You may keep Captain Onasi, but let the others go. They are nothing."

"You want to bargain? So they will betray me? Have them run back to your Republic? Did that Republic welcome you with such open arms? Not that I saw. You were surrounded by the ashes of the Jedi and death. Here, you will be cherished. Here, you are necessary—loved, needed!"

"So you explained," Revan said, so emptily that Polla felt sorry for her. "So you explained years ago. You have me. Let them go. It's my price."

"Always bargaining, even with me. Even now."

Carth's head turned towards Polla, eyes glowing that hellish red. "I don't even know your name, slave; but you've impressed me enough to inquire. I believe Captain Onasi called you 'Polla,' before?"

He did? Oh, frack. "No. Not Polla. Seriina Desiderata Hyperdrive," she snapped. It was the first thing that came into her head.

"Can I have her?" He turned to Revan.

"No," she clipped. "I vacc—she's received the vaccine. She's immune to your touch, her and her husband both. That is why they make excellent messengers for me."

"What a waste, I would have so much fun—"

The red faded abruptly from Carth's eyes in mid-sentence, leaving only a warm brown. He blinked, rubbing them.

"Okay, you killed the guy and then… guess I didn't miss much." Carth didn't look upset about the dead guy at all.

"If you want Tenny-Bro dead forever, I'm in," Polla told Revan. "No one that creepy should even have one body, much less a hundred."

"He has billions," Revan told them. "Or did. He… he neglects them. Sometimes they—they don't always come back."

"What was he saying about a box?" Polla had a million questions but the babble about a box was a good jump point to start at. "What box?"

"Nothing." Revan shook her head. "A fool's dream. My-my uncle used to say we have to measure: sometimes the cure is worse than the cost."
"Which uncle?" Polla laughed. "Can't really see Boon saying that and Fredd's kind of a gambler —"

"Vrook." Revan frowned. "My Uncle Vrook."

"Oh. I did meet him. Hey, and your cousin, that kid? And his weird whore mother, and the Mandalorians—some of them… I never got to meet Canderous Ordo, but Aemelie said we'd get along like a planet on fire…. You guys got along too, right? So… um…."

"You should never have come to Coruscant." Revan bent down, retrieving the dead guy's lightsaber and clipping it next to her own.

"No fracking shit," Polla said. "But you remember what Auntie Mita always used to say? About good things coming from experience? And experience coming from fracking up?"

Revan looked irritatingly blank.

"What about when she said that the trick's not to make the same mistake twice?" Polla was still trying to live up to that one. "I know, we went back to Therion again, after that; but you know as good as I do that at least he was kind of a fun mistake, least before he double-crossed us with the Biscain deal—"

"Wait. Wait a minute. She doesn't know?" Carth interrupted. "You didn't tell her?"

"Which one of us are you talking to?" Polla demanded.

Carth was looking at his wife now though. Not her. Which made it pretty obvious.

"Wait!" Polla added. "Tell me what?"

"There was no time. This isn't the time!"

"No." Carth shook his head stubbornly. "She's offering to… to help. She needs to know who she's helping, Revan. Who you really are—and who you're not."

Revan glanced down the hall, and moved her hand. The lights cut out abruptly.

"Nice trick," Polla offered, trying to hide her fear. "Why'd we do that again?"

"Hopefully, I shorted out the surveillance." Her other self sighed. "Carth is correct, I had assumed Seiran would tell you when it was safe, but I do not want to mislead you. I would prefer you think well of me, Polla Organa."

"Then don't talk in circles," Polla snapped. "Not when there's something to say. "Out with it."

"I am Revan," the woman said. "The real Revan, not the Hero of the Star Forge. Not the woman with your memories."

The real Revan. Polla tried to make that make more sense than it did. Of course, you're the real Revan. I'm me, and then… you're the real Revan. No banthashit!

"You mean you're not me, or you didn't destroy the Star Forge?" She frowned. "What?"

"No. There are two—two of them. Two bodies," Carth added. His voice was strained and soft. "She's a holocron copy of Revan… the one the Jedi took before they wiped my… my wife and made her…into you—kind of you."
"Two bodies?" Two Revans? Two of me? Or—none? It made no sense. "What about me?"

"I… admire you very much. My other self is very like you. Brave. Loyal. A bit foolhardy."

"Two bodies?" Polla remembered something. "Wait. Not more than two?"

"Just the two." The Revan who wasn't her at all narrowed her eyes. "Ah, you're wondering about the nurse in the Coruscant Underground. Yes—that was, that was me."

Polla looked at the woman's hands, but both were gloved. One of them could have been gold and fake.

"Could have fracking said something then!"

"I had no idea who you were either." The woman smiled slightly. "Did you really find that bunting in a discard pile?"

"What? No. It was an anonymous gift. You do mean the blanket, right? Abasen's… blanket."

"Perhaps a gift from her."

_Her. And by her she means the Revan from the Star Forge._

"There are two of you… and the other one, she was the one in vids."

That meant—

"She has my memories? Still? Does she still… she's the one who's me?"

"She thought she was you." Carth was looking at her now with an expression way too raw to be looking at a stranger. "She was you until Malak—"

"No!" Polla started walking again, walking down this hall that seemed too dark and empty in a palace full of people. She heard both of their footsteps behind her, but she didn't turn around. "I don't have the fracking Force. I would have told you and Bastila Shan to go frack yourselves back on Taris."

No one said anything, but she could hear their footsteps behind her, following.

"She did," Carth muttered finally. "Not in so many words, but—"

"No, in those exact words." One look back, just one. In this light, Revan could have been a relative with that hair, except for the color.

Polla turned to Carth instead of asking Revan more questions. "Did she kill her? The real me? I mean, the… me the Jedi put in her?"

"She says not." _Shouldn't he know?_ "Seiran says they left her on—"

"Please!" Revan interrupted, and in that moment, Polla knew it wasn't all banthashit, because Revan sounded exactly like the woman in that vid from Eos she'd seen in the _Official Version:_ even looked like her—kind of glaring and intense. "Don't. Seiran knows where she is. Should you… seek a reunion after this place, she will be there."

"Where?" Polla had had quite enough of this. "And where's the hell's my son? Abasen? He was with Sei—and you said on the comm he was safe, you said he was with your son but—"
"He is safe," the Revan murmured.

"Safe where?" Polla stopped walking. "Seiran's here, so who's watching—?" She had a bad feeling. "Did you leave him with the Mandalorians?"

"No! No!" Revan shook her head. "He is safe. Seiran knows. He will take you there, but in this place, you cannot... you can't think of him."

"Deralia," Carth muttered. "With my wife and Korrie. She left them all there. Seiran told us."

It was very dark in the hall, but she could see their faces in the dim light. Revan Starfire looked pissed, but said nothing.

Polla raised an eyebrow at Carth. "Kinda explains why you two have no chemistry."

He chuckled softly. "Yeah."

"And how do you know the other Revan's gonna stay on Deralia? What's she doing? Visiting my folks while you're back here saving the Sith?"

"Stopping the Sith," Carth muttered. "Not saving."

"It will be dangerous for the galaxy if she does not stay," the woman said, so seriously that Polla laughed.

"She saved the galaxy once already? The one you ruined? Maybe she's got a better idea than you? And you said I could leave. So where's Seiran? We'll go right now, him and me."

As soon as we find the spaceport. This palace was in a different place than the one she'd landed next to before.

"You shouldn't have caught Tenebrae's attention. It may be harder now." Revan looked grim.

Xxx

"It's quite fascinating." The small, cropped-furred Human girl speared another skewer of meat on a stick from a passing slave and handed it to Zaalbar, allowing him to eat it with a wordless nod of her head. "I can't read more than your bare emotions, and I'm usually quite good with intraspecies communication."

"I do not care," he yowled. It would be nothing to break the chains, but Inse Blaise had told him he could not, and now, much to Zaalbar's distress, he'd discovered that was true. "Where is Polla Organa?"

He caught her scent, and Carth's—and one he thought was Carth's son—nearby. There was another, darker scent as well: the madclaw Revan.

"Can't understand a word," the girl said, switching from Basic to Ancient Sith. "You primitive cultures are so... loud!"

Zaalbar realized he was making a low, whining noise and stopped.

"This your new boyfriend, sister dear?" A shorter cub had approached with no warning. Male voice, speaking in their infernal tongue that Zaalbar had studied after the shame on Korriban, when he had not understood the foolish yellow-haired's threats and had almost caused harm to Carth and Polla Revan.
The Mission ghost had told him he had great skill with language, even if his mouth was ill-formed to speak their twisted words, and in truth most languages did seem simple enough. For example, Ancient Sith was a tongue not so different with its roots than the language of the Builders of legend who had fashioned Kashyyyk in the first place.

The new Human was young, even less grown than Carth's cub. He had dark brown, almost normal eyes, atop a long, pointed Human nose and a near-furless face.

Inse smiled, baring her teeth. "How amusing, Phylus. You should try that joke on Lord Scourge, or Hashan. Don't think I'm not aware of how you are quaking in your boots. Why are you even here?"

"You have to ask?" Her brother-cub Phylus laughed. (The other Wookiees in the horrible infidel stable had spoken of this one. The soft Blais, they had called him, though whether due to temperament or lack of physical exercise, Zaalbar had not thought to care.) "Free booze. A chance to see the woman who killed our father right up close…." He was holding up one of his skinned paws, as if he needed to compute the reasons. "Very hot women, meat on a stick, booze and… Mother said Rhea-Junior had a summer cold and one male from our family had to come. Since Nereal's off on another gormack hunt, that leaves…"

"Phylus," the girl-cub sighed. "Mother is senile. The Emperor doesn't care if you're here or not. He has eyes only for that Republic mouse, Revan Starfire, traitor Dark Lord of the Sith."

"Can't fault our Most Highest's taste. Revan's highly acceptable," the cub agreed. "I think I'm gonna get an autoprint. You want one?"

"I do not," Zaalbar's cruel Sith girl snapped. "I want you to go away." Her eyes seemed to glitter, somehow. "You want to go away."

"I want to go away." The boy's voice changed, grew flat.

Zaalbar whined anxiously.

"You want to go away," the evil girl-cub repeated. "But first you want to duel Lord Revan for our father's honor."

"But first I want to duel Lord Revan. For Father." The boy-cub's hand trembled, as if he had been stricken by the sap-sickness. "I want to duel Lord Revan. I-I want to… but that's Force-spawned insane."

"So?" His madclaw sister yawned. She waved a hand. "Be grateful I finally found a death worthy of you! Oh… and before you die, make sure to tell her that we found Cook Dekla's cache. Ask her what's in the vials? I had one of the grooms drink one, but he just broke out in spots and died."

"I will tell Lord Revan we found her cache—"

"I," Inse Blaise corrected. "I, Inse Blais, found the cache."

"—and that one of the grooms died." He frowned. "Which groom?"

"The one with the beard?" Inse rolled her eyes. "Mydia would know his name. She had him in her bed often enough."

Xxx

"Oh, there's my sister," Lady Blais murmured in Dustil's arms. She had demanded an escort to the
dining hall, and so here they were. "See? She's the ugly, hideous crone, feeding meat on sticks to
your Wookiee."

"Yeah?" Her sister wasn't ugly—she looked a lot like Lady Blais, only with shorter hair and a
bigger rack. Mekk would have thought she was really hot. And standing next to her—there's
Zaalbar, which is more the point. Dustil sighed with relief. He barely knew the Wookiee his father
had been traveling with, but it was good to see that Polla Organa hadn't gotten him killed too.

Mekk would fracking love this. Except that he was dead. It was getting easier to think that and not
lose his shit. Dustil's eyes stayed dry now and he could swallow past the lump in his throat.

Strangely, talking to Dad before had helped.

"Hey! Uh… that's my Wookiee," he added, remembering suddenly to pretend to be Malak, who
probably did think he owned people. "I need that—my—Wookiee back."

Lady Blais giggled, taking his arm with a possessive air. "Shall we go ask Inse to give him back?"

"I don't ask." Lord Malak—frack! Why do I call him Lord anything? Because Mekk would? He's
dead! Malak would never ask. "Let's go get my Wookiee." Dustil moved faster, half-dragged the
Sith girl across the floor with him.

The short-haired girl—Inse—looked up at their approach, mouth widening into a pleased smile.
"Lord Malak. It is a great honor! What are you doing with my poor, dull, pox-ridden sister
Mydia?"

Inse and Mydia Blais. Now he knew their names. "That's my Wookiee," Dustil growled, suddenly
tired of all banthashit. "Give him back. Now."

"Are you sure?" Inse had short brown hair and yellow Sith eyes. Pretty fracking yellow for
someone that young. On Korriban, they'd taken eyes like that as a sign of power. Now, Dustil just
took them as a sign of Sith crazy. "Because we have eight Wookiee in the stables and they all—"

"I'm sure," he snapped. "That's the one. His name is Zaalbar."

["We must free my enslaved brethren before we depart this accursed place. But are the others safe
as well?"] Zaalbar groaned. ["Polla Organa was with the braided one who stands at your side.
Where is she now?"]

Gotta thank Malak for leaving the Shyriiwook in my brain.

Dustil glanced over at the 'braided one,' Mydia, who was twisting her braids now and looking at
her sister with a thoughtful smile.

"I'm sure," he repeated as an answer. "I'm sure I'm taking that Wookiee now. Polla Organa can
take care of herself.

"Inse?" Mydia giggled. "You've got that look."

"Which look?" The Sith girl smiled back. "The one that says I finally found a fitting end for our
dear brother?"

"Oh!" Mydia beamed as if she'd just been given a nameday present. "Really?"

"Really." They had almost identical smiles, and both of them made Dustil want to stab them.
Or run. Mekk would find it a turn-on. Mekk would be arguing with me right now over which one he wanted to bang—

It was really fracked, feeling jealous of two Sith that your dead bondmate would probably want to frack. Really fracked, even, missing someone who thought like that, who made Dustil think like that. Really, really fracked to be thinking about someone who was dead. They'd all learned the same fracking Korriban lessons. No point in doing that at all. Ever.

"Dear Brother Nereal's up in the Dark Mountains," Mydia said. "Are we sending him an exploding cake? Because I'm not sure even he is stupid enough to fall for that twice—"

Inse Blais sighed. "No. We need Nereal. In fact, I need Nereal more than I need you."

"Rhea Junior is with mother?" Mydia drummed her fingers along Dustil's arm as if she was using it for an electroharp. Suddenly, she laughed. "Oh! Phylus? You're talking about Phylus. Really? But why? The poor boy's almost a null."

"Phylus, will be challenging Revan to a duel…." Inse smiled, and made a show of checking the jeweled chron on her wrist. "Right about now." She looked up at Dustil again, her eyes narrowing. "Are you sure you're Lord Malak, My Lord?"


"Do you think he's not?" Mydia tilted her head, frowning. "He does seem a little subdued."

"He's frightened, and confused and…." Inse tilted her head and Dustil could feel her, like tendrils of Force pressing against his thoughts, worming in, asking—seeking—

Dustil closed his eyes, channeling all of it: his rage, his pain, his… his hatred into power. Power they could feel.

"Oh!" One of them sounded impressed. Mydia.

"Forgive me, My Lord." Inse's voice was only amused. "I was merely curious."

Dustil opened his eyes, glaring at her. Revan had warned him about this planet, and she was right: it was dark here. Dark like Corellian whiskey burning through his gut, like a shot of glitterstim, like tapping into the power he and Malak and Mekel had merely grasped before—

Oh, but stronger. Much stronger.

"Careful," he warned Inse. Warned both of them. He suddenly felt ten meters tall.

Xxx

The doors opened on another room, near-identical to the first. The two red-eyed Zabrak children stood on either side of the doorway, clad in matching livery, both possessed by their infernal host.

"There's your Wookiee over there…." Tenebrae beamed, extending Takan's hand forward, gesturing them inside. "Or is it another Wookiee? House Blais has several of the animals."

Revan looked up, watching the Wookiee approach, trailed by Dustil Onasi and what appeared to be two young women.

Herpia and Rhea's children.
Lord Rhea of House Blais had taken his wife's name upon marriage, as Blais was one of the few matrilineal lines among the ancient Thulian houses. He had taken Herpia's name and fought her battles for her, dueling Darth Revan and losing—one of Revan's last engagements, before meeting her doom above the skies of Deralia.

Herpia had been typical of her class and culture: easily flattered, wealthy, and cowed by an overt show of strength. Their eldest son Nereal was a brute, notable only for his blades. The younger, Rhea the Second, was more involved with his mother than any battle for dominance. The two girls, Inse and Mydia, had still been property of their tutors three years past. And the youngest, Phylus Blais, had been a favorite of her agent.

Of all of them, Phylus was the most trustworthy, Revan had been assured, as if any child of twelve was ever trustworthy—as if any sentient of any age was ever trustworthy.

It had been a risk, hiding the remaining stores of the Selkath-made virus in the heart of a House loyal to Tenebrae; but the Blaises normally stayed on their Thulian estate; leaving their townhouse in Kaas City empty and easily accessible. It had been a lesser risk than leaving the live virus stored in Revan's own palace, or somewhere else where Tenebrae's blinds might infiltrate. Everyone in the Blais family had been secretly immunized—their servants as well—most without consent or knowledge.

Davad Arkan had recruited the agent. Revan had never even seen the woman's face, didn't even know her name.

House Blais had been a small cut-out, a cell ignorant of its own role within Revan's intelligence network. Like every cell, it had its weakness: all of its security hinging upon its most trusted family servant: a bastard scion of Herpia's mother, the beloved family cook—

"My sister, Inse Blaise, says to tell you she found the cache of vials you left with Cook Deckna," a young voice interrupted Revan's reminiscence (and confirmed its futility) with the effectiveness of lightsaber to the skull.

Revan took a step to the side and turned, to keep all three within her sight.

*Phylus.* He had grown from being a boy of twelve into a taller boy of fifteen. Long and impossibly gangly, with a boy's growth and none of a man's strength. Revan immediately dismissed him as the least threat—but his voice drew her back again.

"Also, Lord Revan, I have to challenge you to a duel. Right here and now."

"I refuse," Revan said automatically. "Until such time as you come of age."

"I am fifteen." The boy—Phylus Blais—sighed. "Inse said I have to challenge you to a duel. For our father's honor."

"The age of consent for dueling is—"

"We lowered it," Tenebrae broke in. "It's ten Kaas years now. I believe that is twelve Republic Standard?"

"He's obviously compelled." Trapped eyes. A child's eyes.

"Again, no violation of our laws. Now."

"Cut the banthashit, Tenny-Bro!" The smuggler snapped. "He's a kid. You know she'll wipe the
floor with him!"

"Would you, I wonder?" The Emperor laughed. "Shall we let your imposter duel this weakling, Revan?" He frowned at the smuggler. "Are you Sheris Darkstar? You don't quite look—"

"Sheris is dead," Revan interrupted. "This woman is an actress. I believe I told you before."

"Stay back, Polla," Carth was warning the smuggler—and using her real name. "Trust me, don't… don't get involved."

"Polla?" Tenebrae's voice sharpened. "What an unusual name on this side of the galaxy: a Polla, traveling with Revan and Carth Onasi…" You fools. He's not stupid.

A sinking sensation, all the way to her toes. That hall—the hall that had led them here. Too dark, too empty. Too perfect.

"Pretty common name." The smuggler looked calm, at least.

"Sheris is less so," Tenebrae mused.

Revan stared steadily at him.

"I tire of games," the Emperor murmured. "Especially ones that are not mine. Will you duel the boy now, Revan?"

What is the life of one boy? She could beat him so easily. Too easily. It had to be a trap.

The boy even looked trapped. Wide-eyed. Wisp of hair like a smudge of dirt on his lip. It had to be Sheris's weak mind who refused to kill the boy. He was merely one boy, and they had killed so many. It had to be Sheris's emotions that spiked through the ice in her heart and saw the relentless futility.

This war will never end.

"Duel the boy for the lives of the slaves," Tenebrae continued. "Oh… and the lives of your companions. Save Malak. He can live, even if you fail. I can always find a use for Malak."

Revan's throat felt dry. Negotiate terms. Malachi had told her that, long ago.

Xxx

"Negotiate terms," Malak's father said, leaning over the reports she'd brought him. Reports from the Senate, refusing aid. Reports from the Fleet's junior officers—the ones who had first agreed to join their fight—but only on their terms: with Jedi backing. Full Council backing. A Jedi Master on each ship.

All well and good—except they had no masters. No masters and no Jedi Council. All the masters had refused them. Even Kavar Vakla, in the end.

"There's no point," Malak said flatly. "We've lost."

Malachi said nothing out loud, merely turned his head to her. Those eyes—so like his son's but cold—widened, and he held up one hand, silencing his son. Urging her to speak. Even without the Force, the old man knew—the old man knew that Revan had found a response.
"Negotiation," Revan said slowly, "is even more important when we've lost. It's how we'll win."

"You sound like that crazy master of yours," Malak muttered. "And where is she? Shouldn't she be helping as well?"

"I don't know." She hadn't seen Master Sunrider since the argument. Since she'd refused to relinquish Malachor to a Jedi creche on Telos. "But we will negotiate terms. The Fleet needs us. We just need to give them what they need, which is different than what they demand."

"What do we have to give?" Malak asked. "There's only two of us—"

"Each worth ten of those weak maffasops—" his father interjected.

"We'll offer a Jedi knight on each ship, at least one. Jedi healers on the medical carriers. Jedi knights embedded within ground troops. We don't need the masters at all. A knight is answerable only to their own conscience. Each has the right to go where they are needed—and we are all needed. We are all needed now."

"You're assuming the other knights will defy the Council?"

"Not all. Not at once. But if we win one battle, the others will follow...."

Xxx

And they did follow us. Most to their deaths. Or—she thought of Davad—or worse than death.

Negotiate. Negotiate terms.

"To first blood?" she asked. It would only take a moment. "Duel to first blood?"

"To the death," Tenebrae murmured. His voice issuing from several throats now. Surrounding her, all of them. "Of course, you are... rather hard to kill."

Revan thought of the Fragment falling from the sky; the pain that had come with what should have been the last moments of her life; the yellow saber's blade in her guts; the Mandalore's vibroblade —

Yes. I am hard to kill. Or she—that body—

"Not that I expect Phylus here to kill you," the Sith chuckled. "Of course not! You will merely kill one child to save dozens! It's a cheaper game than we played on Ziost, do you remember?"

Xxx

Sweat slicked the metal hilt in her hand. Nausea twisted her guts as she turned her eyes away.

These were damned—doomed—vessels infected with Tenebrae's Curse in infancy; but every one, every soft cry had sounded like—

Don't think of him.

Be like Hoth. Like ice. Tenebrae will never expect this level of retaliation, he thinks you are soft, he thinks you are his. He thinks he's won—

Her blade smashed the base of the khyber crystal, the source of all his power here. His power over these children. It was the clarion call that would alert him—
—Now that they were all dead.

Xxx

"I remember."

*I remember your rage when you saw your dead children. I remember the triumph of my victory. But then... I remember you laughed. You had lost any hope of continuing your line, lost the power of an infinite army... you had lost...I thought you had lost everything. But you laughed.*

*And that's when I knew. That's when I knew—*

"No," Revan said. "No. I refuse. I will not fight a child."

"Ah," Tenebrae had retreated to one voice now. Except for the three Blais children and her companions, everyone else in the room now had red, glowing eyes. Everyone else in the room was *his.* "What a shame."

The boy let out a breath somewhere between a laugh and a sob. His sisters stood, expressionless and careful, Sith-trained from childhood. The older one risked a small smile, as Revan's gaze passed over her.

"You have to fight someone, Revan," Tenebrae added. "It's our tradition."

*And then I knew. That's when I knew—*

"Yes," she said dully. *Negotiate terms.* "I know."

"What—?" The smuggler's interruption, Carth's whispered plea for silence.

*If I refuse the boy, you will demand that I duel someone else. One of my friends—or, rather, one of these innocents. The smuggler, or Carth. Or Seiran....*

"I'll do it." Dustil's voice, sounding nothing like Malak. "I'll fight her—*for* her," he amended his words quickly. "I'll fight for Revan. My... my wife. I'll be her champion."

"Perhaps later, Malak," said the Emperor in Zepth's body, clapping Dustil on the back. "No. I have a particular fight... in mind."

*Fool, I told you to be quiet.* Revan glared at Carth Onasi's son, and he stared steadily back. For an uneasy moment, she wondered if he would be championing *her* cause—or his own.

*Negotiate terms.* "They go free. All of them. If I lose, they are useless to you."

"Your husbands—useless?" The dark chuckle began in the man's throat. "No. I find them effective. Even in the event of your death—"

"If I die, you can't use the chamber," she taunted. "There's no one else. I remember... you... you tried."


"But you won't die, will you?" He smiled, eyes burning like suns. "Not my Starfire—"

"Not yours," she muttered.
"Asshole," the smuggler echoed behind her.

That's when I knew—when he laughed at my victory—that's when I knew.

"They go free," she repeated. "The Wookiee, the Deralian, and my pilot—the one who brought me here. I will fight whatever champion you propose. But, regardless of the result, they go free."

Negotiate terms.

That's when I knew that he—that I—that we—

Carth and his son were mercifully silent. She would try to save the boy later if she could, but if she unmasked him now, they might lose any advantage that remained. Malak had power here. Dustil Onasi, a Korriban deserter, had none.

"Done." Tenebrae chuckled darkly in his boy's body. "We're going to need a bigger room."

When I slaughtered the monsters he made, and he only laughed—that's when I knew that every choice I made was merely a search for the best outcome; that every life I saved had a price; that every sacrifice was merely a step on a circular path.

That's when I knew that this war will never end: that there is no final battle, no Malachor.

That's when I knew that there is no death, no end, no victory.

XXX

Atris shivered. She was freezing cold, even wrapped in fur with the plasma heaters on as high as they dared. They could not risk ticking any orbital sensors that might mistake their heat signature for radioactivity, or even for what it was: a sign of a secret base on what was supposed to be a nearly-dead planet.

"Here are the reports you asked for."

Padawan Mical Jorde had never been much of a Padawan by traditional metrics, Atris recalled; but he had a keen intelligence and a loyalty to the Republic that was beyond reproach. In the week since his arrival, he had organized her hard copy files saved from the destruction at Ossus, and made several additional suggestions regarding their sub-categorizations.

The Jedi, she thought, had truly wasted his potential assigning him as Padawan to a master like Azen Loanin: confining his quick mind to the medical laboratory. Mical possessed an intelligence with an almost hungry focus: devouring all knowledge placed in its path. Perhaps not the most fortunate of analogies now… but in his case, quite apt.

"Thank you," she acknowledged out loud, not wanting to give him too much of a complex.

But Mical merely raised one blonde eyebrow and continued to stand… long enough that Atria had time to consider responses to all the questions she hoped he would not ask.

"That will be all," she added.

"I want you to know that I understand," he told her, which wasn't quite what she'd expected. "When weighing the greater good, we have to consider all sentients—and not just our own kind."

"Our own kind? Do you mean Echani or Jedi?" she asked.
His mouth quirked, and she approvingly realized he was intelligent enough to answer one question for himself. Which was more than she could say for his twin, more was the pity. "I suppose soon there will be no difference."

It was an insolent perspective, but she did not disagree.

As if mocking time with its sense of exquisite irony, the outer airlock sensor chimed a warning, indicating that someone had entered it.

"That will be our guest," she murmured. "Would you like to meet her, Mical?"

"I have a great deal of work to do in the infirmary," he dissembled.

"But you know who she is."

He frowned, and for a moment, his eyes looked almost confused. "I… I have met Master Kae before. Many times. She was in the Temple, before the fall—during, in fact. I know what you say is true… about her, but did she… surely, she would have mentioned being… being my mother if—"

"She could not." Atris kept her voice gentle. "Not without jeopardizing all that she was. None of the Jedi knew her to be…." her voice trailed off, as suddenly an image torn from a dream invaded her mind: standing with Revan—no, Sheris, no—Revan, a holocron falling and shattering, and behind them, behind—

"None of the Jedi knew her to be…?" Mical's voice gentled. "Knew her to be what, Master?"

"Knew. Knew her. None of them knew—"

It was a dream, nothing more. A reflection of my own confusion: faced with Sheris Loran. Faced with Revan Starfire. Kavar informed me that Sheris took the holocron's memories… but that was later. Later.

You must go. Leave Coruscant. Return to the refuge you made for our people, your hidden Temple where you keep them; children of your brother, children who call you mother, although you were no mother—never one such as I—

Now, months later, that dream voice still wormed into her thoughts, still echoing in her head.

A vision, transcribed into words. A deflection of my consciousness, an attempt to revoke responsibility.

But no. I am Atris. I am a Jedi Master. I am Atris. I am a Jedi Master. I am Atris—

The door to her office apexed open before she could speak again, and Atris drew back a gasp at the ruin of the woman who entered her chamber.

"Master Kae!"

"Is dead," the blind woman said. "I am Kreia now."

XXX
The shuttle left Coruscant at dawn for the interstellar hub. Mekel wasn't sure why he was even here with them, except Dear Old Dads had just assumed he would come, and Ban had scarpered off and—

And Lydie Korr smiled when he said yes.

Not that he was going to get anywhere with her. It didn't even seem right to think about, with Telos maybe dead, so Mekel wasn't thinking about it. Her. Or Telos. He was trying not to think at all.

The shuttle was crowded with Jedi, more than he'd seen in one place since that weird dorm of Jedi in Malachi D'Reev's tower, the one that was space dust now.

A shuttle full of Jedi, and Mekel couldn't feel a thing. Whatever that dead asshole had done to him still hadn't worn off. Dear Old Dads said it probably never would. Asshole. A good thing too, because Mekel thought if he had the Force right now, he'd fry them all.

The shuttle banked towards the orbital where Senator Master Loanin the Smug had arranged a fast cruiser to take them all to Katarr… where, according to the most fracked-up plan Mekel had ever heard, they were all going to sit and wait, hoping to lure some Force-sucking Sith Lord and then rely on the Republic Fleet to blow the Force-sucking Sith Lord up before he sucked away all their Force and killed them all.

*Great plan, Jedi. No wonder you thought Revan looked like a fracking genius.*

Mekel had a few opinions about the plan, like… if it would take a bunch of ion cannons and plasma torpedoes to blow up a Sith Lord in the first place, why not get some themselves? Wouldn't it be safer to be on the ship than the planet? Or, frack, somewhere else?

Like the opposite end of the galaxy?

He'd tried to talk to Master Vro—Dear Old *Dads* about those flaws, but the old man had just looked like he agreed with Mekel and muttered some excuse about how *being prepared* would look too much like a trap.

Really? Too much like a trap? And this looked like, what—a super Jedi fracking buffet?

"Hello, Mekel." Lydie Korr—*Lydie Loanin now, apparently*—came down the aisle. "How are you feeling?"

*Like I'm a spider roach in a scent trap. Like we all are. And like the galaxy was deaf and dead. "Okay," he said out loud. He grinned, like it was all good, all cash, all copa-septic, like the Doc Moms used to take him to as a kid would say. "How-how are you holding up?"*

Her eyes darted to her husband, of course they did. And Master Azen Loanin was watching them. You didn't need the Force to know it. Mekel could see the man up the aisle out of the corner of his eye. And the man was scowling.
"Good," she said. "I'm glad you came with us."

"I don't have the Force," he reminded her. "Some zombie took it away, and now we're off on a mission to kill him and his Force-sucking buddy. What else was I gonna do on my Seventhday?"

Lydie Korr laughed. She still had it, that laugh that made him feel like the best sent in the world for making her laugh.

Behind them, Loanin was probably glaring daggers. Suddenly, it mattered a lot less.

"I am sorry," Lydie Korr added. "About what was done to you—"

"Hey, I'm alive, right?" He had to shrug it off. What the frack was he gonna do? Grab a shuttle to a secret Sith homeworld practically in another galaxy and rescue Telos? Whatever happened… with that fracked up hunt and the Sith Emperor… it was already done. Maybe Telos had lost the Force too and died. Maybe Telos and Malak had teamed up and taken over. Maybe Telos had felt the world cut out just like Mekel had, and then been torn apart, or shot or gotten a gutful of saber… it didn't matter. Whatever happened had already happened. There was nothing Mekel could have done. There was nothing—

"Mekel?" Lydie Korr—Loanin touched his arm, actually touched it.

His eyes refocused on her face. Indentations ran across her skin, like a tracery of circuits almost. They were a few shades darker than the gold of her face. Mekel had seen some Zabraks that dyed their indentations with acetline ink, but Lydie's all looked natural.

"Is it like a tattoo? Or are they all over?"

"What?" She tilted her head, as if he hadn't been clear. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Your—" They were on her hand too. He wanted to hold it, suddenly, hold on to something. "Nevermind. Yeah, I'm okay. I get it. You guys… you stopped Malak. Great job."

"We hope." Her mouth tightened. "The… the man who did this to you. The Mandalorian Sith? We're going to stop him too."

"Yeah, good luck with that."

You know he's fricking dead? Telos practically ripped his head off and it didn't stop him. You think the Fleet blowing up his ship will do the trick?

"The journey will take a few days," Lydie added, which Mekel already knew. "Let me know if you need anything." Her eyes were very blue.

"I need the Force back," Mekel muttered, half under his breath.

"I'm sorry," Lydie Korr told him. "I can't give you that."

XXX

Transcript from a Sith Holovid #1 (translated from the Ancient Sith, by Master Atris)

Lady Fenestre: "Joining me now is Lord Finiris, a former servant of House Nyriss, now risen, (as all can), to become a member of the Dark Council. In His Name."

Chorus of other Council members: "In His Name."
Lord Scourge: "As per his Mighty Omniscience, I have changed my name from Finiris to Scourge to reflect the growing threat brought upon us by our most ancient of enemies: the Galactic Republic. In their tongue, 'Scourge' means a plague, a pox, an evil shadow descending upon the land."

Lady Fenestre: (giggles) "Does it not also mean, 'to whip?' Or to lash?"

Lord Scourge: (darkly) "Yes."

Lady Fenestre: "So in other words, we might think of you like a whipped—or whipping—personage for our Most Illuminated Upon High Lord? Valkorion Vittiate Tenebrae? First of His Name?"

Lord Scourge: "Do you value your tongue?"

Darth Vash: (hastily) "And there they are! The sentients we all came to see! Marvel, as our recently-redeemed Dark Lord of the Sith descends from her ship and approaches both consorts! Chained to the platform on the right, we have the simple commoner, Carth Onasi, and beside him, her true—"

Lady Fenestre: (whispers something)

Darth Vash: (shocked) "Really? Are we to call him Darth Carth? And he, not even a Force-user?"

Lady Fenestre: (smiling for the holocams) "In his most kind grace, the One has declared both of Revan Starfire's consorts are to be raised to the title of Darth, at least for ceremonial occasions; until such time as they go through their Trials of Pain, Suffering and Subtle Manipulations—after which their titles and rank will become permanently affixed."

Darth Vash: (sighs) "... and on Revan's left, signifying a strangely reduced rank, we have her original consort, Darth Malak D'Reev. Darth Malak is wearing a Human skin, genetically descended from Revan's First Consort—"

Lady Fenestre: (to Lord Scourge) "That must be so confusing!"

Lord Scourge: (inaudible response)

Xxx

"Your transcription is good. Excellent work. But one word I would alter..." Kae—Kreia—hovered a shaky finger in the general direction of the holospeaker, her eyes magnified by the visor she wore to correct her near-total blindness. The word 'Ack'neumanth.' 'Subtle Manipulations' is incorrect. More correct would be to simply call the act 'Compulsion.'"

Atris frowned. "But the form, 'neuam;' Master Korr always told me that it implied something hidden, under the surface."

"Master Marla Korr..." Kae—it would take Atris some time to stop calling her old friend that, if she ever could—Kreia scoffed. "Marla Korr was always one for too much subtlety. She died, by Revan's hand, you said? And Kavar claimed she was an agent of the Sith?" Kae gave a soft sigh. "All of those years and I feel I never... never truly knew her." She shook her head slowly. "All those years... and Tenebrae had eyes within the Council all along."
"Many good Jedi were misled," Atris agreed. *And even more died from their mistakes. We take an oath, we masters, to serve the Republic. Even at the cost of ourselves.*

*Are Kae and I truly the only ones who still remember sacrifice?*

Kavar Vakla was a lost cause. Atris had not dared tell him the truth. And yet… her thoughts were conflicted and torn. Meditation was not the balm it should have been.

*Kavar may be lost. They all may be lost. I know this. I have prepared for this. And yet I still—I hope against all hope for a different outcome.*

"Those who are lost were *never* Jedi." Kreia sat down heavily in her chair, pushing aside the visor. Her whitened eyes stared blankly in the direction of the window's light—although there was nothing more to see there now than polar snow. "Not truly. Not as Jedi must be, for the world to come."

"Are you… is there anything I can do, Ka—Kreia?" Atris didn't want to hover, but the other woman's obvious affliction was difficult to ignore.

*Those Sith Lords took the Force from you. Your sight was fading for years, you complained, but now… in truth—you are blind.*

"I have all I require, old friend." A kindly smile crossed the woman's lips. "For now."

*So gracious, even in the face of such loss. Kae had lost her connection to the Force—what she must be feeling—defies imagination.*

*And yet, she is not the first I have seen walk this path.*

Vima Sunrider had stripped the Force from Atris's former Padawan, the young and defiant Meetra Surik. An act of preservation for the heart of the Order itself—but when Atris closed her eyes, all she could see was Meetra's silent accusation. Those piercing eyes—like the girl's pain was meant for Atris alone.

*You should not have betrayed me, Meetra. I told you not to follow Revan. I told you—*

Atris had left the room before Vima Sunrider performed the act that stripped the Force from Meetra. *Cowardice.* In her dreams, she stayed, and watched her former protege plunge her lightsaber into the stone table—before the Force was stripped from her soul.

In truth, Atris had returned later for Meetra's lightsaber, which no other master had disturbed. Her hand traced the hilt now hanging from her belt—the reminder she kept with her always of how she had failed her pupil.

*But we had no choice. What we felt in her was the death of the Force itself.*

Revan Starfire's madness had cast a long shadow, and the actions of Malachor had created another monster, it seemed, in Davad Arkan. Perhaps one even worse than the creature Meetra might have become, had the Council allowed the void within her to grow.

"Jedi and Sith alike, the Force does not define you." Kae wasn't much older than Atris—not in years—but she looked like she had the weight of decades upon her face now. "You know this; you, who train your brother's children. For all of your science, your laboratories… not one of your handmaidens has the Force."
You are wrong. But Atris held her tongue. There had been a time when she would have told Kae everything. She remembered, so many times, telling the woman everything: her confidante, her ally, her friend.

But now, strangely, she kept to her reserve. Now, strangely, she had no need, no compulsion to share. Now, Atris felt as protective of her charges as if they were all walled within a block of ice.

You abandoned Brianna to me long ago. Her and her brother both. They are mine now, Mine to teach, to shape, never to fail as I did before—

A sense of the world tilting, shifting out of time—

Xxx

After Malachor V, the Jedi Council members had all been in shock: scrambling to uncover the extent of the casualties; to sort through the false reports claiming the entire Fleet was lost; that the Mandalorians had betrayed the armistice; or that the remaining Republic ships were off to the Outer Rim and beyond, chasing Mandalorian oathbreakers.

So many lies. They had wasted so much time, finding the truth.

After Malachor V, Vima Sunrider (tasked with relief work on Echanis) had come to them, bringing with her Atris’s padawan, Meetra Surik, whom she had found in a half-wrecked ship on the edge of blast orbit range.

After Malachor V, (at first), all of their questions came down to ones that only Knight Surik could answer.

"How many casualties?"

"What manner of device could cause so much destruction?"

"Where is the rest of the Fleet?"

"Did Revan give the order?"

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, Knight Surik?"

It was left to Atris to ask Meetra Surik on behalf of the Council, for the child before her had been her padawan, and only barely a Jedi Knight, when she left for the war.

The girl shook her head. "There is nothing to say." Her voice was flat, but inside her—she, who had formed bonds so quick and close with so many—Atris felt her own soul scream, like a falling tide of the Dark.

"Really? Nothing at all?" Vima Sunrider stepped forward too; shoulders stooped as if by some new burden, some agony, some inner torment. Relief work at Malachor… hers had been one of the first teams on the scene.

Vima had dutifully filed reports of the carnage: holos of crashed ships, data from the planet's core. The entire planet's surface was unstable now, slowly imploding from within.

Much like our accord, Atris had thought, not for the first time.

"Nothing." Meetra's eyes met Atris's, and in them Atris saw nothing. No life, no hope, no spark of her former padawan's spirit, or intelligence, or grace. Meetra Surik only blinked. "Did we win the
Her voice was so flat that Atris could never decide; later, when she had too much time for reflection—whether the girl was genuinely asking if they had won the war—or not.

XXX

"Atris." Now Kae—Kreia's—hand brushed her shoulder. "Old friend. You know… you know what High Admiral Rensha will do with this translation? You know what they will say when they see that Malak and Revan are on Dromund Kaas, being hailed as Lords of the Sith?"

Atris nodded slowly. "Yes. I know."

"Perhaps Kavar and Loanin struck a bargain we could not keep," Kae murmured. "Are they on Katarr as well?"

"Yes," Atris said. "Nearly every member of the Council is there."

_I cannot warn the Jedi. If I warn them, they will scatter. And the Beast is too close. If they scatter now—_

Kreia said that Davad Arkan was little more than an animal. An animal has no reason. But an animal can be led.

Arkan was now, by all reports, an animal flying a warship with a military-class hyperdrive. An animal who could not be killed with a blade or a blaster, if the accounts were true. (And accounts were streaming in from Coruscant and the Core, accounts of Jedi in hiding fallen silent, accounts of Jedi corpses, accounts of a robed and masked monster in black.)

And beyond testimony… there was the feeling: like a scream growing ever-louder in the fabric of the Force itself—

Atris could hear it. Perhaps all who had been touched by Malachor could hear it. Louder, and louder still.

A drum, beating out of time.

Davad Arkan was a beast who had to be destroyed. Eventually. For he was also… a formidable weapon, given the right cause.

XXX

"You are a special case, Knight Surik," Master Vrook had said, that day Atris's padawan had vanished. "You have always formed strong connections with others. Unusual bonds. What happened at Malachor V seems to be echoing in you, even now. What we feel in you is… disturbing. Disruptive. A wound we cannot heal."

"And that is why we must seal the breach," Master Kavar added flatly. "Cauterize the infection."

"I'm sorry, my Padawan." Atris looked into the girl's expressionless eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of the woman she had loved as a daughter. "If I could spare you, I would."

"Be strong, Knight Surik," added Master Arren Kae. "Remember, strength is not the Force. It is in you."

XXX
Atris frowned. No. That can't be right?

Something was… something was wrong in her thoughts. A note out of tune.

"Be strong, Knight Surik," Kae said. But Kae was not there.

Kae was not there.

Vima Sunrider stripped the Force from Padawan Surik, but Kae was not there.

Not then. We thought she'd died—

My brother loved her. Loved her enough to shame his standing with her children. I told my brother Kae died at Malachor—we all assumed she had died at Malachor—

Six months later, General Yusanis was killed by a droid sent by Revan herself, excised from the Republic defenses with a medix's skill. His children were left to Atris: the clones of their mother, and the twins both. The boy was already a Jedi padawan, but the girl….

No.

Something was amiss, like a note out of tune.

For a moment she saw Sheris Loran standing before her, holding something in her hand. Glowing.

The holocron? The holocron she stole from me? But I did not see. I was not there.

Is that Sheris at all? It could be Revan instead. Revan looking at me with those cold, green eyes. Sheris never—never had that singular gaze. Sheris never had reason to hate me—

"Lost in the past?" Kae—Kreia's—voice intruded, a gentle knock upon a door.

"Mical does not want to see you," Atris admitted, using the truth to dissemble away her own uncertainty. "I had hoped that both he and Brianna would show some interest in their shared past, but—"

"It is of no importance. Sons...." Kreia's voice frosted over, a well of bitterness in that one word. "They will always disappoint." She laughed softly. "That is one experience you are best left without."

"Daughters may disappoint as well." Once Atris had hoped her brother's daughters would inherit her Force strength, but every one of them was null.

Only the daughter of your body, Master Kae, is Force-sensitive. Only Brianna could be trained as we were trained.

But Atris had not trained her.

"Daughters...." The old woman sighed heavily. "Perhaps. I considered Revan a daughter, although she was not born of my body. Daughters carry the seed of yourself; they are vessels of your flesh—even when the bond between you is frail and stretched." She rose to her feet and walked to the window. "You considered Surik a daughter, did you not?"

"I think all masters think of their padawans as—"

"No. Not all." Kae turned back towards Atris, her eyes blank as moons. "Where does Meetra Surik
"I do not know, I—when she left—and vanished. No one knows…"

Would I know if she was dead? The bond between us snapped. The Force within her shriveled and died. Would I know?

"We will find her." Kae's voice gentled. "For your sake."

"Given what has happened to Knight Arkan, perhaps we saved her from a worse fate," Atris suggested. Her pulse quickened, suddenly gripped by a dread that she could not name.

"Yes," agreed Kae. "We did."

They had. And yet—something. A note out of tune.

Atris raised her head and looked upon her old friend again, scarred and battered by her recent travails. Bent and stooped as if she had gone through the fires of hell themselves.

After Malachor, it was Vima Sunrider who brought Meetra Surik before the Council. It was Meetra Surik who went before the Council, it was Vima Sunrider—not Kae—

"Strength is not in the Force," she told Master Arren Kae, the woman who now called herself Kreia. "It is within you."

"So I have always said," Kreia nodded. Her brows arched, and she reached for the visor again, putting it over her face like a mask. She nodded her head, indicating the comm in front of them. "The Fleet is still… awaiting our response?"

My response. Not ours. With no Force, you are no longer Jedi, old friend.

The transcript of the recording for the Fleet was complete now. One swipe would broadcast the words to High Admiral Rensha and the rest.

The words spoken in Ancient Sith were even more damning than the images: and those were proof enough of Revan's treachery, proof enough of her alliance with the Sith Empire, her alliance with Malak, and proof that the destruction of the Star Forge and a Jedi mindwipe had merely slowed the inevitable.

Proof that she must be stopped and if it takes another Malachor to do so, it will be necessary.

But still Atris's hand hovered, renewed doubts clouding her mind. Had Revan felt this hesitation before Malachor? Had Meetra?

I know what the Fleet will do with this information. I know what must be sacrificed to destroy the Emperor.

I cannot shirk from my duty.

Her hand moved across the screen, transmitting the data to the Fleet.

Xxx

"Admiral." The ensign looked up from the communications array. "We're receiving a transmission. From Telos."
Admiral Rew Ekkumi looked up at her own board, meeting the holographic gazes of the other Fleet commanders, all on their own ships, all receiving the same broadcast. Leeshansintina Racharn had shared some of the visuals with them already—using D'Reev's connections to the Sith media—but the announcers were all speaking in Ancient Sith, and they had been left to seek that information themselves.

Had House Racharn found its own translation? Almost definitely. But whatever motive or intent they expected to gain from withholding it was meaningless.

But even now, a part of you hopes that it's a trick, a ruse for the Sith—some plan of Revan Starfire's, that Carth Onasi in particular is no traitor. They have his son. He could be trapped!

"Play the recording," Rew ordered Ensign Biu.

On the viewscreen, an unwitting world turned on its gentle axis. Their ships were invisible, cloaked, but riding in a tight orbit around the sleeping planet. Katarr was a beautiful world, as lush and green as a gem, and completely unaware of its sudden ascent onto the galactic stage.

XXX

Darth Vash: (shocked) "Really? Are we to call him Darth Carth? And he, not even a Force-user?"

Lady Fenestre: (smiling for the holocams) "In his most kind grace, the One has declared both of Revan Starfire's consorts are to be raised to the title of Darth, at least for ceremonial occasions; until such time as they go through their Trials of Pain, Suffering and Compulsion—after which their titles and rank will become permanently affixed."

Darth Vash: (sighs) "... and on Revan's left, signifying a strangely reduced rank, we have her original consort, Darth Malak D'Reev. Darth Malak is wearing a Human skin, genetically descended from Revan's First Consort—"

Lady Fenestre: (to Lord Scourge) "That must be so confusing!"

Lord Scourge: (inaudible response)

Lady Fenestre: "No need to be rude, my Lord! I'm sure their customs in the Republic are just as unharmonic and unsightly as we would expect them to be! Do you think His Imperial Munificence Shine-Song is planning a spring invasion? It would be a shame for so many of His Voices to miss our cherrah blossoming, and the Harvest Hunts; but one assumes, on some of those other worlds, cherrah bloom just as loudly, like magic screams—

Lord Scourge: "Malak seems inappropriately young for her now."

Lady Fenestre: "Is he? Young? How can one tell? Full-blood Humans are so pale...."

XXX

"I would prefer you spent more time assuring the recalcitrant Jedi, and less time with Mekel Jin." Azen said, as Lydie entered their chamber in the cruiser taking them to Katarr.

The tiny ship was packed, but they had a private room—a luxury to which Lydie was fast-becoming accustomed; like eridu sheets, and a loop-lace singlet under her robes.
There was barely room to stand, and so she sat next to Azen on the bed made for two, set next to a real ferraglass window. The swirl of hyperspace was distracting, but it might have been pleasant in normal space.

"We are responsible for Mekel's condition," she pointed out. "That means we are obligated to him."

*Lessons for a Senator's Wife: Regarding Decorum and Civility.*

"We are responsible for the citizens of three Bespin orbitals as well," Azen muttered. (For those were his family holdings.) "But we don't attend to each personally—"

"Imagine seeing the world with the Force drained out," she snapped, feeling strangely defensive. Lydie could imagine it. In Knight Arkan's arms such a fate had nearly been hers. "After all Mekel Jin has experienced—"

"Did he discuss his experience?" Jealousy took Azen's beautiful face and made it a twisted mask, features too chiseled to seem real. He had, Lydie realized suddenly, not a hair on his chin: just skin so smooth and waxed he could have been from Ryloth.

She felt her skin begin to flush thinking of the comparison. Humans didn't have horns, of course, but Mekel's rough jaw would scrape over the surface of hers—

Xxx

"Have you been to the restricted section?" The padawan everyone said was a Sith spy grinned casually at her. "Telos and I go all the time. I could take you—"

"Master Atris keeps the doors sealed." Lydie Korr felt compelled to mention that, even if it made her sound like a rule-abider, the kind of Jedi who would only do what she was told, and when she was told.

Mekel leaned closer. His skin was rough, with hair extending down the sides, covering his chin. He shaved sometimes, because she'd noticed it would go from pale and smooth to rough over the course of a day—or longer if he didn't have it removed again. His eyes were so dark they looked black, framed with thick lashes and heavy lids. He had a faint scar, like a burn, across the side of one of his arms that she was dying to ask him about, but it was never the right time.

He leaned closer, taller than she was, and she felt his breath, warm against her forehorns, and she looked up at him—

"Got it!" Padawan Dustil Onasi interrupted, appearing suddenly behind Mekel, like he had popped out of nowhere. He was holding a datapad in one hand, grinning. "'Rydal's Crises of Faith.' You sure this is dirty?"

"It's Sith poetry," Mekel said, not looking back. He raised one eyebrow at Lydie, breath still warm on her skin. "What do you think, Padawan Korr?"

"Isn't that in the restricted section?"

"He does stealth. I do locks." He shrugged. "Need any books?"

She found it hard to catch her breath. "I—what happens if you're caught?"

"A very boring lecture about personal responsibility. Loss of privileges." Mekel shrugged. "Not
that many to lose. Then we tell Yuthura Ban to tell them we're worried about the Dark Side and everyone leaves us alone again—"

"We have to go," Dustil interrupted, rather abruptly, grabbing Mekel's arm and pulling him back and around the shelves of the archives. "I think Atris is coming."

"See you later, Lydie Korr." The possible Sith spy was still smiling at her, as his friend dragged him away, his head turning, those dark eyes staring into hers—

Xxx

"—is why," Azen reached for her hand and she realized he had still been speaking, all of this time. "Do you understand?"

It was easy to admit that Lydie did not when he phrased the inquiry like that. "No. Can you clarify?"

"I have made an alliance with Racharn," he repeated. "I have seen footage from Dromund Kaas. Dustil Onasi is there... and possibly still possessed by Darth Malak. Our efforts may have been in vain." He frowned. "You understand, I cannot admit this to Masters Vrook or Kavar, or Padawan Jin—and if the Fleet finds out—"

Lydie tried to make sense of that and failed. "May I see the footage?"

"Of course."

For all of his machinations, Azen seemed to retain an almost... devout loyalty to her. It made her feel guilty, and that, strangely, made her love him more.

She leaned over and squeezed his hands, placing her mouth on his. His breath hissed out in surprise, but he made a quick recovery.

"After," Lydie whispered, in his ear. "After this."

XXX

**Lady Fenestre:** "No need to be rude, my Lord! I'm sure their customs in the Republic are just as unharmonic and unsightly as we would expect them to be! Do you think His Imperial Munificence Shine-Song is planning a spring invasion? It would be a shame for so many of His Voices to miss our cherrah blossoming, and the Harvest Hunts; but one assumes, on some of those other worlds, cherrah bloom just as loudly, like magic screams—

**Lord Scourge:** "Malak seems inappropriately young for her now."

**Lady Fenestre:** "Is he? Young? How can one tell? Full-blood Humans are so pale."

**Lady Vash:** "Youth and beauty are often fleeting. I think they make a terribly impressive couple."

**Lord Scourge:** "Now is too soon to speak of another invasion."

**Lady Fenestre:** "Still as careless and treasonous as ever, Finiris? A new name won't help with that!"

**Lady Vash:** "I think a spring invasion sounds perfectly ideal. And with both Revan and Malak to guide our forces through Republic Space—"
"Invasion? A spring invasion?" Admiral Cein held up his hand for a pause, and they all dutifully stilled their broadcasts. "There's your proof! Vidcasters, discussing an invasion on one of their networks."

"It could be a trap," the High Admiral objected.

Cein squinted at the subtitles to the Ancient Sith. "You're quite sure this translation is accurate?"

"Oh, yes." Rew Ekkumi advanced, and then froze the image on a close-up of Revan Starfire standing between both Onasis, trying to ignore the punch in the gut sensation she kept getting every time she looked at Carth's face. "Master Atris vouched for its provenance herself. House Racharn collected the footage from the network they own on the Sith homeworld, and then transmitted it widebeam—"

*I can't believe you'd turn on us, Carth. I never believed it—but this—*

Hindsight was a terrible thing.

"So the Jedi have not, in fact, rid the galaxy of Malak D'Reev." Admiral Rensha hissed, her tongue flicking through her lips, disapproval evident even over a holocam

"We don't know anything for sure," Rew argued. "But that is Dustil Onasi standing there. The Jedi promised to end his Force possession, and this appears to be definitive proof that they did not?"

*But Carth is standing there too. Is he protecting his son? Or her?*

It was quite difficult to tell in the blurry holovid. Carth Onasi's expression could have meant everything or nothing.

And Revan Starfire just looked serene.

Rensha's lips drew up in a snarl. *"I see proof. Proof that the Jedi lied."*

"It… it does seem that way," Rew admitted. She hesitated, trying not to look at Carth Onasi, half-naked on the vid screen, walking arm-in-arm with Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith. "And there is more. That pinion-class warbird broadcasting from Sullust... we are tracing its respondents……"

XXX

Revan was floating in space aboard the near-dead *Pinion V*. The suit she was wearing smelled like sweat and stale air, and she wanted nothing more than to sleep. But Aemelie had assigned Mandalorians to torment her awake in shifts, and now it was the Second Wife's turn herself.

"And the Star Forge drew its energy from Force users? From people? Not from the sun? Are you sure of this?" Aemelie kept pushing and pushing.

"I think so." It was hard to keep her eyes open, but the Mandalorian had informed Revan (cheerfully) that she risked running out of oxygen if she fell asleep—something about a lack of movement making the suit's processors shut down.
In dark and sleep-deprived moments, Revan had wondered if the Second Wife of Ordo was just fracking with her.

"Maybe both… I… I never really understood it, Aemelie."

"The other Revan might."

If Revan opened her eyes she knew she'd see the other woman peering at her over the comm. "Then fracking ask the other Revan!" It had been two days, floating in this metal fracking tomb with Mandalorians on the comm keeping her awake. Only two days and already Revan wanted to jump out of her skin.

"I would have, had I realized at the time. Do you know if she was the one who commissioned the Mass Shadow Generator that destroyed Malachor V? Was she responsible for its design? The Deathbringer said it was not her, but Milli neglected to get any specific information."

"Millifar already asked me, Aemelie. Before they left. I don't know."

"I don't care."

Revan tapped the nav charts again. Maybe she could steer the ship using the Force? Crash land on the nearest planet with an atmo?

The board sputtered fitfully through, almost out of juice.

*It could run out of juice. Then I'd be truly alone out here. And then if Aemelie's right, I'd fall asleep and die.*

For all of her annoying questions that Revan couldn't answer, Aemelie's presence was preferable to that.

"Ah, there you are." A voice off camera. Gwenarius. "I've brought the children to say good-bye."

"Dxun!" Aemelie's body turned, vanishing offscreen for a moment and then reappearing with a fat baby in her arms.

He'd grown since the last time Revan had seen him, back on Coruscant.

"You… named him," she offered, since that seemed appropriate to mention. "Where are you going?"

"To Dxun, in fact." Gwenarius peered at her from behind Aemelie. "Canderous said he'd already informed you of our new base location, so why feign ignorance?"

"I didn't realize you were going to base."

"With the children, as is custom." Gwenarius sighed. "Truthfully, Third Wife, I have never had a taste for blooding in stars. I leave it to the more capable members of my family. Take care of them for me."

"I will." Revan nodded.

"We take care of ourselves," Aemelie corrected, frowning. "By our husband's accounts, Revan's skills are limited to strategic feints. When we need someone to actually *shoot*, we have our own pilots."
"Aemelie," Gwenarius said sternly. "Do not let your personal judgments cloud your use of the Third Wife's skills."

"She just wants your bloodline," Aemelie half-muttered to Revan. "But since you refuse to consummate your marriage with Canderous, or even more recently with your other husband, and have yet to provide us with a complete medical so that we can harvest appropriate samples—"

"Aemelie!" Gwenarius took Dxun back. His baby fingers batted at the camera. It made Revan irrationally miss Abasen and Korrie.

"Did you name your other daughter yet?" Was she supposed to ask?

"Even without your presence at the ceremony," Aemelie replied.

Gwenarius nodded. "Her name is Oerina."

"Oh." No need to ask why. "I… you haven't heard from… from him. Have you?"

The two women exchanged glances. "No," Gwenarius answered, after an awkward silence. "How could we? We do not speak with the dead."

"But he's… he's dead, but he's still… alive? Aware?" They did know, didn't they?

"We know what he is," Gwenarius said. "And we do not speak to it—as I said."

XxX

"So, this is the Pinion-class warbird transmitting?" High Admiral Rensha pointed to the unintelligible Aurebesh code scrolling across all of their displays. Beneath them all, Katarr turned, twinkling and unaware of the precipice its defenders straddled.

"Yes." Jiya Sand nodded. "When the Aleema was in dry docks in Kuat, we attached trackers, which is the standard procedure. The location transmitters were disabled quickly by the Mando'ade. But they overlooked this frequency, which appears to be their emergency response channel. When an emergency beacon from the Pinion V pinged their ship, it also reached SIS."

"Gibberish," the Trandoshan High Admiral pointed out.

"Encoded," Rew told her, realizing a millisecond too late that of course, Rensha knew that. "We… we haven't been able to crack the cipher."

"The broadcast could be an equipment malfunction on a destroyed fighter, or some long-range patroller unaware that their side has lost," Jiya pointed out.

"This lost warbird has nothing to do with Malak," Cein argued. "Malak has to be our main concern. Malak and Revan on a Sith planet." The man was paranoid, saw Malak's plans in every shadow. As if Malak had ever been subtle.

"Or, it could be that Lords Revan and Malak are summoning their Mandalorians," Rensha hissed.
"It could be," Rew nodded grimly. What a time it was when she agreed with Old Scaly, their High Admiral. Strange times indeed, but here they were. "As I said, we haven't been able to unlock the encoding on the warbird's transmission. What is significant, is that the broadcast is still going on. We can't pinpoint the Aleema's location, but that Pinion has been speaking to it for two straight days."

She glanced at Rensha, whose snout twitched, indicating Rew should continue.

"Furthermore, we are tracing flight patterns of three ships, all closing in on the same sector. Two of them are known to be Mandalorian-owned, with falsified registries. The third ship fits the same naming pattern."

"So this lost fighter... this Pinion is something the Mandalorians want. Badly. Mandalorians? Or... Sith?" Jiya's jaw tightened. "Are they allied with Revan still? Just after salvage? You fought the Star Forge ships in space, Ekkumi—"

"Most Sith fighters were designed for close-range offensives," she told them. "The Pinion-class are different. Elite warbirds, assigned a crew of four. Usually at least one Dark Jedi. If one is returning from a mission now and seeking the Mandalorians...."

"It could be anything," Cein argued. "What does this have to do with Malak and our deal with the Jedi?"

Rew pulled up the other part of the data they had received. "Maybe nothing, but we've dispatched a ship from the Katarr assignment to monitor that warbird."

"And the rest of the Katarr assignment?" Cein paused. "Given this new information?"

High Admiral Rensha's lips drew back from her pointed teeth. "We are still collecting facts."

XXX

Were there words, Lydie Korr wondered, for telling a friend that their unwilling sacrifice had done nothing at all?

Azen showed me a broadcast from Dromund Kaas. They recognized Darth Malak as Revan's consort. Dustil Onasi's body is there, but Darth Malak is what they're calling him—

There should be. There should be words. Those were words, but she couldn't figure out how to say them.

"Our tent's over there," Mekel Jin nodded, pointing across the sea of half-assembled structures making up the Jedi Conclave. His forehead was very flat and smooth compared to his chin. "Not as flash as yours. Yours is nicer. Nice digs."

"Azen selected it." Lydie shrugged. It was much nicer than anything she had lived in before her marriage; but a hovel compared to the Loanin apartments on Coru.

She gestured to the open door. "Would you... would you like to come inside? I could make tea."

"Where is Loanin?" Mekel asked. His head turned, and he seemed to be watching a pair of Togruta padawans sparring. They had stripped down to light under-robies in the hot sun.

Lydie subdued an irrational twinge of jealousy.
"Would you… I suppose combat practice is a way to pass the time. We could… we could spar if you prefer it."

"Where's your husband?" Mekel repeated. His head ducked down. If he'd been Zabrak she would have taken that as a sign of aggression, but Humans used the gesture to mean they were socially uncomfortable. Lydie had noted this behavior with Mekel Jin before, even spoken to Thalia about it at length—

"Azen's in orbit." Lydie nodded at the empty sky. "He had another meeting with Fleet authority."

"Good. Uh… that's good." Mekel's voice cracked a little. "Lydie. Does… does any of this make sense to you?" He gestured at the busy camp around them, Jedi everywhere. Perhaps he couldn't feel it, but Lydie could: the thrum of so many attuned in the Force, together they felt like a song.  

*It makes more sense than what we did to you.*

If she told him, would he still look at her?

If she told him, he'd be angry. Upset. He would turn away—

*And it would change nothing. Nothing at all. Except Mekel Jin would no longer smile at her.*

"I have some training sabers…." her voice trailed off as his smile faded. "Of course it makes sense. When Davad Arkan's ship appears above Katarr, the Fleet ships will uncloak and blow it up. Davad Arkan is a threat that we Jedi cannot stop, proof that not everything comes down to the Force—"

"And then what? We should go to the fracking Sith planets. Stop them. Not this banthashit." His mouth tightened. "You have no idea what it's like over there. So dark… but there's power…." 

"I would love to hear about it." She would. It wasn't merely that Lydie Korr liked the way Mekel Jin's hi eyes looked at her, or the way his voice sounded, or that she liked imagining the strange roughness of his stubble-covered chin—

She liked him.

Not to mention Mekel Jin was a trove of Sith lore. Even Azen would surely appreciate that.

Xxx

"There's no coming back from this." High Admiral Rensha surveyed her closest advisors—friends—although she used the term loosely. One could hardly be friends with those of lesser rank.

*I know." Jiya nodded. His holographic image flickered, as the sunspots from Katarr's red dwarf of a sun cut into their short-range transmissions. *But the footage merely confirms our fears.*

"Did Masters Kavar and Loanin lie? Or are they unaware?" Admiral Rew Ekkumi sounded like she wasn't sure.

*We have to assume the Jedi are compromised—perhaps not willingly, but…* Jiya Sand sighed. "Even Kavar and Loanin."

The Sith broadcast that Atris had translated for them was blurred, conducted in an unfamiliar language, harsh and dissonant, but the main players were unmistakable: there, Revan Starfire, escorted by a Fleet commander and her combat droid, Dustil Onasi, and Carth Onasi. From the
behavior of everyone present (including, their xenososh said, the costume of traditional Sith wedding tunics on both Onasis), there was every indication that the initial report from House Racharn had been the correct one.

Malak D'Reev and his wife were alive and well, and being celebrated on a Sith planet.

Coupled with the rumors of a Mandalorian freighter running old war comm codes, and a *Pinion-class* warbird's distress call pinging from Sullust….

**Who are we fighting?** It was the question Rensha and the others had been trying to answer for weeks.

In the last few days that question had crystallized into sharp relief—even if the answers were unpalatable, would have been unthinkable even a year previous.

Rensha looked at the screen again, at Captain Carth Onasi, decorated war hero and loyal soldier. It was more than emotional regret she felt down to her scales—it was anger. Anger that such a good man could have been twisted so far. And his son's own body taken from him….

*How can we condone an order of mystics who let the dead possess the living? How can we allow their failed policies to continue, when they have caused so many deaths?*

If it were only the Mandalorian threat they had to worry about, Rensha would have welcomed battle. But the darker question remained.

*How can we fight an order of mystics when each one of them has access to powers that can cloud our minds, suspend physics, and advance physical conditioning far beyond even the most enhanced soldier?*

At Telos, Rensha had faced down pilots who flew unshielded, whose blind targeting skills never missed. She'd faced them and fled, limping away on the *Byss Welcome*. Later, she'd seen footage of what had happened groundside: caped monsters with red particle blades cutting through civilian populations while bombs fell around them.

*And every one of those Jedi—every one—has the potential to become monsters like those.*

*And here is an entire Sith civilization full of monsters—and the Jedi want us to destroy the one thing who could stop them.*

*They want us to destroy Davad Arkan, Force-eater. The one creature capable of destroying them.*

It was sentient nature, of course. All beings fight for their survival. As a Trandoshan, Admiral Rensha was acutely aware of that.

*But the Jedi do not rule the Republic. They merely advise.*

The decision was easy, even if living with its fallout would not be.

Katarr had looked so innocuous, small and peaceful below… with a slow, but steady traffic of shuttles, cruisers, and cargo ships bringing the Jedi to its surface for the facade of a Conclave. How many Jedi were there now? They had been told perhaps a thousand.

*How many Jedi are left in the galaxy?*

The Order was notoriously secretive with that information, but their estimates were less than three
thousand, and at least half of those were Service Corps, members of the Order who had washed out of their training; or apprentices, Jedi too young to even be padawans.

If true, most of the able-bodied population of Jedi Force users were on Katarr right now, waiting to lure a Force-sucking monster to his doom.

Doom can be delayed. And if there is no Force left... might the problem of Davad Arkan not solve itself?

Rensha realized what she proposed was... genocide. But an odd part of her heart-brain wondered if Revan Starfire—the real Revan Starfire, the General Revan that she had come to admire, the woman she had nearly followed to the gates of hell itself—might have understood.

"Can we trust Atris?" Jiya asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Admiral Rensha shrugged. "Does it matter?" She had tried, tried to remember the days when Malak and Revan had been the best of the Fleet—not just exemplars for the Jedi—but for all their soldiers. She had tried to stay objective, tried to believe the insane theory the Jedi had first espoused: that Revan and Malak could save the galaxy from some kind of life-possessing Sith Emperor... but yet, the real, hard evidence was there on this vid, standing next to the Republic's most loyal soldier, Captain Carth Onasi.

Revan and Malak reborn were still Revan and Malak. They had not stopped the Emperor. Instead, they were being welcomed by him with open arms—

Admiral Rensha remembered the original Revan well enough. A brilliant, logical mind. Clear-headed enough to be reptilian. They'd all worn the masks then, making them supposedly indistinguishable, but it was obvious when Revan was the one directing operations. Rensha had not been High Admiral then—merely one of a dozen of Forn Dodonna's sub commanders, holding back the rear guard, protecting supply lines.

Until Revan came. Revan's presence shone through Rensha's own victories like gleaming, oiled scales in murky water.

I owe her my rank. I owe her my victories. And then... she nearly cost me the entire Republic Fleet —

Rensha had fought with Bastila too, even once or twice with the legendary Vima Sunrider; but Battle Meditation was nothing without guidance and Revan Starfire had possessed an acute military mind, with an almost uncanny ability to anticipate her enemy.

That military mind, coupled with Sith Force powers, had almost driven the Republic to its knees once. If that happened again—

No. It cannot happen again. Any of it.

"Hold orbital positions," Rensha commanded. "For now." She looked at them all, her subordinates. Allies. Veterans from the same conflict—all of them commanders who had followed Revan before to the gates of Malachor; and all of them ones who had abandoned her after, when it became clear that their brilliant strategist had no end-game but oblivion. "There is no coming back," she reminded them. "And for that reason, our course must be irrefutable."

XXX

If you'd told Mekel Jin a month ago when he was living high on the Coruscanti skyline that he'd be
stuck on a backwater farm planet with his estranged father—without Dustil, and with no Force—he'd have asked for some of what you were smoking; so that he and Telos could hand it out to marks and then rob them blind of any interesting valuables they might have.

(Not that they'd needed credits by then—by then they'd had plenty, but it would have been hilarious.)

But times had sure fracking changed. Now, he and Dear Old Master Vrook Dads shared a small pop-up plasticore tent in a fracking field of them, all full of Jedi. It rained a lot. There was always a line for the fresher, and the asshole Miralukan farmer whose field this was got all pissy when Mekel went off to piss in the river instead of waiting his turn for one of the porta-pissers.

So far, the Jedi Conclave on Katarr reminded Mekel of the time Master Uthar had taken them all on a field trip/invasion tour of that Endorran moon. They'd come in after the main Sith forces had already left and spent a week on clean-up and patrol.

At least this time, no one was on corpse disposal. Yet.

And sparring with practice sabers with Lydie Korr sure beat sparring with particle blades with Lashowe DeVry actually trying to actively kill him.

"I guess when you were my age, there was that Exar Kun thing," Mekel offered. "Did you join him, uh… Dads?"

"What? No! Of course I didn't—" Dear old Dads seemed to pause, as if he realized Mekel was just trying to find some common ground. "No. I did not. Son."

"Oh." Mekel was still trying to think of things to say. Polite things to say that would stop his thoughts from racing, or stop him from feeling like he needed to jet.

Where are you gonna go? What the frack can you do? Every skill you had was in the Force, unless you want to join the family fracking business.

Family fracking business. Hah. That was almost funny, so Mekel laughed.

"It was not an amusing time," Vrook said stiffly. "What do you find funny?"

"Everything. All of this." He gestured at the tent in front of them. "I don't have the Force anymore because of Lord Mal—"

"You don't need to call him, 'Lord' Malak, anymore." Vrook blinked suddenly and bent his head. He made several throat-clearing sounds then, and Mekel waited politely for him to finish.

"You want me to call him 'Uncle Malak' instead?" Cousin? Cousin-in-law? Was that a thing?

A thin smile crossed Dear Old Dads's thin lips. "I suppose it doesn't matter what you call him. I just…it is difficult for me to understand. What your life must have been like that you—"

"And we were getting along so well." Frack you, Dear Old Dads. Mekel got up from his sitting mat (it rolled out to become a sleeping mat at night. and three days now and he was done, he was done with all of this fracking banthashit.)

"Wait!" Vrook stood up too. "Son. Don't—"

"Why are you here?" Mekel snapped at him. "You know it's all nuts, right? Why do you trust
them? The Fleet? Ever think this might be just what that Sith Emperor wants? Or the Senators?"

"They're not the same—"

"Tell that to Master Marla Korr and fracking Master Klee." Mekel said. "I have to piss."

He turned and walked away. Towards the fracking river.

XXX

Ord Mantell was as unassuming groundside as it had looked from orbit. Jasp Organa adjusted his sights on the viewscreen of the shuttle, watching the two robed figures disembark, and trying to ignore the ominous feeling in his gut.

"We'll be back soon," Lord Sion had told Jasp, flashing a rotting smile. "Nihilus wants a snack."

"- - - - - -," Nihilus had added.

"I told him we'd feast at Katarr, but he's… impatient." The dead Sith had looked worse, if that were possible. Something dark was seeping through the skin of his gut.

"I-I don't know how long we can linger before someone asks for our docking clearance—"

Sion had chuckled. "They won't. Just remember: you want to stay here. On the shuttle. Until we return."

"I do." Jasp did. Realizing what was happening to him didn't stop it. "I want to stay here. Until you return."

The door had apexed closed behind them, and Jasp let out the breath he'd been holding, resting his head against the nav.

*They're going to kill more Jedi. Jedi like that woman who stole Pollie's memories.*

*Maybe they deserve it. Pollie doesn't have the Force. They can't hurt her or me. Maybe they deserve it, these Jedi—*

Jasp wished he could get that kid's face out of his head though. That kid, standing over his ma with glowing, blue hands.

But when his Masters…. When *they* were gone, his head became clearer. It was the best—and the worst of times. Self-reflection became recrimination and regret. *I should never have left you, Moll. I don't even know where Pollie is—*

His hand shook a little as he dialed home.

"**Jasp!**" Moll must have recognized the comm because she picked up immediately. **"Where are you?"**

"Ord Mantell, I…." His mouth felt dry. "Listen, Mollie; I may not have a chance to comm again."

**"Why? What's happening?"** Her features sharpened. She must have turned on a light—he hadn't thought how late it would be there.

"Nothing new. Just… I think I got conscripted." Jasp wanted to make it a joke. "These two friends of Revan Starfire's they're… real Sith. It's bad."
What?"

"Real Sith, who?" A boyish treble interrupted, and there was her son again, staring at Jasp, hair mussed with sleep. A muffled cry next to him, and then there was Abasen, Jasp's grandson too—looking bigger than he'd been, tufts of hair spiking almost long enough for his first knot.

"They sleep with me sometimes," Moll admitted. "The boy… he has nightmares."

"I dreamed my mother died," Malachor D'Reev said. "Last night, but she didn't, right? Are you with her?" He rubbed his eyes. "What Sith are you with? Have you seen her?"

"No… no, I—they call themselves Sion and Nihilus. One's dead and one… he eats Force users." They had other names—Sion, the Mandalorian, had practically given Jasp their life stories. The boy seemed as if he just wanted to talk. And the more he did, the younger he seemed, despite his ravaged appearance. If he hadn't been compelling Jasp to follow him, he might have felt sorry for the kid.

"Huh?" The holoimage of Revan's son frowned. "Are you positive that's not what they want you to think?"

Jasp suppressed a shiver. Revan's son didn't sound like any child he'd ever met before. "I'm not sure of anything." Not a good time to get rusty, but he might not have another. "Moll… I-I miss you. Has there been any word? About our Pollie?"

"None since Revan left." Her voice seemed deliberately light. "Jasp, you need to get off that ship right now and come home."

"I can't. Sion… he told me to stay with the ship."

"So?" Revan's son made a face, looking every centimeter a Coruscanti mucky muck. "He's just some dumb Sith Lord, right? My mother's like, his boss. I say you should go."

In a better time, Jasp might have laughed. Instead, he looked at Abasen's blank face, those dark eyes blurring through the comm projection.

"Wish I could, kiddo."

"If this is some kind of joke, Jasp Organa—" Moll sounded fierce and bright. He loved her for it.

I wish I were joking too.


"It's not a joke," he told them. "Hey… listen if you… when you talk to our Pollie again, tell her—"

"You tell her," his wife snapped. "Whatever nonsense is going through your head now? You're gonna tell her yourself."

"Tell her I was wrong about the Sith," Jasp finished. "They don't have the right idea. They have fracking terrible ideas."

His wife made a sound between a laugh and a sob. He didn't think he'd ever loved her more.
Revan shivered.

The stars pressed too close, as if something out there was lurking, just out of reach. Revan could almost feel it—there—in an empty quadrant of space, lights like tiny fires, burning. *Life.*

*I'm losing my mind. There's nothing there at all.*

Revan rested her forehead against the cool surface of her helmet, trying not to sleep again. She wasn't supposed to sleep, but it was getting harder and harder to stay awake. For some reason, every time she slipped into half-consciousness she saw Malak, found herself running down a corridor after him; but every time she reached the end, every time she drew close, he turned his face away.

*The Mandalorians should be here soon*—it was hard to stay awake, and in her half-dreaming state Revan saw Bastila Shan staring back at her in the viewscreen's 'scape, like the reflection in a mirror.

"You never listened," the Jedi declared, her voice full of as much self-righteous scorn as it had been that day on the roof of the ancient temple.

"I'm sorry." *You should have just told me, Bastila. I would have listened. You should have told me. All those times you held quiet, all those times I thought I was losing my mind*—

"Shouldn't have staged your coup above *my* planet," a dark-haired girl with her hair in a top-knot added, standing behind her. It took Revan a second to recognize Beya Organa.

"What?"

"I made my choice, Rev." Beya Organa shrugged. "*Polla* would have done the same, I bet. It was our *home.* Why didn't you pick Hoth instead?"

"Choice? I-I don't—" *I'm arguing with a hallucination. Fracking hell, I'm trapped in space arguing with my own mind—and losing—*

"I wasn't following you; I was helping. Helping my friends on a dangerous mission." Juhani's voice was softer than the rest. Anger gone, full of sad resignation.

"It's gonna be okay, Polla." Mission stepped in front of all of them, leaning over so that her face was eye-level with Revan's seated body. Her eyes were wide and blue, the color of her skin. "Guess it's kind of like you saved me, right? I would've died when Malak blew Taris up anyway."

"Except *that* was her fault," Beya snapped.

"Not entirely," Bastila chimed in. "I remember our sojourn in the sublevels quite well, Knight Organa. Your sad attempts to betray your—"

"I'm sorry," Revan interrupted, muttering to both of them. "I'm sorry I killed you. Again."

*Hallucinating? Hypoxia? Keep moving!* she reminded herself, forcing her stiff limbs to move back and forth.

*Korrie. What a joke it'll be if your ma goes off to save the galaxy and dies floating in space.*
And how can I stop Dar'Revan? Even with the Aleema, what can I do? Why the hell do I think I know what to do with a fracking warship at all?

"If you're real, tell me something useful," Revan snapped. Her breath rattled inside the suit, fogging the visor a little. That was new, probably meant some part of the recycler wasn't working. "Tell me how to defeat Dar'Revan. Tell me how to kill Tenebrae."

"You want to defeat yourself?" Mission scrunched up her face. "I'm not a Sith Lord or anything, but that seems dumb, kinda."

"Use your gifts," Bastila told her. "I used to study your battles. You were brilliant. High Admiral Rensha once told me she thought you were wasted with the Jedi."

"So gifted you nearly burned the stars," Beya mocked. "We all wished you'd been less."

"Sorry, I had to check the local traffic." Aemelie's face appeared again in the viewscreen. The ghost-images behind her dissolved—never really there at all. "I did hear from Canderous and Milli—their corvette should be there to retrieve you within hours. Make sure they anchor your ship properly. We wouldn't want any damage to its hull—"

"I said I'd tell them." Revan forced her eyes back open again and exhaled. "I told you twice."

"The Pinion V is very important to me," Aemelie repeated for the hundredth time. The unspoken bit being that Revan herself was not. "I have drawn up some plans for our invasion of the Sith Empire if you would like to review them—"

"It… it can't be an invasion," Revan protested. "We need to find a way to stop the Emperor. We can't invade his territory with one ship!"

"We have more than one ship." Aemelie looked smug, almost conspiratorial. "But we will speak of this later. Right now… I was wondering if you would play a game with me? It's merely a training simulator. We use them to train children. Polla Organa and I played quite often. She had an innate talent for the targeting sims—"

"Well, I don't, Second Wife."

Aemelie had already given Revan several lectures on how much better Polla Organa was at everything than Revan.

At least I wasn't stupid enough to pretend to be a Sith Lord for credits.

Revan frowned, remembering Taris. And Manaan. And… Korriban.

Well, not for millions of credits.

"There are other simulation programs," Aemelie told her. "I have one here—" she held up a plasticore tape. "Shall we play a game?"

Is it a trap? Exhaustion weighed her lids, and Revan moved her toes in the suit, twisting her legs back and forth to keep awake. Her stomach had been empty now for days, and it ached, dully.

"Sure," she said. "How about chess?"

"I was thinking the Great Galactic War," Aemelie beamed. "If you like, I will control the Sith
Fleet, and you may mount the Mandalorian offensive."

Revan narrowed her eyes. "This is just a game, right? You're not using a real fleet somewhere based on what I'd say?"

"Check your oxygen levels," Aemelie told her coolly. "You may be suffering from hypoxia."

Xxx

"Hello, Lydie." Mekel tried to keep his voice casual, like this was normal. Like any of it—this Jedi Conclave, this Zabrak inviting him to the tent she shared with her husband when he was half a planet away (maybe even in orbit) at some meeting—anything. Like anything was normal, or could be, ever again. "I... I, uh, I got your note."

A shy Neimoidian padawan had pressed it into his hand (when Mekel was on his way back from the river) and then ran skipping off.

*We need to talk.*

Just those words, her sig, and coordinates to her tent—as if he'd forgotten where it was.

*Their tent. The tent she shares with Loanin, because they're married now. They're married, and Telos is dead and I don't have the fracking Force.*

"Would you like some tea?" the Zabrak asked, like she had the other four times he'd been here. He'd always said no, and then they'd spar. She wasn't very good, but she had the Force.

She kept kicking his ass.

*But I'm getting better.*

Mekel liked sparring with her more than with Dear Old Dads. Dear Old Dads was a master duelist who kept letting Mekel win so he'd feel better about himself.

Frack Dear Old Dads.

Lydie Korr didn't know enough to throw any fights. Frack, half the time, he was teaching her stuff.

Her tent was also much nicer than the one he and Dear Old Dads were sharing. And Master Azen Loanin, Mekel couldn't help but notice, was nowhere in evidence. (Just like the other four times he'd been here.) Although a stack of what looked like the most boring datapads ever were piled on top of a nearby chair, next a man's pair of expensive-looking fur-lined slippers.

*A babe like Lydie, your own tent, and all you do is read. Sounds like you, Loanin.*

"Mekel?" The babe was talking to him. "Did you want the tea?"

"Sure." *Whatever. He always took it to be polite, even if it tasted like muddy water. "Unless you have something stronger?"

"I do." Red spots burned on her cheeks like she was blushing and Mekel hadn't even meant—he hadn't meant anything—

"I mean if you have something too...."

"I could." She stood up, gracefully unfolding herself and walked to the console, pulled out two
glasses and a bottle of what looked like expensive CoruGin.

Lydie poured their drinks into glass bulbs that looked like they went meant for tea. A lot of it. Mekel wondered if she knew that—

_Is she trying to get me drunk?_ If Telos were here, If Telos were in his head, he'd make some comment, some crude comment and Dustil would—

_Dustil would be pissed at me. Dustil never understood that it wasn't serious. Sure, she's beautiful, and she's here, but she's not—_

_She's no Millifar. She's no Dustil._

Guiltily, he wondered if he should reverse that order, but Milli at least was still alive.

"I'm sorry about… the Force and… Dustil," Lydie offered. "I'm sorry."

Mekel shrugged. "Seems like I can't catch a break." He drained his glass. "Why am I here, Lydie? Why… why do you keep calling me here?"

_She feels sorry for you, fockda. Not really Dustil's voice in his head, but that's what Telos would say. Poor ickle Mekelkins, all alone in the world._

His face felt strangely warm, and Mekel turned his head to the floor to hide his expression. The drink was smooth; it tasted like lema and spice. His head spun pleasantly.

Lydie sipped hers more carefully. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Of course." Maybe he'd misread this entire thing. Telos would laugh at him for being such an idiot—

"Do you remember that time in the archives?" she asked him. Her head tilted slightly, and her eyes seemed to be examining his face for its reaction with the precision of a micro-bot.

"Sure." He flashed a smile as if he did.

"I thought you were going to kiss me," she said bluntly.

"Oh!" _Oh, that time in the archives._ He remembered breathing on her horns because the Zabrak who worked for Moms always said horns were an erogenous zone. He _had_ been going to kiss her —she was there, and she was beautiful, and she seemed to want to be kissed—but then Telos—

_We slipped that datapad of Sith porn in Mical Jorde's bunk and then, when the tracker noted it missing and Master Atris went looking—_

It might have been funnier, looking back, Mekel thought, if he and Telos had actually managed to see Jorde's humiliation. Funny thing though, looking back. They'd never heard about the fall out. Maybe the asshole hadn't been caught. And then, it had been pretty soon after that that Telos said frack this—or Mekel said frack this—or they both thought it—and then they'd taken off with Master Ban and left the Jedi for good.

_Or until now. Why the frack am I here?_

"Mekel," Lydie's voice was soft. "You seem a trillion parsecs away."

"Sorry, I was just—yeah," he said, looking across the table at her. "I was going to kiss you."
Lydie put her drink down and stood up again, shrugging off her robe. She had nothing on beneath. The porta-lamp light lit the spirals on her arms, over her breasts and taut stomach, the lines that traced the curves of her hips—

The indentations really did go all over her skin.

Mekel felt all his breath leave his body like the drink was kicking in.

He stood up too. Taller than her. She was shorter than Telos. It was all… different.

Good-different though. Not bad.

"Yeah," Mekel whispered, bending his head to kiss the tips of the horns on her forehead. Zella had told him once the horns were… were sensitive. He knew it was true when Lydie shivered, gave a soft sigh, in his arms, and pressed against him. "We're friends," he murmured softly, into the warmth of her skin.

Xxx

Aemelie and Revan played the Great Galactic War for several hours; a game of checks and feints, of hyperspace timing and resource allocations. A game of stalking other ships in three-dimensional space, calculating risk, and using gut instincts that Revan hadn't even known she had.

The first match was a rout. Aemelie wiped out the fleet that Revan had split in two with a war of attrition—stretching Revan's resources so thin that they were easy prey to pick off.

The second match was nearly a draw; but Aemelie ignited a superweapon at the parlay, destroying half her own remaining pieces and all of Revan's.

"I learned that from you," she beamed.

"Not me," Revan muttered, half under her breath, tapping away at the virtual grid.

The third match, Revan won.

"How did you know our ambush was in the Eos sector?" Aemelie's smile was a mock pout, but she looked more pleased than angry.

"Had to be somewhere along our hyperspace trail. You hit us after we restocked our supplies, but before we had a chance to distribute them. Take out the freighters first—leaves the other ships crippled. Without resupplying their crews would be forced to—"

Her voice broke off.

_Hessi walked over my grave._

Revan looked in the viewport, but there was nothing there.

_But the Force thinks there is. The Fleet used Jedi to detect cloaked ships—they told me that they all told me—that and I can detect… something. Something's there. And it's been there for a while._

The conclusion was obvious, like a spiderroach crawling up her spine. Revan shivered.

"Aemelie, how close did you say Canderous was?"

"I can't tell, as long as we are cloaked, not precisely; but I'd imagine mere hours at least."
"Time for one more game."

"The Second Wife of Ordo nodded briskly. "I'm curious to see what you would do faced with the reclamation of Taris now. Have you studied what the real you did when you beat our forces back—"


There, in the left-hand part of the sky. Imperceptible, almost; but if Revan focused—life. Points of light. And one of them's brighter, almost like—

Her senses extended, and she almost felt the light recoil as if it sensed her too.

A Force user. Cloaked ship with a Force user. Sith?

"There's a ship here, Aemelie. Cloaked."

"It's not Canderous." The Second Wife frowned. "Of course they're not cloaked, they're coming in a light corvette, merely a modified cruiser with a forged registry. Did I tell you how good Polla Organa was at altering a ship's registry? She and I renamed the Aleema, as well as some of the other ships. I think she called the corvette the Dancer's Run, on its official manifest—"

"There's a ship here!" Revan repeated, now certain of it. "It's big... not what you... how many— is it just Canderous and Milli? Just the two of them?"

There are more than two sents in that ship. More than a hundred. Five hundred maybe. What kinds of ships hold five hundred—

A part of her mind reached for the answer, but all she could see was Aemelie's damned game.

It's cloaked here. Been here for hours. Coincidence? This close, it has to pick up the Pinion.

Her ship had a cloaking switch on the nav board too, but everything on the nav had died with the main power relay.

And cloaked ships can't hide from Force users. I think they have one too. At least one. It could be anyone. It could be fracking Dar'Revan!

Even as Revan said that she knew it wasn't true.

It's not her. But it's not... unfamiliar. Not—

She had been hiding her own signature, tamping it down to a mere ember. Now, she muffled it even more.

"Yes. Well, Kex came too." Aemelie sniffed. "Poor boy thinks he has a chance with our daughter. Speaking of that, I don't suppose you know where Mekel Jin had gotten to?"

"What? No." Automatic guilt now tugging at her. Right. Mekel Jin. I said I'd help him, turns out we're related, and then I lost him. Him and Dustil Onasi both. "What does that—"

A light corvette cruiser popped out or hyperspace abruptly, closer than she'd have timed it herself, (if she could really fly a ship). The board in front of her sputtered to life, noting the ship as the Dancer's Run.
"Oh," Revan sighed with relief. "They're here."

Blue light from the 'Vette's tractor almost immediately illuminated her face, and Canderous's rough voice broke into the channel, with the strength of a local, wide-beam broadcast.

"Aemelie said we need to keep the Pinion clean," he announced, without preamble. "Make sure your resistors are switched off. Don't want any lulls in the tractor. Need a nice, tight lift against our hull."

"I think the resistors are broken," she offered. They were if they were one of the parts redlined on her deck. "Hello, Canderous."

"Revan." He sounded amused. "Aemelie's pinging me now. She said you re-created the main oppositional feints of the Duros defensive…? That was a fine battle. Are you remembering?"

"What? No, we were just running wargames. Simulations. To pass the time." Her eyes went back to that patch in space. To the uneasy feeling. "This is gonna sound nuts, but is your sensor picking up anyth—"

A hammerhead cruiser shimmered into view, dwarfing both of them, abrupt and final. Painted with Republic colors.

Harbinger, the letters on Aurebesh said.

"Unknown vessels," a man's voice commanded. "Stand down, and prepare for our tractor beam."

Xxx

"Shit," Commander Cody added, softer, with his mic switched off.

They had been watching the tiny warbird for hours. Scans reported one life form, and nothing else—just the steady stream of that signal. Dak was acting really twitchy, but that wasn't new. Kid was born twitchy.

And then, over an open prox channel, the occupants of both ships greeted each other by name.

"S'cuy, Canderous," the cool, woman's voice sounded amused.

"Revan," a gravel-voiced man responded.

They went on in Mandalorian, but Cody spoke Mandalorian. Most Fleet officers did. Hypnosleep vids and a few shots. Know your enemy.

Cody's enemies were here. General Ordo himself.

And in the warbird—that voice, broadcast unscrambled on the local channel—

"Take off your clothes."

His face flushed with humiliation now, remembering the woman who had made him do that.

What if she made him do it again?

Xxx
"Revan?" Aemelie's voice on the long-range scrambled channel was alarmed. Canderous had gone quiet. *Silence among enemies. That makes sense. "Revan? Is he there? Do you see their ship?"

"We've both been tractored," she snapped, still inwardly cursing. "Republic ship here. Hammerhead-class. It's called the *Harbinger*."

"Oh? Harbinger to what?" Aemelie chuckled as if that was funny.

"Trouble." Her mind began sifting through the pieces. *I'm supposed to be dead. The Mandalorians have my Sith warship. Dar'Revan's on the Sith homeworld by now—with Carth and the real Polla Organa—not to mention Seiran Wen—With Carth. How the frack did that even happen?*

*He could be dead. He could be dead—*

Panic warred with guilt and fear.

"I will cut transmission now, so they can't get a fix on our location," Aemelie said. "But don't worry. We will rescue you."

"Wait—I-I don't even know if—"

Her comm was dead.

"Frack!" Revan tilted her head up the viewscreen and watched the incoming hangar bay approach. There seemed to be a large contingent of armored troopers assembled behind the hangar bay's shields—and they were all quite heavily armed.

XXX

"Knight Vesser—"

"Just call me Dak, Commander." The man turned from the viewscreen and gave Cody an apologetic smile. "It seems I returned to the Jedi too late—there are no Jedi now."

*Well, there's you, and that woman being pulled into my ship.*

"I didn't explain before...." Cody outranked this kid, this kid had been a literal kid during the Mandalorian Wars, and still, Cody felt himself scrambling with that strange mix of awe and fear he always got around Jedi. "But I summoned you here for a reason. You have your lightsaber?"

A shadow seemed to cross the kid's face. "Always." He hesitated. "I keep it hidden. I always have, ever since Korrib—"

"No time for stories." *I outrank you. Follow me.* Cody started walking, and to his relief, the kid did start following him, even if Jedi probably couldn't read minds or anything.

"We were sent off-course to intercept a strange transmission," he continued briskly.

"I was wondering why we left Katarr."

"We're tractoring in two ships. One of them has Revan Starfire. The other one has Canderous Ordo." *No way to say it but to say it.*

Dak showed no reaction, which made Cody up his estimate of his age.
"She's not dead." The kid offered finally. "They… the newsvids all said she was dead, but she's not. Again." There was a strange quality in his voice, one that Cody couldn't place.

"She's not dead," Cody agreed. "You're right. Worse than that. She's on our damn ship."

Xxx

Revan opened the hatch to a ring of armored faces, and a few laser sights scrolling across her coverall.

"Sorry, I must stink," she offered. "I was stuck in an enviro-suit for days." She'd shucked off the suit as soon as their tractor beam started pulling her into pressurized atmosphere—probably too fast by the way her ears were ringing.

She'd thought if they could see her face they wouldn't shoot—

Maybe so, with a different face. The guns pointed at her didn't budge.

Revan raised her hands, mind flashing oddly back to the number of times she'd been in these straits before: Tatooine, Manaan, Biscain—

Biscain had been Polla Organa, but it was still where her mind went now. Better than the time on Manaan when her pod crashed into that bus full of Selkath schoolchildren—

"Relax, guys." She made her words an easy drawl. "Who's… can you… take me to your captain or admiral or whoever's in charge?"

She turned her head a little and saw Canderous, helmet off, with Millifar and another kid. The kid took her a heartbeat—Kex. Right. Aemelie said he was here too—

The guards said nothing, although one of them made a finger-chopping motion a vestigial part of her brain interrupted as a hold. As in, hold here until the brass comes and deals with this mess—

"Commander," a voice said from behind, from the direction of space, which was not what Revan had expected.

"No need for formality," she smiled, turning her back on the guns, against every instinct in her body. "I don't really have a rank—"

"Yeah, but I do. You asked who's in charge. It's me. The Commander. Commander Sheen Cody." The man was pale and Human and sweaty and shaved; trailed by a brown-skinned Human Jedi whose familiarity took two heartbeats.

"Dak," Revan said, ignoring the Fleet guy for now. (Carth had once said there was no surer way to piss them off, and she was a little pissed off herself, what with all of the blasters.) "Dak Vesser! I thought…." Her voice trailed off as she realized she hadn't thought of him at all, not since the last real conversation she'd had with Juhani—and that was one she had wanted to forget.


"Some little blue Twi'lek was offering free berths off Korriban. I took the last." He stared at her. "I dreamed of you."

"That's, uh…." She looked desperately over at Canderous, who seemed to be doing an elaborate job of laying down weapons. Hope he still has enough stashed. His head jerked in a nod as if all this was normal. Being delayed and searched by Republic forces… actually, it strangely was.
"You're looking a little worse for wear since Peragus," Commander Cody chimed in.

Her muscles ached, from disuse and the injuries she'd sustained on Deralia. "Peragus…"

*Mining station, explosive, tactically worthless,* her mind supplied, mocking her as well as Dar.

"You stole my uniform," the Commander snapped. "On Peragus."

One of the armored men behind made a sound between a cough and a snort, loud and awkward over his voder.

"Oh. Sorry." Revan wondered if there would ever come a time when she could stop apologizing for banthashit she'd never done—or couldn't remember doing. "That was… before… I-I still don't have a lot of memories from the—"

"It was a few weeks ago," he said flatly. "You were in my head. You made me take off my clothes."

One of his men snorted and another one elbowed him.

"On Peragus Station—" *points on a grid. Hyperspace lanes—" This was… recent?* Damn her. "Was I with a guy, little shorter than you? Deralian, maybe?"

"Is this a game to you?" The man didn't seem stable enough to be in charge of a starship, in Revan's opinion.

*If only. Those I win.*

"What happened on Peragus was… classified," she hedged, unwilling to admit it wasn't her. *Am I protecting Dar? Still?* "I'm sorry for the inconvenience—"

"You apologizing again, Revan?" Canderous seemed to have a better rapport with their set of guards than Revan had, because he, Millifar and Kex ambled over to them now, escorted by sents who didn't have their weapons out. "She doesn't mean it," he added. "I mean the apology. Revan, we owe them nothing." He nodded towards the Mandalorian corvette, dwarfing everything else in the hangar bay. "Let's load up your ship and go."

"You need a sonic, Third Wife," Millifar added, making a face.

"You're all my prisoners," the Commander said foolishly as if saying made it true.

Kex laughed as if that was funny. So did a few of Cody's own guards, but the Commander wasn't laughing—and neither was Jedi Knight Dak Vesser, whose hand, Revan couldn't help but noticing, had curved in a way that suggested he had his saber close at hand to call.

"Commander Cody," Revan tried another charming smile, but they seemed as effective as mud. *He's brass through and through. He won't respond to thisla treats, not from me… I'll need the closed fist.*

"Commander Cody," she repeated with a stronger voice. "While my… officers and I are delighted to accept your hospitality; I feel it fair to remind you that I am a sovereign citizen of… Mandalore, as well as a member of the Republic High Senate. Have your men put away their weapons. *Now,* or I will… put them away for them."

One or two took a step back before looking to their commander. *Good.*
Their commander's lips thinned. "You can't make us all do what you say with your Force magic!"

I could try. She eyed him, assessing, before noting Dak's scowl next to him.

I'd take out your Knight protector first…

"Listen to her," Canderous's voice was a low growl. "If you want this to stay peaceful."

"Juhani said you wanted peace, Revan," Dak muttered. "On Korriban. She said you were going to stop the war—"

"And I did." Peace. A dream. A fracking lie. "I stopped Malak. I'm sorry about Juhani, I'm sorry s-she didn't—"

XXX

"Wait. Wait a minute. Where are the others? Juhani and Jolee Bindo?"

"They didn't make it." Her words felt like they were coming from space, far away and frozen. Abstracts. They didn't—they didn't make it.

Bastila was talking, bragging really, taunting them with it, and Mission's eyes widened like she didn't want to believe—

XXX

"You're sorry," Knight Vesser snorted. "I still dream about her. Sometimes. Being sorry doesn't bring her back."

"Sometimes I do too. I…"

"Why are you here?" Commander Cody interrupted. "Why my damned command? Why again? Is it what I said on Peragus? I was joking—just thought you were an actress!"

"I…." Revan didn't know what he was talking about enough to know if she should lie. Aren't we supposed to all be on the same side? "Was this recent? Recently, that you saw someone like me?"


"With a metal arm?" She held up her left, wriggling the fingers. "A metal arm, right? Here?"

He only looked at her blankly. Revan looked to Dak, but he seemed confused as well.

Maybe she was wearing gloves. That seems like the kind of thing she'd plan, wear gloves, so no one knows she wasn't me, blame me for more of her banthashit—

"It wasn't me," Revan told them both, anger rising like a tide. "That was the imposter. The woman we have to stop."

"Imposter?" The Commander shook his head. "No, it was you. Your face. Your voice. You. I don't know what game you're playing—"

"I'm not." She looked toward Canderous and the kids, hoping they didn't try anything. Not here. Not yet. "I'm not playing a… a game."

He's a good soldier, a part of her mind muttered. Follows his orders. He has orders to bring you in,
so you can either escape or take this to the top brass—

While that schutta does frack-knows-what on Kaas?

Revan tried breathing in a calm that she didn't feel.

"You have orders to bring us in?" Revan asked. To where?

"My orders were to investigate your ship—and anyone who came along to collect it. My orders are
to look out for another ship. One that's gone missing." Cody's eyebrows were thin and gray, and
now he raised one. "My superiors have every reason to believe the Mandalorians have the Aleema.
And you, apparently."

"They rescued me." She forced herself to sound nonchalant. "How long were you sitting there,
watching me drift in space, Commander? Waiting for my life support to fail?"

"I didn't know it was you! All we saw was the ship. The Sith ship." So much venom there.

Thanks a lot, Dar'Revan. Not only did you start a war against guys like this, but then you had to
personally humiliate him?

Why would you take his clothes? Is this—does he mean they had sex?

She eyed him up and down and tried to imagine it.

Her? She wouldn't. And what would she need his clothing for afterward—

To impersonate a Republic officer. The answer came quickly. Or have Seiran impersonate one.
The question is... why?

At that, her mind drew a blank. Because she's nuts? Because she's taking over the Republic?

Over my dead body, she is! Fracking schutta!

"Revan doesn't have the Aleema," Canderous broke in flatly. "I do. And I suggest you let us go. My
people are tired of Republic diplomacy."

"I can't." To his credit, Commander Cody looked like he wanted to. "I have orders too."

If they'd been groundside, if Revan's lightsaber worked, if she hadn't felt like every one of those
helmeted faces standing in front of them might contain another Mission, another Juhani, Jolee—
Revan might have made a run for it. Clearing the hangar wouldn't be difficult, she realized
dispassionately, even without a blade to deflect the worst of their fire. Not difficult for her, but the
Mandalorians wouldn't run—they'd fight too—and, even if they won, there would be casualties
and, worse, if word of this ever got back to the Republic....

She was aware of Canderous, watching her. Canderous and his kids.

"We don't have time to go back to Coruscant," she snapped. Not when we're so close. From Sullust
I could make it in two weeks if I burned the jets, if I knew how to really fracking fly—

Cody shook his head. "Not Coru. Fleet's in orbit around Katarr. One jump away. We can be there
in a few days."

"Katarr?" She frowned. Isn't that one of the Miraluka colony worlds? Why—?"
Cody shot Dak a warning glance as if the knight was going to offer Revan anything useful.

"That's need to know," he snapped. "And right now, you and your friends are needed in the brig."

Revan smiled slightly because it seemed to bug him. "If that makes you feel safe, Commander."

_Won't be the first time Canderous and I have broken out of a Republic jail._

Too much to hope it might be the last.

Xxx

Katarr was a moonlit word with a dim, red sun. Fine for the Miralukan colonists, who had photosensitive skin where their eyes should be; but Mekel felt like he was living underwater.

They'd been here a local week now, assigned to one of the makeshift camps on the world that had _trap_ written all fracking over it. The Jedi had been placed in a cove surrounded by mountains on one side, and on the other, the sea.

You didn't need the Force to have a bad feeling. Mekel had several. He was having another one right now, listening to Dear Old Dads try to explain why, (maybe because Dear Old Dads didn't consider they were all about to die), Mekel sleeping with Lydie Korr-now-Loanin was a bad idea.

"Contras," the old man repeated, looking slightly purple.

"I think she takes them?" Mekel admitted. He used to himself, but when it has been just Telos… well, no need. "Not sure they have a Free Medix here for Humans, even if I wanted to go. But she's got it covered, right? She was the one who asked me… to… you know." He raised an eyebrow. Him being here was fracking proof his old man at least got the basics.

"She's married," Dear Old Dads added.

"And her husband is away," Mekel argued back. Loanin was almost continuously up in orbit with Fleet Command on those cloaked ships, waiting to spring the trap or whatever. "Right? And she… she asked me!"

He couldn't believe his luck. All things considered, his luck was astounding—when he forgot about Telos being dead and not having the Force and being probably being about to die in this trap for a Force-eating Sith Lord.

Fracking Lydie Korr was great for forgetting all of those things. Fracking Lydie Korr didn't make up for anything… but it sure as frack felt good.

Xxx

Master Azen Loanin checked his chron again. It was odd, the way he and Kavar had been abruptly excluded from Fleet's Command meetings, but he had learned in his time as a Jedi and a Senator's son to have patience first, then questions, and only then to force the required response.

The Fleet ships were still cloaked in orbit around Katarr, and for now, that would suffice.

On the bench across from him, Master Kavar looked more impatient. Beside him, Master Vrook Lamar seemed half-asleep, or deep in a meditative trance. Azen wondered at the old man's inclusion, but assumed all would become clear, given time.

"Atris was apprising us of Arkan's progress," Kavar noted. "Now, she isn't answering her comms."
"There could be any number of reasons for that," Azen told him. Sunspots, for example. Those often interfered, even with transmissions as close as the planet beneath their feet. Lydie had missed two comms of his recently.

"Did the Fleet send word from Kaas? Or House Racharn—did they give you the broadcasts?" Kavar sounded suspicious, although Azen, rather tiredly, wondered who there was left to be betrayed. "Atris was to provide transcripts to me, but has not sent them. My own Ancient Sith is… limited."

_Those who do not study their enemies cannot understand them_, Azen thought. His own Ancient Sith was quite proficient… but he had not offered to do the transcription himself, as sharing that information would only garner suspicion among the Fleet officers, who already seemed quite certain that most Jedi were in league with the Sith.

"Jedi," General Sand stood in the doorway. "The High Admiral will see you now."

Xxx

Master Vrook Lamar had a bad feeling. The entire planet of Katarr was one bad feeling, but this was worse—and being summoned directly to Admiral Rensha's flagship felt… wrong.

_Loain and Vakla have kept me out of their plans with the Fleet all this time. Why include me now?_ Something was wrong—something felt poised. There were Jedi who had premonitions, like the former Sith girl, Thalia May. But Vrook's senses were not that advanced.

_Maybe Azen Loanin is luring me here to take me to task for my son's behavior—_

That was as absurd a reason as any he could muster, and yet the man himself sat opposite now, not even looking in Vrook's direction.

Maybe Yuthura Ban could have helped Vrook understand his son's reasons for sleeping with a Senator's wife, but she was not here. She had stayed on Coruscant citing personal concerns. With the Order in tatters, no one had authority to tell Yuthura Ban that she had to come.

Vrook himself could not understand his own son at all.

_But his mother… his mother would probably be proud_, he thought sourly.

General Sand invited them into the main conference room, and Vrook stood and followed, leaving his useless thoughts to stew for a time.

Xxx

"Now," Aemelie smiled happily, clapping her hands. "Now it begins." She turned her head towards Leskal, who was manning the navigational controls quite adequately, for one still unblooded in stars. "A quick surgical strike on their main Senate building will throw the entirety of the Republic into chaos."

"You always want to play the same game," Mother Catrinex sighed. Even half senile, a formidable opponent. "Did you play 'Sack of Coruscant' with Revan of Lin as well?"

"She is not ready," Aemelie sighed. "Not yet—"

Her comm chimed, and she glanced down at it. "Shavat," she muttered, reading the messages from
the Dancer's Bounce and the Dancer's Hope. "Canderous's retrieval of Revan was intercepted by Republic forces—he left a distress beacon."

"Can they track him?" There were those who thought Catrinex of Rialis was senile; but they underestimated the old warlady's depth of experience.

"Yes…." Aemelie frowned. "I'm getting a probable trajectory, based on jump points. But eventually we must assume even the Republics will search their prisoners and find his personal tracker."

"If they are prisoners." The old woman sniffed. "Surely, our Mandalore and his barbarian wife outrank them. She was a general in their army!"

"We will follow," Aemelie said nodding at Leskal to make it so. "Have the vanguard ships stay cloaked for now, but put scouts ahead at all points of hyperspace exit along the Firrikan Trail. Miir, Galatea, Ord Mantell, Katarr, Lothal—"

"We can catch them before they go farther than that."

"Unless they switch the lanes and take another path. The Trail goes into the Reach—not the Core…." Aemelie frowned. The Aleema purred under her feet; fully operational and a magnificent marvel of engineering and grace.

"Increase speed to full and head for Katarr. It's the first point where the Trail forks. If they're going to switch lanes, they'll do it there." Aemelie realized she was beaming like a sated manka and beamed wider. "Our ship is faster than anything the Republic barbarians have. We will beat them there and then take the offensive."

It would be glorious.

XXX

"Well?" Rensha eyed them closely, these Jedi who had come before her. She flared her nostrils at them, alert for the stench of lies. "Explain. This."

On the holo-screen in front of her were two images. One showed Revan Starfire with Captain Carth Onasi and Dustil Onasi, clad in brief ceremonial Sith wedding clothes. The other showed Revan Starfire, dressed in a black flight suit, surrounded by Republic troops and wearing hand restraints, with Canderous Ordo and two younger Mandalorians wearing battle beskar (also in restraints) beside her.

"We did tell you there were two of them." Kavar frowned, twisting his smooth skin unpleasantly, for one so even-featured. "One of those is Revan, the other one is Sheris Loran, with Revan's memories."

"You told me," the High Admiral tried to be patient. There's no coming back from this. And so, I must be sure. I must be sure. "But which is which?"

Vrook, the nest-uncle of Revan cleared his throat. "My niece is with the Mandalorians. The other woman is the one with Sith."

"How can you tell?" Rensha asked him. It was true, many Humans looked alike; but these women were nearly identical, save for one having blackish hair, not red. And Revan had had blackish hair, in her quest for the Star Forge. The woman next to Canderous Ordo looked exactly like the other.
"With this resolution, it's not certain—" Kavar Vakla interrupted.

"I am certain," Vrook said. "I know my niece. She is loyal, and she is dedicated. The Revan who destroyed the Star Forge allied with the Mandalorians. She has joined Canderous Ordo. The woman with her memories wants to stop the Sith threat, so she has come before the Emperor to try to do so—"

"That Revan appears to have joined the Sith threat," Jiya Sand pointed out. "There is Malak—"


"Or Malak is possessing Dustil Onasi's body." Rensha folded her arms. "I see no proof of anything besides complicity. I see nothing but a Sith threat… and yet, we have our forces here." She lifted her lips, exposing sharp teeth in a predator's grin that these pacifists would never understand. "We have our forces here to help Jedi. Jedi need to help us."

"After Arkan is dealt with we will," Kavar Vakla said.

"You have our assurance," Vrook Lamar added.

"We have captured this one." She gestured with a claw to the Revan in the flight suit. "And the other one is on Dromund Kaas. Are they working together?"

Vrook seemed to hesitate. "I… I do not know."

"You will need more than one neural disruptor," Kavar Vakla interjected. "Revan's strength is formidable. She would be hard to restrain—"

General Sand coughed. "Some of us have experience with that, Vakla."

"Of course." The Jedi Master frowned. "But that was Revan injured and near-dead. This woman would be even more—"

"Commander Cody's report said that she and the Mandalorians are cooperating. For now."

"What are you doing with them?" Vrook again. It was admirable he cared for his brother's nestling, but strange to see so much emotion on a man Rensha had once thought as clever and dispassionate as General Starfire herself.

"Bringing them here." Rensha folded her arms. "If she continues to cooperate, Revan Starfire and her men may join you on Katarr's surface. Then, once the threat of Arkan is eliminated, she will assist with our assault into Sith territory."

There was an art in lying to Jedi, and that art was to believe the lie with all of your heart and gill-sacs, in the moment of its utterance.

It was an art that High Admiral Rensha had learned long ago.

Xxx

"Mekel…."

They didn't bother with sparring practice now. After the first time, each time was like a race to the finish. A race to see who finished first and then a repeat.
How had Mekel once thought Lydie Korr was shy?

"Mmmm?" He sat up above her, smiling.

There was nothing shy about the woman in front of him now, lying, wide-legged on her back, with that lazy, satisfied smile on her face.

"That was… nice," Lydie murmured.

His fingers dipped into one of the grooves of skin that ran down her ribs and she giggled.

"Oh? Are you ticklish?" Mekel asked, bending his head to investigate a breast.

"There. A little." Her voice was breathy.

"Everyone is there—a little. Telos was—when I…. Maybe it's my skills."

Her lazy smile faded a little. "Telos," she repeated.

Frack. That was probably rude. Telos didn't like being compared to Lashowe or Shardaan or Damaris or Akai or Zizania in bed either—

"Dustil, I meant… not that I was… I wasn't thinking of him. Then. When we—"

It was kind of nice being with someone who didn't know what you were thinking.

"Telos is Dustil. I knew that. But you and Dustil…." Her frown deepened, and she sat up. "The two of you were…?"

"Yeah, well, he's dead now. Probably dead. So frack it, right?"

"I didn't realize." Her eyes looked dark in the tent. It was dark in her tent. She pushed his head away and brought her knees to her chest, leaning forward. "It was serious?"

"We weren't fracking married," he muttered, pointedly.

"I need to show you something." She got up, still naked, and went to the console desk across the room. The shadows pooled in her indentations, making her a creature of light and dark all at once. Her hair cascaded in loose curls around her face, shadowing her expression when she turned back towards him. "Look," she said simply.

The holo projected on the tent wall showed Revan Starfire standing in front of two men, both Onasis. They were dressed alike, emphasizing their resemblance. Dustil was a little darker, a little taller than his dads; but he had the same grim glare, the same heavy brow and those cheekbones you could cut an eye on. That same hungry, angry look—now glaring at Revan Starfire, dressed in white with black gloves and boots.

Nothing like this had happened when Mekel was on Kaas with them, so it had to be after.


When? When?

He was smiling, suddenly, smiling so hard it hurt. "H-how long ago was this?"
"A week, I think. Maybe a little more."

"He was alive. He could still be alive." Mekel smiled at her, scrambling to his feet. He reached for her, taking Lydie in his arms again. He hugged her. He wanted to kiss her, frack her all over again, but she was looking up at him now with an air of puzzled concern.

"Are you… you're not angry?"

"Why would I be angry? Thank frack, right?" Mekel laughed. He couldn't stop laughing, tension Mekel hadn't realized he was carrying sloughing off like a cheap mark. He kissed Lydie's beautiful horned forehead. "Thank you. Thank you for showing me this."

"You're welcome," she pulled away slightly, still looking puzzled.

Mekel looked past her, back to the holo.

Telos was alive, but he didn't look happy.

Crazily, Mekel weighed the odds of charging off to Kaas to rescue Dustil from a Sith planet with no Force.

Frack it; he's got a better chance of rescuing himself.

"I… I was worried," he admitted, glancing down at Lydie again. "I was really fracking worried." He started to laugh, and kissed her forehead again.

"I thought you'd be angry." Lydie looked confused. "You're not?"

"What's the point?" Mekel laughed. Telos was alive. Wearing a lightsaber. Wearing a matching Sith outfit like his dads. And was that…? Mekel frowned at the screen and waved a hand to turn up the volume, before remembering he couldn't turn up the volume, not with no Force.

"Turn it up a sec?"

Lydie's fingers moved and the volume increased. Mekel felt himself smirk. "Hear that?"

"I only know the basic syntax of Ancient Sith," she admitted.

"They think he's Malak." Mekel wanted to laugh. Fockda, you idiot. You suck at pretending to be Malak.

"You don't think he's Malak?"

"He's not even trying to be like Malak." Mekel waved a hand at the screen. "Frack, I could do a better Malak than that. His arms aren't folded, stance is all wrong…" From the announcer's tone though, the Sith were buying it.

Hook, line, and tractorbeam, like Mission used to say.

She's there too. She'll help them. Help him. She cares for him too—

"Thank you," he said to Lydie Korr.

"I thought you'd be angry. I thought…." Her brows creased around her horns. "I thought you'd be upset."
"Dustil's alive," Mekel felt the smile creeping back on his face. "Why would that make me upset?"

"I just thought…” her voice trailed off. "We have to tell Azen."

"I don't think that's a good idea. He doesn't like me. Some sents are kind of possessive."

"What? No!" Her cheeks flushed. "Tell him about Dustil. About that being Dustil and not Malak. Tell him your… friend is only pretending to be Malak. He thinks… Azen said everyone thinks that is Malak. That Revan and Malak are joining the Sith again. But if that's Dustil, then maybe the rest of it is a ruse too. Maybe… this isn't what it looks like."

"It looks like they're fracked," Mekel pointed out. "Is the Fleet gonna help them? Because Dustil's a horrible liar."

"The Fleet is supposed to help all of us," Lydie Loanin said.

XXX

XXX
"This brig's nicer than those torture cells they had you in on the Leviathan." Canderous's lips twitched with amusement. He sat back on the bench of his cell.

Next to him, his daughter made a disgusted noise in her throat and tugged at her braid. It tumbled down from the coil around her head. In the cell next to her, Kex was staring and looking as if he was trying not to look. He was even blushing.

Mandalorians. If Revan wasn't starving and exhausted after days trapped on that fracking ship, she might have even made a joke and embarrassed the poor kid even more. Still…. It's hair, Kex. Not like she's stripping off her clothes.

Although… the Mandalorians had been stripped of their battle armor, leaving them all in serviceable coveralls. Revan looked down at her own battered garments in disgust. Moll had said they'd been Polla's once, with her voice careful and her eyes too bright. Polla's favorite trousers, and a sleeveless navigator's vest that reminded Revan uncannily of the one she'd worn on Taris. That fracking rakghoul ripped the back of it when I was trying to dodge-

-But that guy saved me. That guy-

She frowned, the memory lost in the sea of chaos and confusion that had been their experience on Taris. "Revan?" Canderous's dry voice dragged her back into orbit. "You look like you're about to fall over."

"Thanks." Revan felt like it too. "You think this cell block's nicer than the Leviathan? So was the fracking Selkath jail." She put her hands on her neck, trying to figure out how to remove the neural disruptor. It didn't feel as all-encompassing as the one they'd gotten on Yavin IV that had almost killed her a century ago; but it wasn't exactly comfortable. "Do we have time for me to nap before we escape?"

"Thought we'd give the kids a chance to rescue us." Canderous shrugged, so mildly, she couldn't even tell if he was joking.

"The kids?" She glanced at the ceiling wondering if the Republic were fools enough not to monitor them. Wouldn't put it past them.

Canderous followed her gaze, as if he understood. "It would give them something to do."

He means the crew of the Aleema? Or Kex and Millifar?

Revan stared across the cell. Millifar had produced a security spike from the depths of her hair and
was frowning thoughtfully at the energy field containing them. The controls were on the outside, of course; but there were other ways to disrupt a field.

*Have at it, kid.*

"Just let me get a few hours rest first." Her stomach clenched, reminding her that she was also starving. "And get some food."

"If the guard comes again, we'll request a portable sonic," Millifar said. "No offense, Third Wife, but I can smell you from here."

There didn't seem to be a good response to that, so Revan sat down on her bunk and closed her eyes.

"Wake me up after you take over the ship," she muttered, rolling so her back was to the wall, and putting her arm over her face to block out the light.

XXX

Korrie was asleep—uneasily. It had only been days since he'd seen his world end, since he'd seen everything he'd known on Coruscant vanish. He had nightmares and they, by unspoken accord, traded off in shifts to comfort him. They were on the ship Revan had thought was taking them to a Corellian moon called Navar. The ship that Dar'Revan had made Seiran fly to Deralia instead; where Dar would betray them, dumping Revan and the children off like last week's refuse, before running back to the Sith as if Tenebrae himself had commanded it.

(Had he? Was Dar so compromised? Was that why she had betrayed Revan in the end?)

Before the betrayal, (if it was one, and what else could it be?), there had been nearly a week of avoiding glances and closed doors, as Revan and Dar tried not to speak in a space too small for five—even if one was an infant.

It was logical, of course, that they avoided each other: she and Dar both wanted time with their son, but never together. They both wanted time training for combat, but never the same time.

On the ship, Revan had thought they walked a saber's edge between them: between what Dar remembered and what Revan did not. Between Malak's death, and Korrie's infancy, between the events that had left Dar reviled, and Revan the Hero of the Star Forge. At the time, Revan convinced herself that they had tasted the same darkness in the end—and perhaps the differences in what they remembered mattered less than one might think.

Later—when she woke from a coma on Deralia—the idea was a cruel joke.

Dar had taken the smallest room on the ship, like some mockery of a Jedi's humility. The gesture had reminded Revan, rather painfully, of Juhani.

Perhaps it was the memory of the Cathar she considered a paragon of the Order that made Revan wonder what had truly happened to transform an even stronger paragon (by all accounts), into the scourge of the galaxy.

The door to Dar's room slid open before Revan could knock, and her own face looked up at her, blank and unsurprised under a coil of elaborate braids.

Mandalorian braids, *her mind whispered.* Dar'Revan annihilated the Clans, but she still wears their patterns in her hair.
"Yes?" Dar'Revan asked.

"I need to ask you some questions."

A thin red eyebrow arched. Did Dar pluck them? Revan thought her own were less refined. "Ask," the woman said. "I will answer, as I can."

"Malachor V." Her voice felt rusty. "The... planet. Why?"

Dar'Revan turned her head to the ferracrystal viewport, then back, and looked at Revan. The braids took her hours, Korrie had said. She did them and redid them every night, he had said.

Revan wondered why the woman bothered—maybe just to taunt Revan with the image of the smiling woman in the holo Korrie kept by his bed. The woman who no longer existed?

"I could show you." Dar raised an eyebrow and beckoned her closer. She touched something and the ferraglass window went opaque, the blur of stars vanishing, replaced by a veil of black.

"Then I'd have to kill you," Revan joked, although it was a bad one joke, one she regretted instantly.

Green eyes blinked back at her. "Could you?" Dar sounded like she was actually curious. "I thought about killing you, but the galaxy may need your strength."

"You can't kill that emperor of yours without me!" Even then, Dar must have been planning, but Revan had trusted her. Almost.

Dar nodded. "Yes. Is Mal asleep?"

"Yes." Revan nodded back.

"Then I'll go-"

"No. Wait."

Dar blinked, perfectly blank. "I will not be mocked, Fragment. Even by you."

"I wasn't mocking you." Much. "Tell me what happened on Malachor V. You could have just signed the fracking armistice."

"Yes." The word hung between them—they kept agreeing, even when they were diametrically opposed. "I was Mandalore after I defeated Lin. I had the location of the Star Forge. I knew... something of what we sought. I could have fought Tenebrae with beskar and Clan. Basilisks. We could have fought Sith together in sun, sky, and stars."

Was her voice wistful? Sad? Or just flat? Revan couldn't tell.

"But you decided to just kill them and the Republic and drive all your friends insane instead?"

"Not as easily as you make it sound. I felt them all die. I felt the survivors all fall. Malak and... all the others. Friends. Innocents. Enemies alike." Her voice dropped low, almost a whisper. "Do you know Cherchal's law of energy conservation?"

"Is that the one that says, 'blow up a planet to become evil'?"

Dar'Revan made a choked noise. It could have been a laugh. "Closer than you'd expect. All life
contains energy, and all energy can be controlled by the Force. The loss of life at Malachor V released a great deal of power—normally, such energies would dissipate back into the ether—return to the Force. But I—"

"You used the deaths of all those sents to drive your friends crazy. I figured that out already."

Was it worth it, Dar? For a moment, Revan was back on the Star Forge, pinned under Malak's superior strength, her blade sparking—useless—as she fumbled for another permacrete detonator.

To stop Malak, I sacrificed friends. I'm no better than she was-

Only a tightness around the other woman's mouth betrayed her annoyance. "I made the surviving Jedi the strongest weapon in the galaxy. Stronger than Tenebrae. Stronger than the Republic. Stronger than the hellspawned Mando'ade."

Revan had more questions, a galaxy full of them, but all the answers, she suspected, would be this fracking insane and incomprehensible. Instead, all she said was, "Show me. Show me what you did." Her mouth felt chalky and too dry. "Show me Malachor."

Dar nodded slowly, still looking away. "You are right. You should know."

She began to sketch charts on the now-black glass. The sensors lit traces where her fingers touched, citing precise notations, orbital calculations, fleet numbers and positions. Her fingers danced across the screen.

It was oddly beautiful, the graph that showed the death of two armies, the forced conversion of a third.

"How... how many died?" I should know these things, Revan told herself, but she had never asked anyone before.

Dar listed a number, down to the digits exact. Her expression was blank, but she seemed to be waiting for a response.

"Oh." There was a long silence. Truthfully, it was a smaller number than Revan had expected. Almost immediately, that thought brought its own wave of guilt. She stared at the diagrams again. Ship names, types, numbers... the Aurebesh blurred and she rubbed her eyes.

"But why... why didn't you just... use the Mandalorians to make the Republic surrender? You could have used both to take on Tenebrae. Or rule the galaxy, or whatever the frack it was you wanted!"

You could have not fallen. Then, I would never exist. All those lives... would I give up my existence now to save them? Revan remembered the datapad of her life, the words she'd written for herself when she'd prepared to do just that. Sacrifice myself. In a heartbeat. Of course. The greater good....

No. Frack the greater good! It doesn't help us now!

"The Clans were compromised." Dar gave a short, bitter laugh. "The Mando'ade were hers. My master thought I was hers too. And she wanted to supplant the Emperor—not end him."

"Who?" Revan had been so lost in her own thoughts that it took a few seconds for Dar's words to sink in. And even then, they didn't make any fracking sense. "She? She, who?"
"Vima Sunrider. Jana Novasun. Arren Kae." Dar'Revan's lips thinned, drawing lines across the smooth planes of her face. Her expression might have been intimidating if Revan hadn't seen it so often in the mirror. "Do you know what else?"

"I'm sure you're about to tell me."

The other woman nodded. "I sometimes think... she must have been responsible for you, Fragment." Her forehead wrinkled in thought, and her head tilted, eyes like green ice. "I'm just not sure what she intended you for.

XXX

Transcript from a Sith Holovid #2 (translated from the Ancient Sith, by Padawan Yuthura Ban, for the House of Racharn, for the Edification of Leeshansintina Arabel Racharn, First of Her Name)

**Lady Fenestre:** (smiling for the holocams) "In lieu of the traditional sacrifice, Darth Revan has offered herself as tribute in a trial of combat with his Supreme One-ness, in a guise yet to be determined. Darth Revan herself is wearing her own Human skin-

**Lord Scourge:** (inaudible response)

**Lady Fenestre:** "What was that, Scourge? Of course, our own Dark Lord of the Sith is female! Those vids suggesting otherwise were proven to be a work of pure fiction."

**Darth Vash:** (sighs) "And yet, once her joining with our own Light of All Lands is complete, might not the Dark Lord take upon any form of her own choosing?" (Heavy sigh.) "Think upon her good fortune yet-to-come! The gift of being any number of sentients all at once, to be forever young and beautiful! Why, that alone-

**Lord Scourge:** (inaudible)

**Lady Fenestre:** (to Lord Scourge) "Vash knows she is beautiful, my lord. Why do you Dark Councilmembers always indulge her?"

**Lord Scourge:** (inaudible)

XXX

"No spoilers!" Leeshy Racharn told Padawan Ban, curling her legs under her on the chaise and settling her cube of red poppacorn on her knees. "Lees? I bet you anything that Korrie's mother will kick Sith butt."

"What did I tell you about making blanket statements like, 'I'll bet anything?'" Leesa laughed because it was just them two and their Jedi and it was nice that way. She didn't miss Mother or Lees or Sinty or Tina at all. "But, sure! I'll bet you your next week's charitable donation to the Underground Clinic."

"Okay." Her little sister grinned. "Make it two weeks, okay? If I win it gets to go to the thranta rescue on Alderaan, not your dumb medical charity for the poor sents-

Padawan Yuthura Ban coughed suddenly. "Would you like me to pause the holorecording?"

"What's the red guy with the weird neckbeard saying?" Leeshansintina the First of Her Name froze
the vid again, centering on the scene: an arena, more Sith announcers, and Revan Starfire herself standing in the middle of the ring with two sabers upraised. "You didn't translate that part."

"I can't hear it clearly in the recording," Yuthura Ban told her. Politely, too. The Twi'lek was a real treasure. "But from the movement of his lips, I think he's sighing. Perhaps with impatience."

"Go on then! Play more of it!"

Yuthura nodded her head. One head-tail was wrapped around her neck. "Of course, Senator." Leeshanstina's newly-hired Advisor-About-Sith-Planets-and-All-Evil-Stuff sighed, perhaps a little impatiently herself.

Leesa had started watching the second the transmission came in from Kaas, but the foreign Sith gibberish gave her a headache, so she'd passed it on to their new hire for translation before calling in Leeshy. Ban hadn't synced it to a voder, so it was just subtitled, but that was a huge improvement over wondering why Revan Starfire and Captain Carth Onasi and Dustil Onasi (who was now Darth Malak, go figure) and that weird red-headed copy of Revan were all walking tamely into an arena (with a Wookiee) like nerfs to slaughter.

"Go on!" Leesa waved a hand at the woman again.

"I just wanted to remind you of my price," Yuthura said slowly. "The fast ship?"

"Sure. But if you'd rather stay on Coruscant, I can totally hook you up with more translation work.-"

"Sadly, I must decline your offer. Again. But the ship… is it ready now?"

"Do I look like a ship merchant? I asked my steward to call the one we use and tell them to give you the one you liked. GG-49 said they had a few for you, no problem." Leesha was trying to be polite because the Twi'lek didn't really seem to understand her place.

"Good." Padawan Ban twitched her finger and the recording began again, drowning out any further conversation.

XXX

The arena looked like it was underground. It was a vast, domed space, rowed with seats on three sides, all filled with sentients who had red glowing eyes.

They were cheering at once, a single note that sounded like a giant orchestra in tune. In the foreground, a red-haired woman stood with two lightsaber hilts in her hand. She was wearing an elaborate white gown that left most of her shoulders and back bare, facing off against an arched doorway, barred by a gate.

Behind her, stood a motley crew of sents that included Captain Carth Onasi, his son, Dustil, some Human that that Jedi guy said was that dead girl, and a Wookiee that had to be Zaalbar from the Star Forge.

The timestamp on the recording dated it back a Coruscanti week.

XXX

Polla glanced over at Carth Onasi, and he gave her a strained smile. At her back, Zaalbar groaned, probably just as freaked out about this fracked-up situation as she was.
There were more red, glowing-eyed sents here than ones who looked normal. Just how many bodies did this Tenny-Bro asshole have? *Billions.* That was what Revan had said, but they couldn't all be on this planet, or in this room. He had a hundred here. Two hundred? Rows of them. Enough that when Polla closed her eyes, all she saw were red, glowing dots, the after-images of their eyes.

Revan Starfire walked in front of them all, ahead and alone. Her back was perfectly straight, and she was still wearing that white, filmy gown. Was she going to fight in a dress? Maybe the Force made that easy or something, but it looked like it would be fracking awkward.

Polla stared at the woman's bare shoulders, the shaved back of her skull edging up to her topknot. Revan Starfire had freckles on her back, which was a weird thing to notice about a Dark Lord of the Sith.

XXX

"You wondered what I was for, Dar?" The answer seemed so obvious that Revan assumed it was some kind of trap. "They needed me to kill Malak. The Jedi needed me-"

"Oh, I've seen the holo-versions." Dar's expression shifted, the mouth curving back into what looked like it should have been a normal smile. "Malak's death weakened Tenebrae... but it also shattered my forces. All of our strength, the treaties, every concession we had won from the Emperor reverted back with his demise." She grimaced. "I-I assume, in any case. We can't check. Not until Malachor is safe."

"I'm so sorry," Revan drawled. "I didn't mean to ruin all of your plans for galactic domination when they were going so well after your husband tried to kill you-"

"Stop." The other woman's voice was steady, but her flesh hand was white-knuckled, gripping her artificial wrist like it was a saber. "Don't." Her lip seemed to tremble. If it was an act, she was one hell of an actress. "You and I... we need to be one purpose."

"Then stop fracking with me, and just tell me what you know!"

Dar'Revan blinked. "I don't know where to begin."

"Anywhere." At the time, Revan had thought that moment would be the real beginning of their real accord. She had exhaled, trying to let all the tension and anger she felt for the woman drain away. "Why is your hair in braids?"

Dar looked startled. "I-I like them."

"That's it? You're using Mandalorian clan patterns, I thought-"

"I thought they were pretty. And practical. To fit under a helmet."

"Oh."

Revan sat down slowly against the closed door. She folded her legs and straightened her back, never taking her eyes off her duplicate's face. The braids suited it.

Maybe I should grow my hair, she thought. Comfortingly pedestrian as a sentiment. It implied a future.

Dar' had lapsed into silence. She sat down too, staring steadily back at Revan. "Malachor has our eyes," she noted. "The shape of them. I... never noticed before."
"He has Malak's mouth. I think." Too late she wondered if that was an awkward topic. "Malachi had pictures-from when he was the same age."

"Yes. I-I thought so too." Now Dar's smile was slight, almost shy. A little sad.

Revan shifted her legs. "You mentioned... Vima Sunrider...? Or Arren Kae? Whoever?" She thought Arren Kae might have been one of the masters who had greeted her on Coruscant; but she couldn't remember the woman's face at all.

"Yes. My old master had many names and many schemes. She sent me to Kashyyyk. She knew... somehow, she knew the Rakatan machine there would respond to me. But it taught me lessons she never dreamed of-beyond anything her mind was capable of-"

"Like how to be evil? I spoke to it too."

"You did more than speak to it. You downloaded its core memories into an astromech with a teenaged Twi'lek's personality." Dar frowned. "You have no idea what you unleashed upon the galaxy. I kept its links one-way for a reason."

"Oh? Well maybe you should have mentioned that when you were recording all those fracking secret messages-who were they for, again?"

"Malachor." Dar made an exasperated noise in her throat. "My son. Obviously. I had hoped to give him a universe of peace; where the Republic and Sith Empires were united without Tenebrae-"

"You know you sound nuts? You sound like an insane fracking Sith ranting about how all the power in the galaxy will soon be under your command."

"Do I?" The eyes were half-lidded, deceptively lazy. "A part of you knows power too, Fragment. Tell me how it was when you killed Malak. His was not the only corpse you made that day."

She's testing you. She wants to see if you'll crack. Somehow, Revan just knew that-although for a second, the voice in her head almost sounded like Bastila's. "Would you like me to draw you a diagram of our fight?" she asked coolly, nodding at the screen that still held Dar's notes on the destruction of Malachor V.

"Unnecessary." The other woman folded her arms. "Would you like me to tell you about the Sith Emperor?"

"Is he as big an asshole as you?" Revan rubbed her temples. "No. Keep talking about Vima Sunrider. You said she was our master?"

"She tried to be much more than that. Always a thousand plans. Vima once told me never think of one way to accomplish your goal: think of five, and put them all in motion. Account for everything, but expect nothing."

"And she was Arren Kae too."

"Yes." Dar shrugged. "She had several names, several identities. The Mandalorians knew her as Jana Novasun. And on Balmorra-"

"And you knew all of that and never wondered why?"

XXX
They'd been led-more like herded-down ramps and passageways to a large, underground arena. Only one exit. Stone benches rose around a central pit, covered with sand. The air was stinking and still.

"She's got this." Carth sounded like he was trying to be reassuring, but the way his jaw twitched, and his hand rested on the blaster at his hip, spoke otherwise.

Such a fricking joke-they were all armed. If this had been a vid, or one of those holonovels Polla had liked to read as a tweener, they'd just fight their way out, and then someone (like Seiran, where was he?) would swoop down flying that sweet *Ebon Hawk* and whisk them away to safety. Then, the good guys would arrive and blow up this entire stinking planet.

It was a nice dream, but Polla hadn't seen the good guys doing so well so far.

The red-eyed sents were most decidedly *not* the good guys. There were a hundred of them (or two hundred), and five good guys: if Revan Starfire was a good guy. If Dustil Onasi was a good guy. Polla was sure about herself, Carth Onasi and Zaalbar; but what the frack could she and Carth and the Wookiee do against a hundred? Two hundred?

On the first row of seats opposite the entrance sat another row of sents, more elaborately armored and dressed than the army of red-eyes. *They* looked like actual non-possessed people: all red-skinned Sith with a few Humans. Some were masked. One was mottled and tattooed with dark lines, just like the Sith had been in the *Official Coruscanti Version*.

Three of those sents-two Human women and a red-skinned man-were talking to a hovering holocam, like this was some kind of a swoop race.

If only! Polla could win a swoop race. Probably. But a sweet Aratech against a hundred Sith or more?

Without a word, Inse and Mydia Blais pushed past them, the two girls taking vacant seats along the front row. Phylus Blais, looking lost and a little confused, went and sat next to them.

*I don't even know where Seiran is!* Polla's eyes went to the Blais kids. Shit was scary, when your protectors were the barely-of-age sents torturing their slaves for fun. *No help there from that sector*....

"Where is my armor?" Revan demanded more than she asked. She'd turned so they could see part of her face, chin tilted as she stared up at the rows of sents, all but ignoring the two Zabrak kids the Emperor had used to get them down here.

"Do you think you'll need it?" A dark chuckle issued from multiple throats in the audience-maybe ten.

"The gown is restrictive."

"Does that matter, for ones like us?"

Revan's mouth tightened, but she didn't respond.

Polla glanced over at Dustil Onasi, who was glaring at the sents in the stands, his eyes narrowed. His father was staring at him. Zaalbar whined something, standing right behind Polla. The two Zabrak kids turned abruptly and flanked Revan.

All the red-eyed lights of eyes suddenly went out.
Click and whirring sounds announced the arrival of several hovercams, shining their spotlights down on Revan. Illuminated, she looked like one of her vids.

But real. This is real.

"Shall I leave your companions upon the sands?" asked an echoing, single voice, coming out of a door in the wall of the arena. A door made of bars set close together and arched—at least four meters high. Bars… to keep something in?

The voice was young and female, but Polla was beginning to realize that meant banthashit. Tenny-Bro had a tone in his voice no matter what mouth it came from. Polla was getting pretty good at hearing it.

"Their lives whether or not I win was the bargain," Revan said. "They should be seated in the stands."

"Killjoy," the young voice sighed. "Very well."

Like flipping a switch, several sents in the second row stood up, filing out of the stands, and then walked past them out of the exit.

XXX

The hyperspace engines thrummed easily beneath, ticking safe and secure. The woman sitting across from Revan had undone one of the braids in her hair, was twisting the strands through her fingers, staring into space as if her mind was a million jump-points away.

"Kae," Revan reminded Dar. "You knew she had more aliases than a spice runner and you never wondered why?"

Dar'Revan frowned. "I had theories." She dropped the braid. "Several events raised suspicion. She took the name Arren Kae when she took the Jedi redemption—or supposedly took the Jedi redemption. Years later, she told me that her own personality transfer was a ruse… although she had collected fragments of personalities from several ancient holocrorns to absorb their knowledge…." Her voice trailed off. "Perhaps that might account for some of her delusional thinking."

"For a delusional thinker, she managed to snow you and the Jedi!"

"Snow?" Those green eyes widened and blinked. The mouth curved up slightly.

"Pull the eridu over your eyes. Fool-uh…." Revan recognized the smile on the other woman's face a beat too late. "You fracking well know what I mean!"

"Sometimes you remind me of Beya. The way you talk." Dar ducked her head, pulling her knees to her chest.

"She's m—she's Polla's cousin. I remember her a little." We were talking about Kae. But it was Beya's face in Revan's mind suddenly. Pale, heart-shaped face in the reflection of a mirror. Beya's face with clotted, yellow eyes—

When was that?

"She was my best friend, after Malak." Dar seemed to hesitate. "And… she was friends with Sheris as well."
"I think I saw Beya cut her arm off. Your arm. I mean."

Manaan. The woman with her face. The surge of anger was still there, but lessened now, tempered with pity. I should have done more for the Selkath Ten, but I barely even knew they existed, and then they were dead, before I had any real power-

"Beya did this?" Dar sounded like she hadn't known. "That scar on your left arm."

"You told me already."

The woman continued anyway. "A duel with Lord Blais. He lost. Their allegiance is uneasy, but…." She frowned. "I need them. We need them."

"For what? Your Sith army?" Never gonna happen.

"We will discuss that later." Dar looked like she wanted to leave, but it was her room.

Revan smiled, and put her back to the door.

XXX

When Revan woke up on the Harbinger again, Canderous and the kids were gone, replaced by a helmetless Republic trooper with a square jaw and a jumpy look on his face.

She sat up slowly, noting the absence of the energy fields, the distance between her and the trooper, the blaster at his belt-and the neural band still wrapped around her neck, the restraints holding her wrists.

From somewhere, not far away, she also heard explosions, running feet, and what sounded like a firefight.

"Admiral… uh, Onasi? Revan? Don't move!" the jumpy guard said, even though she was still moving. "They said to let you sleep, but to comm if you woke up. I'm gonna comm them now, just… just stay still okay?"

Revan wiggled her hands, working out the stiffness. She'd fallen asleep on them. The restraints encased her fingers, her wrists, all the way up to the elbow.

Meant for Jedi. A part of her mind whispered. You've seen them before, used them before. On Jedi.

"You're going to comm… who?" You called me 'Admiral.'

The title set off a roil of panic in her gut. Dar'Revan might have been an admiral once for about five seconds before she went nuts and tried to rule the galaxy, but that-that had been to stop the Mandalorians and Tenebrae and Revan didn't have any fracking idea-

"I'll comm General Ordo, of course." The ensign kid said it so matter-of-factly that Revan felt her skin prickle with something like fear.

Or anticipation.

Canderous? I was fracking joking when I said take over the ship!

The nervous ensign continued, words tripping over themselves in his eagerness to tell her everything. "W-we've secured most of the ship, but Commander Cody and the hold-outs have barricaded themselves on the bridge. General Ordo said to comm when you woke up-"
"You're working with… uh, you're with us?"

"Some of us… we remember." The kid didn't look old enough to remember, but then Revan noticed the trace of a fragburn scar on his face—the set of his expression. She didn't need the Force to feel the loyalty rolling off him like a wave—it was all right there in his face.

He'd die for you. The voice in her head was arctic. It sounded like Dar. You must be worthy of such trust, such sacrifice-

"Why would you…?" She didn't want to distract him, but she had to understand.

"You saved us." Conviction in his voice. "I was assigned to one of the ships at Malachor, but you pulled all the ground troops off. Army, maintenance, most of the flyers too. If it hasn't been for you, my squad would've died there."

If it hadn't been for me, your squad would never have existed. You might be a civilian. You might have never been within a thousand klicks of a battle.

"Take off these restraints. And the Force blocker. Now." Her voice barely sounded like her own.

"Of course, I… the General said to just let you sleep, then maybe explain before I-I… removed them. He said you won't hurt me. Y-you won't, will you?"

"No. Of course not." She smiled with a reassurance she didn't feel. The frack, Canderous? I said escape. Not have a coup!

No, you told him to take over the ship. Fracking literal jare'la Mando'ade and their thick skulls-

"It all happened so fast." The kid muttered stepped forward with an electrokey and waved it over her restraints, then over the neural band. The binders dropped to the ground and the microfilaments stung as they retracted along her neck, leaving her free to use her hands to pull the Force-blind device off.

Her senses came back in a rush with the entire ship suddenly opening in her mind: an invisible hyperprint, marked with points of light for the lives of its crew. The absence of any other life closer confirmed what the sound of the engines had already told her. They were in hyperspace.

That limits the terms of our engagement; but if they still control the bridge-

They could have changed course, they could steer us into a sun, they could pull us out in the middle of the Republic Fleet-

A more ominous thought occurred to her. They could seal off the bridge and cut the life support to all decks below. That would be the most logical way of stopping us-unless… they still want us alive? Or, maybe killing off their own troops gets a bad rap these days, after I-after I did it. That's what I did. I-

"Admiral-?"

"Please don't call me that." Alarms blared, reminding her eerily and abruptly of another ship, another man shaking her awake, face strangely familiar, yellow eyes, but his features blurred until they were those of this young soldier, only the skin color similar-

Who was that? When was that?
"Why? Why did you… isn't this treason?"

"I think that depends on if we win," the kid said. "We… a lot of us… we remember how you stopped it."

"You know I don't remember." She stretched her arms, wriggling her fingers until the circulation returned. "Flashes sometimes, but I… I was told about Malachor. I know what I… did there, but I-"

"You pulled my squad out," he said. "That's all I care about."

_If she did, Dar had a reason. She did nothing for free._

XXX

One side of Dar's head was a mass of loose, red curls now; the other side still braided. Strange, to feel jealous of yourself, but Dar's hair was beautiful. Revan didn't remember ever thinking that about her own.

She pushed back her cropped bangs, suddenly self-conscious. "Beya Organa died," Revan snapped, trying to rattle Miss Fluffy Hair.

"Malachi had her killed. Her, Vikor, Wu-and the others. Yes." Dar met her eyes, one of hers half-hiding behind a swoop of red silk. "I killed him, Fragment. He was dying anyway, but I put a pillow over his face."

"Good." A part of her meant it, but another part just saw Korrie, smiling at his grandfather. The old man had ruined their lives, according to every record she'd seen, every piece of the past she had restored-and yet-

He thought he was right. He thought he was acting for the Republic. He was manipulated too. Or he let himself be.

Maybe it's when you think you're acting for the greater good you need to panic.

"Was it?" Her double gave Revan a sad smile, and reached for another braid, untangling it with her fingers. Her head dropped towards the ground, features masked by all that hair. "Was it good? He suffered in those last few moments."

"Good," Revan repeated, but suddenly she realized they were both avoiding the other's eyes.

"Back to Kae…." Revan took a deep breath. I left her to be tortured by Davad and Oerin. I can hardly get pissed at Dar for killing a dying man. "Or Vima, or whatever. Tell me the rest."

Dar nodded. "Kae set me on my path. She knew Tenebrae was a threat. I managed to piece together some of her schemes, over the years." Dar stretched out her legs again, bringing her head down low over them, as if stretching out her muscles. "She wanted me to control the Rakatan computer on Kashyyyky-to find the Star Forge. She wanted the Mandalorians to rise up under her husband's banner-"

Her husband?

But Revan didn't ask. Instead, Revan copied her, mostly just to see the furrow of annoyance on the other woman's smooth forehead when she looked up. "And you let her live?"

"She was useful, later. After Malachor." That smile was fracking creepy. "I left her at Malachor
with Davad Arkan and Meetra Surik. Her Battle Meditation enhanced their gifts, serving as a conduit—"

"Vima Sunrider had Battle Meditation?"

Dar'Revan's expression seemed to indicate that once again, Revan had said something incredibly obvious that everyone knew. "Yes."

XXX

"Come." Takan the Zabrak kid gestured, his eyes glowing again. Polla and the rest followed. The seats they were given were hard and stone and tilted forward just enough to be uncomfortable.

"Do you need more time, Revan?" The voice from behind the door crackled over the arena speakers. It sounded amused. There was something else about it. Something… it took Polla a second.

Metallic. Artificial. It's a voder, but a good one. Does that mean she’s going to be fighting a droid? A cyborg? Or just a Sith so horribly scarred they don't have a jaw or something? Like Darth Malak?

For an insane second, Polla imagined that Darth Malak had been alive all this time, and the Force possession of Dustil Onasi was just banthashit.

"Do you?" Revan's voice was cool and clear, like a bell. It cut through the noise of the crowd so well Polla wondered if she was using Force magic. "Do you need more time, my Lord Tenebrae? How many times have we danced to these steps? Have I ever lost before?"

I didn't have the voice right, Polla thought. A weird and useless thought; but one that was easier to dwell upon than wondering if this was the end, or how to fight an army of possessed Sith.

Snap-hiss and Revan's green laser sword ignited. Another snap-hiss, and the red one she'd taken from that dead guy did too. The Dark Lord of the Sith (former or otherwise) raised both above her head, where they met with a clash.

Like she was showing off, the woman twirled the green blade deftly in her right hand. She took another step back, bouncing easily on her feet. At some point, she'd kicked off the shoes she'd been wearing. Her bare feet scuffed the sand.

Revan was still wearing the gown, but as Polla watched, the fabric rippled, buffeted by an invisible wind. The front of the skirt split and tore, and she stepped forward, slightly, settling her bare feet on their toes. Her legs were freckled too.

She just used the Force. Maybe this Revan wasn't the Hero of the Star Forge, but Polla thought that she looked like she knew her way about a dueling ring.

She's got this.

"There is always a first time to lose," the voice said.

"But never a last," Revan Starfire said. "Not for us."

The metallic voice chuckled. "We shall see."

The barred gate slid open, retracting like a hangar door.
The small, round bedchamber was one of the few rooms along the outer wall of the compound with a window—one that looked out over the freezing plains of the Telosian pole.

The woman on the bed was staring fixedly in the direction of the snowy wastes, even if the visor she wore to see was in her lap. Her lips moved—and for a moment, Atris had the strange idea that she was praying.

"Kae? Are you all right-?"

"Did you send the latest translation to the High Admiral?" The old woman didn't even correct Atris for naming her Kae and not Kreia. She sounded utterly exhausted.

"I did, yes." Did I betray the Jedi Order? I did, yes. For the greater good. But it's not too late. We can still turn back-

Kae-Kreia-had insisted on pushing the translation to the Fleet almost instantly, despite Atris's requests to reconsider their course of action. There was too much unknown—both on Dromund Kaas, and elsewhere. There was too much unknown in Atris's own head. Sometimes she felt like she was waking up from a long, dark dream.

XXX

A dream of her office on Coruscant and there was Revan—no, Sheris, no—Revan.

A holocron fell and shattered, and behind them, behind—

"Revan." Atris heard her own voice. "I only want to help you."

"You didn't help us before." Sheris stood in front of her, green eyes blazing. Defiant. She bent down, reaching for-reaching for something on the floor. The room was a mess, someone had upended the contents of Atris's desk all over the floor, and in the wreckage of datapads and scrolls glittered the fragments of something distinctively broken-

"Forget," whispered a voice in her mind, in her memory. Familiar voice. If she could only place it-

XXX

"Atris?" Kae-Kreia's voice was gentle.

"I still don't understand," she said slowly, "why did Sheris take the holocron memories of Revan—how it was even possible—"

I had them. They were in my room. My room on Coruscant. I kept the door Force-locked.

Didn't I?

For a disorienting moment, she couldn't remember.

A holocron's crystals, broken on the floor, sparkling like jewels, like temptation-

"A Jedi's life is sacrifice." The older woman stood up stiffly, as if it pained her. "Has there been further word from Katarr?"

"No." It was not caution that made her keep the news of the amnesiac Revan's capture by a Fleet
ship to herself, she reminded herself. High Admiral Rensha had told her in confidence. And she did not want to cause poor Kreia any further distress.

"I would like to see my children," Kreia told her. Her voice was meek, nearly a whisper. "Would you bring them to me?"

"I will see if they are available," Atris hazarded. *I will go and feign to look, for I already know they do not want to see you.*

Xxx

"Commander Cody sent his report. The *Harbinger* is safely in hyperspace." Rew Ekkumi wasn't entirely sure why Old Scaly had called her to the High Admiral's flagship in person, but her grim expression looked a little more grim than usual. "Their navs estimate another two or three days before they arrive in the Katarr system."

"Yes." The High Admiral's claw hand tapped her own display of the solar system. "Revan will need to be transported to the planet immediately upon arrival. I assign that task to you."

"General Sand had more of a rapport with her. Before, I mean. Maybe he-"

"Which is *why* I am assigning the task to you." The Trandoshan's eye membranes retracted in a way that Rew had learned meant that Old Scaly was giving an order, not opening a debate. "Knowing her capabilities, we must consider that Revan and her Mandalorians may be more than a match for Commander Cody."

"The reports said she was demanding to go to Dromund Kaas?"

Rensha snarled softly. "If she manages to do so, she would save us the bother of dealing with the Mandalorians. But we cannot count on anything so logical. The real Revan was predictable, but this one-"

*Predictable?* Old Scaly must be off her cockpit. *Darth Revan didn't seem so predictable when she was beating our ships and burning our worlds-*

Rew bit back her impatience. *So... you want me to escort her to the planet? And then...?"

"The *Ravager* was spotted in orbit around Ord Mantell. And there have been rumors of... unrest there."

"Katarr is the next jump point in the map. You think Davad Arkan will be here soon."

"By all accounts, he is drawn to Force users. Revan Starfire will be a beacon he will not ignore. We need her... with the rest. But how to convince her to stay there until his arrival?"

"Tell her to do something else." The joke came out too sharp and it wasn't funny. "When has she ever obeyed a Fleet command?"

"Hrm..." The Trandoshan High Admiral walked over to her private bar and produced a ferracrystal bottle. She set it on the table between the two captain's chairs and added two ferracrystal glasses. "It's possible we can keep her groundside by force, perhaps with drugs, but we can't rely on such things. I don't believe I need to explain why." Her claws curved towards the chair. "Sit."

*Drink with Trandoshans, end as pit fighters,* went the old saying in Fleet Academy, but Rew could hardly refuse.
"Revan is ignorant," she suggested, although truly, how would she even know? For all Rew Ekkumi knew, the mindwiped Revan had learned everything from the holocon copy. "Concoct some story about how her uncle needs her. Or… her nephew? If he's truly no longer possessed… maybe he needs her."

Rensha hissed, sitting down on the chair opposite with a sigh. "I had thought perhaps of telling her Mekel Jin was still possessed. But that would give us a very small window in which to act before she discovered the error."

"Not if she has to travel to get to him." Rew looked at the map of Katarr in front of them, noting the geography, the rings of mountain ranges. "If Jin and perhaps Master Vrook Lamar are both moved to a more inaccessible area of the planet…"

"I could say it was for safer for them… yessss. That still leaves the Mandalorians, but we can handle them." Rensha's tongue flickered in and out. "I have some news from Kaas. Atris has sent another translation of the latest broadcast-"

"More recent?" Carth, you fool. It was only that they had known each other for so long, that Rew allowed her heart to ache, just a little.

"Time-stamped the same day, but they waited to release it." Rensha's snout twitched.

XXX

Something huge shuffled forward. Something massive squeezed through the door. Brown and green and armored. The first thing Polla saw were claws. Then the teeth, surrounding an almost small, nearly circular mouth.

Small was relative. Standing, the thing might have been eight meters; but it was stooped to nearly half that, crouched forward, with curving talons dripping with dark ichor.

The beast's eyes were red and glowing.

"Rancor," muttered Dustil Onasi next to Carth. He… he sounded impressed. "Big one."

"We fought one on Taris," Carth muttered. "I mean… we… we tried fighting one."

"Running would seem a lot fracking smarter," Polla muttered.

CARTH shot her a startled look. "That's what she-yeah. Yeah. It was. A lot smarter. But they're fast. You have to… they're really fast."

Obviously, Revan Starfire was here to duel, not run, because she was just standing there, facing the giant scaled monster-thing down. Her voice rang across the arena like a bell. "Possessing a beast, my lord? Rather unsporting." She flipped her green saber again, twirling the single blade. A second green blade ignited from its other end. The hand holding the single red saber stayed steady, but the green one flashed electric, now spinning like a wheel.

All that flash didn't look practical, but Polla was no Jedi. The one time she'd tried a stunt like that (in the kitchen, with a mop and one of Bolts's vacuum attachments), she'd nearly taken out the wedding pots.

"This One is entirely sentient," the beast said. There was a silver square inset where it almost had a neck. The woman's voice came from that. "All sentient creatures are mine."
"A rancor..." Revan still hadn't moved. Her green saber was a blur now, a wheel of green. "From our breeding program on Dathomir?"

"You remember." The creature's mouth slavered... dripping with dark slime—at odds with the mechanical voice from the voder. "I wasn't sure if you would."

"I remember everything," Revan said. "Still... rancors don't have poisoned claws."

"The terentatek venom is only applied to the claw and teeth's surface. An edge, nothing more. Not so different than exposing an entire Dark Council to a mutative virus."

"I merely wanted parity," Revan's voice was low, but it carried. "You possessed half of them already. Our agreement was between equals. I wanted what was due."

"Was it? An agreement between equals, Revan?" The voice chuckled, and sents in the stands did too, until the room swelled with noise. Then, abruptly, they all fell silent. "We might have had our accord between equals, had you ever followed my terms."

"What's done is done." The woman's voice was flat and hard. "Do we have an agreement regarding mine now?"

"Life for your companions, blah, blah. How tedious, Revan. Do you truly think a beast this small could kill you?"

"I must account for every possibility." Revan practically spat the words through her teeth. "Were I incapacitated or disabled, even for a brief time, and if in that brief time my companions came to harm-"

"This concern is not worthy of you!" Tenebrae chided. "I understand your regard for Malak—even without my essence with—"

Revan charged, moving forward so quickly that the attack had happened and ended before Polla could blink. Her cry of anger erupted like a scream, seemed to ripple the air around them. Polla blinked and the duelists' positions were reversed.

The asshole Emperor-rancor was marked with a burn along the scales of its side.

Before Polla had time to register or reflect, the rancor's fore claws raked the air, as the thing pivoted on its haunches, and jumped.

Fracking fast for something that big.

Revan darted to the side, moving so quickly her body was a blur.

The crowd cheered.

XXX

"Do you know for sure Kae is dead now, Fragment? Over the years, I thought my old master was dead at least a dozen times, but she always came back. She... clouds minds. Even Force-users." Dar'Revan grimaced. "Her and Tenebrae were well-matched with their lies."

"A dozen? You mean you were wrong a dozen times? You? Revan? The master strategist?" Revan almost didn't recognize the anger in her own voice. It felt... cold.

Dar pulled her red curls sharply back, exposing the sinew of her neck, the hollow in her throat. "I
was wrong about a lot of things. I knew Vima was manipulating us, I knew that the Council was compromised, but once I had harnessed the power of the Star Forge, Kae could no longer lie to me." Her mouth curved slightly, almost smug. "After that, she was mine. They all were."

Revan wondered. "Like Malak?"

Dar didn't take the bait. "Mal was the Emperor's. I did everything I could to exorcise that thing from his mind, but it was never enough. I had to keep my distance. But Kae—going by what you witnessed with Oerin Lin and Davad Arkan… Davad must have been Kae's creature all along." She frowned. "I… should have known that."

"Davad was your lover too."

"How is that relevant?" Again, Dar held Revan's own expression, like looking in a mirror.

"I suppose it's not." The memory the Jedi had shared with her, the one from the holocron, where Davad Arkan crawled across the floor flashed through her mind. A broken thing that this woman had made—and yet—

"Run," he said. She could almost hear his voice in her ear, feel his breath on her cheek. "Run."

When had he said that? When was—

Dar scowled as if lost in her own thoughts. "It was Davad who told Oerin Lin to give us this ship…"

Revan remembered the morgue. The pile of dead Jedi, Jedi that Davad Arkan had killed. She remembered the shadows around Oerin falling to the ground when Davad Arkan… ate them.

"I hadn't realized you two were still so close," she muttered. "Did you tell Malak?"

"A clumsy goad, even for you." Dar twisted her hair sharply, tying the loose strands and the braids together. "Malak had Sheris Loran, and I had Davad—"

It was a small pleasure interrupting with the obvious. "But now you're Sheris, too."

The woman's jaw worked as if she was gritting her teeth. "Are you going to share Polla Organa's husband with her? I've seen you watching him."

Because he reminds me of Carth. Except they were nothing alike past the surface resemblance. "I'm watching him," Revan snapped, "because I need to know how to fly this frickin' ship after we dump him on Navar with Korrie and Abasen."

Dar'Revan said nothing, only pulling a strand of hair from the knot she'd just tied, letting it fall over her face. As Revan watched, it split into three strands and began to braid itself.

"Can you stop that?" Revan added. "Please? It's distracting."

"It's a Force exercise," Dar told her haughtily. "A technique to hone my control. Quite soothing. You should use it yourself."

Revan yawned. "All that hair in battle. Doesn't seem practical."

Dar smiled coldly. "I suppose that's true, if you rely merely on brute force."

"Back to Arkan…." Revan thought she was beginning to understand the woman's methodology. It
wasn't exactly subtle. Leading Revan around the intel she wanted to share like they were both reluctant hessi.

"Davad was... different than Malak. Not... worse, but very... different." The woman's cheeks flushed. "Apologies. That was a terrible joke."

"It was the most Human thing you've fracking said to me!" Revan snorted. Her own face felt hot. Polla Organa wasn't the type to blush, but some inner reserve seemed to exist in them both.

"I am Human, Revan." The direct green gaze, the lines pulling the mouth up in an almost apologetic smile. "I-I regret my mistakes. I am trying to remedy them."

"By talking like a fracking droid?"

Dar made an exasperated noise in her throat, almost a growl. "About Davad. What do you wish to know? He is a shell of the man he was because of me." She swallowed. "You might have killed Malak, Fragment, but Davad has nothing to do with you."

For once, Revan almost felt like the practical one. "Are you saying you're not interested in his Davad's Force-stripping powers? Or Force-eating? His ability to end any Force-user with a mere touch?"

Dar'Revan's eyes flashed, as if Revan had hit a nerve. "Perhaps I am. But he's more dangerous to you than me now-whether he's my creature or Kae's. Keep your distance."

Revan remembered the man's smile when he took her hand and kissed it in the Meditation Gardens, the strange echo, as if they had all stood like that before.

"He said something to me once. He asked if you knew what you did to him at Malachor. He asked if he was part of your... plan?"

Did you plan on making your lover a Force-eating monster, Revan? Did you plan on making your husband an insane warlord who slaughtered entire worlds? Were they your fracking greater good?

But those questions cut too close to the quick.

What I did wasn't any better.

"You asked once before about Davad. On Coruscant."

"And you didn't answer me."

"Davad and Kae were at Malachor because I needed their... abilities to amplify the death we all felt. I needed them for Malachor-them and Meetra Surik. Their survival afterward was... convenient. Plans..." Dar's lips twisted. "They change, Fragment. Remember that."

XXX

Plans change.

The door of the Harbinger's prison cell was jarred open, and it rattled with the sound of another explosion.

Explosions in space are bad. Dangerous. Spacer's worst nightmare, vacuum rushing in, falling out into the black-
The Republic ensign stared at Revan hopefully, like a kath pup, holding out her flight suit like a gift.

By the looks, someone had cleaned it and emptied the tanks, refreshed the batteries.

"Thank you," was what she finally came up with. *I'd rather fight in my underwear than get back into that fracking thing, but I guess it's practical.*

*Ma always said it was polite to thank people for giving you crap you didn't want.*

"Here." He handed her lightsaber too. Revan took it numbly. The crystal rattled inside; she could feel it somehow, ruined and cracked from when Dar had destroyed it.

"Uh, thanks." No point in telling him it didn't work.

"Do you…." He ducked his head and Revan realized she'd been staring at his scar. "Do you want to join the battle? Or… we-we've set up a temporary command if you'd rather… just… monitor our progress-"

In the quest for the Star Forge, Revan had been in a lot of fights, but only the last one had been a battle, and that one had only had two people in it.

*Command?* She remembered Aemelie's absurd game. *That gives me the qualifications of a tach.*

"Why don't you tell me what to do, um… Ensign…?" She made a mumbling noise under her breath, hoping it sounded like a name. Like his name. The one she couldn't remember at all.

"Me?" He looked so horrified she almost laughed.

"If you would-you don't need to." He was still looking at her strangely, so Revan set out down the corridor, forcing him to follow.

"Stang!" His footsteps behind her stopped. "Wait! I have to comm…." A wall of battered armor and blaster rifle abruptly blocked their path.

"Canderous." Revan said because there was no one else the hulk of beskar in front of her could be.

"I was just gonna comm you," the ensign said behind her, almost guiltily.

"Bastards are threatening to cut off life support to this deck." The Mandalorian's voice was metallic through his helm. "We've got interdictors on the way-"

"We do? You do?" *More than one? Like the Leviathan? Ships to pull us out of hyperspace?*

*Can we wait to fight the Republic until after I have a decent sonic?*

*Or… let's not fight the Republic at all,* Revan added hastily, feeling strangely guilty for joking, even to herself.

"Just how much danger are we in?" she added. "With this… uh, ship invasion?"

"Not much, kids already routed one of the access tunnels to the next five levels down." Canderous handed her a vibroblade he'd been carrying at his waist, almost absent-mindedly. "But get suited up again, in case they cut the gravity."
Revan nodded and started stepping into the enviro-suit.

The vibroblade was a nice weapon-retractable-but it reminded her too much of all the training she'd done with blades after the Star Forge-when the thought of her saber cutting through flesh again made had her sick.

And now?

Now I know I fight better with a weapon of the Force than this pathetic piece of cortisteel. But I'll use what we have.

She buckled it to the belt of her suit.

"The bridge has its own life support. They could shut the rest down." The schematics of the ship were almost visible when Revan focused, whether from memory or a Force sensitivity to the running conduits of an active hammerhead battle cruiser.

"But our own men-" the ensign interrupted. "Commando Cody wouldn't cut off systems to the decks! There are hundreds of soldiers-"

Poor kid, he doesn't get it. He still wants to think the brass gives a damn about him. Like those soldiers on Taris, or the scientists on Manaan-

"We need to take the bridge," Revan announced. "Soon, before they do something foolish."

There. I did it. I gave a command. Her voice, Revan thought, had even sounded like Dar's.

Both men just stared at her.

"Yeah. We're... already working on taking the bridge." Canderous coughed through his helm's voder. "But it's sealed, and we don't have anything strong enough to break the blast doors without decompressing the hull. Think you could cut it open for us? You Jedi are always good for that."

"Let me see the door." Maybe there was a way.

But they fought former Jedi before. If they're smart they used cortosis to reinforce that door... and I don't have a working lightsaber.

Her fingers flexed, the Force flowing easily.

Perhaps... I won't need one.

XXX

Holocameras flashed.

Do they have HoloNet here? The Blais kids had said something about media, but Polla hadn't been paying attention.

"I will enforce your terms!" Revan Starfire called out. "When you remove your spies from Republic space, Tenebrae!"

"My spies?" The chuckling spread through the crowd, not the rancor. It was fracking creepy. "Oh, my dear. We are far past the point of you worrying about my spies!"

The green lightsaber stopped spinning abruptly. Revan brought them forward again. Another clash.
Was she just showing off?

Polla nudged Carth. "Why does she keep doing that?"

"Charging the crystals," It was Onasi Junior who answered. "Happens on its own in a fight, but if you dual wield, you can do it yourself. Have to be careful not to overload." He paused. "Unless you want it to overload them."

What would that do? Were lightsabers like blasters? Could you set them to discharge?

"Do you remember?" The voice coming out of the voder seemed to soften, not any less creepily, shifting into a sibilant whisper that nonetheless carried over the arena floor. "Do you remember the first time we danced, my Sith'aerah?"

"Yes." The word was clipped. Revan's blades wavered. "I remember."

"We will see." The possessed rancor lowered its head and charged.

Xxx

"What spies in Republic space?" Admiral Cein glowered at the holoimage, with its holographic wall of text. Rensha was sequestered in her flagship, but she'd sent over the translation of the vid (courtesy of Master Atris) with the command to watch it. "Did that Sith Emperor of theirs just say they had spies in Republic space?"

"We need a test," General Sand said. "Some way to tell what a Sith spy looks like."

"According to the Jedi, that's what their sithspawned plague is for." Cein's blue skin was flushed almost purple with anger. "Except for the races it doesn't affect."

"That damned plague is like carpet bombing a planet to stamp out kanna mites." General Sand checked his comm. He'd thought that Ekkumi was going to join them, but she'd commed at the last minute from Rensha's flagship.

"Hrm." Cein seemed to agree, but his glare never left the holo in front of them.

Xxx

The woman stepped to the side, so quickly her white dress was a blur.

The beast thundered past her. When its back was turned, the former Jedi ran backward, faster than should have been possible, putting the length of the arena floor entirely between them, before the rancor could turn around again.

It was obviously not an act of cowardice, because she immediately ran forward, dead towards the beast as it was still turning, launching herself into the air with the trajectory of a torpedo, straight towards the rancor's maw-

For a moment, she crouched almost on its shoulder, as her blades sparked against the armored hide.

In another moment, it shrugged her off as easily as water, and she was rolling across the sand, as graceful as an acrobat on a solar trapeze.

Xxx
"Did you ever see her fight-before?" Cein sounded calmer now. He seemed to be treating this vid-match like a nostalgic revision of the Mandalorian wars, which surprised Jiya, considering how much the man had despised Malak.

*But he didn't hate Revan. No more than you did. How many times did she guide your troops through the Mandalorian blockades? How many times did she know where to strike, where to send fighters, how to get your ground troops safely back on board?*

"Yes. On Cathar and Taris." After that, they had stopped risking her groundside.

The woman on the vid fought with the same skill that Jiya Sand remembered—the same distinctive grace. She was not the best of the Jedi duelists—Malak had been a brute, even before his fall. And Beya Organa's technique was flawless, Kavar Vakla… a true master. But Revan's sheer power—her ability to literally stop most opponents in their tracks—

"She's not freezing that thing," he pointed out. "Why isn't she freezing that thing?"

"I don't know." Cein frowned. "Toying with it, perhaps. Like she did to the Fett's forces at Bothawui."

Xxx

"It's not just a question of splicing the lock," the Tee-Three told Seiran. "Sure, I can do that. Easy! But we can't leave the others."

"I'm suggesting we should go look for them." It had been hours—and then five hours ago, the two Zabraks had left too, eyes glowing, without as much as a by-your-leave to go hell-knows-where.

"I'm filtering through as much media as I can… Kashyyyk agreed to boost my signal, but I'm not sure who to call," the Tee clucked. "I did leave a message for Canderous, but he never answers his own pings!"

Across the room, the HK unit's eyes whirred. Revan had left it turned on in guard mode, but it kept talking and talking—until Seiran remembered the volume switch on its voder. Now set to mute, it could only glare at them—at *him* with injured rebuke.

Truth, it was hard to keep thinking of the Tee-Three as a thing. He'd noticed Carth called it Mission. Carth's kid too. The Bitch didn't, but she hardly used anyone's proper names.

"Holy Spaceballs!" the Tee exclaimed. "Get a load of this!"

A cam whirred open on her dome and began broadcasting a panoramic holographic stream with impressive detail.

The Bitch was fighting some kind of pit-beast in what looked like an arena.

As Seiran watched, the Bitch threw a red lightsaber at the thing's armored hide. At the same time, the creature lunged forward on two legs, extending its upper claws farther than seemed possible.

The red blade glanced off one of the arms and fell to the ground. The Bitch was already ducking in, somehow executing a roll with an ignited lightsaber, as if she was trying to reach the thing's underbelly.

One of the claws lashed down and sparked off her blade.
It's resistant, Seiran realized. Its hide. She can't cut through.

For what seemed a long heartbeat the two were poised: the woman half under the beast's body, the beast's claw pressing down.

The detail of the projection was clear enough that Seiran could see the lines of strain on Revan's face, the sweat darkening her hair. Her arm shook, and he wondered how long this had been going on.

The everything blurred, in a haze of grit-

"Get the picture back, Mission."

"That is the poodoo picture. It's I think she's throwing sand at it."

"What's going on?"

There was an audience behind the fighters, slightly out of focus, shadowed by the same holocam spots that overlit Revan and the beast.

"Mission-focus on the audience." I'm calling her Mission too. Seiran had been feeling like he was losing his mind for so long it seemed normal, but there-in the second row, next to a Wookiee-the Wookiee's distinctive shape had drawn his eyes first. There…

"Big Z!" Mission exclaimed.

Their faces-her, hers!

"Polla." It felt like he'd been holding his breath for an age. Now it all came out at once. Tears pricked his eyes with relief. "She's there. She's safe."

Polla looked okay-considering. Wearing robes that could have been red in the shadows. Her head was turned towards Carth Onasi's as if they were talking.

"Is there audio?"

"Yeah, but it's bad, these Sith news stations mostly edit and splice in dialogue, so they don't have mics worth a plugged credit." Mission's speakers crackled with static. And then the roar of a crowd chanting. Took Seiran a sec to realize they were all chanting 'Ten-eb-brae'-took him right about to when they erupted in a wordless cheer.

Polla's head snapped back, and an expression of horror crossed her face.

"Bantha kriffing poo!" Mission said.

The image panned out.

The Bitch was standing, but her artificial arm hung, loose and useless at her side. It appeared to be smoking.

"What happened?" he asked.

"She tried to jump-best way to kill those things is the eyes or mouth. Only parts that aren't plated. Rancor caught her with its claws… but she's not that bad-she blocked most of it with the prosthesis…. You know, this is interesting," Mission chirped. "Polla Revan would have just fried it by now. This Revan's fighting it. Weird."
No, it's not.

Seiran remembered those weeks on the ship, watching the woman train like an automaton; watching her fall, fail, try and get back up again.

Xxx

"The Force used to sing," she said, staring at him, sweaty and hollow-eyed. "Now it feels like it's in another room-always out of reach."

Seiran just stared at her. Did she want pity? Her?

"You had enough to choke me," he snapped.

"I apologize." She stood up stiffly and left.

Xxx

"She's not as strong as-as the other one," he said. "The Bitch can't use the Force like the other one. I saw the other one almost fly."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. Sheris Loran is a class-three Force-user in Jedi records, and someone wiped the Sith archives clean on her." Mission whirred. "The Sith thing's a little odd, actually. Especially because it wasn't me."

The crowd roared again. The Bitch had dropped the lightsaber-seemingly deliberately-and raised her good hand. Lightning sparked there, but weakly, splashing across the rancor's back, even as the creature turned and charged.

The woman slid to the ground, and then skewed sideways, graceful, except for the limp arm. Somehow, she'd evaded the beast, which lumbered, turning slowly for another go.

Revan raised her good hand and the lightsaber flew into it, igniting on one side. As the beast charged, she ran straight forward, ducking between the beast's claws. The green arc of her saber whirred like a wheel, sparking off one claw and then dipped, sharply, slicing down.

A chunk of the rancor's lower jaw fell smoking to the ground, as she rolled away, dodging the lower leg that tried to smash her.

The crowd cheered again, mindless.

"They don't care who wins?" Seiran asked.

"Why would they?" Mission made a snorting noise. "Most of them are him. Sith rules: assholes always win.

As if enraged, the rancor swiped out.

Revan dodged, flipping into a roll that landed facing her opponent again. There was a slight, grim smile on her face now, and what seemed like renewed confidence, despite the damaged arm. She took two steps backwards and then broke into a run, charging the beast.

Two meters away, she jumped again, saber extended, but the rancor turned its armored head and her blade glanced off. Her body was a pale blur as she dodged another claw strike, rolling again, and circling.
She's figured out its range, Seiran thought.

His wife's face was an indistinct oval, a pale blur in the dark, in the audience beyond.

Revan repeated the move again, but this time, her blade ignited sideways, and speared the beast's eye.

It roared in agony, snapping its head back and forth, blinded.

On the sands, already clear, Revan flipped her saber back to a single blade.

The crowd roared louder, as the rancor staggered, now half blinded, claws grasping empty air-

"Thank goodness," Mission said. "For a second there, I-" The camera lurched. Revan jumped-just as the beast straightened its back, rising to its fullest height.

Instead of landing on the rancor's head, her leg slipped.

The crowd gasped, nearly as one….

XXX

**Lady Fenestre:** "Oh, me! I don't think any of us were expecting-"

**Lord Scourge:** "Wait! Revan recovers himself!"

**Lord Vash:** "Herself. For the last time, Scourge, Lord Revan is female-"

**Lord Scourge:** "It's a generic pronoun. Like Lord, Lord Vash-"

XXX

"Oh, no!" Too late, Leeshansintina considered the folly of letting little Leeshy watch the vid with her. But surely, Yuthura Ban would have warned her, if it was going to get full of guts and stuff.

"Is Korrie's mother gonna be okay?" Her sister covered her hands. "We need to make a copy of this for him!"

Yuthura Ban stopped the vid, looking as if warning them had maybe just occurred to her too. "Malachor isn't there," she began. "We don't know where he is, but we do know there has been no sign of him on Dromund-"

"I know where he is." Leeshy wiped her eyes. "We comm all the time. How am I gonna tell him his mother died? Does she? Does she die?" Her head shook back and forth, developing a wail like the one Leeshansintina remembered using herself at that age. "It's not fair!"

"You know where he is?" Leesa considered her sister more carefully. "Do tell."

"No." Little Leeshy shook her head.

Leesa made a mental note to check the outgoing comm feeds.

XXX

Revan’s leg slipped, glancing off the rancor’s razor-sharp teeth, and then she… seemed to almost spin in the air, somehow clambering atop the rancor's head. Hard to tell in a holorecording, but
she seemed to be sparking blue, like she'd activated a shield of some kind.

Her blade ignited on one side, and she drove it hard into the beast's unblinded eye.

The creature fell like a stone as the crowd went wild-

XXX

"You know where Korrie D'Reev is?" Yuthura was asking. As if she'd have the secrets of House Racharn with no oaths of loyalty or anything? Jedi were so arrogant, sometimes!

"He is to be my betrothed," Leeshy said stiffly. "Of course, I know where he is." Her eyes went back to the vid, and she sighed a little, as if with relief. "Why did you stop it? She won?"

"Yes, and that is the end of the recording, unless you want to hear the Sith National Anthem again…?" Yuthura smiled. Really, for a former Sith, she was good with children, Leesa thought.

"All that electro harp. Gross." Leeshy made a face and unfolded herself from the divan.

"Time for bed," Leeshansintina told her little sister, stretching herself.

Leeshy was vanishing through the door when the Twi'lek coughed once. "A moment," she said to Leeshansintina, as if they were equals.

"What?" That had been the problem with Jedi, her own mother had always said. So arrogant.

"There's more to see." Padawan Ban's fingers moved, and the vid began again….

XXX

The red-haired woman in the torn white gown bowed to the audience. One of her arms hung, limp and sparking. The other saluted slowly with an unlit saber. She was smiling, but it was a fixed expression as if she'd forgotten how to turn it off.

XXX

"Right! The awards part." She stifled her yawn. "Look at Carth Onasi in the crowd there. Why does he look so pissed?" Leeshansintina peered at the screen. "Wow, Dustil does too. So, he's not Malak anymore? Or he is? That thing with the Jedi was confusing. Did it work? Do they think he's Malak?"

"I do not know," Yuthura's voice was distracted. "Would you call me a cab to the shipyards?"

"Already done." Leesa yawned. It was late. "My driver is waiting outside. Are you going to Katarr with the rest of the Jedi?"

"Do you think I should?"

"They've got a lot of Jedi. But hey… in a few years, we might have some Force-sensitive kids for you to train…here… so stay in touch, okay?" Leesa coughed. "Because, like, Leeshy and Korrie will get married and have babies… not, like anything else going on with our House."

"Thank you." Padawan Ban sounded distracted.

XXX
Rew Ekkumi exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "She won."

There was Carth in the stands, next to his son and a Wookiee. He was cheering with the rest, but he didn't look happy to be there and a small, nearly extinguished part of her loved him for that.

Rensha hissed softly. "Did we want her to win?"

"Does it matter?" Rew asked bluntly. "She won. Carth Onasi is safe, and beside him is either his son or the ghost of Malak D'Reev-"

High Admiral Rensha coughed.

XXX

The woman's head turned abruptly away from the crowd, just as the gate behind her opened again. A brown-gray blur the height of the opening emerged. It was big-even bigger than the last monster—and moving fast.

Revan Starfire turned—leaping into the air and back, and then started to run along the perimeter of the sands, as if she was trying to get momentum to jump again.

The new rancor stopped and roared, baring its chest with clawed hands that gleamed with something dark and dripping, and a metallic voice echoed its roar, matching the syllables, but any real words were lost in the excited roar of the crowd.

In the audience beyond, hundreds of red eyes gleamed.

The woman screamed something back at the rancor, her words lost in the roar of the crowd, too.

The crowd was chanting now, all in unison. Revan was already moving again, her saber outstretched—

XXX

"The Emperor asked if she thought it was over," Yuthura translated. 'It—he said it was not. The crowd is chanting the word 'sikkath,' which means 'victory' in Ancient Sith. Over and over again."

Leeshansintina yawned. "Another fight?"

XXX

The red-haired woman fought valiantly with one hand, dodging the great beast, but the aggression she'd shown previously seemed stunted now, her movements more defensive than offensive.

XXX

"She's tiring," Cein said.

"She's fighting one-handed." Jiya thought that the outcome didn't matter, but they still bore witness.

The woman's jumps were ragged now, her limp arm unbalancing her effort. She was using a single green blade, and with the overlong hilt, the weapon looked like it was being held by a child—an effect emphasized by the size of the creature she faced. It was even larger than the last one. With longer claws.
Jiya's comm pinged suddenly, breaking the onscreen stalemate. Jiya suddenly wanted to just speed to the end and end this-

"Blast," Cein muttered, looking down at his own comm, which had pinged too. "Distress call from the Harbinger."

XXX

This already happened, Rew reminded herself. Old Scaly knows how it ends, she's watching you watch it for a reason.

She tried to keep a neutral expression, as the woman circled the rancor, lightsaber half-raised defensively, as the thing lowered the lump of its head and charged again.

Revan Starfire backflipped, neatly landing on the corpse of the first beast. Her next leap propelled her forward, straight towards the dripping claws, the ravening mouth of the one still living. Her blade was outstretched, and she twisted in mid-air somehow pushing off the armored belly, as she flipped again sideways, saber outstretched. Her green blade sparked hard along its scales, and the creature... reared back, as if suddenly trying to get escape.

She landed on the ground, the mechanical hand flopping.

"Rancors." Rensha told Rew. "They are one of the great preys from the Great Hunt. Whatever else, the Starfire fights like a great hunter in this battle. I honor her blade." She handed Rew a glass and drained her own drink. "So should you." Her incisors bared, and she gestured at the cup Rew hadn't touched. "Now."

Rew nodded, not sure what to say. The Trandoshan liquor burned her throat. Her eyes stung.

As they watched, Revan repeated her attack. But this time, one of the claws found purchase for a moment on her bad arm, and the mechanical one ripped free, sparking in their grasp.

The rest of Revan rolled again, her saber momentarily extinguished. But the stump where her hand had been was still sparking with wires, and darkened with red.

Her face was still frozen with that grim smile.

The rancor rose to its full height. Now, there was a line along its belly, where the blade had scored.

"Another few cuts with the Jedi blade might break through the armor," Rensha said. "But the claws are poisoned. Look."

Revan Starfire's good arm shook as her blade ignited again.

XXX

Commander Cody leaned across the main comm board himself, yelling-as if that would make Fleet arrive sooner, get their interdictors in range faster-

We're still in hyperspace. By the time Fleet hears me, it'll all be over. And they'll know that! They might have the distress call already, but they won't leave bleeding Katarr for me-

"Ready to vent the decks," Corporal Buteen called out. "On your command, sir!"

"They're closer." Dak Vesser brandished his lightsaber next to the blast doors leading from the main deck. "She's closer. I can sense it."
"And her Mandalorians?" Cody already knew the answer, but he was numb. *I should have placed more guards. I should have acted immediately when the systems cut out in the prison sector and sealed it-not sent a patrol-*

*I should have accidentally depressurized the entire prison block the second I locked them in!*

"I believe the Mandalorians are… with her." Dak sounded less sure. "I sense multiple presences on the other side of that door-"

The patrol Cody sent had not returned, but he'd seen them on the cams, taking their own comrades prisoner for the Mandalorians.

The traitors must have gotten deck paint from requisitions. Every one of Revan's mutineers had splashed the front of their armor with a blood-red hand.

Cody felt even more of a fool than when she'd stolen his clothes.

"Pardon, sir…" His communications officer, Lieutenant Hannist'al, was apologetic. "Dammer Squad and Alfiri haven't reported in. All evidence suggests that they… they… joined them."

"Special Forces." *Always loyal to Jedi. Too many merc recruits. Or, she did something to their minds…*

XX

"Take off your clothes."

*And he had. The Force could do terrible things to a mind. Revan Starfire could do terrible things and she was on his ship-*

XXX

"The door's holding, sir." Ensign Tavis looked nervous, standing next to Knight Vesser with her gun drawn. A red line etched along the cortosis-lined surface, like a madwoman with a lightsaber was cutting through the other side.

"Is that her?" he barked at them.

"She's close." Dak was a capable Jedi, Cody had seen him take on an entire bridge of slavers when they'd been on Rim patrol.

"Harbinger requesting assistance from Fleet Command." There was a protocol to follow in cases like this, and Cody forced his voice to calm enough to follow it as he sent the recorded message into the sub light channel, projecting towards Katarr. "We're going to vent all the decks, but if that doesn't work-"

"If it does work, they'll all die," Knight Vesser noted. He sounded as if the prospect was an intellectual curiosity, not a problem.

Cody continued his report. "We issued an evacuation order, hopefully our own personnel made it to the escape pods. As soon as we drop out of hyperspace they can launch-"

He glanced at the door again. That schutta didn't seem to be making any more progress, which was a relief. "Secure the door," he called out, and his guard moved to surround it, all weapons trained on the glowing red line that was attempting to cut through the cortosis-enhanced blast doors.
Sheen Cody's hand hovered on the exhaust lever. One key command, and the other decks would vent. Locked to his biosig. The Captain's last choice. His eyes met Corporal Kisha's across the bridge. She nodded slightly, indicating (he hoped) that the rest of the ship had made it to the pods. Crew in the pods would survive vacuum.

*I've done all I can.*

Cody closed his eyes and grabbed the lever. It was an act of insubordination, desperation—a last resort. The lever moved—

And then his arm… *froze.*

Ice gripped his limb, numbing it near-instantly. His entire body went rigid, his head still turned towards the door—

The bulkhead above Cody's head tore open—enforced plating ripping like plimsi. An envirosuited figure dropped down into his view, and he struggled in the grip of invisible ice to react, to attack, to do anything at all.

The whine of vacuum hissed before the breach shields took over. Even as his mind tried to define the hole in the ceiling as the result of a blast, his eyes told him differently—there had been no explosion, no sound but the buzz of shields, the whispers of his crew.

Now, above their heads a maze of pipes and exhaust ducts lay exposed, the maintenance crawlspace, the smooth plated ceiling rolled back like plimfoam—

In the next instant, blast bolts winged past him, close enough to feel their cold fire, aiming at the slim figure half-kneeling in front of him with her hands out, palms up.

She was helmeted and masked, but Cody *knew*:

*Came through the ceiling. It's triple-reinforced. It can hold back plasma bolts and she… just peeled it open.*

One gloved hand twisted, and he noticed the blaster bolts were frozen, vibrating in thin air, dozens of them like deadly spikes in ice, almost a perfect ring around her body.

Revan Starfire's other hand traced a circle and then another, and then, with each easy gesture, *more* of the ceiling opened, more armored and suited bodies dropped down. Some were Special Forces, Cody's own men—

—and four Mandalorians, clad in their infernal filthy beskar, which had been *confiscated*, blast it!

Another look at Revan confirmed that she was wearing her kit too—and had even added what looked like an officer's sword buckled to her belt, next to the obvious hilt of an unused lightsaber.

*I was never in command, from the moment we took her on board. We should have blasted her ship from orbit! Orders be damned!*

"Don't shoot," her voice was soft but it… it echoed. "Don't shoot again."

Later, he was never sure if she'd used Jedi magic on them all or not. She could have. Or it could have been just her.

"Okay..." she added, unsnapping her helmet. Underneath, her face was still streaked with sweat and
Revan Starfire stepped gingerly around the blaster bolts frozen in the air. The click of charged weapons dropped into the silence like a sonic grenade. Cody expected to die in that moment. He'd... he'd fought Sith before. He'd seen how bad it got. At least stinking Mandalorians just wanted the battle. Blasted Sith enjoyed the death.

"Revan," Knight Vesser said. He'd pivoted, lightsaber still lit, as if he and the scourge of the Republic were the only two sentient on the bridge.

"Dak?" She ran her hand through her cropped hair, grimacing. The blaster bolts remained, floating. "Give me a moment, I-I need to figure out what to do with these."

"Give you a moment?" The Jedi Knight's voice cracked, and he leaped, blade out in front of him, moving so quickly that Cody flinched, self-preservation kicking in before his officer's stripes. Dak landed in front of him, spinning around. The whisper of his saber was a blue trace in the air, closer than Cody liked to see, close enough to feel the oscillation of the particle blade.

"Yes." Revan took a step backwards, hand raising up in a signal that they all recognized. *Hold.*

Not talking to them, but to her own soldiers. *Her soldiers*. They had so recently been *his*.

Cody glanced at Dak and the man was... frozen. He looked carved in ice-mouth twisted in anger, blade raised in a killing arc, his feet stretched apart, unbalanced. As Cody watched, the Jedi Knight rocked back and forth like an unbalanced statue... Until one green-eyed glance from *her* stabilized him, like a game piece she'd put back on the shelf.

"A moment," she said, raising one eyebrow. Her hair was dyed brown, not red. It wasn't until then it occurred to Cody to wonder why.

Revan's conquering glance went to the door, to his men, crouched there, the ones who had fired. Her hand twisted, and the door itself... peeled open, like a skin off a hard-boiled Moffa egg.

Behind, there was Ensign Sikos, holding a laser torch and not a lightsaber at all.

Behind him...

The rest of Cody's former command broke into a ragged cheer.

Ensign Sikos waved hesitantly, twitching his antennae. "We're good?"

"Yes." Revan stared at the bolts again, brow creased like they were a mathematical puzzle. "Thank you. You all did very well. Watch the Commander, Canderous."

One of the beskar-suited figures grunted an agreement.

The red dot of a laser sight momentarily blinded Cody's left eye, before trailing down almost insolently to land on his chest. *There was never a lightsaber at the door.* But Revan had one, hanging from a clip at her waist. Revan had one... but she'd disabled Dak Vesser with nothing more than a twist of her fingers.

A blue lattice built up around the frozen blast bolts, as if she was summoning a shield from nowhere. As he watched, the lattice expanded. "Might want to step back, everyone," she called out. "If this doesn't work, I'll try and contain the explosion, but-"
"Third Wife!" The smallest figure in beskar stepped forward. "Wait! You could set up a shield dome."

"That's what I'm doing." Revan moved her fingers again, and the blue light encircled the blaster bolts.

"A shield dome with working technology, instead of your hu'tuun Dar'Jetti magic," the girl insisted. "This is no time for an experiment."

"I think I have it, Milli. Just stand back."

"Father."

"Trust her," Canderous Ordo grunted.

Revan Starfire flexed her hands and there was a quiet pop. The bolts and the lattice all vanished.

"There." She smiled, looking too smug to be the scourge of Malachor. "Now…." Her attention glanced over Cody, dismissing him entirely.

He still couldn't move.

"Dak…." Her stasis around the Jedi collapsed, leaving him stumbling to right himself. His blade sparked to life again, and Revan ducked as the Jedi swung blindly at her with a growl of rage.

"At least do me the honor of fighting," the Jedi hissed, sounding like less of a Jedi than she did. "Draw your weapon, Revan!"

"I can't." Revan raised her hand again, and his saber arm froze. His hand trembled as if buffeted by an invisible wind. "My saber's broken. I don't know how to fix it. The crystal's… fused or something."

"Did you leave it somewhere?" Vesser didn't sound like he believed her. "How could that happen?"

"Apparently, I was never taught to shield." Her voice was soft suddenly, and Cody felt his hackles rise. "Perhaps the Jedi didn't bother, or they wanted to be able to leash me."

Her hand moved again, fingers crooking, and the lightsaber in the knight's hand broke free and flew into hers with a snap.

"Wish I'd known that on Korriban," Dak muttered. His hand closed into a fist.

The lit blue blade in Revan's hand made a popping noise and then shorted out.

Revan chuckled and threw it away. The hilt clattered on the bulkhead. "Seemed like a nice weapon. You didn't have to ruin it on my account."

"You didn't have to kill my friend-

The world (or the ship) tilted abruptly, proximity alarms drowning out the rest of Dak's words. Sheen Cody heard the engines hitch and short out, as the bulkhead tried to stabilize.

In front of them, the blur of hyperspace was suddenly replaced with a view of stars.

Stars… and the half-cloaked shadow of a great, triangular-shaped ship. The lines of it were alien, and terrible, and… familiar. *Sith. A Sith Interdictor.*
"Finally!" the Mandalorian girl exclaimed. "What took them so long?"

The woman in white stood, bare legs slightly apart. Her left arm ended in a bleeding stump. Her right arm trembled, holding the ignited double blade as if it suddenly weighed a decagram. Her face was pale, bright hair slicked back. Her topknot fell half in her eyes, but her stare remained the same: glazed and unblinking.

"No," she said, clearly in Basic. "This isn't over."

On the other side of the sands, the possessed rancor lowered its head for the charge-

"Grass Priests!" Polla could barely hear herself over the crowd, but she thought she was screaming. "Why is Revan just standing there?"

Zaalbar roared something—maybe a response.

"It scratched her," Dustil Onasi said. "Look."

The stump where the fake left arm had been bleeding. As they watched, blue light rippled over it, almost like a shield.

"I think she's trying to heal—" Carth's kid sounded awed.

"With the Force?" Carth asked the obvious. "Can you help her?"

"Not… not from here." Dustil started to stand up in his seat, but Carth grabbed his arm, pulling him down again.

"Don't," he muttered.

Inse Blaise (who was sitting in front of them) glanced back. "You would stop Lord Malak, slave?"

"Our Lord Malak can heal?" Her sister Mydia added, twisting back in her seat. "Can you reattach severed limbs? What about… say, toes?"

"If you help, you're responsible for ending the duel. Either by killing your opponents, or dying yourself." their brother Phylus interrupted.

"I'm sure Lord Malak knows that!" Mydia elbowed Phylus sharply.

The roar of the crowd brought Polla's attention back to the match. Revan was making another run on the beast now, which was crouched low, shielding its guts from her blade. She jumped into the air-

"Poo doo! That trajectory's all wrong!"

Seiran looked up from the pile of weapons Carth Onasi and his son had left in a plasteel crate in their room. Every impulse, every intuition he had was screaming at him now, screaming this was
all trouble.

"We need to get to them." He selected a holstered blaster, sliding it out to check the charge. "Let's go."

"We're too late." Mission's voice reverted to sounding like a machine.

*I have a bad feeling*-

The HK droid made a frustrated whining noise, like it had a lot to say.

Seiran had had nothing but bad feelings since they'd landed on this sithspawned planet, but this one was different. This one was-worse.

The rancor's clawed hand slammed across just as Revan leaped, lower than before, perhaps tiring. This time, the poisoned talons found purchase, pinning Revan's leg at the knee. She made no sound-at least none heard over the ecstasy of the crowd, but Seiran saw her mouth open, saw the grimace of agony on her features.

The rancor shook her, back and forth, like a kath with a toy. Her head snapped back. Hard.

Sand filled the screen again, buffeted with blue.

Xxx

*This isn't how it goes.* Polla stood, frozen in shock.

"No," Carth whispered. Zaalbar and the kid were saying things too, but their voices were lost in the roar of the crowd. Carth stood. On his other side, his son grabbed his hand.

"We can't. We can't-"

"No!" Carth said again. He raised his blaster and fired.

The shot scored uselessly across the beast's armored back.

Carth fired again. "Damnit!"

"Dad, you can't-" Dustil said something else, but it was lost in the crowd and then Carth's eyes were glowing red again… and instead of shooting, he was laughing.

"Interference is not forbidden," Tenny-Bro intoned in Carth's voice. "But the rules say the terms must extend to include the new parties. And so, this body must finish the fight now that it has been engaged-"

Polla's right hook lashed out, smashing into Onasi's face.

Still red-eyed and laughing, Tenebrae staggered back.

In front of them, Revan had-Polla wasn't sure what the woman had done. The beast was shaking her back and forth, and she'd activated some kind of blue shielding. But it was hard to tell if the shield was doing any good. The thing had its claws in her, had her pinned against its mouth. *Poisoned mouth and poisoned claws.* The remains of her white dress were rapidly soaking red.

"A messy end," one of the Sith said in the front row. Two others seemed to be resolving a bet.
"Frack!" Dustil Onasi looked like he was torn between helping his da and trying to rescue whatever remained of Revan Starfire.

Later, Polla would come up with all sorts of reasons for what she did. But when she dreamed about it later—and she did a lot at first—after everything that came after—in her dream she didn't think at all.

In real life, there was simply no time. Dustil was already leaping in the air over the bystanders with a lightsaber in his own hand, Zaalbar was standing, mouth open in a roar. Carth Onasi was frozen, light in his eyes gone out, momentarily disoriented, nose already bloody from her shiner, and Polla Organa angled herself to get a better vector—

*Stop this fracking frack this fracking asshole—*

It was one smooth movement: Polla's right hand to her left boot, to the snub pistol's grip, to the air, to the red, gleaming eye about fifteen meters away. A small, moving target; but she'd hit harder ones.

She fired.

A bolt of blue, smack. The thing staggered, waving Revan in its grasp. The eye darkened where Polla had scored a hit and the beast roared.

Polla fired again.

And again. The rancor had stopped moving at all, which made it easy. Revan twitched in the monster's claws, but not enough to obscure the shot.

Polla fired once more into the other eye and the monster collapsed, half on top of the Sith Lord's limp body.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

XXX
The Shrieking of Nothing is Killing, Just—

Chapter 56 / The Shrieking of Nothing is Killing, Just—

"Next stop is Katarr." Sion was talking again. So much talking. "You'll like it there. Lots to eat. Miralukan colony. They're all a bit Force-sensitive. Perhaps if you consume an entire planet, you'll take a nap and stop asking to be fed every five minutes."

[""Food."" ] Nihilus walked to the map to see the food. Once, he'd asked his cousin-bastard to kill him, but now he was starving. Nihilus was always starving. Just like Sion was always dead. Sion and Nihilus. Their names had been a joke. He remembered that. He still remembered how to laugh, even without a mouth.

Xxx

"Butcher of Endor, Butcher of Telos, Butcher of Malachor... all rather repetitive." Oerin Lin shrugged. "Put a Darth in front of any word, and at least it sounds distinctive. Sometimes, I see Mother's point."

"That may be the Force compulsion." Davad chuckled, looking down at the training pit in the Sith Embassy. The new Blades were coming along quite well... but the sithlings fighting them were mostly pathetic. "Sion seems a bit close to the nose, in my opinion. Was Darth Mandalore taken?"

Oerin shrugged. "Scion of a noble house... Sion. Perhaps it's dialect. Mother chose it. She decided that you're to be Nihilus. Because of your cheery disposition?" He leaned against the railing. "For the record, I did suggest 'Darth Drexl.'"

"Your mother and her schemes...." Davad took a bite of goreapple, crisp and sweet and hard. And hard. "Here we are, rotting on a fish planet. Lord Malak is dead. Lord Revan is dead. The Sith Empire is all in disarray, and your mother-"

"Mother thinks we rule best from the shadows." Oerin Lin shrugged. "The Pretenders were my idea... I think." He frowned. "At least, they make it interesting."

"Does she really expect us to restore the kolto here on Manaan, or is it all for show?"

"I have no idea. Distraction for the Emperor? Culling the herd? Genuine sentiment for the weak?" Oerin smiled at the match below. "Does it matter?"

The victor of the match had long red braids. She glanced up, hand raised.

Oerin Lin waved back. "I like her."

Even from here, even with so many pretenders, Davad knew that one. Bitterness curdled in his gut. "Sheris was always drawn to power. She must like you too."

"She's beautiful." Oerin Lin looked like he was blushing under the stubble on his chin that wasn't quite a beard. "As a child, I never saw Revan's appeal—but as a man-indisputably, her form is... lithe and pleasing. And Sheris herself... refreshing," He grinned. "Is this a problem?"

Rage was pure and sweet and hard. Davad threw the goreapple away. "Sheris is nothing like
Revan.

"I didn't think she was," Oerin shrugged. "And again: do we have a problem?"

Davad exhaled. "Not yet. He had already seen her die once. The second time was easier. And Sith
did not grieve. They sated their defeat with victory, or fell trying.

"Perhaps we should find you your own Revan pretender?" Oerin chuckled. "We have so many to
choose from now, and all of them are much more convincing than that Jedi persona ever was-"

"Revan is dead. Another one of Traya's failed experiments." Davad's hand curled in a fist, and he
watched with dull satisfaction as the red-haired woman below froze, one hand creeping to her
throat.

"Don't." Oerin's voice was a low growl. His own hand reached for Davad's arm, Force and raw
strength grappling like a vise. For a moment, they stood, poised, eyes locked, the Force channeling
a void of darkness between them.

On the fighting grounds below, the red-haired woman in white robes righted herself and wisely
fled, leaving the games to be fought by less important fools.

Not yet truly Nihilus, but the hunger already a dull ache-confused, perhaps, with regret for a
woman twice dead. On Manaan, Davad's only conscious goal had been to outlast Beya, to live past
her even if he kept his word as a prince of Onderon not to take her life—

But Traya had her own plans, and for those, he and Oerin—Nihilus and Sion—had to dance.

XXX

Here in the now, the ship was large and dark and hard and dead. And Nihilus was starving.

Nihilus went to the room with the crates and the frozen shadows. All the carbonite boxes were
broken and scattered. His maw ached for meat but there was nothing left.

"I told you to save some." Sion's voice behind him. Following him. Reproving. "Even after we
arrive in orbit, it will take several hours to travel to the planet's surface."

["Have them deliver the food,"] Nihilus suggested. In days of old, Beastrider subjects had brought
tributes to their kings: gifts of honey and break and smoky, succulent meat-

"That's right. Good boy." Sion wheezed. "Food! You'll have it soon."

XXX

It was the middle of the night on Deralia, and lunchtime on a Seventhday on Coruscant.

Korrie did the math twice to check before he snuck downstairs to use the comm without Molla
knowing. He'd already gotten in trouble once-apparently, comm calls cost a lot to Coru from the
Outer Rim, and Molla had gotten the bill last time Korrie had called home. She'd said it wasn't the
money, only the safety-thing…but he'd seen the bill. Three thousand credits sounded like a lot.

He'd have to ask Leeshy to wire her compensation for that call—and this one too. Korrie couldn't
figure out a way to stop the bills from coming, so he'd just have to pay them. Moll was really,
really nice to him—nicer than Grandfather had been most of the time—and the other kids from his
riding lessons were cool, but he hated always having to lie.
Sometimes, like Grandfather used to say, you just needed to talk to someone, and you had to make absolutely sure it was either a psychdroid you could reprogram later, or someone who had signed a confidentiality agreement, and who knew you like family. He trusted Moll-Moll okay now, but she wasn't family. Both of his mothers were gone, Grandfather was dead, and Father's ghost was probably still haunting that mean kid, Dustil Onasi (also not family).

So, there was no one left to talk to except Leeshy, Second of House Racharn. She wasn't family yet, but she was his betrothed.

Now, her holoimage was smiling back while Korrie curled up on the sofa next to the spiderworm plant, cradling the heavy comm unit on his lap under the knitted sofa-blanket. Moll had told him she'd made the sofa-blanket herself from Imperial-grade eridu. Korrie liked it because it felt like the sheets back home.

"You had a dream?" Leeshy asked again. "I told you, I just saw her on a vid."

"I had a dream my first mother died," Korrie repeated. "On that Sith planet. You're sure it's not true?"

If it was true, wouldn't he have dreamed of her ghost like he used to with Father? Would it even be her ghost though? Or that mean Sheris-lady's?

"I saw her fighting these monsters, and she won. The crowd cheered and everything. Leesa got a Jedi servant to translate the vid for us." Leeshy's head vanished from the comm screen for a sec and then popped up again. "Just sent you a copy I made. It's encrypted with our secret password. I spliced in the subtitles too."

The secret password was 'Dracheev.' It was their names all mixed up, for when they were the older and married and could rule things.

"Thanks!" Korrie adjusted the comm unit next to his datapad on his lap, and keyed open his mail file. When he unloaded the file, the sound blasted into the room. Hastily, he turned it down, watching.

"You're watching it right now?" Leeshy craned her neck to see. "Resolution's all funny, watching it from a vid across the galaxy. Your planet needs better infrastructure."

"It's not my planet," he pointed out. "Deralia's independent. I told you."

"Independents," she scoffed.

Mother was good in a fight, and Korrie was glad to know she was okay. And glad Leeshy had told him she was okay before he watched, because there were a few times that looked pretty choppy for her against that rancor-monster. He still didn't really relax until the vid cut out (kind of abruptly) with the crowd cheering.

"My sister sent me to my room," Leeshy explained. "That's why it's all jerky at the end. I was hiding the recorder and I had to stand up fast."

"Did you find out where my other mother is?" Korrie asked. Mother had said she couldn't call, couldn't risk anything that might trace back to him on Deralia—not until they were safe… but Korrie had seen a lot of vids and been in Eglatine school for years. He knew there was no safe.
He wished she'd just call anyway.

"No, but the Fleet want Revan really bad?" Leeshy sighed. "I don't think Leesa cares about her though. She's all into the trading with the Sith thing right now. She even got me a Sith language teacher, but then the lady just quit."

"The Sith are evil," Korrie reminded her. "They use slaves. And my mothers are going to kick their asses."

"If they don't, we will." Leeshy promised.

"When we're older." Molla-Moll was teaching him to shoot a rifle, which might come in handy. "How's everyone at school?"

"Oh! I guess you didn't hear! Agnis Makeon is a Fourth now. And Dummy Phin…." Leeshy made a face and drew a finger across her throat, making dramatic choking noises.

"Really?" His eyes widened.

"Really!" Leeshy curled her legs up under and leaned back, getting ready to tell Korrie everything.

XXX

Mekel must have dozed off, because when he woke again, Lydie Korr was across the room and fully clothed, staring at the comm unit in her lap. She began speaking the second his eyes opened—as if she'd been waiting for him to wake. "I spoke to Azen an hour ago. He and the other masters are taking a shuttle down from the High Admiral's flagship."

"Oh." Mekel sat up. "How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours." Lydie smiled slightly. "Did you know that you snore?"

"I do not!" He tried to use his sleeve to wipe the bit of drool from his stubble and still look suave. "Did you tell Azen to tell those Fleet officers about Dustil only pretending to be Malak?"

"I sent the message." She frowned. "You need to dress… and—"

"Leave. Right." Mekel grinned at her, sliding out from under the covers. "Loanin might wonder why I'm napping here, huh?"

Her skin flushed, and she averted her eyes when he stood. "We can't do this again."

"No more naps?" Mekel grinned to show her he got it, even if he didn't like it. Was she serious? You're the one who's fracking married, Lydie Korr. "Why?"

"It's not… appropriate. I don't think either of our… partners would approve."

Partners? You're the one with a partner. How can Telos be my partner if he's so much more powerful than I am? Or dead. By the time I get to Kaas, he could be dead.

"So that was it? That was the last time?" Mekel tried to sound like he didn't give a frack; but if she'd told him before, he would have made it count. And last longer.

"I think it's for the best," Lydie nodded. "You're going off on your mission to rescue Dustil Onasi on Dromund Kaas."
"Right." Mekel had said he was going to save Dustil. He'd said a lot of things, without bothering to think them through, whispering them into her skin, like she was his magic charm. "I'll go. Did Loanin-did Azen-say what the Fleet was gonna do about Dustil and his dads and the others?" He felt a pang of guilt for not mentioning the Wookiee or the real Polla Organa bint, but they were nulls anyway.

_They won't make it no matter what I do. Nulls don't make it on a planet like that, just like on Korriban-

"No." Lydie Korr's cheeks tinged pink. "But Azen wants to see you. He's with your father and Master Kavar. They want to know exactly what you know. Everything they can about the Sith Emperor and Dromund Kaas."

_Everything?_ Mekel felt his face scowl. _Like they didn't ask questions before? Everything is fracked. The Masters want to know? Do they want to help?_

"Good thing I'm here already." He lifted his arm, catching a whiff. "Should I get dressed first?"

"I put your things in the fresher." She was strange and stiff and formal and looking at him like he was poison. "If you hurry, you can take a sonic and dress here."

"Nicer than the communal freshers," Mekel drawled. "Thanks. You... uh, you want to take a sonic with me?"

"No. We can't do this again," she repeated firmly. Her horns were flushed pink, and her lips were parted. An errant lock of hair coiled on her forehead. Rather pointedly, she picked up a datapad and began scrolling through it.

Mekel took the fracking hint.

XXX

They were in Rensha's private quarters, with a line open to the bridge one level below. More the illusion of privacy than the actual. On the viewscreen before them, Katarr slept, the outline of the Fleet's ships etched in holographic outline around its equator.

"We are not a tyranny," High Admiral Rensha told the Telosian Human. "And this is not a coup." She folded her claws. "But there can be no hesitation. No deviation from orders.... I need to know that my officers understand-and agree-with our difficult choice."

Admiral Rew Ekkumi nodded slowly. "Whatever _that_ Revan's intentions were on Dromund Kaas-"

"They no longer matter." It was pleasing, when subordinates made the proper connections.

Rew frowned her tiny flattened Human face. "But Malak D'Reev...?"

"Is still on the Sith homeworld with the Sith Emperor. And all Sith must be stopped." Rensha nodded, and waved at the screen, panning past Revan Starfire's (or Sheris Darkstar's) broken body, to the figure of Carth Onasi. Even in the haze of the holocam's last still, his eyes were clearly glowing red.

"And Captain Onasi is possessed." The Telosian blinked rapidly a few times, and wiped her eyes. "So that's it, then. That's-"

Rensha's private comm channel pinged. _"High Admiral?"_
"Yes?" Rensha held up one talon, indicating silence to the Human. Yikas was comming, she recognized the Quarren tones of his voder. Her steward wouldn't interrupt if it wasn't important.

"A Sith warship just uncloaked. It appears to be using its interdiction engines to pull another ship out of hyperspace."

"Ah." It was not even a surprise. Rensha glanced at Rew. "Hold the Fleet cloaked for now, but maneuver our own ships to surround the intruder. Visual onscreen."

The image appeared so quickly that Rensha was sure Yikas must have already began the transmission before her request. The great, wedge-shaped hulk was like the skull of some great beast, blue light flickering over the hole in its maw—from a distance, almost an eye.

The last time Rensha had seen this perversion of Force magic and science, it had been in dry docks in an orbital above Kuat. The engineers had doubted it could ever be space-worthy again. Obviously, Mandalorians had better engineers, for all the bays of the *Aleema* were now lit up, and the interdiction engines crackled—

"Vulnerable now," Rew Ekkumi spoke the obvious. As a new admiral, perhaps she felt she had to prove herself. "As long as they're shunting power to generate the gravity wells, their shields are down. If we blast them now—"

"We would risk losing the prize they are pulling out of hyperspace," Rensha finished the sentence. "At best, their prize breaks free and continues its journey. At worst, their prize breaks apart. Would you sacrifice the *Harbinger* ’s crew so easily?"

"We don't know the *Harbinger* is the ship they're retrieving. It could be one of their own. It could be anything—"

"Yikas!" Rensha interrupted her underling again. Rew Ekkumi would be a better commander if she could stop her pointless ruminating with her blunt Human teeth. "Do we have any Jedi still in the fleet?"

"The last of them were sent planetside on your orders two hours ago—"

*Good. Because our real prey is expected soon.* The timing of this was all surprisingly good. Suspiciously good, perhaps. But Rensha had run the scenarios a dozen times on her simulators. The only sticking point she saw was the *Aleema* itself, but if its main cannon were disabled just prior to their departure...

"Make sure every ship has its sensors set to max. There may be other cloaked Mandalorian ships...."

A hammerhead cruiser popped into existence, low beneath the *Aleema*’s belly.

"*The Harbinger has just been pulled out of hyperspace by the Aleema,* " Yikas reported. "*Its commander has transmitted a coded distress signal indicating that Revan Starfire and a small band of Mandalorian mercenaries have taken over the ship.*"

"Mandalorians are predictable," High Admiral Rensha noted. "Is there any sign they know we're here?"

"Shields are still down, looks like they're powering up the tractor beam."

"In other words, no." Admiral Rew Ekkumi stood up slowly. "Good."
"So, you see?" Rensha bared her fangs in a smile.

"I see." Rew glanced at the frozen holostill of Captain Onasi again. "We will need to run an assessment of the Aleema's current offensive capability immediately. Jiya and Cein would know better than most. They fought her before-"

XXX

The proximity alarms were going off, flashing the bridge with white and blue light. For a moment, time slipped, and Revan was standing on another ship, in another time.

*I don't want to die like this. No one should die like this. Every spacer's nightmare—*

"Tractor beam's pulling us in," one of the Harbinger officers announced, jerking her back to the present. Revan looked up at the ship's main controls, still meters away. The space was occupied by a pair of nervous Sullustans. She smiled at them.

*Don't panic. This isn't like the Leviathan—*

Next to the Harbinger officer, Canderous's daughter smiled triumphantly. *"Our tractor beam is pulling this vessel to our docking bay,"* she corrected.

Dak Vesser's expression was murderous as he called his now-broken lightsaber back to his hand from where Revan had thrown it on the ground.

*Need to win him over so he can show me how to fix a fracked crystal, and maybe do some of that shielding.* The thought was absent-minded, as Revan was already focusing back on Commander Cody, who looked at her like she'd just blown up his blasted fracking planet.

He wasn't the only one. For every crew member who had joined them taking over this ship, there were three in the brig, and more in hiding. She could sense them—sparks of light, mostly clustered near the escape pods, but if they began to organize, if she sensed anything like a last-ditch offensive—

"Tell your men to stand down," Revan told Commander Cody. "There have been no casualties yet, and I want to keep it that way."

Millifar coughed. "Technically, three of their suits failed when they tried to flank us coming through one of the maintenance shafts; but it was really the force of the depressurization when we blew them out the airlock that killed them—"

"There have been only minimal casualties," Revan amended. "Commander Cody?"

"What?" He was dull and vacant-eyed now. "Do you think the Republic will stand for this?"

"They're not here," Revan pointed out, glancing up at the nav chart projected in front of the view port. It was strange—they'd won, but now every nerve in her body felt raw and exposed. "Speaking of here… where are we?" The stars aligned as she recognized one of the constellations, answering her own question. "Frack. Vensori sector? Why?"

"Katarr orbit, in the Vensori system," Millifar said. Formally, as if she was reporting. "In orbit around the sole planet. It was the closest jump point."

"Katarr…." Commander Cody looked up at the chart as if he was just noticing it. Inexplicably, he started to laugh.
"Maybe clear the bridge, put in our own people," Canderous prompted Revan in Mandalorian. "That one's useless. Crazy."

"I'm not crazy! And my people won't harm this ship," Cody snapped in Basic.

Revan looked at the planet, spinning peacefully below. Four moons hovered in a trail across a sea-green surface, dusted with clouds. It looked peaceful, but something—

_I remember that Cody said Katarr was our destination when they captured us. If it was always the Republic's intent to bring us here... why?_

_Where are their forces? Are they going to meet us? Are they already on the planet? But surely, the Fleet would have some ships monitoring our progress—_

Their ship lurched again as the _Aleema's_ tractor beam steadied its grip. The _Aleema_ grew larger in the viewpoint, sleek and gray and sharp and perfect—except for the haze of shielding around the side of its bridge, the heavy blast scores.

_That's it. That's where you died, Dar'Revan. That's where I died—where we—that's where we died, Dar. The first time._

Looking at the ruined bridge now, Revan felt nothing—except the creeping sense of unease. The rest of the ship was flawless—but something was wrong.

_Hessi walking over my grave—except they don't have hessi in fracking space—_

"The planet," she muttered to Dak. "Do you feel that? The Force? What's wrong with the planet?"

It looked peaceful, but the Force was wrapped tightly around its placid surface, like a coiled spring —

"It's a Miralukan colony," he said calmly. But his eyes were narrowed, and a muscle twitched in his cheek. "Do you sense their presence? Most of them have some Force sensitivity—"

_Lying. He's lying. "No. More than that."_ When Revan closed her eyes, the sense of menace increased. The sense of... presence increased. The menace felt... cold, like a storm building above them. _Elsewhere_. But the presence was—different. The presence was—many. The presence was... calm. _Waiting._

"It's the... planet. Or... above the planet!" _Like before. Like with the Harbinger when it was cloaked. But this is bigger. Louder... or something._ "Something isn't right—"

_Xxx_

_The Star Forge grew in the viewscreen, ever—larger. But even with her eyes closed Revan could sense the Republic ships surrounding them—and each one containing a thousand points of light—_

Cloaked? Pathetic fools. Do they think they can hide from us? _Bastila's thought or her own? They had to be united in purpose. It made no difference, not here. Not at the end of all things._

"Here," Canderous said, setting a bottle on the nav board beside her. "One more drink before the war. You game?"

_Cloaked, but I see them. Every ship has a thousand crewmembers, roughly, and there are twenty ships—twenty thousand lives opposing my will, between me and Malak and every one a wretched waste—_
"Drink," her Second repeated, shoving the bottle in her hand. Revan did so automatically, her mind still lost in the stars, lost counting an idle tally of those puny, wasted lives still standing between her and Malak—

XXX

"The planet," Dak repeated. "A Miralukan colony world. The Force is strong here." But he wasn't staring at her, he was staring at his commander. As Revan watched, Cody gave an almost imperceptible nod—

The Republic wanted us here. Cody said they were taking us to Katarr when they captured us. That means—

"Aleema! Raise shields! Cloaked! They have cloaked ships! " Her senses struggled to count, but the more Revan focused, the more she felt overwhelmed, until the placid planet beneath them seemed wrapped in a haze of hate and fear and anger—

Dak laughed harshly. "Took you that long?" His expression was… smug.

Revan bit back the sudden urge she had to silence him. "The Republic Fleet is cloaked." So obvious, Revan felt like a di'kut for not realizing it immediately.

Closest jump point—of course, it's a trap. "Surrounding us. A-a-lot of them. More than… a lot."

Probably some fracking military term for being this badly outnumbered. Now that she was aware, her senses screamed of nothing but.

Canderous nodded, the lines in his face showing no surprise. "Aemelie?"

"Nothing on sensors, but they have our cloaking tech, so it's possible. Occasionally, the barbarians do something worthy of respect. Raising aft shields, but until you're docked we can't raise portside. Give me coordinates, and we can lock onto the best targets. Isn't that a Jett'ai trick? Revan?"

Millifar had walked over to one of the weapons desks, blaster held lightly in her hand. "Third Wife? Coordinates?"

Revan's eyes went to the map, and Polla's knowledge supplied numbers, as some forgotten part of her own began to calculate trajectories, probable arrays or orbit. "Hold," she said. "No… no shooting. Can you… just bring us in faster? Angle down to delta on the zee, veering towards Harbinger's ex—vector at ninety, keep stable?"

"That puts both of our ships close to atmosphere. I assume their orbits are higher." Aemelie sounded more thrilled than concerned. "We will be able to target all of them that way."

"And our own?" Canderous asked his wife. The Mandalorians were all speaking Mandalorian, but Revan was watching the faces of the crew carefully, and it looked like several of them understood.

We should get them all out of here. Evacuate all that aren't loyal immediately—but there's no time.

"Our main forces are too far away. The two cruisers accompanying us are close, but they have no shields worthy of this fight."

"Keep them back," Revan snapped. "Edge of system and cloaked. If we drop lower, the Republic ships will be fighting gravity to keep us in range too. They can't hold this formation forever, and
if… if our forces need to pick them off—" after they blow us out of the sky—"maintaining a lower orbit will strain their resources. Soften them."

_Some small, hollow victory._

Canderous chuckled softly, but did not countermand her order.

"They'll take your actions as provocation," Cody said in accented Mandalorian too, apparently abandoning any pretense of ignorance. "You have to know that. Anything less than a surrender is an act of war."

"They're the ones who are cloaked! Can the _Aleema_ handle an atmospheric orbit? At the cloud line?" _So low they'd smoke the planet beneath if they fired on us?_

"In this gravity? Maybe…. As long as the weather patterns are stable—" Kex broke in and then blushed. "I mean… permission to speak?"


One of the gunners made a garbled noise that sounded like a prayer.

"Not literally!" _Fracking soldiers. Worse than Mandalorians. Half a fracking brain cell between any of them!_

_No time in battle for thought. No time for consensus, no time for calculation—each action a split second, a path shown by the Force itself—you must make them follow you either through loyalty, fear, or coercion—_

The voice in her head almost sounded like Dar.

_The battle would be a rout. But they seem to want us—or at least this crew—alive. I need to use that to our advantage. How can I use that?_

"**We can certainly lower ourselves to use the planet as our cowardly shield,**" Aemelie cut in over the commlink. "**But as long as the Republic osiks surround us, they cannot fire without hitting their own ships—**"

_But they can move unseen and we can't—not with this tractor holding us up. "There's no glory in this battle. I will not risk you—or your ship. They want us alive, or we'd all be dead already. We are outnumbered. By—a lot." Kriffing technical term for a crapload more ships than we have?_

Canderous's daughter stalked back over to the command bank, muttering something under her breath.

"Milli—" Canderous said sharply.

His daughter nodded at him, and raised the comm's mic.

"**Attention: crew of the Harbinger. General Starfire is your commander now.**" Millifar was broadcasting her words over the ship's main channel. "**Follow her, and you may all yet overcome the shame of your bloodless capture by our smaller and minimally-armed forces.**"

A few of their own troopers—the ones marked with the red hand on their armor—stepped forward at that, hands on their guns. The military discipline of the room almost visibly cracked, as the crew around them began whispering amongst themselves.
"Good job, Milli, insulting the forces we just won over—"

"Uh… give me the commlink, okay?" Revan walked over to Canderous's daughter, well aware that her position put her back to Cody. She pivoted, leaning back against the command banks, as Millifar pressed the mic into her hands. It was cabled, tethered to the board, and several lights flashed green on its surface.

"I'm going to eject the escape pods," she said over the comm—then mentally cursed herself. "I mean, this is your… this is Revan." And I need to sound like it. "This is Fett Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi. I have command of your vessel. The Harbinger will be docking in my ship soon. Any of you who don't want to be our prisoners you should… get in the escape pods. Now. Before I eject them all."

"There's no centralized bridge command to release the pods," Cody objected. "You can't release them from here. Tell them to evacuate. In fact… let us all evacuate. You want our ship? You can have the damn ship."

"Oh?" The commander was too eager. Frack it though. Less of them is better. Less casualties if the Republic Fleet decides to kill us all— "Fine. Evacuate at will," Revan said into the mic. "Uh… leave. If you want."

"Masterful," Millifar rolled her eyes at Kex and Revan saw the boy bite back a laugh.

"Good luck," she offered, regretting that instantly too. She switched off the link, turning towards Commander Cody. "How do I—can we hail the Republic forces?"

The muscles in his jaw clenched. He wouldn't meet her eyes, kept staring at the ruin of the ship's ceiling above his head, where she had ripped back the armored plating in order to take the bridge. "Are you… you just said we could leave."

Obstructive ass!

"I meant your forces outside of this room. In the escape pods. If I let you leave in the remaining snubs, how do I know you won't fire on us?"

"It would be amusing for them to try," Aemelie noted over the comm.

The Harbinger rocked back and forth, as they swung sharply closer, reeled in by the Aleema's tractor beam. On screen, the pods from the Harbinger's own sides launched into space. As Revan watched, one of them seemed to slam into an invisible wall and explode. She felt the lives within wink out.

Five. Five lives. There, and then gone. There, and then gone. Next to her, Dak winced.

A grid flickered around the debris, and for a moment, they all saw the whitish hull of one of the cloaked ships.

"Their ships are too close! The escape pods—"

"Nothing we can do," Canderous grunted.

Another glanced off the side of a momentarily visible cruiser, and spun, sparking away at a bad angle.
"It's going to ram back into us—Revan closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to feel the sparks inside, use them to judge the velocity, push, down—"

"Once you're docked, we can go to hyperspace immediately," Aemelie added.

"What?" Revan blinked. The pod was falling freely now, frantic sparks within stilled, either because they were strapping into their crash seats, or unconscious. Slow, slow, angle it down—

"Once we're docked in the Aleema's bay we'll make a jump," Canderous said.

"Can they pull a ship the size of the Aleema out of hyperspace?"

"They could try," Aemelie said cheerfully.

Revan heard her breath exhale, as the pod's arc stabilized once more. When she opened her eyes, Dak was watching her, brown eyes wide.

"I-I think you saved them," he said softly.

"Maybe." She wrenched her attention back to their own readouts, the conversation going on around them. Revan raised her voice. "I need to speak to the Fleet command," she said. "Are they blocking us? Did you try... uh, hailing them?"

"We can open a channel on their coded frequency now," Millifar sniffed. "Right, Kex?"

"I've descrambled the signatures." The Mandalorian kid squared his shoulders. "Transmit at will."

Revan raised the commlink again, nodding at him. "Good." When the light flashed green, she began speaking. "Unknown Republic vessels, this is Fett Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Ordo Onasi. We have full control over this vessel. Please... uh, move out of your current formation, and uncloak. We know you're there...." She caught Millifar's bored expression and tried not to wince.

"You need to stop saying, 'please.'" Canderous chuckled. He sat down in one of the vacated officer's chairs, and put his feet up on the console, pulling out the short-nosed blaster from its compartment on his thigh, and snapping open the cells to cycle through. "They'll try and wait you out. Test your mettle."

"And?" She tried to match his nonchalance.

"And, they won't fire on their own—not so directly. This is not the time for a fight." Canderous stared at Millifar, until his daughter looked away, nodding slowly.

"Try and keep us over populations centers, Milli," Revan suggested. They won't fire on innocents. They're not... her. Me. Mandalorian.

"I knew you'd say that," the girl muttered, but she gestured to the navigator, and the Sullustan nodded slowly.

"I told you she'd say that," Aemelie added.

"Your allies are right." Dak Vesser looked like he smelled something bad, giving any credit to Mando'a'de, but he nodded slowly. "They're pulling back."

"Some." Revan could sense it too—a little. The lights of life on the other ships were farther away
now, but the aura of menace, of… doom… remained.

She leaned over the comm again. "Republic ships! We have the remaining members of the Harbinger's crew here. This is a negotiation."

The commmlink crackled. "No," said a voice. "It is not."

A hammerhead warship appeared on their skyward bow. And then another, drifting in a formation so precise it made Revan’s breath catch. The proximity alarms shrilled again, but Revan was still staring forward into still-empty space, where she suddenly knew—

The Great Hunt, the Aurebesh letters said, as the larger bulk of the capital flagship emerged, almost close enough to the Aleema’s bow above them to ram her. The ship dominated their viewscreen, and suddenly the entire field was bathed in the harsh light of a new tractor beam, as the Great Hunt locked on too.

Their world twisted, as the Harbinger jerked, stern upending. The turbines screamed, thrusters going as they swung upended, gravity generators working overtime to compensate.

Two tractor beams—they’re going to tear us apart!

The Harbinger groaned, now beset on two sides. Alarms rang—and again, time dislocated: for a moment becoming a different bridge—

XXX

The stranger smiled, a teasing smile, almost flirtatious—maybe sly. His mouth was a little like Therion’s—like a knife. His eyes were yellow, his cheekbones sharp as the blade of his mouth. The skin on his face was nearly gray, but it should have been brown—

"Your ship's under attack."

XXX

The Polla in her memory didn't react, but in the present, Revan heard herself gasp.

That was Davad Arkan.

Where was I—when was that?

"Revan. Tell your ship to stand down." The new voice over the comm channel was familiar too. Female, with an almost familiar sibilant hiss. Almost familiar, but she couldn't quite place—

"The Aleema is not under Revan’s command now, but mine. I am General Aemelie Ordo, Second Wife of Canderous Ordo."

"Let go of us," Revan added. "Your Republic soldiers on the Harbinger are unharmed. Release our vessel to ensure they stay that way."

Perhaps as a response, the Harbinger's stern twisted sideways again with a tortured metal groan—Another alarm went off. "Hull breaches on Decks three, four and six," one of the officers reported.

XXX
His laughter was soft, as if this was all some kind of bad joke. "The two interdictors that pulled the Endar Spire out of orbit have set up opposing tractor beams. Currently the Leviathan and Demon Moon are pulling your ship apart."

XXX

Before Taris, all of Revan's memories were a blur after the canyon wall. Faces. Bastila's face. Voices. Some more distinct than others.

None were Davad Arkan.

But he was there on the Endar Spire? He was there too—he said they had two interdictors that would tear our ship apart—

"Frack! Disengage!" Instinctive. The fear was adrenaline. Revan almost dropped the comm. "Aemelie! Stop the tractor before they fracking tear us in half!"

Vacuum, it's so cold in space. Every spacer's worst nightmare—

"That's the High Admiral's flagship," Millifar noted, voice calm. Force knew how she knew. "Destroying it would be a victory—"

"We aren't fighting! This isn't—" A part of her mind noted the torpedo arrays, the vulnerable ship's belly turning towards them. They could use the tractor beam's own energy, load it up with armaments, sending them straight in, while punching the forward repulsors—

Didn't work when you tried that with the Hawk, Revan's mind whispered. The Ebon Hawk didn't have the same firepower and the Leviathan was shielded—

Aemelie's voice. "Republic ships, we have our guns targeting troop carriers. Any further act of aggression will be seen as an act of war."

"No, it—" Revan caught Canderous's head shake, a moment before she reached to transmit again. "Open a wider comm channel," she snapped. "All beams, get everything in range. There are more ships out there. A… a lot more."

Twelve in orbit—and... more, beyond. Their crews were clusters of life in the overlay of her vision: like fires in the sky above the planet.

"Yes, sir." The communications officer nodded, turning the dial even as the Harbinger commander glared at them both.

All of this to trap us? Me? They must think I'm a fracking genius if I even have a snowball's chance in nine hells of getting us out of this.

Some battles you cannot win. The trick then, is not to fight. Not that different than running spice through a fracking impossible blockade—

"Republic ships," Revan began. "This is Revan Starfire, in command of the Harbinger. We are your allies, not your enemies in this fight—"

XXX

Their names had been a joke once. Darth Nihilus and Darth Sion. A joke. How long ago was that? Nihilus did not know.
Time was only measured in meals. They had left a planet after Nihilus had eaten everything—the small ones in hiding, the two angry morsels who drew their sabers and demanded a fight, the flock of dreamers in an old shrine who did not know their own power—and now they were here again.

On the ship. Sion had promised a feast.

Kill me, Nihilus had once told the bastard Kavar Vakla; but too late now. Now, was too hungry to die. Now, he wanted the feast.

But the ship was hard and empty. Nothing to eat, just the other pacing back and forth. Restless. Sion the other was hungry too. Hungry, but too slow to hunt.

Not too slow to talk. Too much talking.

Sion chucked at him like a hungry cannock. "Did you know… our former master's body is not on the side of the volcano where we left her?" Sion wheezed, pacing back and forth, expending useless energies. Expending useless Force. Force too dead to eat. "I had the shadows scan for biosigns—Mother did not die there. She may not be dead at all."

Sion ruined the Force. He did not yet understand his place. Nihilus ate Force—the live Force that the other did not want. The other—Sion—ate nothing. His flesh rotted off bones. What could the other eat to sustain? What did Darth Sion need?

Food. Same as Nihilus, only different.

"Can you tell if she is dead? I can't sense anything." Sion came closer. Closer enough to eat if he'd been food. They were both so hungry.

["You need different food," Nihilus told him.

"What was that, food?" Sion coughed.

"I think he's hungry again," said the pilot.

They'd grown closer, the pilot and Nihilus. Close enough to feel the pulse of the poor null's mad mind. The thud of the man's heart was a reassuring downbeat to Sion's sad bleating.

"He's definitely hungry," the pilot croaked. The pilot liked to think he had a name and that name was Jasp.

"You can hear him?" Sion's face didn't really hold expression easily, but at least he still had one.

"I… don't know. I can just… tell."

"He ate three padawans, two masters and that cluster of Force sensitives we found in that religious retreat on Ord Mantell and cleaned out the last of our frozen supplies yesterday." The other sighed, a gust of wind through his chest. "He needs to wait for Katarr. There should be food there."

The other's name was Sion, and his name was Nihilus. Sion and Nihilus. Their names had been a joke once.

XXX

"I'm a fallen Jedi already. Why do I need to adopt a Sith pseudonym? Davad Arkan is the Butcher of Endor. The galaxy already trembles in fear."

"Mother said," Oerin shrugged. "I mean Darth Traya. If you hate the name she's chosen, make
another—it can hardly be worse...."

XXX

Now, Nihilus knew the names did not matter. Nothing was worse than hunger when there was food.

XXX

As it turned out, Mekel and Lydie had another awkward hour before the Jedi came. Another awkward hour, while she read the same datapad and he picked up and discarded ten, trying not to look her in the eye. Suddenly, she put the datapad down, her face turning toward the doorway like a Corusec with radar. "They're here," she murmured softly.


"Yes," she nodded, cheeks pink again.

Several more awkward and silent minutes followed before Azen and Vrook walked in the fracking door. Kavar wasn't with them.

Azen walked over to his wife and kissed her. Didn't last long, but it looked like he meant it. "I'm sorry we were delayed," he murmured. "They kept us all in chambers for some time—"

"The First of Racharn sent a comm message." Lydie was holding his hands and looking adoringly into his eyes. "She wanted to know if you'd seen the new Revan vid from Dromund Kaas." She shrugged. "I wasn't sure how to respond so I told her you were in a meeting."

"Accurate and astute." Azen kissed the tip of his wife's nose, smiling like he wasn't a smug asshole. "What new vid? Did she provide a copy? Any other reference points?"

"She did, yes. But I haven't opened it yet." Lydie smiled back at him, like he was the only sent in the galaxy. Mekel wasn't jealous—Mekel didn't get jealous—and Telos was alive, after all, and this was just a thing, but—

"Well?" Lydie walked forward eagerly, smiling at her husband, while Mekel tried to look fracking microscopic, or at least not like he was sleeping with Azen Loanin's wife. "Did it go well? When you told them?"

"We were not given the opportunity." Azen frowned directly at Mekel, maybe wondering why he was there in their quarters, sitting not four meters away from the bed he'd fracked Azen's wife on. A lot. Had she changed the bedsack? It was gray. Had it always been?

Dear Old Dads cleared his throat sharply. "We did leave a message with the High Admiral's second-in-command, but Rensha was in closed chambers all day." He grimaced. "After being held waiting for hours, we were returned to this planet with no explanation given."

"Well, frack them." Mekel didn't bother to hide his anger. "We're gonna rescue Dustil, right? I-I've seen the planet. Probably better we sneak in anyway. I can tell you where we need to go—"

"Mekel." Dear Old Dads had somehow inserted himself between Mekel and the happy couple. "We should return to our quarters now. I'm sure the Loanins would like some time alone."

"But we need to go soon!" Mekel hadn't realized how fracking stupid that would sound until the words left his mouth. "I mean, it's Captain Onasi too. And... Revan." *Dear old Revan. My fracking*
"cousin. "I thought you guys would at least want to rescue her!"

"Sheris Loran," Loanin corrected like the smug prick he was. "The body of Sheris Loran is on Dromund Kaas—with Revan's memories. The Fleet has captured the real Revan Starfire—apparently, they're bringing her to us."

"Why…?" Mekel looked at Master Vrook, but dear Old Dads just shrugged.

"She is the Jedi's responsibility." Loanin's face was perfectly smooth, angles like a fracking Jedi statue. It wasn't really fair that someone so good-looking was that much of a prick.

*Why the frack would she go along with that? Does she want to be stuck in the salt trap with the rest of us?*

"Sheris took the holocron of Revan's memories," dear Old Dads added. "I do not know if they have one plan between them, or two—and will not until I speak to Revan."

"They were working together," Mekel said, shrugging. "I think." Or, Malak had thought so. Mekel didn't give a shit. "You sure the Fleet are bringing Revan here?" *You sure they really captured her and not the other way around?*

*Uln thought he'd captured her too. She ripped him inside out.*

They were in the tent, but Mekel couldn't help but glance up towards the sky, where supposedly the Republic Fleet lurked all cloaked and stealthy, waiting to save them all from the Force-sucking Sith Lord.

*Unless they frack it up and we all die. Or they just want to get rid of us.*

"We have no assurances." Vrook sighed again, even more heavily. He seemed to be staring too hard at Mekel's face. Was he looking for fracking family resemblances?

"So, can Revan cancel out this Sith Lord Force-suck?" That would be useful. *Is there anything you can't do, cousin fracking Starfire? Or not fracking cousins—frack—not that I want to frack my fracking cousin—*

Telos would be laughing his ass off at this chivhole, if he were here.

"That isn't how—" Vrook's voice cut out abruptly. His head turned up, toward the sky.

Lydie was frowning too, but as Mekel watched, her face smoothed over, etched with a strange distance. When he turned to look, all the Jedi were reacting the same, all heads tilted toward the sky, like they all heard the same frequency, just out of fracking reach.

"Oh!" Lydie's voice was surprised. "Is that—?"

"I believe so," Loanin nodded. "No other source carries such a distinctive signature."

"Outside," Vrook snapped, pivoting like he was on rollers and heading for the door. Mekel followed him, vaguely aware that Lydie and Azen were following too, because he could hear them behind him, even if his permanently-dulled senses told him nothing at all.

Outside, the sky was darkening with dusk—or—it took Mekel a second to realize the shadows cast on the ground weren't caused by the time of day at all. It was midday here in fracking Jedi Camp valley—midday, and a fleet of ships hung low over the world, blocking out the sun.
"Is this the Force-sucking guy?" Mekel asked, because seriously, they should have prepared some kind of bolt hole. "Force-sucking guy's here?"

"No." It was Loanin who answered, neck craned toward the ships above, as if he could tell too. "Revan. Her Force signature is remarkably loud when provoked."

Lydie's eyes were wide, as if she sensed it too. "I-I heard her cry out, that time… in the Temple; but this is—different. It's not panic."

Deafened to whatever the frack this was, Mekel could only look up. One of the ships—the one flying lowest—was larger than the others. Larger, with that sleek, triangular shape he still saw sometimes in his dreams. Sometimes his dreams, because they'd traveled on ships made by the Star Forge from Korriban. Field trips. Recruitment drives… that peculiar smell of dark side energy and fear and new metal—but sometimes not just his. Sometimes Malak's dreams too. Malak had known that ship. He had dreamed of it too.

"That's the Aleema," Mekel pointed out. "And the Mando'ade own it now. So, are Revan and the Mandalorians working with the Fleet to take down this Sith asshole?"

"I don't… know," Vrook said, even as Mekel noted the sparks of shielding, the too-close proximity of the hammerheads to the larger Star Forge vessel. One ship tilted between the Aleema and one of the Fleet capitals hanging above, and Mekel saw the shimmer of what looked like a tractor beam, tracers of what looked like escape pods arcing from the sky.

They're all too close to this fracking planet. It'd be hilarious if they crashed. Crashed and wiped us all out. Jedi, Fleet, Revan Fracking Starfire. All in one go.

He laughed, and immediately regretted it, because Lydie Korr was staring at him now, with those big blue eyes, as if he'd suggested they all join the fracking Mando'ade. (Given everything else, that didn't even seem like a bad plan.)

"Maybe comm those Fleet admirals," Mekel suggested. "Tell them not to wipe us all out if they start shooting?"

"Mekel—" Lydie began.

"No." Loanin, of all people nodded slowly. "Mekel's right."

Xxx

It was Rear Admiral Cein's ship, and technically General Jiya Sand was only here on an advisory capacity. Or as a witness.

"Republic ships," Revan's voice was like a ghost on the comm. "This is Revan Starfire, in command of the Harbinger. We are your allies, not your enemies in this fight. Please stand down and let us rejoin our companions aboard the Aleema—"

"Allies?" A girl's voice.

"We're gonna have to work on your discipline, Milli." Man's voice now. "If we all make it through."

"Republic ships," the woman repeated. "This is Revan Starfire. I have your men unharmed. We wish nothing but a cessation of hostilities and an alliance against the Sith
"Empire." Crackle of static and a long pause. "Republic ships?"

"Rensha's orders," muttered Cein. "No contact. I've targeted the Aleema's main guns. You knew her best, Jiya. Is this going to work?"

*We could still back out. She could still pull off some kind of miracle.* General Sand had seen a lot of Jedi miracles during the Mandalorian Wars.

But he'd seen worse after. "We have Rensha's orders," he muttered, not answering. *I don't know if it will work. If it doesn't, we're going to have one pissed off Sith Lord and her Mandalorian army to deal with. But they don't have the numbers and that's still better than all-out war with the Sith Empire—" No contact. Like you said. "Are the long range—"

"—scanners picking up another ship?" Their ensign nodded. "Yessir. I mean… that was what you were going to ask, right? Yes. Another ship's setting off alerts in the hyperspace tunnel. It's still a few light years away. But the readings are… off… like it's running without shielding. Is that—?"

" Republic ships!" The voice turned harder edged, glacial. "You need to answer me—"

"Yes, Ensign." Jiya thumbed the doomed broadcast down on his board and nodded at Cein. "Our target will be here soon. We just have to hold position—for now."

" Target the Aleema's guns," Admiral Cein broadcast to his command. "Fire at will…."

XXX

"They're not answering us," Kex said. The kid next to him looked restless. Revan's skin prickled. *Hessi walking over my grave. Something. Something worse is coming.*

" Frack," she muttered, and realized she was still transmitting. Hastily, she turned the board back down, pointing the signal to the Aleema only. "Raise shields! I have a bad feeling—"

XXX

"Incoming transmission from the planet."

Rensha paced back and forth in front of the viewscreen, in front of the hammerhead that hung suspended in the Hunt's tractor claws, like prey in a net. "Onscreen."

Rew Ekkumi, her guest for dinner, was still seated at the table, looking like a lost nerf calf, cut off from her herd.

*Accurate, I suppose. But her fellow commanders have agreed.*

" High Admiral Rensha…." Master Azen Loanin's voice had that false Jedi calm, but the man next to him looked wild-eyed and frantic. It took Rensha a moment to identify him as Mekel Jin. Master Vrook Lamar and Loanin's Jedi wife stood in the background. *We have some concern that your attempts to capture the Aleema and Revan Starfire will put the inhabitants of this planet in jeopardy."

"They chose the lower orbit," she snarled back.

" I would recommend Jedi counsel for the negotiation—"
"It is not a negotiation!"

Rew looked up from the table frowning.

"Then what is it?" Master Vrook asked bluntly.

"War," Rensha snapped. "Advise your people not to panic, Master Jedi. Revan will be joining you shortly."

"Did you tell her?" the dark-eyed Human boy muttered.

"I have seen many Jedi miracles," Rensha told them, pointedly. "Prepare your forces to enact another one."

She had every faith in them—even now. A fitting coda to your existence, Master Jedi—saving the lives of one last Republic ship—

On the viewscreen opposite, she watched the Aleema's main starboard cannon disappear in a haze of plasma.

"The Mandalorians have raised shields," Cein reported from the Glorious. "We disabled one of their main gun arrays, but the other line—their shields are still holding."

Too late to go back to the creche now, as Rensha's birth mother used to say.

"Press the assault, but only on that cannon," Rensha commanded. "Until my signal."

XXX

Only one word now and the word is food.

["Food,"] said Nihilus.

"Soon," Sion chuckled. "All you can eat, old friend. A veritable buffet."

Xxx

Aemelie nodded to Dessa. "Ping the Republic Fleet again to stand down. Are the shields holding?"

"Yes. Only one cannon was lost to their pointless aggression. The barbarians aren't taking us seriously," her Second sighed. "We have basilisks. We should show them our strength by boarding one of their ships. They are too closely packed now to fire without hitting each other. But their limitations provide unique opportunity. It would be good practice."

"Yes...." Aemelie frowned. It was too good. Too ripe. The Republic ships clustered around like fruit for the picking. They had to know the Aleema was worth ten of them. Did they doubt the prowess of her crew? She had done the best she could, in the brief time they had. They only had five torpedoes. Could barely muster two squadrons of fighters and most were so green she expected a fight like this would waste their potential, send their sparks to the stars long before their time.

A waste. Glorious, perhaps. But with more time, we could have done so much better.

Dessa nodded, her eyes sympathetic. Her hand caressed her still-flat belly. Really, with a child germinating in her womb, Aemelie should have insisted the other woman go to Dxun with the rest,
but her friend had been so stubborn. It wasn't only men who wanted to be blooded in stars, even if women were the ones with much more complicated blood-rituals.

"Aemelie, disengage the tractor. Now." Revan's voice interrupted Aemelie's mental calculations on the gravity to thrust ratios of their own orbit. The sensors showed the barbarian Republic ramming ship tilting at a decidedly vertical angle, as the Aleema's pull was much stronger than the weak, Republic command ships could ever be.

"Your ship's hull is still intact enough," Aemelie noted. "The Republic will not sacrifice its own people. They will release their tractor beam first."


Sighing, Aemelie nodded to Leskal, who swung the levers back. Almost immediately, the holographic representation of the captured hammerhead stabilized, now pulled in only one direction.

"After you board and capture them, Third Wife, we should leave this sector. Their nav charts will have something of your Sith homeworld in their records, perhaps. Do not let them wipe the records—capital ships have a back-data storage receptacle a few levels under the bridge. It's usually unmarked, but you should be able to recognize it by—"

"Hells! Cody! We're too low. Raise the main yoke and stabilize those thrusters." At least Revan sounded more like a commander now, even if she was declaring fairly obvious things and not listening.

But on their screens, the Harbinger continued to list dangerously starboard, canting over as if its own propulsion thrusters were entirely offline.

"It's not working, the tractor's beam's—" Hiss of static, and his words cut out, but Aemelie could see for herself what the Great Hunt's tractor beam was doing.

It was deactivating, as the command ship itself pulled away, rising back up high above the planet's atmospheric band.

"Reboot your engines!" Aemelie yelled at the comm, which was now emitting only gaps of static. "You're too low, the ship's already canted, you need to pull out of the gravity, you're twisting slower than orbit."

"The engines are all offline." Kex's voice. "They… did something."

"Wasn't us!" Some woman's voice, cringing. "Please! They sent a pulse through our banks. Protocol! When a ship's in danger of capture, we render the engines non-operational—"

"And kill everyone on board?" Revan. "Are you fracking insane? We're falling out of the sky!"

"Lock onto them," she commanded.

"They're too low." Dessa was cursing softly under her breath. "If we chase them down, we risk further vulnerability—"

"We can evacuate the Harbinger—"
"The pods are gone. All?"

"All." Canderous's voice. "Are any of the gyros working? Bring the nose up."

"Wheel's locked, we can't—"

The commline broke into a babble of frightened voices. It would have been amusing, had Aemelie's clan not been among the doomed.

"Revan? You need to use your Force magic! Now."

"Shut up, Second Wife."

"I-I think she's trying."

"Help her, you cursed Jett'ai—"

The nose of the Harbinger tilted suddenly, jutting up, like a top spinning, and then swung over.

"Too far!"

"That's not me." Revan again. "Dak, can you feel—"

"Yes." A new voice. "Coming from the planet. They're—"

"Helping." Revan sounded awed, as if she'd forgotten their impending peril. "The Jedi... they're helping."

XXX

They were all staring at the sky, where suddenly, just off to the left, a ship fell from the sky, twisting like a badly-balanced saber. It had started out level, but now the front end—

**Hammerhead-class. That's a hammerhead. They use them for troop movements. And to fracking ram into other fracking ships because they're all fracked.**

"It's going to hit the camp." Even as Mekel said that, he thought he was wrong. It was going to hit the edge of the camp, although maybe the rain of debris might hit them. It was then, too, that he noticed the flares from other landings—what looked like escape pods, raining down on their secret Jedi enclave like an invading force.

Is this the trap? We're being invaded? Is it Sith? The Republic? Fracking Mandalorians?

"Help them." Vrook's voice, quiet. "Help her. Please."

In front of Mekel, all three Jedi sank to their knees. Vrook's hands were glowing.

"What—" Kavar Vakla came in at a dead run. There was that second when he was looking at Mekel, and then his face went blank too, with that weird glazed look Jedi got when they meditated instead of filling themselves with the Force, like it was going through them all.

And then Master Kavar Vakla was on his knees just like the others, his hands pressed palms together, face perfectly blank and gone. Just like the rest of them.

"I'm sleeping with your wife," Mekel told Azen's closed eyes, blank face. These feelings—rage,
jealousy, helplessness—with the Force, he could have used those emotions. Instead, suddenly, he was a man standing on a quiet field. And everywhere he looked—everywhere—were blank, kneeling Jedi—like droids that had all been activated by the same frequency.

Above their heads, the hammerhead cruiser swung horizontal again, began banking down gently, towards the beach and the sea.

XXX

Dak's hands tightened in hers, as together they tried to still matter, pull gravity back, upend their falling vessel. Even this open to the Force—and Revan wasn't sure she'd ever been this open before—she knew it was too much. Maybe from a higher orbit she could have used the Force to keep them in orbit; but at their current trajectory, with gravity pulling them down like lightning, the fall was inescapable. She felt sweat break out all over her body, as she desperately tried to channel the kinetic energy around the ship back, up, away—a part of her mind screaming with the effort; a place beyond anger or a loss of hope—just pure desperation.

And then, what had been one discordant note—the screech of the Harbinger's hull entering atmosphere, the failed wails of its turbines overloaded, power cut, its rudderless fall—changed.

Somewhere in her mind's eye, Revan's vision splintered. She became aware simultaneously of the planet's surface rising up, and the ship falling—and below, a sea, a string of round huts, temporary structures, ringed like a half-moon on the beach—

And then, a soft wave, like water breaking over her skin. The Force became a thousand notes in tune, a chord—a song—a blanket. The Force surged from the planet below, enveloping everything in a glowing haze. The world tilted back, stabilizing. The ship slowed, its fall becoming more of a drift, a gentled glide, banking slowly down, towards the swells of the sea below.

Uncle?

His presence was there, so familiar it made a part of her ache, like the press of an embrace, soothing of a child's nightmares. His, and so many more.

Jedi. Jedi on the planet. So many Jedi on the planet. That makes no sense. Why would the Jedi be on Katarr? What possible reason—?

There was no answer in words, just the Force, surrounding them all in its warm embrace. It was beautiful, safe, like a song she had been trying to sing all of her life. United. All one purpose—all to save us.

This is what the Force is. This is the truth the Jedi know. It's beautiful.

Had she ever seen the Force like this before? If she had, Revan didn't remember. It was nothing like the rush of raw power. It was like floating in a salt bath, drifting slowly downwards, a leaf, a speck in the galactic tide, but connected... around them... everything.

Oh, she thought. The Force was the press of warm arms about her, the brush of lips in her hair. This is. This. Through me. Through us. Through everything—

In all of us, Red. In all things. Ghost of Malak's voice, here and now. Remember this.

It seemed like they fell for an age, for an hour, for a year, and yet, it was no time at all. A place beyond time and space, where a barrage of memories assailed her. None of them nightmares.
None of them nightmares and all of them hers. *Hers.* Not Polla's or Revan's, but *hers.*

XXX

_Sweetness of ice crema, the rough of Carth's stubble on her neck. Her son, heavy in her arms and too big to fit. Abasen, smiling up at her as she sang him to sleep next to Korrie. Mission's bright laughter and Zaal's soft rumble, the lazy crackle of a Kashyyyk campfire. Canderous's slow nod of approval as they resumed their spar. Carth's lazy, sated smile as she stood in the doorway, grinning back at him. Two suns setting under a Tatooine sky—the crash of waves on a Rakatan shore—_

"*When this is over...*" she whispered her promise in Carth's ear. There was an equal promise in his eyes, and she smiled back in happy agreement—

"Thank you, upworlder," the woman's voice shook a little. "Without the rakghoul serum, my brother would be dead——"

"Master Jedi," the man took a step forward, as if he didn't know what to do with his hands. "You saved Rahasia and me——"

"Lord. Your wisdom wets our children's mouths with its bounty—"

"Czerka are gone from our world," the Wookiee rumbled. "Thanks to you, Human——"

"Those Selkath schoolchildren owe you their lives, Jedi Knight—"

"W-who are you?" the black-eyed kid asked. His face was marked with burns from the lightning, but his wide eyes fixed on hers with something like worship—

_The wash of the Force overwhelmed Revan: light and dark and everything in between—_

XXX

Revan opened her eyes, as somewhere outside the world she felt the Harbinger's battered sides settle upon a slowly rocking sea, sink into warm water, like a child in a soft bath.

_Landed. We've landed._

Standing over her, Canderous exhaled heavily. "You did that, Revan?"

"Not alone." _We are never alone. Not when the Force flows through all of us, through everything we are—_

Dak's hands loosened their grip on hers and he reached up, wiping tears from his face. "I... I saw... _her_. Did you... did you see—?"

"No—but I have, Dak. I have before." _Juhani. He saw Juhani._ "Dak, I'm so—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know." He smiled slightly. "You called, and the Jedi on the planet heard you."

"We called, and they helped." Revan wiped the wetness from her eyes with her sleeves. "Why are there so many Jedi on this planet? They knew I would need them? They knew this would happen?"

"No." Dak was still wiping his eyes. He stood up, reaching out a hand to help her stand as well. "It-it's a trap. A lure. For Davad Arkan. He calls himself Darth Nihilus now."
"What?" Revan tried to make sense of his words, but reality came smashing back, like a fracking Sith invasion force. "Davad consumes Force users. Jedi gathering like this... are they fracking insane?"

"No." Dak shook his head. "The Republic Fleet will fire upon his ship as soon as it comes out of hyperspace." Dak smiled slightly. "The Fleet and the Council came up with this plan together."

"Oh." Something inside her felt... strange. Like she should feel something for a man she didn't know. "They think they can kill him from orbit. I... I guess that could work."

*But the Republic High Admiral just let our ship fall out of the sky. Was she trying to kill Darth Revan too? And why do they need this many Jedi—do they need to keep him here? What if it doesn't work? We can't fight him with the Force—*

"Revan." Canderous's voice brought her back into the present, to the duraplate floor beneath her knees, the hiss of the ship's atmospherics, venting and pressurizing to the planet beneath their feet.

Revan looked up, aware of Dak doing the same thing next to her. Around them, the Harbinger's remaining crew seemed to be scrambling to order, her own soldiers herding the bridge officers into a double line towards the exit. Commodore Cody shot her a look filled with hate.

*Just fracking let them go! We've landed. Need to just find a working shuttle back up to the Aleema —*

"Revan," Canderous repeated. "When you're done with the Force-praying, stand up. There's something on the sensors you need to see."

XXX

"Katarr." Jasp's voice felt dry and disused. "We've come out of hyperspace—Masters." He wasn't sure how long he'd been staring at the blasted navboard, watching the engine readouts. Ship had seen better days, but the way these capitals were built it could run for another Standard century on the secondary engines it had left. Shields were bad though. If anyone went after the *Ravager* in space, he doubted they'd last.

There were no escape pods. One of the first things Jasp had checked, even with those infernal commands of Darth Sion twisting in his mind. No escape pods—only their one shuttle, the one Sion kept under lock and biometric key codes.

*No betrayal. No escape.*

"Katarr...." Sion's voice made the word into a tortured hiss, scream of an engine overload. His chuckle was dark and choked. "Ah. Is this their pathetic trap?"

It was only then that Jasp looked to screen, and saw that the orbit around the planet was crowded. Packed. The *Ravager*'s automated sensors had brought them out of hyperspace in the middle of a fleet of ships. Like a herd of shifting kissra sheep, all jostling for position at the trough, smooth planet gleaming beneath—

"I-I had no way of knowing these ships were here!" *It's not a trap! I didn't lead you into a trap—*

"—" Nihilus murmured. Softly.

"A sh-shuttle?" Jasp felt the world spin, as if oxygen was gone, gravity cut out, nothing in his mind now except the roar of his master's voice.
"—?" Nihilus echoed. "—!

"Yes, yes, of course—" Jasp was standing, his goal already clearly in mind, abandoning the navboard, abandoning the sensors— "Adjusting for orbit, and gravity, we can be groundside soon, Master. Soon, but the other ships, they—"

"Republic ships," Sion said. His blinded white eye rolled in his skull, and the other gleamed, yellow and mad. "She meant to trap us all along." He leaned over their weapons board, and as Jasp watched, the controls containing their remaining torpedoes lit, preparing—

"If you fire, they—" *They can't fire back! They'd hit the others. But if they did, or if our torpedoes hit, this tightly clustered, we'd have no chance. We have no shields—* "Master, our shields cannot withstand prolonged assault. We need to jump—the next jump point is Biscain. If we go now, before they have time to respond—"

"—," said Nihilus.

Jasp's head rang with the force of his command.

"I know, Master, but—"

"Her," Sion murmured. "*She* is here."

"Who?" Both of them stared fixedly at the planet below. "Masters, I can prepare the shuttle—" Jasp wanted to serve. Nihilus had wormed into his brain, soft whispers, all the time now.

"*Revan.*"

Spacer's instinct brought his eyes back from the floor to the viewscreen, as the Republic fleet surrounding them began to wink out of existence, one-by-one, ships going into hyperspace.

The black sky around the planet was suddenly empty, save for one gray, triangular hulk, larger than the others, an angry, flickering blue around its front bridge, a gaping hole behind, scar from some long-fought battle. Despite what would have been a mortal wound in a lesser ship, lights winked in and out along the great ship's sides.

One of its main guns was blasted and dead, but the others looked coldly operational.

*Aleema,* the Aurebesh letters read.

"No!" Sion's voice rasped. "They were supposed to be free."

XXX

There was a storm coming.

Lena Wee had only lived on Tatooine for a few years before she left, but she could still feel it in the air, that heaviness that had nothing to do with rain. Like a tickle at the back of her throat.

"Thanks." Nico Senvi's lekku twitched, emphasizing sincerity, even if he wouldn't meet her eyes. He stood in the doorway of his own conapt looking like he barely recognized the place.

"That's everything, right?" The pink—*See'raa—call her See'raa— set the crate filled with tach glands down next to the box of Czerka salvage that her twin—*Tee'raa— was sitting on. "Here's
your life back and everything. Just watch out for that loser, Griff. If he tries to get you to invest in one of his schemes… don't. That sleemo always rolls loaded dice."

Tee'raa nodded, twisting her lekku. *Plus, don't tell him about us,* she signed. *Or we'll gut you.*

"I won't." Nico sounded like he was trying to laugh, but it would have been more convincing if those limp lekku hadn't been wrapped around his neck in a chokehold.

They didn't know why, but Tee'raa couldn't talk. Her lekku worked just fine, but when she tried to speak, all that came out was garbled noise. Like a…a faulty wire, See'raa had said. A bad connection. Tee'raa was stoic about it.

Maybe it was the way the prince… the Nico-who-had-never-been had connected her brain. Or maybe the original Tee'raa had been mute too.

*Having a meat body still beats being a droid,* she'd offered, when Lena found herself apologizing again to the girl she'd once been—or part of her had been.

Now, Lena's child rolled in her belly, butting up hard against her ribcage. Her prince had kept insisting the baby was a son, his heir, a mirror-image of a monster; but now she hoped for a girl. Hoped for an ordinary kid. Even if her baby had her genetic father's brains. Still beat some of the alternatives.

*What if he is? What if my baby's like… him? Like… T'chhhsimmemewhat?*

*Or like them? My twins?*

Lena looked towards their ship, parked in the dusty shade of the spaceport wall. She thought of the locked cargo hold, the ancient artifact sealed within three crates of durasteel wrapped in chains.

All their plans for its disposal seemed fraught with risk: *what if we leave it drifting in space and some salvager finds it? What if we drop it in the ocean and some salvager finds it? What if we drop it in molten lava and that… releases him somehow?*

*No. The best thing, the safest thing, is for us to keep it. Because we can hide it safe—for the rest of our lives—and then beyond… somehow.*

See'raa and Tee'raa were very good at building droids. They would fashion protectors. Make something safer than Kashyyyk, find an uninhabited planet….

"Know what I was thinking…?" See'raa took Lena's arm in her own, steering her almost protectively through the dusty Tatooine streets. "I was thinking… what your kid's really gonna need is a stable Republic government, you know? I mean, sure—in a million years of sentient historical records there are better examples… More efficient ones. But we gotta work with what we have. And what we have is a lot of credits and like, a semi-functional Senatorial republic."

*Yeah. We need to buy some senators,* Tee'raa added, motioning t'chin and t'chun exaggeratedly, so that Lena didn't miss seeing them. *Or would it be best to start small, with a crime syndicate?*

Lena sighed. Just because she loved them, didn't mean they weren't scary. "Why don't we start with getting ourselves a decent ship…?"
“Any word from Katarr?” The old woman had a sharp, querulous voice that grated on Mical’s nerves.

“We know that the Ravager appeared in the sky above Katarr. Then, the Republic Fleet immediately jumped to hyperspace.” Mical stood in the doorway of her claustrophobically-small room, wondering if he should venture inside. “Master Atris asked me to keep you informed.”

“Nihilus will take Katarr. The Jedi will have no defense.” His biological mother smiled as if the death of thousands of Jedi—not to mention the Force-sensitive population of an entire planet—was something that pleased her.

Mical kept his face neutral. “It appears he will—yes.” And how would you stop him after he consumes the Sith Empire? Or would you stop him? Is your true goal the death of billions? Or the Force itself?

“Appearances may deceive. We will not acknowledge our victory until the act is done.”

Your presumed victory, old woman. “Master Atris says much the same.” And more besides.... It was she who had sent Mical to Kae, told him to keep the old woman occupied,

“An old woman may appear helpless, too.” His biological mother’s whitened eyes rolled in his direction, and Mical noted the silvery interlace at her temples, the faint scars on her brow. It was entirely possible, he posited, that she could see better with her ocular implants than he could.

“Master Atris has told me too much about your work for me to consider you helpless.”

“Has she? I was under the impression that Master Loanin had the privilege of your training.”

“I have been honored to have been trained by them both.”

“Trained by an effete Senate lapdog and a hidebound scholar. Strange honor, indeed.”

“I learned much from them.” Mical considered that he had never been properly grateful for their teachings before this moment. “Thank you for entrusting my care to others, Mother.”

Her head straightened, slightly, and something in those eyes glinted. “I could not take you with me.”

“To Mandalore?” The samples he had run from the Jedi genebanks had found three children. Oerin Lin’s death had provided genetic evidence of a fourth. Their existence was either part of some plan—or their maternal parent was remarkably incompetent. Mical had given up wondering which. Both could certainly be the case.

“Keep her distracted,” Atris had said. “Keep her off guard, and on edge. Do not underestimate her. I was blind for too long. She has resources we do not control. There must be no chance of any
interference—”

“Mandalore.” The woman nodded slowly. “Yes. When you and your sister were weaned I went to Mandalore. I imagine you have questions.”

“After you left our father, Jorde Yusanis, you went to Mandalore and married the Fett Lin. You convinced the Mandalorian Clans to rise against the Republic.”

“Oversimplification,” Master Kae murmured. “And your father was a disappointment.”

“You had him killed—”

“Revan had him killed,” she interrupted. “To weaken the Republic’s strategic command.”

“Of course.” He dipped his head. “Revan.” Your puppet all along? Why?

That was the question he kept asking, long after Master Atris had lapsed into bitter silence. Master Atris said the reasons of a mad Sith were dangerous. That quarantine was their best recourse. Arren Kae, or Traya, or whoever the Jedi Vima Sunrider styled herself as—Master Atris thought she was simply a madwoman. A madwoman like her padawan, laying waste to the galaxy.

Master Loanin suspected there was something more. And Mical thought he was correct. That was why Mical had sent a warning about the Fleet to Loanin—days ago, when Master Atris was still puzzling through the mists of her own confusion, still examining footage from the Jedi Temple, Council logs… still coming to terms with the obvious. If it was just Atris’s warning that galvanized the Jedi on Katarr into action, it would have come too late.

Keep her distracted, Master Atris had commanded him. There was one distraction they were holding in reserve; but it was not time for that. Not yet.

“Our contacts in Republic intelligence have located Meetra Surik…” he began, noting the sudden tension in her shoulders, the grim smile of her mouth.

“Your half-sister,” she murmured quietly. “Before the end of all things, I would like to see my children all in one place.”

XXX

Aleema, the Aurebesh letters read. Jasp wondered why they sounded familiar. (Later, he might remember: the news broadcasts, the name of the Sith dreadnaught that had appeared in orbit around Deralia some three-odd years past.) But now, all of that was disconnected. Removed. Now, all he could feel was the master’s need.

Hunger. Hunger that needed sating on the planet below.

"No!" Sion's voice rasped. "They were supposed to be free."

“———,” Nihilus whispered.

“No,” Sion said. His voice grated, a raw and painful crack. Unlike when Nihilus spoke, Jasp couldn’t hear it inside his skull. Sion’s voice was just words, half-lost over the roar of his master’s anger. “They are not for you, Arkan. Do what you want with the Jedi, but leave my people alone.”

“—Hunt. Food—”

Jasp could almost feel his master’s desire now, cold and coiling in his guts.
“I said, no.” Sion’s saber lit, a sudden beam of scarlet on the darkened bridge. “Take the Jedi—all the Jedi. But leave my people alone.”

“—!” It was more calculation than Nihilus usually showed; but Jasp understood. The large craft in front of them gleamed with health and life, even with the damage to its forebridge. The Ravager’s systems were failing. They would need a better ship, if the master was going to be fed—and the ship in front of them—Aleema—was better. Much better.

Aleema. An almost familiar name; but in this place, Jasp had no context for its existence. His own life before was an increasingly faint dream. Moll, he thought sometimes. Pollie. He thought of their daughter, the lost one he’d come to save—but she was lost.

The boy is safe. At least, the boy is safe. Mine—and her boy too. He thought that—metal in his mouth like blood, and Nihilus’s own hunger gnawing at his guts.

The master needed food. Jasp could… feel that now. Like the master’s mind had crept into his own, invading his dreams with its whispers. The master needed food now.

“He only wants their ship.” Even as he spoke, Jasp realized his mistake, as Sion turned on him, his good eye glittering with hate, blackened teeth bared, hand holding his laser sword outstretched, its beam sparking cool death—

“H-he only wants their ship. It's faster. Better than ours. A faster ship can get more food.”

Sion’s voice hissed like molten ore. “I said no. Touch one hair of their heads, and our alliance is over, Arkan. I have no need of you… can you say the same?”

“—, ———— ——— ————————!” Nihilus didn’t move, but his shadow seemed to grow, looming over the other Sith, until Sion was encased in darkness.

The dead Sith chuckled, gesturing toward the planet below. “There is meat for you. Below. Take it. Take it all—” He broke off, cocking his head.

——. It was more than a name in Nihilus’s mind. It was an image, a scent, a… presence. “——— ,” he said, voice softer now.

“Revan,” Sion agreed. “That’s right. She’s on the planet. You feel it too. We should go there.” His rotting mouth smiled. “Go to her.”

The bridge rocked suddenly, and it was only then that Jasp realized they were under attack.

XXX

“Fire again,” Aemelie ordered.

Dessa looked at her warily. “They used Mandalorian codes before. Hailing us.”

“A trick. Scan the vessel for life forms,” Aemelie said flatly.

Dessa did as ordered, frowning at her screen, her eyes widening. “I see only one. Is it droids?”

“No….” Aemelie shook her head. “See the scars on her side? The way her hull's listing—see the marks on the bow? That’s one of the ghost ships from Malachor V.”

“Ori’dush!” Dessa made an old sign to ward off evil. “The rumors about… him? They are true?”
“Yes. Now, fire,” Aemelie repeated. “The man he was deserves a clean death in stars.”

XXX

He is hunger. He is the beast above the world. The word is food, and it is the world. He is stronger, he is starving. And she—and she—she is there, she is meat—she is here—she is his—

XXX

“I don’t understand why you are here again, Aunt Vima. I have a master. Master Zez-Kai Ell has been tasked with my instruction—”

“There are lessons a Jedi cannot teach their own padawan.” Master Sunrider (who was only an adopted aunt) looked (rather pointedly) across the field to where her own assigned padawan was training with Master Vandar. The girl’s red hair was as tangled as her limbs in the heavy robes. In the Force, the girl felt like frozen water, dull and screaming. “At times we learn more from those who see the galaxy in diametric opposition to our own perception.”

“There is only one way to see.” Davad had been young enough to think that true. “The Force shows us truth.”

“The Force conceals as much as it reveals,” Master Sunrider corrected. At that time, she had been the concealer. Davad had thought that he knew her, his foster aunt, but he did not know who she was truly—that hers had been the hand that had rocked his princely cradle—that set him on this inexorable path. “What do you see when you look at her?”

“A girl. Her name is Revan. A padawan—”

XXX

For Nihilus in the now, there is no word but food and the word is her. Her. But there was a time before. A time before she mattered. A time when dreams and drexl came first; but then his master came and took him—and then he saw—her.

But now, she is here, and there is the word, and the word is food. The food is below, and they are above. They must bank and glide, descend on a bed of soft air, gentle as drexl wings. Get to the food. The world is food.

XXX

“A girl. Her name is Revan. A padawan—”

“A padawan. Is that all?” She sniffed derisively, proving to him it was not.

“Your padawan,” Davad offered. “Padawan Starfire is strong in the Force—”

“Stronger than you?”

“Strength does not matter—”

“Oh, but it does.”

The hand behind his throne. The hand that took his throne from him—

“No,” he guessed. “No one is stronger than me.”
His master raised her hand and he felt his skin burn, throat tighten with the invisible response. “You are wrong.”

XXX

Now, Sion is busy yelling at a computer terminal, and the pilot whispers his sadness. They do not know.

The word is food. The world is food—an entire planet’s worth below him. Nihilus opens his maw, as if with a scream he can eat it all from here—

XXX

“What… was that?” Vizzy Marr had no words for the feeling. The Force, yes, of course. The Force was brighter in what they had begun to call ‘Jedi Valley;’ but not like this. The Force felt like a sun outside—brighter and warmer than their own sun ever was.

“Jedi,” her father muttered. “That’s the Jedi up to something. I never should have let them sign that land-lease.”

“They’re really loud,” her brother Vicey complained. “What’s going on outside? It's so bright, I can't see!”

There was a rumbling sound, and a shadow passed across their ferraplate window.

“It's from the sky?” Vizzy went to the window, just in time to view a gray ship, clubbed like a weapon, descend past their house on the river’s mouth, and splash down onto the reef just beyond the ocean's edge.

“Did you feel that?” Viky, her sister, burst in from outside. “Some kind of space battle outside in the sky! And then all these ships left… except for two…”

“Jedi,” their father sighed, adjusting his shade-cloth more tightly over the bridge of his nose. “Always something with the Jedi. Did I tell you about the one who keeps pissing in the river, Visas? I've caught him four times already!”

“Does he think we're blind?” Vicey added. “Nobody wants to see one of those long, Human-shaped —”

“Vic!” Since their mother had died, it was up to Vizzy Marr to enforce what manners this house of men and children had. “The Jedi saved that ship from falling from the sky, but the tide’s coming in. If there are survivors—”

“There are,” Viky noted. “One of them is way too bright. I think she was yelling before.”

“If there are survivors,” Vizzy repeated, “we need to help—”

“Oh.” Her father blanched suddenly, turning as pale as the sand on the acid beach. “Oh, no. Do you… see—” His lined head tilted up, staring through the roof of their farmhouse to the sky above again.

“It's nothing.” Vic sounded puzzled, his head tilting up and then back to the crashed ship like a confused compass. “Down here it's too bright and up there it's nothing. How can it be nothing?”

“It can't.” And yet it was.
"Ysalamiri?" Her father tilted his head. "More? But they filled the sea caves already, and it’s nothing at all like that?"

"Ysalamiri?" Vizzy repeated. "Sea caves? Dad, did you lease out the hydro-generators to the Jedi too?"

"Enough for two years tuition, Visas! The old Jedi said it had to be secret." Father sniffed. "But crashing a ship down over the vents seems like a lease violation, I think—"

"The tides are coming in," Vizzy reminded him. "If there are survivors on that Jedi ship, we need to get them to shore."

"Guess all those fishing droids your mother told me not to buy are worth something after all," Father ruffled her hair. "They can man the life rafts."

Xxx

The food is below, and they are above. The fastest way down is a straight line, but to arrive with the pilot intact—and no more holes in Sion—they must go slowly.

Slow is hard, because Nihilus is starving. Taste will be too-sweet, but it is so hard to wait—

XXX

"Congratulations, Jedi Knight Arkan." The girl from Hoth slid into the chair opposite, nodding to the servo and holding up three fingers. "I really thought Mal and I would be knighted first, but Beya, and now you—"

She said his name. And three fingers for three drinks—not two.

Davad should have been celebrating his promotion, allowing himself to relax—finally—after nearly a month in the Kessel spice mines; but instead every muscle tensed at the sight of her. He felt as nervous as if they were children, instead of two adults—two Jedi—two companions meeting for a drink—

Two companions. Not three.

The servomech slid three cups of caff on the table and rolled away again.

Davad looked up towards the cafe’s open archway, but Revan’s Coruscanti shadow wasn’t lurking in it. Not yet... but she kept turning her head toward the archway, away from him. The air around them felt charged with anticipation. It rang through the Force.

Before his departure, Davad had been so sure that the two of them were hiding something... but then he’d flat-out asked the man regarding his intentions towards Revan--and Malak had denied having any intentions at all.

Davad took a deep breath, steeling his courage. He, who had faced down slavers and zakkeg, now felt frightened of a girl’s response.

Tell her, he commanded himself. Tell her now, before Malak comes.

"Are you okay?" She turned back to him, tilting her head. He wanted to give her a bell to wear on those braids of hers, but he was afraid she’d know what it meant.

Just tell her. "Fine," he managed.
Davad took a sip of the too-sweet caff he had only pretended to like once before she made it a part of their regular ritual: four of them, sometimes five. Refugees in Padawan beige at the streetside cafe by the Library. But Beya was offworld still, and Viktor working in the clinics. That left the two of them and Malak. Malak, who still wasn’t here.

Just tell her.

Davad cleared his throat, trying to find a beginning. “My knighthood is not official yet, Master Zez needs to sign off on my progress—”

“My master said you performed quite adequately.” She turned back to him and raised one red eyebrow, words crisping into that imitation of Malak’s accent that Davad despised. “Coming from her, Knight Arkan, I assume you can surely see how—”

“She wants us to work together,” he blurted out.

“Who?” Her bow mouth pursed in a frown.

“Your master.” Our master. Although Davad was not allowed to say that. He had already said too much, probably. Aunt Vima would chastise him later. She would know.

She always knew.

“Master Vima? Aren’t we? Working together?” Revan frowned, as if she didn't understand. “The four of us were quite a team on Nar Shaddaa, and with Vik and Razza’s help, I really think we can get those power grids back up again in the refugee sectors. The locals said they didn’t have the funds for builders, but we can do most of the heavy lifting, it isn’t difficult—”

“Not for you,” he interrupted, nettled by her automatic inclusion of the others from their training squad. “But no, Master Vima wants us to work together. Us two. You know, she… she always has her own plans….” He moved his hand in a back and forth motion between them.

“Doing what?” She took a sip of caff, as if she had no idea.

“I don’t… I don’t know.” Davad’s mouth felt dry and the servomech refilled his caff bulb just in time. He took a sip to cover the spoor of his fear, trying not to grimace at the sickly-sweet. “Revan, I-I like—”

“Mal!” Her face brightened, head turning up like a flower as Malak D’Reev appeared in the archway. Her voice was soft, softer than Davad had ever heard it, and two red spots had appeared suddenly on her cheeks, as if she was struck ill, or embarrassed, or—

“Red.” The man had damnably long legs, because he’d crossed the distance in half the time it should have taken, and Davad sensed nothing in the Force, beyond the usual din of power he had grown accustomed to basking in by her side. “I thought we were going to meet in the…? I was waiting there… but then I thought… perhaps you had made other plans?”

That was when Davad knew Malak had lied, that they were both hypocrites just like all the rest of the Jedi, denying their passion while indulging in secret trysts—

“Oh! When you said our place, I thought—thought you meant… here. ” Her entire face flushed blood-red, just to add insult to injury.

“Oh! No. But here is… fine. Good. Here is… good.” Malak was smiling at her foolishly, like
Davad’s own mother used to smile at Gaven, her last lover before the coward’s bomb took them both. “It’s… good, Red. It’s… fine.”

“Red?” Davad forced the nonchalant tone, holding out his caff and wishing he could discard it in the incinerator. “Instead of Rev? I keep telling you lot to call me Dav but it never catches on.”

“You can still call me Rev, Davad.” But she was looking at Malak, smiling at him with a lightness he’d never seen on her face in training, or sparring, or on mission.

“Dav,” Davad joked, but he might as well have been talking to the air.

XXX

This world is food—all of it. A feast! The word is only food and—there. A faster beast gets more food. They need the faster beast. They need the faster beast because the word is food and her. The word is food and she is the word and she is there.

She is there. She is the word and the world and it is food.

Xxx

“They’re firing,” Sion pointed out. Nihilus was standing by the viewport, his tongue practically hanging out or his mouth—at least metaphorically. Black mists seeped out from behind his mask. “My people are trying to destroy us.”

Their ship lurched back and forth.

“——?” Nihilus commented.

“The Mando’ade will destroy this vessel.” Sion did not need the readings on the navboard to know that they had no shields left. The Ravager had survived a gravity well’s implosion, but it would not survive a squadron of Mandalorian warflies, or repeated assault from a plasma cannon the size of the Aleema’s. “We need to go.”

“——. ——! ———, ————.” The Lord of Nothing took a step closer to Sion, and then another, standing too close. Nihilus’s breath was like a hot wind. No face under the mask. His hands flexed, fingers misting and shifting—from claws to hands. One reached out—

And Sion cursed himself for instinctively flinching, for stepping back, ceding the ground.

But he is stronger. He is damnably stronger. Did Mother intend to make him the stronger one? Stronger than me?

“The shuttle,” Sion repeated. “Unless you would prefer to make our end here.” Perhaps if I’m atomized, the pieces won’t reassemble? Nothing short of that had worked.

“——.” The masked head jerked up and down.

“He says you were right. We need to go to the shuttles now.” Jasp Organa was halfway to the door. “Like you said before, Lord Sion. We need to go. She is… she is waiting, he says. Below. Leave the ship.”

Sion felt almost comical. “Then, hurry. They’re shooting at us—my own people.”

The ship rocked back and forth and he suddenly wished his people had better guns.
Suppose I still retained consciousness? Living in pain is preferable to what life would be atomized and adrift in space.

Sion’s guts hurt again, as if the parts of him that had broken were knitting anew, only to break and rot again. A constant, throbbing ache, in tune with the wheeze of his withered lungs, the dryness in his mouth—

“———!” Nihilus commanded, and despite his own power, Sion jumped.

“We need to hurry,” he told Jasp. “My people will destroy this ship.”

“Then they’re not your people,” the old man snapped, with surprising insolence.

“Barbarian.” In the early days of his service, Jasp Organa had talked a great deal about family, his thoughts tangling around the skeins of his own attachments, images of his wife, his foolish daughter, that hapless babe.

But he was starting to fade now, just like all the others. All that regret and pain—flattened like a ridge of bone. Now, Jasp Organa’s eyes were half-closed, his movements mechanical. Sion had to keep reminding him to eat. Only occasionally, these flashes of fire. It happened to all of them, the ones they had taken into their service.

Perhaps they could find a new null pilot—and a new ship—on the planet below. This one was nearing the end of his use.

Their ship rocked from side to side again, beset upon by the Mandalorian fighters.

“We need to leave,” Sion repeated. “In the shuttle. Now.”

Xxx

There is one word, and it is food and it is her. Her.

He is moving through a corridor. He is waiting for their slow feet at the base of the shuttle. He is starving. He is remembering her.

XXX

The dappled shadows of her bedchamber, gleam of her skin, soft belly, durasteel underneath. The pink of her breasts… of her.

Of her. Of her. Stay here, where she is. This memory is the one you want to keep. Eyes like suns, the bare pink of her scalp, the fuzz of hair like down under his hands, the warmth of her mouth and the cold of her mind—

Her. Like this. Just this, just... just this. Not before. Not after.

“Davad,” she says. Her head turns, profile sharp as a beast of prey. “I didn’t call for you.”

“Do you wish me to leave?”

“No.” A breath. Ribs flexing along the side of her bare flank. “The... information you brought me before... about... that room—I need to be certain, I need to be absolutely certain—it was... unused? Truly?”

“As I detailed. The toys were still in boxes. Seals unbroken on the bed linens.”
What thoughts Revan had in response were concealed in the ice of those eyes. “No sign of a child in residence?” Her breath hissed, almost as if she still wore the mask. “You’re sure?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “They stay there occasionally, but aside from the groundskeepers, there are no slaves, no staff. The kitchens are empty. If there was… someone there, it would be—”

“Blast it out of existence. Send a squadron in unmarked ships. Let Mal blame some Sithling for the offense….” Her voice trailed off. “They stay there, you said? You mean, my husband and Sheris stay at that estate. Always together? Does she travel alone?”

“Sometimes. He sends her to make preparations. You know he’s given her a ship—”

“See if you can time the estate’s destruction to her arrival. But leave Malak unharmed.”

Davad had wondered why she had allowed Sheris to live this long. But without Sheris, would Malak turn back to her? Was it Sheris who kept her away from Malak? Sheris, and not him?

“As you wish.” Would she go back to him? Hate burned in his gut. “If you wish Sheris dead, it would easy to arrange something more… subtle.”

His master walked to the viewscreen, staring out at the stars below them. Her body had become a hard thing, forged, flesh stretched over bone. Davad found it beautiful. “Sheris is irrelevant. I want Malak angered. Irrational. It makes him… malleable.”

Malleable. Was this all merely a show to make Davad malleable too? He should have been King of Onderon—but now, he was only this.

Dark desires warred with hate, twisting in his guts. But then her head turned back towards him, her eyes wide and yellow and still—somehow—beautiful.

The words seemed caught in his throat. “You… are concerned that she will give him an heir. I could… we… we could… we could make—we could have—” Suddenly he felt a boy of nineteen again, stammering his devotion in a Coruscanti cafe.

Her body tensed. “No.” Her head turned towards him. “No children, Davad.”

At the time, he had not understood. It had seemed a personal affront. “Of course.” I offered you the blood of kings. He looked at her, and felt his fury grow, fanned like a flame in the cold suns of her eyes.

Revan chuckled softly. “Careful.”

“No.” The word came out feral, almost a growl.

“Then come here.” She took a step back, towards the transparisteel behind her. Her body naked, open, beckoning—her breath hissed out again, this time with a smile. “Your loyalty is appreciated, Lord Arkan.”

He closed the gap between them in a stride, took her in his arms. One hardened leg wrapped around his hips, and her back arched as he lifted her against the transparisteel, crushing his mouth hard down on hers, tasting the sweet of her mouth, the salt on her lips—

XXX

“Step this way, my Lord.” The man was nervous, pacing back and forth, while their ship rocked
and burned. The shuttle’s gangplank was small so Nihilus made his form smaller, more at a head with the other men, those who still bore human form.

[[“Food,”]] Nihilus told Jasp and Sion. [[“She is food. Now.”]]

The pilot’s name was Jasp. He was loyal. A good man. His good loyalty had peeled him open like a ripe berry. If only the meat was good, but it was not. Not for Nihilus.

Sion could have eaten him, Nihilus thought, but the dead man did not know how.


Jasp liked to think about Polla. Polla Organa.

Polla Organa was a lie. Nihilus remembered the last time she thought she was her. He remembered it well….

Xxx

He stepped out of the shadows in front of her, watching her eyes narrow, the warrior’s stance she automatically assumed. The woman called Polla Organa still dressed like a smuggler, but her hair had grown in along the edges: a tinge of red beneath the dyed black. She wore a Jedi’s over robe over her smuggler’s tack, and a dual-bladed hilt dangled from the twice-looped hide laced at her waist. There was a sharpness in her eyes that was new, and hardness to her features he found enticing, familiar as the marks her teeth had once made in his neck.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“A friend. You should know better than to trust the Genoharadan.”

Her green eyes narrowed now, taking in the plain, gray mask that covered his face. “I should trust some Sith asshole with a stealth belt instead?”

XXX

“You will not tell her. You will tell her nothing of her past.”

The old woman’s words from long ago. Had she said them again? Was she here now? Or was her compulsion still carved in Davad’s brain?

Davad had been weak. Nihilus was not. If he saw the old woman now, he would eat her.

XXX

“I will not harm you.” He spread out his hands, the old gesture of peace. She would not remember the time they’d pretended to be peaceful Jedi in the fires of Serroco, before their sabers cut the Mandalorian battalions down, working out like a fan from the heart of their camp.

“Right. Who wouldn’t trust a creepy masked Sith guy?” She twisted a lock of black-dyed hair. “Look, I don’t care about your stupid Sith war, or your Jedi hunts, okay? Were you following us? How did you find me?”

Anyone could find her. She was blazing like a beacon in the Force now. So much that all could know.

XXX
So easy to find her then. Just like now.

Their shuttle is lifting and Nihilus can help. He raises his arms in the same gesture, and the shuttle rises higher, banking sharply towards the shields of the docking bay.

“Pilot? Are you trying to crash us into our own shields?” Sion sounds more intrigued than concerned.

“That’s not me, that isn’t—” the old man is frantic, fingers dancing across the keys. “It’s him! It’s him!”

[“Food,”] Nihilus explains. The fields are energy and he cannot eat them. [“Food!”]

“There—”

The blue shielding between them and stars releases, and their shuttle slips out, nearly into a small flotilla of fighters.

“Oh, my people,” Sion sighs heavily. “So strong and so proud. And foolish.”

[“You people burn so brightly.”] Nihilus tells, and moves the space winds to send the useless ships spinning. [“But not for me. I cannot eat them.”]

XXX

Mekel Jin glanced up again towards the sky. There were only two ships visible now. From what the others had said, there were only two ships left—the Mandalorian one that had been Revan’s Sith flagship and… the new one, a battered slice of gray hovering above it.

*The new one that has that Force-sucking guy in it?*

“Did all the Republic ships cloak again?” he asked. Mekel wanted to be hopeful. *Force-sucker can’t hurt me, right?* Mekel wanted to be hopeful, but it didn’t look good. Didn’t take a fracking planet-sized droid brain to figure that one out. Even the Jedi around him seemed to be cluing into the fact that the Republic had backed out of their bargain, left them all twisting in the wind.

“They’re gone.” Dear Old Dads glanced up at the sky again, and then at the hammerhead cruiser half-banked in the sand, half covered by the sea in front of them. It had been a beautiful thing, watching the Jedi all float it down; but now it seemed like a fracking catastrophe. “The Fleet is gone.”

“And the Force-sucking guy? He’s on that ship up there?”

“I think so.” It was Lydie who answered. “Davad Arkan. He feels… louder than he did before.”

“He calls himself Darth Nihilus now.” Loanin had a gift for pointlessness. And he kept glaring at Mekel, like *Mekel* was the problem here, and not the Fleet that had just ditched and left the Jedi out to hang like last month’s laundry.

“High Admiral Rensha did this?” Lydie began, still looking shocked. Didn’t she get it? This is what sents did. They fracked you, or you fracked them first.

“It was always a risk.” That was Kavar, the asshole who had been *working* with Oerin Lin before, like he was a fracking expert on betrayal. “We knew it was always a risk.” He seemed to be getting new lines in his face. “But Nihilus’s power does not extend from orbit. We have time—”
“I had hoped we were wrong about the need.” Vrook nodded slowly.

“Maybe the Mandalorians will blow him up,” Mekel offered.

*This could be it. Blind and deaf, and I might be stuck on this rock til Mister Force-Suck comes.*

As he watched, Revan’s old flagship fired on the smaller ship, bursts of plasma billowing like flowers in the upper atmosphere. The smaller ship’s shields sparked, but it did not return fire.

“Lydie,” Loanin’s voice snapped, like he was the boss of everything. He glanced behind them, to the clusters of wide-eyed padawans and apprentices behind. “There is a contingency plan. You and I need to get the children to safety.”

“I wish you had shared your contingency sooner, Azen.” The mildness of her tone was a contrast to the sharpness of her rebuke, the hardening of her mouth.

“Safety?” Mekel interrupted. “From what? Lord Force-Suck? What’re you gonna do? Ask that dead asshole to take away their Force powers before his friend can eat them?”

Loanin’s eyes narrowed, and suddenly Mekel was entirely fracking sure the man had heard what Mekel had said earlier about sleeping with his wife.

He flashed Master Loanin his best banthashit grin. “Sounds great,” he added. “No wonder you guys won the war.”

“Go,” Dear Old Dads added, to Loanin. “Go now. The disruptors are in crates by the mine’s entrance.”

Master Kavar the traitor nodded slowly. “I’ll prepare the snub. What about Revan?”

A muscle twitched in Vrook’s cheek. “She will help too, once I explain the need.”

“Help?” Mekel asked, a millisecond before Lydie did, although her words were directed solely at Loanin, something like anger furrowing her brow around those sensitive horns. “How do you think Revan can help?”

“Go with Azen, Mekel.” Dear Old Dads not bothering to explain. Sending Mekelkins off with the kiddos. Telos would have thought this was all hilarious.

If Telos was here they’d already be gone—

Lydie’s face flushed. “You knew this could happen, Azen? You put the people of Katarr in danger? All the Jedi? The children?”

“Everything is risk,” the Coruscanti Senator asshole Jedi said. “Atris warned me that the Fleet were liable to pull back from their end of our bargain.” He nodded to Vrook and Kavar. “We all had shared concerns, but once we realized the need for action was severe, we took measures to ensure the survival of as many Force-users as possible—as well as the destruction of Darth Nihilus.”

“Stay with Master Loanin,” Vrook ordered Mekel. He turned and walked away toward the shore and the half-submerged ship before Mekel had a chance to say frack off or good-bye, or anything else at all. Master Kavar turned and went in the opposite direction, breaking into a Force-enhanced run that blurred his robes before he vanished behind a dune.
“Come with us, Mekel,” Loanin said. “We will need your assistance.” His teeth pulled back from his lips, gray eyes hard as duracrete. “Your experience with my wife implies that you’re… good. With people.”

XXX

“There’s activity on shore.” Kex looked up from the scanner, which flickered on and off, only half operational since the crash. “No weapons.”

“They aren’t here to harm us, Kex.” Absently, Revan waved him off, staring at the viewscreen. Some Jedi there. Less than she had sensed before.

We’re safe. For now. But something’s wrong. Something’s coming. Something’s coming from the sky—

“Sensors say the water’s only a few meters deep. We should be able to evacuate this vessel easily,” Millifar shrugged. “No sign of Republic troops, just Jett’ai and Miraluka.”

“The water’s acid,” Cody broke in. “But it looks like the Miraluka are assembling life rafts for us.”

“Are you intact?” Aemelie’s voice crackled over Canderous’s commlink. “The Republic ships have fled, no doubt cowed by your power. A new ship has arrived, but we are burning it from the sky, even now—”

“The Republic Fleet left?” Dak froze, half-turned toward Cody.

The commander nodded. “All ships were ordered to make the jump to hyperspace, to return to their assigned stations outside of this system.” He stared down at his screen. “I never thought they’d go through with it....”

“But that doesn’t make sense! What’s the point of dropping us down here and then leaving?” Revan felt Dak Vesser’s panic, a small shockwave in the Force, eddies of it echoing as if other Jedi reacted as well, somewhere outside the ship. Outside. My uncle. Uncle—

“What doesn’t make sense?” Her mind was still half in the sky. “We’re all fine,” Revan assured Aemelie. “That was… some kind of miracle, but we’re all fine. You’re under attack?”

“We are attacking. The salvage ship hailed us,” Aemelie continued. “Using Mandalorian codes.” She scoffed. “Dikut Dar’manda on the Ravager said we should run. That this is not our fight. We will burn them from the sky.”

“Dar’manda? Mercs? You need to… send a shuttle for us.” Revan tried to think of a fracking plan now, but there was something else—something, like a shadow flickering on the edge of her vision. “The Harbinger won’t fly again, I think. Not without work.”

“If the Pinion is intact, it does not matter. Husband, would you check to make sure it survived your landing? Did you have time to make the repairs? They shouldn’t take long.”

“Not yet, Aemelie.” Canderous snorted, and stood. “You’re saying that salvage ship above is dar’manda? Are they trying to win back honor?”

“It would be impossible for them to win anything.” Aemelie’s laugh rattled over the comm channel. “A moment, while we end them.”
“Bank the ship more sharply,” Sion urges their pilot. “I believe it’s that continent over there that holds the prize Nihilus wants. No need to worry about landing codes or local protocol—we’re quite cloaked.”

“If we burn on entry, we’re never getting back up again,” the pilot snaps. “Let me do this!”

[“Food,”] Nihilus reminds them. [“She is food and I am here.”]

Before he had been a prince. And then she came. Then they came, her with her lying consort, and his master and hers—

XXX

“My name is Malak D’Reev.” The other boy was tall and broad, the bulk of him taking up too much space on the skywalk. “Master Jopheena said you had questions. She thought we might be more convincing than another three Jedi masters lecturing you about responsibility and destiny....”

“Why you?” A week ago, Blood Moon woke, howling at the sky. There was a saying your drexl sensed danger first... but Blood Moon was no longer his drexl. And Davad was no longer a prince. All too suddenly, his aunt who was never his aunt had upended his entire life. Now there were Jedi in the Kira palace on Iziz—all here for him. The Jedi unsettled the beasts. He could almost swear he felt the planet scream in protest under the tramp of their boots.

“I’m a Coruscanti senator’s son... and you're a prince of Onderon.” Padawan Malak shrugged lazily. “But now, we’re Jedi. Being a good Jedi is harder than ruling any planet.”

Davad had heard this kind of lecture too many times from dear Aunt Vima, the Sunrider scion who had taken on testing all the palace children—nobles and bastards alike. Being a Jedi, Aunt Vima said, was the ultimate service, the ultimate sacrifice. But only for those with merit—

Aunt Vima had taken that bastard Kavar the first season, and Davad had felt a dull and unreasonable envy. Now, she was back for him, with a pack of other Jedi and these two unremarkable children. The boy was too tall and the girl—

“What’s she?” He nodded at the redhead standing a few meters down from them, staring out at the city, doing a terrible job of pretending she couldn’t hear them. Her nose was long and tilted at the end, and her eyes almost too far apart. It gave her the look of a flightless bird, he thought, although the pink bow of her lips held promise. There was a sly knowingness in her plush smile. “Heir to an Alderaanian barony? Princess of Naboo?”

“She’s from Hoth. Her name is Revan.” Malak’s careless tone was a feint, although Davad had been too young to realize at the time. “Another padawan, like me, here with her master, Vima Sunrider.”

“I like her mouth.” Davad shrugged. “Why didn’t Vima send her to seduce me, instead of you?”

Malak blinked. You would think a senator’s son would be wise to the ways of the galaxy, but the Coruscanti just looked shell-shocked. It made him look much younger, even being so tall. “What?”

Would Davad have noticed her so quickly if he hadn’t been told of their common master? Would he have assumed the familiarity? She was beautiful, but in his first memory, he remembered only the red hair, the pale face, those features too large for it, as if she hadn’t quite grown to them.
“Mal?” she called out. Her eyes skipped over Davad as if he didn’t exist.

“Prince Davad was just asking if you were a princess of Naboo,” Malak said.

That bow-mouth curved, masking a Force power that made the drexl in the courtyard below them roar, circling back uneasily. Tied to the planet as he was then, Davad had felt the same sudden unease, looking back into her leaf-green eyes.

It wasn’t her strength that drew him. He had his own. And yet, there was something—

“When she called out…” she said, walking forward. Her hand was small and white when it extended, and clasped his own. “I’m Revan. And you’ve met Mal.”

“Malak,” the other boy corrected, slightly stiffly.

“Mal-ak,” the girl repeated. “I’ve studied the Beast-riders of Onderon, Prince Davad. Do you have a drexl?”

He would not look in the direction of the stables, of his cousins, of Blood Moon, who he could sense, even now, still dozing in the hot sun. “No.” Not anymore.

“Oh.” The look of disappointment on her face faded so quickly he suspected it was feigned too. She and the Senator’s son, both with polite Jedi smiles as they ripped him from the nest—

No. I wanted to go. I had to go. Vima said I had a great destiny—with them. With her—

Xxx

[[“She is Revan,”]] he tells Jasp and Sion, but they are too busy quibbling about landing coordinates to pay attention… and then something else catches Nihilus’s attention: a shadow, a sky-sense.

Revan is not the only familiar meat on this world.

Blood calls to blood.

[[“I will consume you!”]] Nihilus promises Kavar Vakla, bastard cousin, traitor to Onderon and all of them. [[“I will take your essence and bleed it dry.”]]

“He’s giving me a headache with all of the screaming,” Sion snaps to Jasp Organa. “Make the ship fly faster.”

XXX

Dxun. The Demon Moon. Taste of sweet rot in his mouth from the scent of the night-blooming flowers. On the summer solstice, night and day aligned, and the Dxun moon grew close enough that its atmosphere bled into the sky of their planet; colors of orange and gold mixing with a heartrending blue.

Davad, and his brothers, and cousins, and all their royal escort would mount their great drexl and fly straight up, angling towards that impossible moon, the thread between their worlds. The air would grow thin and their limbs would shake; but they’d still rise, impossibly high—until the moon’s heavier gravity took hold, and the wings of their great beasts would falter and fall, plummeting towards the demon moon suddenly below.

It was a true test of a rider’s skill, to guide a beast through its fear of falling, fear of oblivion;
against all of its natural impulses: to command it to spread its great insectine wings and glide, catching the dense air currents, and angling down, slowly, gentle as a lover’s kiss.

Do it right, and a feast awaited.

“I’m going to join the Jedi.” His cousin was pale where Davad was dark, but they had the same cast of features, Kira blood ran true enough for that.

“Ugh. Why?” Davad reached for another cannock rib, savoring the grease on his fingers, the smell of salt and spice in his nostrils. Even as he asked, Davad knew already. Aunt Vima was at the feast today—there, at the table next to his own queen mother. She was there and dressed like a Jedi. She was there and dressed to be a Jedi because she was going to take one of them away.

He tried to ignore the tug of envy in his gut, that she had chosen the bastard over him.

“Why?” he repeated to Kavar. “We have everything we need here. Jedi have to swear allegiance to the corrupt Republic! Why would you leave?”

“And no sex,” Drella, their cousin, added. “Jedi don’t have sex. You knew that, right?”

“Neither do we,” Kavar pointed out. “Not yet.”

“Speak for yourself.” Davad winked at the visiting princess from some Core planet he’d never heard of sitting across from them. She’d only let him kiss her hand so far, but he was optimistic.

“I am,” Kavar said. “And I’m going.”


“Disgusting.” Drella took a sip of stolen wine from her water goblet and giggled.

But Aunt Vima was staring at Kavar now—and even when Davad smiled, she would not meet his eyes.

“It’s not sex that’s forbidden, only attachment,” Kavar corrected them. “Attachment to individuals —”

XXX

No attachment. That is another Jedi lie.

A ship shoots up past them, high above and into the sky. It is full of half-embered sparks, full of food, but moving too fast. Nihilus growls, but there is more food on the planet below. Kavar is on the planet below.

Attachment of blood and kin. And her. And her—her ties that bind.

“The Jedi appear to be concentrated there—” Sion points to the ground below, where there is a yawning pit like a mouth, full of treats within. Nearby, as if promised, a landing strip, half-finished, and a few ships. The Jedi had used fighters like that in the wars. Davad had flown one himself, once. Nothing like a drexl, nothing like the swift bank and glide. “Do we care that they have some trap?”

[“No,”] Nihilus tells him.
“He says he’s hungry,” Jasp Organa whispers.

One of the snubs below is lit, engine trace visible through the clouds. Nihilus can feel the power within, like the sleepy touch of a boma’s claw.

[“Him.”] He growls softly.

Does Kavar know the beast sleeps within him too? Ties of bone. Nihilus could show him and then —

The hunt would be glorious. Two to flank her. Sion is too slow. He does not want to eat.

“He wants to go there first,” Jasp Organa tells Sion. “We need to land there, by that pit.”

Revan’s feet had taken her to the bridge’s emergency airlock before her mind registered that she’d known where to go.

_of course, I knew. Hammerhead-class. Evacuation routes are designed to alleviate chokepoints—_

The locked mechanism was nothing that couldn’t be sheared open by the Force. The latch snapped, revealing an acrid salt-smell, grayish-green water lapping on the Harbinger’s side. Ahead of them, robed figures were bobbing up and down in small, flat boats. A few more Jedi gathered on shore, scattered with the natives in garishly bright clothes, spots of red and green and blue among Jedi beige.

A ship half-burning overhead was too low in the atmosphere to be in orbit, and above it, the Aleema hovered, sparks of fighters around the bow like stars.

Revan’s mind tallied the sparks, even as she looked ahead towards the figures in the boat coming to greet them. There are two squads from the Aleema. They have two squads and Aemelie is sending them all after that ship—

That empty ship—

The black cold made her gasp again, even as a splash of salt-spray stung her hand. The black cold was like a scream in her head. Not coming from the ship—but below.

Another ship, cloaked. Smaller.

For a moment, the cold scream sounded like her name.

“Revan!” a real Human voice interrupted, drawing her attention back to the approaching boats. The one in the foreground held Vrook Lamar. Vrook’s voice was still far away to carry and yet it did, buzzing in her mind, the touch of a warm hand.

“Uncle—” The wind blew strands of her hair back in her face, and she pushed them away.

“Niece.” He nodded stiffly as the small boat approached, holding out an arm as if he was going to help her aboard, but there was no need. She jumped aboard easily, pulling the Force to land without rocking it.

Dak and Kex boarded, slightly more awkwardly. Canderous and Millifar used their jet packs to board—and Commander Cody edged on, glaring at them all. Behind them, two more petty officers followed and then their boat was full, pulling away, and turning toward shore. A row of rafts
behind them, staffed by droids and children, stood in line to get the rest of the Harbinger’s crew. Their raft pulled away, giving room to another, this one manned by a droid and a Miraluka kid who didn’t look old enough to drive it.

“You’re well,” Vrook said to Revan. The ship cut through the water and she realized that he and the Miraluka were controlling it with the Force. “Not the best time for a reunion, but I… I’m glad to see you—even here.” He took a step forward at the same time she did, which brought them awkwardly close.

It felt strange when his arms suddenly locked around her shoulders, and he pulled her to his chest. But when she awkwardly hugged him back it almost felt normal.

“Uncle.” Revan tried to keep sounding calm. “Why are there so many Jedi here?”

“A trap.” He glanced at the sky, as they watched the burning ship, the Aleema’s bulk above it, so low in the sky. Vrook’s gaze shifted down, and with a chill, Revan realized he was tracking that null-space—that scream—the same one in her mind now too. “A trap for Davad Arkan, the Sith Lord who calls himself Nihilus.”

“It looks like a trap for Jedi,” she pointed out. “The Fleet left, and we’re all stuck here. Arkan is coming—I think in a shuttle? You know?”

Vrook’s eyes were dark, and there were more lines on his face than she remembered from the man who had lectured her on Dantooine. “We do.” Lines drew the sides of his mouth into a scowl, and he dropped his arms from her shoulders, stepping back again. “We lured Darth Nihilus here to make an end. The Fleet was to burn his ship in orbit above this world.”

“Well, his ship’s burning, but the Fleet’s gone and it’s both of them.” Revan could feel them. Dark coldness pressing down from above. Like death. Like a scream. “Oerin Lin and Davad Arkan. Arkan eats the Force—I told you before. And Oerin… he can’t be killed! How the hell do you think Force users can stop him—either of them?”

“Oerin?” Millifar interrupted. “Lin is dead. You mean the dead thing.” She nodded briskly at Revan. “You may help me and Kex kill it permanently, Third Wife. It must be done as soon as possible.”

“Did you know the Fleet was going to leave?” Dak was glaring at Commander Cody, who just looked miserable. “Did you know this would happen?”

“There was a rumor….” Cody grimaced. “But I didn’t think they’d go through with it.”

“What?” Revan felt like her attention was being pulled in polar directions: the increasingly cold darkness from the sky, and the chatter of the others on the boat.

“Arkan and Lin are there—on a cloaked shuttle.” Vrook pointed to a spot in the sky, away from where the Aleema’s guns had set the Ravager partially aflame. In the Force, it felt like a dead spot screaming. “High Admiral Rensha and the Fleet were supposed to shoot them down in orbit.”

“But the Fleet left.” The full implications of that sank in slowly, as Revan watched the Miraluka woman adjust the tiller of their boat, steering it to shore. The Miralukan had a piece of clothing over the bridge of her nose and a part of Revan—more intuition than memory—knew that underneath the woman had Force-sensitive receptors stamped in her skin instead of eyes: smooth and eerily unmarked; but beneath them, she would see… everything. “And it’s not just the Jedi. This entire planet is full of Force-sensitives. If he… did you see what Arkan did back on Coruscant
in the Jedi Temple? He *consumes* people! If he eats this entire planet—he could kill nearly everyone—"

The Miralukan’s head lifted. “You would bring death to our world, Jedi?”

“No,” Vrook grated. “We will stop him. We have a plan.”

“When my father rented this valley for your retreat, there was no talk of traps for Force-eaters.”
The cloth over her face was fringed with beads that trembled when she turned her head, eyeless gaze turning to Revan. “And *that* one is too loud. You frightened my siblings.”

“I’m sorry,” Revan said.

The girl’s mouth twisted in a sneer. “Try and appear more quietly. Your echo drowns the Force.”

They were nearing the shore now. Above, Revan could feel the shuttle’s descent, banking, a wall of blankness. And above it, the snubs—flying blind. *Useless. If I was there and not here, I could help. I could help them—*

“We do have a plan,” Vrook said. “We had hoped not to need it.”

“Can I help?” Even as she offered, Revan tried to imagine how. Nothing she came up with ended well. *You couldn’t blow him up in orbit, so will you try on land? What else could you do?*

“Yes.” Her uncle looked a lot like an older version of Mekel Jin, she realized suddenly. “If you… if you would.” He grimaced. “I wish we had more time, Revan.”

*Is Mekel here too? Is Dustil? With Malak?*

Vrook cleared his throat. “Davad Arkan followed you… before. I supposed you don’t remember, but he thought very highly—”

XXX

*The man before her had been a Jedi once. He’d been a friend once. His dark skin had a gray cast to it now, and his eyes were as yellow as hers. Damned.*

*He ran his tongue across his lips and looked at her. His eyes burned.*

"Fetch him. Get Malak. Bring him here." Davad’s expression didn’t change, but she could feel the hunger in it. *One of the noblest men she’d known. Once.*

XXX

“I know.” Revan didn’t know how to reconcile those memories of a man with one she could not remember at all. *I don’t remember him, but Dar would. Malak. Malak would.* “Is… is Dustil… still —”

“Dustil is not here.” Vrook’s eyebrows shot up as if she’d surprised him. “Dustil is no longer Force-possessed, but he was taken. Kidnapped by Tenebrae. I thought you knew—Dustil is on Dromund Kaas—”

“No. I didn’t. But he’s… then he’s on Kaas with her.” The wash of anger was visceral. *She betrayed me. And she has Malak too? “So, Dustil is on Kaas, and so is Carth.” And Polla Organa. And Seiran Wen? There was a puzzle in all of that, but they were out of time. “Wait. You said… Dustil’s no longer Force-possessed?*"
“I did.” He scanned her face, as if he was looking for a reaction.

Revan willed none to be visible. Did that mean Malak was dead? If so, then Malak was irrelevant—all fracking irrelevant, compared to the threat of a Force-eating Sith Lord descending upon them.

Why would the Jedi lure Arkan here, and not to Dromund Kaas where he could defeat our enemies?

“So, Malak is gone.” She felt nothing. She would feel nothing. “What is your plan for Davad Arkan, Uncle?” I will not call him fracking Darth Nihilus. Fracking Darth Nobody.

On the shore in front of them she sensed power—the same unity of power that had helped her and Dak land the ship before. Councilmembers, Jedi Knights. All strong in the Force. The power they had all channeled so recently into helping her land the Harbinger shone through the mist almost palpably, even if the Jedi themselves were hidden from view.

Like a beacon. A trap for Arkan?

Canderous snorted. “If you think Revan’s gonna sit there singing Jedi songs with you lot while that Force-eating di’kut comes, you Jedi deserve to die.” He shook his head and spat into the water. “Revan, let’s get out of here. Lin deserves a death in stars, and that Force-eater of yours… we can burn him there too.”

But what about this world? The Miralukan girl muttered something under her breath too fast to catch.

“If all our efforts fail, Darth Nihilus will continue to Sith space.” Vrook glanced up. Clouds half-hid the burning Ravager and the larger Aleema from view. “With every life Nihilus takes his strength increases. Conservative estimates put at least two billion Force-sensitives in the Sith Empire. You once chastised the Council for its inaction, Revan. Now, we must act—not only to save ourselves—”

“But to save Sith?” Millifar copied her father and spat over the side. It probably meant something in Mandalorian, but frack if Revan knew what. “They are not honorable people.”

Arkan could end the Emperor. And Dar’Revan. And everyone else on that world. In that system. Everyone with a scrap of Force-sense—

And then?

It was practicality that made her think of Carth and Polla Organa there. If they’re even still alive. Davad would destroy all the Force-sensitives, but they don’t have it. They’d still be alive—

But not Dustil. Not if he’s there too.

And then what?

“And then what?” Revan scoffed. “Does the Fleet think they can just blow him up later? The Emperor is unkillable… if Arkan gets more powerful, doesn’t it stand to reason that he might be unkillable too?”

Could they? If the Fleet amassed at a jump point after he destroyed the Sith worlds—could they destroy him? Would they? And what if they can’t?

“Your plan is to sacrifice ourselves, Master Vrook?” Dak interrupted. “How will that stop him?”
“We prepared a trap.” Vrook nodded in the direction of the horizon. “Not a sacrifice.” He grimaced. “We hope.”

XXX

“You should have told me.” Lydie could hear that familiar scream she had felt before—but magnified—pressing down from above, as if the meters of rock between them and the surface meant nothing at all.

Azen waved at the padawans entering the tunnel, gesturing for them to continue. “I had hoped to be wrong about the necessity.”

Behind them, Mekel Jin was quiet. Too quiet. She would not look at him. She would not think of him. She would not wonder if their affair was what Azen meant when he said Mekel was good with people—

“The Fleet—those soldiers—they betrayed us.” She should feel something, Lydie thought. Anger—or grief. Instead, she was just numb, staring at the children filing past them, each one already wearing their neural disruptor, filing down the curving tunnels of the old mine to the chambers below. “Why would the Republic leave the Jedi—leave this planet—to die?”

“The Fleet acted without Senate approval,” Azen told her. “High Admiral Rensha will be removed. You and I—and the other survivors—will need to testify before chambers when this is over.”

“There was no other way? We could have commandeered their ships, or taken our own—”

“The Jedi have no fleet, no weapons of mass destruction by design,” Azen reminded her sharply, as if Lydie was one of his students, as if she hadn’t taken the same history classes he had. “Power is more easily abused when it is close to hand.”

“But we aren’t there.” She should feel something other than relief—and she did. Guilt, dark and bubbling near the surface. “Master Kavar, the others—” most of them councilmembers she had never seen in person, drawn from a hundred remote worlds. “How was it decided that we get to live?”

“We are weak, comparatively, in the Force.” Her husband grimaced. “I thought you, of all people, would understand. You’ve faced Nihilus before.”

“Nihilus.” It was a foolish name, a whisper of rumor that seemed to have nothing to do with the handsome Human man Lydie remembered from before—before that time in the Temple library, when he’d almost killed her. “Knight Arkan was just a man! They could… shoot him. Use grenades—”

“And they will. But any Force user can shield themselves from simple armaments. It may take more than that.” His gray eyes were cold and clear when they met hers. “We must prepare ourselves. The Jedi may fail.”

Lydie watched the children file past them, all of them so young. The Miralukan on this planet were entirely defenseless. And so much depended on their Sith Lord taking the bait—

“If they fail, we will have to rebuild the Council, avert the Sith threat, assist the Senate—”

“Yes,” Azen said. He smiled, reaching for her hand. “We will rebuild the Order, Lydie. From the ashes. Make a new galaxy, better than the old.”
“What could go wrong with that?” Mekel Jin was rolling his eyes. Even without looking back, Lydie just knew.

Lydie squeezed Azen’s hand back, dully, trying not to remember her history lessons, of how many Jedi had thought similar thoughts before—and how severe the consequences had been. “What about Revan Starfire?”

“My hope is that her conscience will keep her with the others,” Azen said. But he wasn’t looking at her now—his head had turned back to Mekel. His features were twisted in an uncharacteristic scowl. “With the rest of her family.”

“I was thinking about starting a family,” Mekel drawled back. “Got some practice in, while we were here. Did Lydie tell you?”

Azen’s hand gripped hers so hard that it hurt. “It was implied,” he said tightly. “And irrelevant.”

“Azen—” she knew her face was flushed, and she should be concerned with their fate, but all Lydie could see in that moment was her own humiliation—and the two men who had brought it to pass. Like it’s their fault, she chided herself. You were the one who fell for black eyes and a crooked smile. And if it wasn’t for the way he looked when he talked about Dustil, you’d fall again. Or you would have. She realized that she had turned to glare at Mekel Jin herself.

To her surprise, he hunched his shoulders and looked at the ground. “Sorry, Lyd,” he muttered. “You… you’re okay?”

“Yes,” she said. And was surprised to find it true.

At the end of the world, neither of them matter all that much. She smiled at one of the frightened padawans and took the girl’s hand, dropping Azen’s.

“Apologies are irrelevant,” Azen broke in. “Our concern must be the preservation of the Jedi above all else.”

Ahead, the corridor opened to a vast room with glistening white walls. Large as a hangar bay—and it was a hangar bay. Rows of light cruisers, a few disc ships. Thirty maybe. All the transport the Jedi had brought to this planet. All hidden.

Above, the watery sun shone down through a circular hole in the sky. As they watched, one of the ships rose up and out of the hole.

“Where are they going?” Lydie asked.

“Into hiding,” her husband said, smiling at a few padawans clustered next to them. “All assigned to different planets. “Once the threat of Darth Nihilus has been eliminated, we will reassemble and rebuild. You and I are assigned to Iridonia.” His voice brightened as if that would please her.

“I barely remember it.” Ma might be upset about Aunt Marla. What would I say? I’m sorry, Ma. Revan Starfire killed your sister, because she was a Sith spy—

“I’ll pass on Iridonia,” Mekel Jin said. “If it’s all the fracking same to you.” He looked restlessly up at the sky. “Any of these ships going to Dromund Kaas?”

“No,” Azen said. “But I can arrange to send you to Hoth, Citizen Jin. Your father’s home planet?
When the temperatures fall at night, I’ve heard the locals compare it to hell.”

XXX

Above, the Ravager burns. Sion will not like it, but they will need his people’s ship. Sion is too easily led because he does not care. But he cares about his people. Perhaps Nihilus will leave him behind.

Will Jasp Organa still follow without Sion’s will to guide?

Perhaps. Dead Sion has broken Jasp Organa—taken all of his pain and made him flat.

The man’s mind is laid bare now, laden with sadness, with memories. She will know those times, remember the careless brown-eyed child riding an eight-legged beast, the fields of aromatic plants, this father’s touch.

In his own mind, Nihilus remembers how their master would not let him help her. He wanted to help her.

XXX

Davad spread out the reports stolen from the Jedi Temple on the table. His shadows had been diligent, but there was little enough there—a holo of a red-haired child’s face, some scribbled notes about Force potential.

But I had to see.

Now he had. The child looked too much like his father, except for the red of his hair.

No children, she told me. No more children.

“A child’s life is fragile,” Traya murmured. Was she behind him now, or merely in his mind? Davad would not look—it made no difference. “Fragile as a world, and everything in it.”

“I would not hurt him.” The boy was irrelevant, a vestigial limb to a vanquished dynasty. Rather like Davad himself. But he had promised to watch and so he would.

“I would have trained him as I did her.” Traya laughed softly. “But the boy lacks strength. All my effort for nothing.”

“Another failed plan?” Davad didn’t bother to hide the scorn in his voice. His master would not care. “You have had so many failed apprentices, Master.”

Failed children. Some hers by blood. Others like him, forged in her games.

“We fight with tools at hand, Beast-Lord.” Footsteps. Davad would not turn. Would not look. Her voice was sweet and soft, almost beguiling, like the nursemaid she’d pretended to be long ago, rocking the sides of his cradle. “What greater weapon than turning what is Tenebrae’s to our cause? I have done it. Revan is mine again.”

“Tell Revan, not me. She still thinks she’s a Deralian smuggler.” In the holo of the boy’s face he could see resemblance: something about the eyes, the red of the hair. Would the mindwiped Revan see it too?

For a moment, madness seized Davad. I could bring this report to her. I could show her the son and earn her trust—we are strong, we would be strong enough to end Malak and my master both—
But then his master interrupted his thoughts, invading them with her own demands.

“She will leave Manaan after she finds the Star-Map? Their next port of call?” Her voice, sharp as knives, asking what she already knew.

“They plan to go to Korriban next. As you surmised, they seem to be seeking a path using the Builder’s maps to Lehon, or Belsavis, or Dromund Kaas—”

“But which, I wonder?” His master sounded thoughtful, but Davad knew better. He knew. And so did she.

“Lehon.”

“Where Darth Malak sleeps, wrapped in his fading dream.” Traya sounded pleased. “She is strong enough now for that. She will defeat him.”

Davad remembered the woman in the drowning hall, weeping over the dead scientists, and wondered.

XXX

Davad Arkan had been wrong to wonder. He should have never doubted her—

Nihilus has no doubts. Her will is strong. It will be delicious.

But first—Nihilus roars, and dimly, as if through fog, prey answers, the call of the lesser, bastard beast.

XXX

Their plans for defense had already been in motion when word came from Loanin’s padawan, confirmed by Master Atris. Word that Vima Sunrider still lived, stripped of her power. Word that it was Sunrider’s hand behind the Fleet’s defection. And, with that, words of apology from Master Atris, for a betrayal she had been too blind to see.

Kavar Vakla sat in the snub fighter, trying to make peace with his own thoughts. There is no peace. There is nothing but stopping him. My cousin. The man who is the death of worlds.

Kavar Vakla’s mother had been a dancer: a city girl, pretty enough to attract a Beast-Lord’s eye for Summer Festival. His birth had been a secret, but common shame. Just another babe left in a basket on the Palace Steps seven moons after Festival. But Kavar Vakla had become a Beast-rider, even as a child, strong enough to attract the attention of a Sith Lord.

Blind enough to never see her. Vima Sunrider took him for Jedi, and then found another master to train him, less than a year after.

“Too quick to anger, too quick to seek conflict,” Vima had chided. “You need another master.”

Only now, did Kavar realize the rejection had been a reprieve—one his cousin, Davad Arkan, had never received. Davad was hers all along. Davad was Sunrider’s and Sunrider was Sith—

All of those bodies in the Jedi Temple. All upon Kavar’s conscience—because of all of them, he should have known. Blood calls to blood. When Davad followed Revan to the Mandalorian Wars, Kavar should have stopped him. When Davad fell to the Sith, Kavar Vakla should have tried harder to make an end.
I stopped Malak, he reminded himself. Vrook’s son confirmed it. Tenebrae does not have his Sith puppet—not yet.

And Sunrider will lose hers today.

Once, Kavar had thought Revan Starfire would be the one to stop Tenebrae, but the Force had brought her here instead. Perhaps it was fitting that if Kavar failed, she would be the lure cast to draw his cousin deep.

But today is not the day I die. I must not fail. Less premonition than hope. But he felt his resolve harden in the Force, with the full strength of his will behind it.

“Flight checks, Master Kavar.” Knight R’tar’s comm broke in on his feed. “We’re clear for ascent.”

“You all sense him.” Four ships, four Jedi against a monster. “Flank from below, drive his ship higher. On my mark, we’ll launch the plasma bombs. Get in close, so he can’t deflect them—”

“But the Ravager’s shuttle is unarmed,” Knight Querith noted.

“That doesn’t matter,” Master Lavash said, before Kavar could. “From the observed incidents on Coruscant, Kreeg, and Ord Mantell, we know that Arkan possesses the ability to manipulate space far beyond his person. Get close… but not too close.”

“This beast will have claws,” Kavar added. “I mean that literally. Be careful.”

Grimly, Kavar put the flight helmet on his head, displays activating with a whir, as he reached for the controls. Like all Jedi snubs, theirs were designed with heavy guns and minimal instrumentation—read-outs and calibration meant to be sensed by the Force more than measured.

Above their heads, he felt the shuttle descending and the black scream of nothing within—


XXX

“This is your plan?” The Force felt like flames on Revan’s skin, as if all the Jedi around them were deliberately projecting their power. Different from the gentle tide that had helped guide the flagship—the Force now burned with desperation. And more than a little darkness. “This is your plan? Lure him down a hole? It’s insane.”

The hole in the surface of Katarr was some ten meters across, and perfectly circular, like a crater. It was surrounded by an orderly mob of robed Jedi, with a few masked Miralukan. A lift of scaffolding and wire was bolted precariously on one lip and, as they approached, a platform set in the scaffold descended, filled with a group of silent padawans.

An alarm chimed, somewhere from the pit below.

“That’s a warning. A ship is taking off,” her uncle noted.

“Taking off?” Revan walked to the edge and peered down. “From down there?”

“Stand back—” Vrook put his hand on her arm, and Revan looked at him, startled. The gesture was strangely familiar, like something she should have known, like the hug had been earlier. He frowned at her, as if thinking the same thing. “You’ve dyed your hair again.”
What? Yes, I….” On Deralia. I was trying to look Deralian. “What the frack is this?”

“A salt mine.” It was the Miralukan girl who answered. “My father’s salt mine. The Jedi have been using it for storage.”

The alarm chimed again, three times this time.

“That’s the departure warning,” Vrook said. “Stand back—”

“Departure?” Revan took several steps away from the edge with the rest of them, trying to ignore the whispers from the group of Jedi.

Two ships shot into the air, rising almost straight to the sky and the black. Rush of ion engine as they shot into hyperspace.

“Give us ships,” Millifar snorted. “Kex and Father and I will blow your monsters from the sky.”

“We only have four fighters.” Vrook’s voice was grim. “Master Kavar and his squadron will attempt to destroy Nihilus’s shuttle.”

“And if they fail?” They will. Maybe an entire fleet could have burned him, but they’re Force users, even getting close is a risk. A risk for me too. For any of us.

Her eyes went back up to the Aleema, high in the sky above.

Another light cruiser shot into the air in front of them, banking and lifting away. It jumped into hyperspace low—lower than Polla Organa would have risked it.

“Desperate,” Dak said to Vrook, like the word was an insult. “You’re getting everyone out. Everyone that you can—”

Vrook nodded and turned to Canderous. “You and your children should stay above. Keep the area clear—for at least fifty meters.”

“No chance.” The Mandalorian had put his helm back on again at some point. Now, the visor shook back and forth. “We go where she does.”

“Canderous, Vrook’s right.” Sinking feeling in her gut as Revan eyed the space below. Why underground? Revan could think of one good reason—and it wasn’t good at all. Fracking insane. Fifty-meter blast radius? And there might be aftershocks. Implosions. Can’t be that stable if it’s an abandoned mine to begin with. “You and the kids need to stay clear of this pit. If we fail… someone is going to have to clean up this Jedi mess.”

“You don’t have to come with us, Revan,” Vrook told her, voice gentle. “I want you to know that.”

One of the other Jedi were handing Dak and the Miralukan girl Force disruptors. To hide them. They’re hiding everyone they can—

— And drawing Arkan out with the others. The non-hidden ones. All that power—meant as a lure.

“Do you have enough of these Force-blockers for my brothers?” the Miralukan demanded. “Will these keep us safe? We trusted you!”

“I’m sorry,” the Jedi— Lonna Vash— a part of Revan’s mind supplied the name, even as the Human woman’s cool eyes appraised her, looking past the girl who had helped them as if she no longer existed. “Your family was warned. We offered the option of evacuation, but they chose to
“Idiots!” The girl’s veiled face turned, as if she sensed the answer already. Without another word, she broke into a run across the sand, heading for a cluster of huts outlined on a hill above.


“I will,” Vrook said. “On the lift. We need to descend now. There are ships below. You still have time to decide.”

“Revan.” Canderous’s voice was granite. Familiar. Less a question than a reminder.

“Like I said.” Revan swallowed, meeting his helmeted head. Her own reflection was blurred and grim. “Stay above ground. Here. Keep an… eye on things. That family.” The girl was running across the sands. “That girl’s family. Go with them. If the Jedi frack this up, you’re gonna need to clean it up. Everything. Here and on Kaas.”

“Your sacrifice will be remembered,” Kex told her. He looked like he was thinking about kneeling, the way his shoulders bent, and his hands came forward.


Canderous snorted under his helm. “Don’t,” he offered. “Don’t die.”

Her mouth felt dry. Her breath was stale. “I… I won’t.”

“We hope it won’t come to that.” Vrook took Revan’s arm, as she was still trying to come up with a better response, guiding her almost gently to the lift and the pit below.

XXX

Kavar Vakla’s ship rises on a bed of soft air, as the other three do as well. The black spot overhead is closer, a few thousand meters—nothing to one of their snubs. He and Davad had fought in ships like this together once, above the skies of Serroco.

Serroco, where they met as men, as Jedi—friends once more.

It makes no logical sense, but Kavar Vakla hears the rustle of wings, feels the coil of the great beast beneath him, holds the thruster like rough saddle leather, urging his mount higher to the sky—

Above to sky. To joust with the King above.

It makes no sense, but the Force opens inside him, spreading like dark wings across the alien sky.

It makes no sense, but Kavar roars his challenge to the heavens and the Beast-King answers.

XXX

In times of old, when the Beast-riders of Onderon kept their bloodlines close, and all men were Kira—equals—under sun and sky, their leaders were chosen in trials of combat. Trials in sky.

Now, Nihilus feels the challenge from below, roared through the Force as much as air.

“Four ships, firing on us.” Jasp Organa sounds startled, fear breaking through the dull flatness that Sion’s presence has stamped on his soul. “Firing at us.”
“Jedi,” Sion says. “There are Jedi flying those fighters. The cloaking on our shuttle is useless.” He bends over the controls, adjusting as if they will help.

He does not understand that Nihilus is flying the beast now; they are mere passengers in its belly.

The viewscreen bursts in a blaze of blue-white fire, and there is the scream, somewhere, of a turbine shot off their bow. The ship tilts, nose-first, and for a moment, Nihilus almost feels the flex of drelx wings, the coil of scaled muscle beneath him, his hands tangled in the jesses as he urges Blood Moon forward—

“We’re falling.” Jasp Organa is only a man, can only state the obvious. The air grows hot and smolders, makes him cough. Jasp Organa cannot feel the heart of the beast, the glorious dive.

“No,” Nihilus opens his wings. This ship has no fire of its own. He wishes to feel the taste of prey with his own maw. The nearest ship is not the bastard’s, but it will do. It comes closer, angling for the kill and he reaches—

XXX

“Amnesty was granted by a Senate vote of fifty to forty-one.” Kavar went to the controls along the wall of the Force cage, dimming the field around Davad’s cell. “You’re free to go, cousin. Congratulations.”

“I should thank Talia and Vaklu.” Did the bastard think Davad was stupid? “My solicitor showed me the testimony you gave the Senate, arguing for Jedi custody.”

“Talia expects you back on Onderon to hold the throne.” Kavar had one hand on the hilt of his saber when he keyed open the Force lock, leaving nothing but air between them.

“What do you expect?”

Kavar’s eyes were a faded blue. He looked older than Davad remembered. Older than any of them. “I expect Bandon will be disappointed to have his old master back. I expect Malak will have you killed within the year.” He sighed. “And Vaklu may dispose of Talia, if we leave her on her own. They’re too close in blood to marry, and she won’t share the crown. Not with a reformer who wants to sell our world to the Republic.”

“Perhaps when I rejoin the Sith, I can make Onderon a better offer.”

“Hah, hah.” There was still some spine left in his cousin. Davad could see it in the way his lip pulled back from his teeth. “I’m not going to beg. For our planet or our friendship. I was at Endor. And Telos. If you go back to the Sith I will kill you, Arkan.”

“I wasn’t at Telos. That was all Malak.” I was with her.

Kavar folded his arms, standing between Davad and the door. “If you stay with us, you could help us stop him.”

“Stop who?”

“Malak.”

“Why would I want to stop him?” Davad chuckled. “Revenge? Master Kavar, you would make a terrible Sith. Darth Malak was the strongest, and so he won—if someday that changes....”
And it would. He could feel that, like words writ on wind. For it was a lie, Malak’s strength. A lie concealing the Emperor. A lie that shielded them from Tenebrae’s gaze, a lie his true master hid behind. But Davad could no more speak of that than he could cry for Revan.

“If that changes, some other Sith will kill you.”

“I hope you’re not in charge of recruitment.” Davad stretched his arms above his head, turning the gesture into a mockery of a Jedi’s curtsey. “All these promises of revenge, and idle threats. You’re making the Jedi seem much more interesting than they are--”

XXX

“I will kill you,” Kavar had said. But he had not. He will not. Kavar is a liar. Just like Malak was.

Nihilus reaches with his claws, diving in for the kill. The bright spark of another Jedi within. The man’s life, a name, all of it a heartbeat, a gulp. A delicious swallow.

XXX

After their lovemaking, Lord Revan was still, features so frozen she might have been wearing a mask. The cold, blue light from above made her face carved from pearl and space, dark lines radiating from eyes of gold: the mask of a priestess or a queen.

“The schematics of the entire dwelling? Show me again.” Her voice cut through Davad’s skull, even as her fingers closed hard on his arm.

“Here. The Blades of Acknahar’tah brought a full report.” Davad waved a hand to the display by the bed, shifting the image, showing the hall curving in upon itself, like the lines of a shell. “Malak built a fortress on Thule. The defense systems are extensive.”

“The room… the hall… everything is an exact copy, down to the stuffed toys on his bed.” She let go of Davad abruptly. Her hands were dark-lined too. They traced the holo-image, lingering on a stuffed, shaggy toy in a box propped against the wall. She drew a quick breath, as if her composure was rattled. “But he’d be older now. He might want different toys.”

Who? But Davad knew better than to ask. “As I said before, there are no signs of occupation. My shadows found no evidence that Sheris and Malak have a child, or that Sheris is with child.”

“They will have no children.” Ice in his master’s voice made that fact an absolute.

“No children,” she had said before, before, just before he took her against the transparisteel wall.

“This is… another… experiment?” Davad knew a little of what had transpired on her trip to Ziost. The Emperor’s games were even crueler than Traya’s.

“No. My son must never be here.” His lover stared at him, her face a mask of bone and skin, her hands a coiled threat. “You will ensure my son’s safety, Davad. Now and forever.” Revan rose to her feet, pacing slowly to the expanse of stars in the viewscreen of the Aleema. “Promise me. My son must stay on Coruscant. His name is Malachor—”

“His name is Malachor—?” The words escaped before rational thought intruded.

“Yes.” One brow rose towards the ruin of her bright hair. “His name is Malachor, he lives on Coruscant, and Sheris and Malak and the sithspawned Sith Emperor will never have him.” She exhaled, and something in those yellow eyes flickered. “Promise me, Davad. Promise me now.”
“Of course.” You have a son and he is not mine. I would have given you children. I would have made you a queen, but you chose him. Even after all of this, you still choose him. He bowed his head, but Davad did not kneel. So many times she had made him kneel, made him crawl. But now—

When he raised his head again, his master was biting her lip. It took a moment to recognize the expression on her face—so long since he had seen it on her face.

Fear. Naked fear. More vulnerable than all her soft skin.

Revan took another, ragged breath. “Your loyalty makes no rational sense. I made you Sith, but it was not you... not your nature.”

“Before Malachor?” He was starving, suddenly again.

She nodded. “Before Malachor, I remember a man soft enough that he abhorred taking life—any life.”

That was never true. But we see what we desire. Davad still saw her as beautiful. She still saw him as kind.

“Master.” Obeisance and acknowledgement, all in a word.

“Promise,” her voice was dark and low, promising torment as well as delight. “As you love me, you will keep Malachor safe.”

“I... have always loved you, Master.” The answer required. The truth.

She smiled slightly, pale skin stretching over her perfect, white teeth, but the fear still shone in those eyes.

It made him love her more.

“I know.”

XXX

[“I have always loved her,” he tells Sion. “I kept the promise. The boy is not here. I will not eat him today. ”]]

The boy is in Jasp’s mind, not-here. They boy is on a planet called Deralia. Nihilus will try and eat him last. The galaxy is large. It could be years. Centuries.

“Yes, yes, we’re getting close to the food.” Sion rolls his eyes. “Those snubs may blow us up first though. Great plan.”

Nihilus extends a wing and it glitters, Force-enhanced shields curling into a claw. One of the snubs rocks, as tendrils of power rot its hull. The man inside is bright and sharp and delicious. He will be gone in a heartbeat. Just food, this Knight Querith. Not the bastard. No reason for the food to fight, to struggle, to suffer.

“No,” Jasp whispers, voicing the obvious. “Master Nihilus keeps us safe.”

“Huh.” Sion tilts his head, almost looking impressed.

XXX
“Kriffing dar’jett!” Canderous looked up to see the firefight going as bad as he’d expect. There—the Jedi assault had left the shuttle half uncloaked. Looked like one of the engines was shot too, from the plume of smoke—but even as he watched, the thing righted itself, and kept on coming down. The shuttle dodged like it was a dar’jettai itself—missing the ion pulse almost at point-blank range.

“Jett’ai magic,” Millifar scoffed. “They are fools to follow that shuttle. The dead thing wants them close.”

“No choice. They don’t want to let it land.” Canderous had seen fights like this before. Those snubs barely held an atmosphere, pilots relying on suits and the Force to fly. The self-sacrificing ord’inii would burn everything they had, break vanguard lines. Hells, once he’d seen a pack of them ram a dreadnaught, in the skies above Althir.

Glorious. But dumb. The ship had gone down screaming, Jedi and Clan alike.

One of the ships darted forward, maybe seized with a similar suicidal idea, but upon impact with the shuttle, it dissolved instead of shattered. And then the shuttle’s nose was exposed, black and smoking but intact.

“Oh, no,” the kid with no eyes said. They’d caught up with her easy enough, halfway to her house. There’d been a few Miraluka in Clan Wies. Another attempt to bring in Force-users by the woman, maybe. None of Canderous’s business. “He’s… gone. That Jedi in the fighter, he’s—just—gone.”

“Vaporized,” Canderous commented. “Yeah. Neat trick.” He should have spent more time in the armory on the Harbinger, gotten some ground launchers. Instead, all he could do was tap his comm. “Aemelie? Get those squads down here? We’ve got a visible target on Lin and his skanah. Tell the kids to try not to hit the Jett’ai snubs. For once, they’re on our side.”

“Finally!” His wife sounded thrilled. “They’ve been holding formation waiting for a visual.”

“Keep distance,” he warned. “They have magic.”

“What’s your name?” Kex was asking the blind girl. Milli was ignoring them all, her viewers tilted up at the sky, scanning the fight.

“Visas,” the Miraluka said. “But most people call me Vizzy.”

“I’m Kex.”

Millifar made a disdainful noise under her breath.

XXX

Outside the enclave, another ice storm raged. There were no seasons here, but sometimes the wind blew and sometimes it did not. Atris knew without looking that the temperature was dropping again, that this time of year, with its few hours of daylight, left their enclave the only refuge within thousands of kilometers.

A Jedi is beyond petty revenge, but she wondered if leaving the old woman to the ravages of the elements would be kinder than leaving her to realize the extent that they had betrayed her, the utter failure of her plans.

But I would not leave her to die. I am Atris. I am a Jedi Master. I know what that means, even if she has forgotten—
“Has there been any word?” Kreia asked. Her head was bowed, hands folded in her sleeves. She looked frail and helpless and harmless—and Atris had to remind herself once more that so did a jryyysh-snake, right before it sang its death-strike.

Atris had underestimated the old woman so many times before. She had done the old woman’s bidding so many times before.

She would not do it again.

“From Katarr? We were told the Fleet jumped away. Otherwise—nothing.” Atris could only assume that the Jedi were currently fighting for their lives. If they failed, Atris suspected the Force would echo with that failure, with their deaths, as it had before at Malachor.

If they fail, we will remake the order. If they fail, I will make things right. But not as Kreia would have it. Kreia. Arren Kae. Vima Sunrider—how could I have been such a fool not to see?

The Force felt like a blast helmet had been removed from her eyes. Like waking from a long dream.

You made me your betrayer for the last time when you told me to advise the Fleet, Kreia. Without the Force, you have no power here. Without the Force, all your illusions are exposed.

Her eyes met Mical’s across the room, and he gave a brief nod. As requested, Mical had escorted his mother to the main hall, standing with his hands behind his back, while the children of Yusanis flanked Atris.

“An announcement did come,” her foster son said. “Yesterday. From Kaas.” A faint smile played across his lips. “Brianna? Did you have a chance to tell Master Kreia?”

“An official announcement?” The hooded head tilted up, blind eyes dry, staring into space.

“I… did not.” The girl whose face was an echo of Vima Sunrider’s (and why had Atris been so blind to that fact before? So blind to so many things. There was no anger, only purpose—and yet—she could not forget.) “There has been so much bad fortune… I thought… we should spare the woman who gave us our faces further pain.”

“I am well used to pain,” Kreia murmured. “Child, tell me.”

Mical glanced at Atris, and she nodded. Death in an ice storm was fast. She did not want Master Kreia to die—only the hope of her plans. This would be the first blow. If the Jedi on Katarr succeeded, soon the second would fall.

If the Jedi failed….

Then we will call in the Fleet. Again.

Mical nodded. “Yesterday, it was announced that Revan Starfire is dead, and that Emperor Tenebrae is once again the sole ruler of the Sith Empire.”

There was a long pause, and the room seemed hushed. Was it Atris’s imagination that added the arctic chill?

“But that is merely the copy who was on Kaas,” the old woman said finally. “The body of Sheris Loran, succumbed to terentatek poison at last. I-I would know if the real Revan was dead. I would know if she—”
“The translation used the word ‘gith,’” Atris added. “It means ‘both,’ or ‘two.’ Two of Revan Starfire. Gith dead. Both.”

“I would know,” the old woman insisted, but her voice had gone querulous and soft.

“Would you, Mother?” Mical asked. “How? You no longer have the Force.”

XXX

_A few weeks earlier on Dromund Kaas..._

Pain.

_Like being stabbed in the guts by the Mandalore. Like having the back of your skull taken off when the bridge of your flagship explodes. Like a blaster bolt to the chest on Yu-Phaedra, falling out of the sky on Altair, choking on ash-water and xoxon dust on Iridonia._

_Like being seven on Telos and feeling the world end when the building comes crashing down above your head._

_Pain hurts._

When Revan closed her eyes, the pain hurt less. There was nothing to see but the sky and the crowd and the roar of the crowd was not important, so Revan kept her eyes closed.

Her artificial arm had gone entirely numb, like all the nerves had been severed. Her flesh arm felt like something was crushing it down, something that burned and smoked. That same something rolled, twisting over her ribs, she felt two of them break—white-hot sparks of pain, adding to the fire in her veins, the twisting of her guts that felt like they were churning inside out—

She tried to scream, but she couldn’t move her jaw. The world was shaking. Something tasted sour, like bile, like her guts coming up.

_It hurts. Mal, I’m dying, Mal. Malak. I’m—_

_I know._

The crowd noises faded, the world tilted, like someone was carrying her. Arms, carrying her, voices like dark whispers, everything cold.

“Dying hurts.” His lips pressed against her forehead, and his arms cradled her body. A dark chuckle. “How many times, Revvie? How many lives? I'd think you'd be used to it by now.”

She looked up at him. Familiar, broad face, calm, gray eyes staring into hers. Nothing mad in them. His hair hung in loose curls, soft on her cheek.

“She’ll have to do it. The Fragment. Figure out a way—I tried, I—” Grief and frustration were galactic. “I tried, I—”

“No. You're not done.” Malak sat down slowly, still holding her in his arms. The tunnels looked—they looked almost familiar.

_Like the ones on Coruscant._

_Like ours—_
“How are we here?” She asked even knowing. *We aren't. We're dead. This is the end—*

His broad hand cupped her chin and Malak brought his mouth down hard on hers, nipping her lower lip, his mouth pushing against hers with sudden, passionate intensity.

His hands tore at her robes. Her own hands slid across his bare chest, pushing back his robes. Both of them were panting now, frantic, desperate—

“How are we here?” she murmured in his neck, her mouth lapping at his ear, body rising against his chest, rising, falling, rocking. Her own breath caught—and caught again—“Slow. We have time, Mal, we have all the time in the galaxy—now—”

“No,” he murmured. Voice lost in her breasts, but she heard him, echoes reverberating in her mind. “We don't, Red. We have no time at all. This isn't the end—”

A jolt of agony sparked on her spine, phantom pain from her destroyed arm, sharp stabbing pains in her chest—

*Ribs. Spine. Arm. But it's the poison that's the problem, Red. It's the poison that might end you still*

—

*Malak*— his hand slipped away from hers, small and slippery as Malachor’s, vanishing down a long, dark tunnel and then there was no light—no light at all—
"We've lost ten fighters," Dessa reported, unnecessarily, because Aemelie had been monitoring their ship's read-outs. "The rest are blooded in skies, but they failed their mission. The dar'jett shuttle with the dead Oerin Lin is landing, even as we speak."

"And the supply drop?" They would kill him on the sands, then. The dead man should have taken his gift when he had the chance.

"Following Canderous's ping it was delivered successfully. Near the edge of that hole in the ground. What is that hole in the ground?"

Aemelie shrugged. "It looks like a mine."

"What do they mine? Our scans don't indicate any useful metal on this world."

Dessa was full of useless questions.

The communicator that Canderous forget to take when he and Millifar left to rescue Revan pinged again from her pocket. Lately, it did that every hour. Truly, Aemelie would have destroyed it long ago, except the device itself had been a name-day gift from Gwenarius, and at times, their husband was strangely sentimental.

They had long since learned to ignore the comm's soft chime. That astromech droid of Revan's had been demanding to talk to Canderous for the last month, but the obstinate thing never had anything to say to Aemelie.

If Revan had abandoned the droid, she must have had good reason.

The ping came again. Irritating. She tapped the receiver. "Please stop calling."

"Aemelie Ordo?" The computer snapped. It was using Revan's voice again, but Aemelie had only fallen for that trick once.

"Aemelie is not available," she told it, and cut the connection. Lights flashed almost instantly, as if the thing had Canderous's comm number on auto-repeat.

Dessa giggled, despite the gravity of their circumstances. "Is that the T3 droid again? Gwenarius found it useful on Coruscant. Where did it run off to?"

"It doesn't matter. Salt," Aemelie told her. "They mine salt on this planet."

"From that sea?" Dessa looked dubious. "Scans show it's too acidic for life. A jarosite sea. What do they use for equipment that wouldn't dissolve in those waters?"

"Something silicon-based? Plasticore?" Aemelie shrugged. "In truth, I have no idea. Stay on task!"

"Your comm is beeping again." Dessa sighed. "It's giving me a headache."
"Drink some water. And have the survivors land near the Fett Ordo," Aemelie commanded her. "If Oerin Lin cannot be killed with a simple carbine repeater, it may take a few tons of munitions to blow him to pieces."

XXX

"Bantha poo doo!" Mission cursed to herself, sliding between two covered palanquins and a small landspeeder as she crossed the bustling square. Kaas City was no Coruscant, but the International Sector, at least, was always hopping. "Mandalorians!"

Objectively, she thought, you could see how Revan had managed to trick the clans into a fake armistice at Malachor. All she'd have had to do was tell them to go somewhere else and not pick up their stupid comms.

The door to Mission's destination was just up ahead with a familiar form hunched in its outline. If she'd had arms she would have hugged the big lug, but instead Mission rolled up and beeped.

"No change," Zaal growled softly, before she could even ask.

[[Still in a coma,]] she transmitted back to the Builder's installation on Dromund Kaas. [[But, hey! She still could wake up, right?]]

[[Bring me the other one.]] Its tone was weary, as if tens of thousands of years helping to shape this totally evil world of darkness had made poor Kaas computer a little cranky. [[She will serve.]]

[[Sorry! Can't find her!]] Wasn't even a lie.

Mission just hoped Polla Revan had the sense to stay lost. She couldn't exactly warn her on Deralia (Mission's odds only had Polla Revan still being on Deralia at about one to six-thousand-seventy, anyway). She couldn't warn her, not with Kaas lurking on the edges of her own signal, and Kashyyyk agreeing that they needed to "fix things." All she could do was wait. Knowing Polla Revan, she'd have no sense at all… and that was why they all needed to be ready. For anything.

"No change at the palace too," she whined, punctuating her tone with a few random beeps like a good little droid would. Her dome rolled around to check, but no one was paying a Wookiee in a doorway and an astromech any mind. Not on a planet like this, where if you didn't have a black robe and a lightsaber, you didn't exist. "At least Emperor Asshole seems to have gotten over his little crush on Polla Organa."

"Mission, he did not want to mate with her!" Zaalbar sighed.

"Don't be gross, I didn't say he did." She rocking up on her rollers to let the body collector and his cart pass her. "But he's stopped asking Lord Malak to go buy her away from House Blais, so that's good, right? The man has the attention span of a botfly."

"He has too many eyes," Big Z agreed.

"Bring out your dead!" The body collector called through the formall-looking twisted trumpet thing he carried around. Then he blew on it, making a sound like the universe dying.

"This is a weird planet." Mission would have sighed, if she had lungs.

Doors opened under the steps of the surrounding houses as the slaves began dragging out the night's casualties, all wrapped in bright plasticore and splashed with biohazard sigils. She didn't want to know what the Sith body collector did with them — any more than she wanted to know
why the death rate seemed to be going up.

Considering they were a planet of murderers, these Sith were awfully squeamish about corpses. They liked causing death but they didn't like to look at it later. They burned bodies—part of some ceremony, supposedly, but Mission thought it was probably just for hygienic reasons.

Lucky for Carth and Big Z and Polla and everybody. It was how they'd gotten that Sheris Loran body out from under Emperor Loser in the first place.

_Canderous. Call Canderous Ordo again._ The alarm she'd set herself chimed in her internal processors and patched through the nets (no easy feat) _again._ It was hard to trace the bits that far out of Sith space—especially with Kashyyyk so suddenly rude and demanding and siding with Kaas—but she did her best.

What was her old pal Canderous doing near a Miralukan colony world anyway? And where the kriffing selsop was Polla Revan the Real—really?

XXX

The sky was lit by flashes of gunfire, the sky was a circle of fading light as they descended into the planet's heart.

Revan remembered that Polla Organa used to have nightmares that started like this—the sky exploding above, a weight pressing down, burying her in the ground. Spacer's fears: vacuum and falling. Now, every instinct Revan had screamed at her to break free of this trap, to run—

" _Run._"

That voice again, echoing in her head.

" _You really should run._"

"What about my men?" Commander Cody was talking to Vrook, glancing up at the disappearing sky as the lift carried them down, into the pit.

"They will be evacuated to a safe location. As will you. We have ships below to take as many as we can."

Revan felt a jolt in her chest as another light in the sky winked out, as the scream grew closer.

_There were Jedi in those fighters—two of them are gone._

" _Run—_"

"Davad Arkan only wants Force users." Revan kept her eyes focused on her uncle's face, trying to ignore the voice in her head. "But everyone will need to stay clear of this pit. You're... going to blow it up, aren't you? The walls will collapse. It still may not be enough."

Every scrap of Force she had was telling her to run away.

_Green eyes widened, looking back at her with abject terror. Behind them came another savage howl—"

" _Run. Run away. I cannot stop her blade before it finds your heart—_"
Who-whose blade—? Revan jerked suddenly, the hallucination had been so vivid that she could still taste the dust on her lips. But in it, she had been speaking with a man's voice—and the face looking back at her was her own.

Xxx

"Run."

But where— when was this? Her own face, eyes wide and frightened. Her hair was dark, almost black, tied neatly in a topknot. She was wearing a pilot's vest, her favorite pilot's vest—

"Polla Organa. You must run. Now." He commanded her, willed her to obey, laying the compulsion deep in her shattered mind.

Those blank, green eyes skimmed past him, seeming to focus on the broken gate, the bodies. From behind the wall's safety more rakghouls roared….

XXX


"Who told you about the bomb, Knight Revan?" A Jedi she didn't recognize brought her back to the present. Female. Sullustan. Her ears were pinned back close to her head.

"It seems logical that there is a bomb." Logical. Not sane. We're all going to die. A part of her was really fracking not okay with that. Another part was losing her mind, hallucinating she was Davad Arkan stalking Polla Organa on Taris.

Not a hallucination, a voice whispered inside. You know what he is.

"The bomb is a last resort. We will try a less drastic measure first." Vrook. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. A part of Revan felt disconnected, more attached to the monster bearing down on them than this platform lowering into a pit, this handful of Force users. The prox alarm rang again and another starship blasted past them, rising out of the pit, with more Jedi aboard. Heat seared her face and she tried not to wince.

What happens when the bomb doesn't work? "You… want to lure him into these mines and… trap him first? Try and trap him? You think you can trap him underground?"

"This all seems… desperate," Dak muttered. The former Sith was looking at Revan as if she knew the answers.

"Well, isn't it?" She didn't know what to do except smile. "We've landed in desperate times."

The drone in her ears was growing louder. And then… the world didn't give Revan the courtesy of a warning before it shifted, suddenly becoming another place entirely.

XXX

"Desperate times, old friend." Revan smiled at him from the doorway of his tent, a little sad and worried all at once. Her braids were tangled and there was mud on her face, gray mask pushed up over her eyes. In the dim light, her eyes were almost colorless, narrowed with concern.

"There's mud on your face." His felt warm, probably from the fever of battle. Revan was concerned for him. It wasn't love, but it was something.
"You don't have to come, Davad. If it's too much—"

"Never," he promised. "You'll need more than just you and Malak to make it believable. One Jedi looks like a deserter. Two, like you've both lost your minds. But if we come in numbers crying truce—"

"They'll think we're a trap." Rev nodded. "Clan Rialis won't be expecting Knights Tio and Wekoo leading the charge on their supplies—not when they see three Jedi coming as a frontal assault. But we... we will have to end them all, Davad. Even if they surrender. We've no place to put prisoners."

"I... understand." She still thought of him as kind. It was flattering. "They can't be allowed to report back. They can't be allowed to know that we've taken their tech."

"Yes." Her smile wasn't one. "And... we may have to play this same trick again."

XXX

"Run." Davad's voice again. Louder now. Her legs twitched.

Where was that? When was that? That wasn't... my memory. It was his.

Serroco. Ghost of a whisper in her mind. Troop battalion seventy, the Rialis Massacre. Near the beginning of our war. One of our first victories. The voice turned acid. Before they burned away all our victories on Serroco with seven radioactive bombs, we raided their main munitions cache. A simple task, although it required eliminating dozens of Mandalorian warriors at their main camp. Laughter, like an echo. At that time in the war, we still counted casualties by dozens.

Revan tried not to react. That voice hadn't sounded like Davad at all. It had sounded like Dar.

I could just be losing my mind. That's as logical as anything else. A thousand-meter fall. A week drifting alone in space... Maybe none of this is real.

You know better than that. That voice again. Not Davad's.

"The Jedi... you think you can contain Davad Arkan down here in some pit? What about Oerin Lin?"

Dar'Revan had been working with Oerin and Arkan, Revan was sure of it.

Lin and Arkan gave Dar'Revan that fracking ship that took us off Coruscant. Is Dar in on this too? Is this her plan to destroy the Jedi? Her plan to destroy me? How could she know that I would be here?

How can she be in my head? She never was before.

But she could have spies in the Republic. They could have arranged this. All of this. Luring me here—and the Mandalorians. All of us to one place, all of Dar’Revan’s enemies, ready to be destroyed.

Traps among traps. Revan wasn't sure if she was baiting one or in one anymore.

And it doesn't matter. Either way I must break it.

The Sullustan Jedi cleared her throat. "We are in possession of a null field, Knight Revan. Null to the Force. It was Master Loanin's design. The salt chamber will naturally amplify the ysalamiri enough to form a stasis around the null field. If we can contain Nihilus and Sion, even briefly—we
can attempt to reach… anything that remains of the men they were."

"Then what? Offer to mind wipe them?" It came out before Revan thought. Not quite a joke. *It doesn't matter. It won't work. "Do you hear that? He's coming."*

"*Run.*"

She felt the muscles in her legs twitch, as if the whisper in her mind was a command to be obeyed.

No.

Vrook glanced up at the sky, now a perfect circle above them, surrounded by the walls of the pit. "We want him to come."

Their lift settled on the ground of the pit. It was even larger than it had looked from above, the sides hollowed out into open chambers, each at least twenty meters high. The walls glittered, salt crystals overlain with some kind of mesh supports. Grimly, Revan noted the neat rows of beryllium charges blinking in lines across the walls.

*Rather an obvious trap.* The voice in her head was dry. *Typical Jedi.*

A few light cruisers were banked against the sides of the salt walls, with tracks indicating there had once been more ships. There was a crude launching pad in the center, delineated by flashing lights and repulsor coils.

Above them, the living Force cried out in agony and something screamed back. Null space, a void. And within that scream so much death—

Revan shivered. Duraplate beneath her boots, the cold air in her lungs. "You're going to offer Davad Arkan another chance if the Jedi up there don't shoot him out of the sky? You were willing to have the Republic Fleet vaporize them before—why show mercy now?"

Vrook's lips thinned. "Every attempt is one to save as many as possible. But in the end, the man who calls himself Darth Nihilus must not leave this world." He paused, dark eyes narrowing, staring into her own. "And he will not."

"So, it's not mercy." Of course not. *None for the likes of Nihilus.* She remembered the stacks of dead in the morgue, the burning, yellow gaze of the man as she'd last seen him. "You're going to sacrifice yourselves to fracking stop him if you have to."

*I should let you. I should run away and let you.*

*Die to stop a madman?* Odds that Revan had been willing to take once. A fate she had almost accepted, before the last fight.

A fate she had once thought *she* deserved.

*But the others. Korrie. Carth. My friends, I can't—*

"*Run,*" Davad Arkan whispered in her mind. For a moment, she almost felt warm breath on her neck, strong arms lock around her ribs in an embrace—for a moment the word was more a tease than a warning. *"We could have a race."*

Her eyes took in two of the knights, leaning against each other, their interlaced hands locked. Togruta and Twi'lek: the Togrutan's monotail brushed over her friend's lekku as if for comfort.
Unabashedly intimate. The Twi'lek woman caught Revan's gaze and glared at her. Defensive.

"I'm not—" Revan didn't even know what she intended to say. "Your bomb, uncle… if it doesn't work, what happens to everyone else, when we are gone? What happens if we don't kill him?"

Her uncle's response was lost in the roar of a ship rising out of the pit, bound for hyperspace.

Xxx

The shuttle is small and stinks of Deralian fear, and Sion's rotting flesh. Nihilus is no carrion beast, but he is so hungry that the smell still makes his maw rumble.

"Set us down!" Sion keeps yelling at the pilot, as if the Deralian is the one in control of their machine.

"I can't," the man whispers. "He's doing it. He's the one flying—"

Their craft rocks under another barrage of the Jedi's guns. Light taps, meant to herd them higher. Nihilus knows the game well. They played it on drexl, they played it in wartime….

Xxx

" The base ahead at eleven—that's the one we must protect." Kavar's back was to Davad's, manning the guns while Davad flew their strikefighter low, trying to stay under the Mandalorian sensors. "Cein and Karath want to keep our supply line near the Stereb cities."

" Cein wasn't on Taris," Davad snapped. "And Karath should know better. Do you think that will work, cousin?"

Ahead, one of the stone watchtowers lit at their approach, its gas-powered beams circling, lighting their craft in waves of cerulean blue.

" I think you need reminding," the older knight said sternly, "Jedi knights are not generals. We have orders and we follow them. Run supplies, defend the troop carriers."

" Just the two of us? In one ship?" Vakla had to feel it too, like barometric pressure before a storm. The enemy was above: a flock, a fleet of them. But they were holding, holding in formation instead of attacking the lone Jedi striker.

" If they were to mount a full-scale assault the Republic would have no choice but to answer in kind." Kavar Vakla had enjoyed reciting the obvious to Davad ever since Dxun. "These raids are just their attempts to earn honor. Our presence is symbolic, a deter—"

The rest of his suddenly obsolete explanation was lost to the near-vertical climb Davad assaulted on their ship's thruster, as was any objection—brief objection—for, as fast as they winged themselves skyward, something dark and finned sped past them, twisting downward towards the crylline towers below.

" What are you doing?" Vakla's instincts were still too slow—

Xxx

That world had been bad. Rotten to its core.

Now, there is only this world, this one unscathed by bombs and Mandalorian death. This one full of meat.
And her. And her.

{""Run."} he says, like he did before. {""Run."} he tells her.

Xxx

The vision of Stereb spires and clouds dissolved, in flashes of blue. Revan's feet scuffed on duraplating and her stomach sank. Stereb cities. That's Serroco. Master Kavar. I… saw—I was in Davad Arkan's head. That was his memory.

"Run," he said.

"—mine is roughly two kilometers deep. If we lure them into the tunnels and then set off the explosives—"

A part of her mind calculated the size of the implosion. Another part of her mind… agreed. It won't work.

"It won't work," Revan mumbled. Her feet stumbled, and that was when Revan realized she was walking again, off the lift, following Master—Uncle—Vrook off the lift and down an increasingly narrow hall.

"—the salt chamber may enhance the null field enough. If we can just reach him. Knight Arkan was once a good man. A true Jedi."

"Revan said it wouldn't work." Dak's voice, next to her.

"It won't work," she repeated, knowing even as she did that it was true. "It isn't enough. He's stronger than you think."

Strong enough to be in my head. Arkan is in my head. How is he in my head?

"There are other detonators," Master Vash said grimly. "Running down each of these main tunnels. The planetary crust is quite thin. There are fault lines we can trigger—"

"Run." The voice was louder now. Insistent.

"No. It won't work." Revan shook her head. They mean to crack the planet. Send him into its heart, but if they do that, then everyone—everyone on the surface of this continent—maybe even the planet.

These are the fracking Jedi with their greater good. Burn a world to save thousands. That voice again. If that was enough, perhaps—

No. But it's not. It's not enough. It won't work—

Revan had no idea why she was so certain.

"Forgive me, Padawan, but you are no engineer." Revan had no memory of Master Lonna Vash, but the dislike in the woman's voice implied the ignorance wasn't mutual. "There will be a period of geologic instability and casualties will be high on this land mass, but compared to the alternative—"

"Run." A voice in her mind. A command. A compulsion—

Her hand traced the wall, slick, slightly damp. The corridor was wide enough for four abreast.
Revan realized at some point she'd been surrounded. "What about… civilians?" She thought of that girl with her beaded veil. Vizzy. She said she had family. There were kids on those rafts. All the sents from Cody's ship—

"There are shelters. A planetary alert system has been triggered. Many of them will survive. Based on the carnage Nihilus has left on other worlds, their chances are better with our bomb than with his predation."

"No." Revan shook her head. For a moment, the world blurred and she was—she was floating. Flying. Circling down, and below, a vast pit beckoned—a wound in the dirt. A promise. "We should run. We need to run. Evacuate everyone we can from the planet. Get the Fleet to come back. The Aleema can at least delay him — and we've got more ships. The Mando'ade will help."

"The Mandalorians will help?" Master Vash said. Her voice sharpened, as she turned back to glare at Revan. "Your Mandalorians?"

"What?" She blinked. "No, I meant—" she glanced up at the low ceiling, the polished surface of old salt, glittering in the overlights inset in its walls. There were cracks too, and she wondered how stable it was. The ground above pressed down, and above—

*Dark wings, circling prey. Insignificant warflies buzzing like gnats. And then the one. The challenger, calling up from below—*

"This isn't going to work! Your plan to stop Davad Arkan won't work. You can't just blow up a world to stop a-a mad Sith!"

*Really? The cold voice in her head sounded almost amused. At least in this case, we agree. *

**Xxx**

*The Stereb city beneath their wings had been a small one, occupied by maybe five thousand Stereb, and a few hundred Republic troopers tasked with guarding medical supplies. A small sacrifice of men compared to what would follow, but Davad heard Kavar's grunt of pain from his own mouth as they felt all those lives below suddenly wink out.*

*And then the cloud formed, like a dimple of imploding ash, rising higher and higher, its center curving in a distinctive dome.*

"*Fission bombs.*" Kavar sounded as numb as Davad felt. Both of them could feel the poison down to the agonized molecule, the cell-death of so much life, the poisonous cloud that would stop all life for generations.

"*Atom-splitters.*" Davad put his hand to the yoke again, wheeling up higher, higher, trying to escape the resonation in the Force. Somewhere above the moon was Admiral Cein's flagship and safety. "Animals! How could they?"

**Xxx**

*Davad? Revan blinked again, suddenly looked up at the smooth ceiling, for a moment seeing sky instead, the world tilting beneath her feet as a ship somewhere banked and turned. Either in her memory—or above.*

"If we can't stop him, Nihilus will consume the Force. All the Force in the galaxy." A Jedi she didn't recognize, using that pedantic tone they all used, was walking by her side now. Her uncle
was on the other side, flanking her, as if they had both been presenting an argument for some time. "There are some theories that since the Force is in all living things, the destruction of the Force will destroy them too—perhaps even destroy all matter itself. He must be stopped before that happens."

"Of course. But Davad Arkan could stop the Sith Emperor," Revan pointed out. I won't call him by that stupid name Nihilus. It isn't his. "He could eat all of Tenebrae's Force-sensitive minions. If you weren't trying to lure him here, maybe he'd be doing that now." Even as she spoke, her mind shied away from that solution.

How many dead then? Billions? How powerful would Davad become after that? How much more powerful could he become?

And then, how could he be stopped?

It might be worth the risk. That voice again. Like ice.

Xxx

He has eaten the third ship. Now it is just the bastard, one lone beast clawing and keening, circling below their shuttle.

The bastard fires his last cannon, and the plasma bomb ricochets off the safe shell Nihilus has made for their craft, spinning to the ground below—

XXX

"No," Kavar whispers. Spots dance in front of his eyes from the torque, the loss of oxygen. His breath frosts out of his mouth. "You fool! I'm trying to save you." He realizes his cheeks are wet, that his ship is listing to the side. The shuttle fills the viewscreen, and his cousin's talon reaches out slowly, almost lovingly, and knocks his own ship to the ground.

His neck snaps back against the unenforced seat-back. His skull crashes into the hull. Pain is blinding white. He feels the impact dimly, a whisper.

Xxx

The Stereb spires had vanished, leaving a dome-shaped cloud in their wake. Leaving death and poisoned ground. When Davad's eyes turned to the horizon, he saw three more clouds, where once there had been cities. All gone—

"Monsters! Dung-eating savages! May their flights be cursed and their eggs rot in the nest!"

The Beast-rider curses of their childhood made no sense, but Davad had no other language to express his anger, which suddenly seemed a living thing, coiling low and dark in his gut, rising like the taste of blood to his throat. "All those people—they were innocents!" Half-blind, he fumbled for their own torpedo keys, seeing the Mandalorian warbirds ahead of them still cowardly cloaked, but visible as fire to anyone with the Force.

"No." Kavar did... something, because suddenly Davad's board was dead. Entirely dead, and their ascent had slowed, changed trajectory toward Admiral Cein's Corellian Conquest, half-hidden by simple cloud cover, drifting uselessly in the night's sky. "No, Davad. Not with anger. Never with anger." He sighed. "We were wrong to come to this war. I see that now."

That one learned Tokare's false pacifism all too well.... Her voice, a faint whisper in his skull.
Davad barely heard it, because his mind was elsewhere—reaching—reaching out to—Her. Ice. The stars were filled with it. Ice. Numbers. Points on a grid….

XXX

"Revan?" Her uncle touched her arm, shaking it lightly.

"What?" Revan realized she’d stopped in the corridor. She looked up again. "Another Jedi crashed. That was… that was—"

"Kavar," another Jedi voice said. Female behind them. Cold. "The last ship of the Jedi is down."

"But he’s not… he’s not dead. I think?" The light above flickered, fading fast.

"Better that he was," Master Vash said bitterly.

"A… few… thousand lives lost. Mostly Stereb." They had been lights, winking out on an overtaxed grid just like Master Sunrider had said—at least to Revan; but beside her, Malak looked as shell-shocked as every other Force user in the room, except Master Sunrider herself, who wore the simple gray mask that she kept reminding them all to adopt. "That was plutonite. Fission. They… annihilated those people down to their very atoms."

"And what have you learned?" Master Sunrider said, as if this was another blasted lesson, as if it were only them two in the room. "Why do you think the Fett Mandalore cares about a minor supply depot and some native settlement?"

"He wouldn't care about a native settlement," Revan said, looking at Mal speaking urgently to Commander Dodonna about rescue operations.

But he knows there are no survivors, he should know.

Mal glanced up at her and shook his head. We must be sure, Red.

His thoughts in her own head, his pain and shock and for a moment she felt it too and then the barricade between their minds slammed down, encasing them both in ice—

There are no survivors, Malak. She felt Malak’s pain ease, just as she felt the two Jedi below in the rapidly-approaching ship. Davad, and Master Kavar. She should feel relief they were alive, but the cloaked ships of the Mandalorian Fleet, cowering in the planet’s upper atmosphere, just out of cannon range, caught her attention instead.

There. Our enemy. No anger towards them, just resolve.

She felt Davad and Kavar calm, felt their pain vanish, frozen—

"Good," Master Kae said approvingly. "Like that. Just like that, Revan."

"The coordinates of their ships, as follows..." her voice rattled off the numbers, as Malak lit them up on the board.

"Do you see now?" Kae asked Admiral Cein. "Do you see now; what Jedi can do?"

No. That was… wrong. Not Kae. Sunrider. She said, she said she was Kae now, she was Master
Arren Kae now because of the Redemption—when Vima took the Redemption she took a new name. Master Arren Kae, but she-she told me otherwise. She told me that on some worlds, she'd been Master Arren Kae for a very long time.

Xxx

She was the bridge between them, their old master, their foster mother, aunt, master—she was the bond between them, but now that it is forged, and Nihilus strong, and Revan so close—he can just see—he can just see her, caught between Jedi in a narrow hall beneath this planet's crumbling crust. The walls glitter like silver and her hair is brown and matted close to her skull. She's dressed like a common fighter pilot and her hair is brown, but she is her.

*Her. Delicious.*

{{"Hello,"}} he sends. {{"Revan. Revan, Revan—run—"}}

Xxx

Vrook kept explaining, and Revan began to feel like a prized nerf, hemmed in by harvesters, on her way to the factory for processing. The world ebbed and dimmed, and somewhere in it, someone was screaming her name.

"Revan?" Vrook touched her arm, frowning. "You seem… distracted."

"Revan."

"We're luring a Sith Lord to his doom, why would I be distracted?" The words came out in Polla's Deralian drawl, and felt as false as everything.

"Revan."

"He-he's screaming. He's hungry." Her ears rang. "Is it just me? You all don't… you don't hear him too?"

"Revan. Run."

The Durian knight on the hover in front of her twitched its skull. "We hear nothing," it said.

"They failed," said a yellow Twi'lek knight she didn't know. "R'tar. Lavash. Querish—and Kavar. They failed. R'tar and Lavash are dead. I can't sense the others."

So many Jedi Revan didn't know. Would Dar have known them?

*Probably not, she fracking killed all her friends.*

But that memory had been… *hers. Dar'Revan's.*

And… new. *How?*

"Stereb cities," Revan muttered. "On Serroco? The Mandalorians bombed them. We… we were there."

Uncle Vrook's face-lines grew deeper, grooving into lines of lines. For a moment, he looked younger, like Mekel Jin, trapped in Uln's mad caves with her. "You shouldn't be here," he muttered. "Knight Arkan was—"
"My... lover." She hadn't meant to say that. Dar hadn't seemed to give a frack for the man. Revan tried to sound calm, like all of this was reasonable. "Davad Arkan was Darth Revan's lover. And he's... talking. Right now. In my head. You all... you don't hear him too?"

"You did this to him," muttered the yellow Twi'lek. "You broke him at Malachor. Like Meetra Surik."

"Who?" The name was familiar, but the significance escaped her.

"Revan. Run. You need to run."

"Your plan won't work," she repeated, sure of it now. "Do you think Arkan will willingly sacrifice himself in your trap? There's a planet full of Force users above—why would he come down here?"

"Our strength," Master Vrook said. His smile was strained. "It's not a good plan, niece. It's the only one we had time to make."

"Run."

Her legs twitched. Her elbow jerked out, and the Jedi nearest stumbled back.

"To me, Revan. Run to me."

Xxx

He calls to her. Calls up pieces. She was a hollow egg that they smashed but some of her calls back—and hears him.

He will show her the rest—lies and truth. Linked through the bond their master forged long ago. He will show her, he will eat her, and they will become—they—

They will become one, he hopes. What can they become? Where is the world for them?

But first, she must see—she must see how much he has always loved her. She must know that she is not just prey. She is more than food.

Xxx

"It's nice," Davad lied. The cafe was not, and surely a senator's son of Coruscant knew that. The cafe was small—not even a cantina—set on a walkway between the University and the International District, too close to the Jedi Temple for privacy, too full of gawkers and tourists for peace. There was another trio in beige robes by the door, but Davad was more acutely aware of the speculative whispers surrounding him and Malak D'Reev. "Not very private."

"Scrambler." Malak shrugged and placed a small cube on the table. "Creates a dampener about a meter around, if you're that worried about being overheard." His smile was carelessly arrogant, the smile of a boy bestowing a favor on a treasured servant. Davad had seen it often enough in the mirror to recognize. "You wanted my advice?"

"Not advice. Information." He hesitated. "Personal information. I don't want to make you uncomfortable—"

"Please." Malak took a sip of his calf. "We faced down those slavers on Dagmar together. You saved Revan's life when that hellspawned Gamorrean set off the charge. Whatever I can do to help."
"Revan had the rest in stasis," Davad pointed out, not wanting to object, but also striving for honesty. "All I did was disable the detonators." He grimaced. "Had a lot of practice back home. There have been a few uprisings—"

"Colonials," Malak sighed. "No offense."

"Onderon isn't a Republic colony so how could I be offended?" He was.

"I meant your rebels. Isn't that what they want? Protectorate status for Onderon? Trade access? Civil rights?"

"For a senator's son, you're a terrible diplomat, D'Reev. I almost think you're trying to insult me." Davad forced a chuckle.

Level gray eyes stared at him. "Or, this could be a test to see if you put the Order first." Malak's wide mouth quirked and he shrugged. "Say what you like. I told Knight Kavar I'd ask about your loyalties and I have."

"He's checking up on me?" Sharp wave of anger, hot and inviting. Davad swallowed it back, with the bile in his throat.

"Get used to it," Malak said. "We're the public faces of the Jedi. No scandals, no questions about mislaid loyalty, inappropriate attachments—"

"That's... actually what I wanted to ask you about." Davad took a deep breath. "Attachments."

"Oh." Malak nodded slowly. The smile on his face looked a little forced. "Of course. You heard about the Jedi brothel? It's on sub-level twenty. I was told they'll even bill the Temple, if you want to admit that you... need such things." His gray eyes were remote, as if his mind was somewhere else.

"No! That's... that's not..." He heard his voice crack like an unbelled boy's. "Revan. It's Revan that I... want. But I wasn't sure, I thought that you and she... uh, you and her. I thought you were..."

There was a pause, long enough for Davad to curse himself and wonder if Malak was laughing at him, like a botfly caught on a hook.

"No," the other boy said finally. "Padawans are discouraged from forming attachments to other padawans. Or knights. There is nothing untoward in our behavior." He frowned. "You... were correct to bring this to me first. You know she admires you—we both do. But this would be... awkward."

"It is awkward," Davad muttered. "But I can no longer deny my feelings. She-do you think there's any chance she might... has she ever mentioned...?"

Those stone-gray eyes blinked. "No," Malak said.

Later, so much later, Davad had to admire the man, the way the man so flatly lied, with a deception so complete it rang through the Force—

Xxx

"Run, Revan. Do you see?"
Malak had looked so... young. Something caught in Revan's throat. Mal. He was so young.

Young and pompous. Trying to make Davad sweat with that talk about a brothel. He was being an ass. But the voice in her head sounded wistful too.

"Revan?" Her uncle again, voice gentled. "Come on, we're almost to the safety zone."

It's not safe.

Someone's voice. "Lift her. There's no time."

Time. It telescoped, rushing years speeding past; images too fast to measure.

XXX

She sees. She sees him. Her head tilts up, towards the sky. He feels her muscles tense, feels her start to spring—

{{"Come!}} he roars joyfully. {{"Come to me!"}}

XXX

His skull was pressed so hard into the duraplate floor that Davad half-expected to snap his own neck. His shoulders ached with strain, and the burns across his chest ached through his charred and smoking robes.

The pain did not matter. Nothing did. Not in this new world they'd made.

XXX

{{"I thought you were dead then,}} he explains. Does she see? Does she see? {{"I would have made him pay."}}

He is in her eyes now, so she must. Her body tenses, and then her arms fly open, like a bird's wings.

She parts the Jedi who try and stop her like water, while behind, her loyal minions keep the others from following.

Her world is a whirl of Force and blades. Their attempts to cage her with the Force shatter like ferraglass on her skin.

Pounding feet down the corridor as she leaves them all behind.

{{"Yes,"}} she says back to his mind. More with deed than word. {{"I'm coming."}}

XXX

"I did not expect your return," Darth Malak hissed. Thud of his footsteps, shadows of his boots falling across Davad's fingers. They both knew the lie: Malak had anticipated this, as he had everything else.

Davad dared to lift his skull a few centimeters above the ground, to see the man who had killed her. "Are we not Sith, my lord?"

"Are we not Sith... Master?" Malak corrected. "I am Sith. The Supreme Leader of the Sith Empire."
"You are the worm groveling at my feet." Davad thought Malak would be smiling now, had he still his mouth. "Tell me. Is it death you seek at this reunion?"

"I could not destroy you from Coruscant," Davad lifted his skull slowly, pulling his lips back from his teeth as he looked at the towering, armored figure above him. He felt his muscles coil, taut springs of blood and bone and sinew, ready to be fueled by the Force. "So, I came here."

"You cannot destroy me at all," Malak murmured, his eyes glowing a hellish and infernal red. "You are only a man, Beast-Lord, and a broken one at that."

Her whisper coiled at the back of his skull. You must not. You must not challenge him. You must not. Not yet, my apprentice. Now is not the time—

"I… came back to serve you, Master." The words stuck in his craw. Was Kae here too? Sometimes she lurked in the shadows behind, and sometimes it was only her thoughts, poisoning his mind, sapping his will.

"Until the time I weaken enough for you to take my place?"

Swear to serve him, Beast-Lord. Lie. She failed and so you must serve him until we find the means to destroy him. Your petty feud with the man is of no consequence. You will serve him until I will it otherwise.

"Master." He should have been a king, never to kneel to man or beast, but Davad Arkan bowed his head.

"Ah." Malak's prosthesis gleamed in the light. A low, metallic chuckle emitted from the voder inset in his throat. "Indeed I am."

XXX

He is circling the last of his prey's wrecked shells. He is nearing the ground, it rolls out beneath them, sprawling lazily down to the sea. The mounds of hills could be breasts and thigh. The pale sand gleams, color of her skin. She is there. She is here. Somewhere—near—and his mind reaches out—

{""You're coming."}

{""You leave me no choice,"} she sends back.

XXX

Outside, the storm had lifted, revealing a pale sun ghosting across the ice. Its light shone through the round window, casting dark shadows across the table, the pot of tea, the old woman's wrinkled hand.

"More crackers, Mother?" Brianna lifted the tray to be polite.

"Oh!" Those blind eyes were wide with surprise. Her battered chin lifted, and her jaw went suddenly slack.

The bulb of tea fell from the old woman's hand, and only Brianna's own Force reflexes, minor as they were, allowed her hands to grasp the stem before the fragile crystal shattered on the stone floor.
"What is it, Mother?" It was only polite, Brianna thought, to call the old woman 'mother.' Technically it was true, of course. And the tears that had fallen from Kreia's eyes after Mical Jorde was so rude to her had seemed less a ruse than a real emotion.

Sometimes, Brianna thought it might be pleasant to live in a different place, where passions were realized. Somewhere less cold.

"Shyrack wings," the old woman said. "Far from here, I think, but even the smallest effect ripples outward."

XXX

Red eyes. Malak had... red eyes.

A whisper, a clench in Revan's guts. *Red is bad. When I was Polla Organa, I knew—every time I saw a Duros or a Chiss, I jumped like a spooked hessi.*

There was a roaring drone in her head now, near-constant. The... visions from Arkan flashed, almost too fast to see.

XXX

*He looked down at her, still half-asleep. Her hair was dyed an ugly shade of brown-black, and her eyes were half-lidded, sleepy, but still that unmistakable green. They'd been yellow as suns on that last day, but now—*

"Surprise!" He smiled in that moment, made perfect by the fact that she was still alive—

XXX

"Wake up," Revan muttered. Her feet stumbled toward the lift. Her eyes felt blind.

*That was the Endar Spire. Arkan was... there too. He's been there. All along. He was with me? Following me? Why don't I remember? I was Polla then. I should be able to remember....*

XXX

The five members of the Red Claw Gang had not been nice sentients—they had been monsters. Perhaps they had deserved their fate: carved to pieces under the sabers of three Jedi padawans on this remote Corellian moon. Perhaps—or perhaps not. As they watched Malak depart with the last of the rescued children, Davad felt nothing except relief to be finally alone.

Alone with her.

"Is that the last?" Revan wiped the sweat from her eyes, blinking hard.

"I think so." Davad scented no enemies on the air—just the frightened, half-grown children that Malak had loaded into the shuttle to take to their base, their spoor vanishing over the horizon with Malak. "Until the next shipment comes. How long did Vima say it would be?"

"Zhar said three hours. Mal should be back by then." She shrugged off her outer robe, scratching the thin fabric wrapped around her ribs. He couldn't help but watch the smooth muscle in her shoulder, her bare arms, freckled in the sun, the curve of her in profile. "This moon is too hot. How can you stand it?"
"I can't," he admitted. "At home, we'd swim, or sleep through the long days. Hunt at night."

Revan pointed at the lakeshore ten meters from the Red Claw base.

"There's water," she offered. "If you want to go in, we could."

"We could both go." He was proud at how calm he sounded. "They commed from the far side of Dagmar. It would be impossible for them to get here faster."

"Yes. We could both go..." She seemed to hesitate.

"What is it?" He felt too aware of her, even as he unbuckled the sleeves of his robe, lay his belt carefully down. Underneath the heavy outer robe, he was only wearing skivs—it had been too hot for anything else.

"We don't have a biological assay on it. There could be parasites, bacteria—"

"Sea dragons." He snorted. "Lake dragons. There's not. The animals here drink from it. See the tracks?"

"I can suspend myself in the water, of course." She wasn't looking at the tracks some type of grass-grazer had made in the sand. She was staring at the ground, back stiff. "I can suspend myself above it for short distances, propel myself through it, but I'm not very good at... swimming. The forms of it."

"Strokes," he smiled slightly. "We're just cooling off. It's not a race."

One red eyebrow raised up at him. "Don't let Master Zez hear you say that. Didn't he tell you? Only one of us will go for Knight's trials this year."

"Swimming isn't our trial." Davad already knew it would be him. Vima had told him. He had to wonder that she hadn't told Revan.

He pulled off his shirt, watching her. "We could race to the water, if you want."

Her robe dropped to the ground. It seemed like every week she grew more beautiful, but he forced his gaze up to her eyes, which were appraising him steadily.

Or... not so steadily. There was a faint flush on her face that couldn't just be the sun. "The bells on your—"

"Ceremonial," he said. He'd taken the ones down from his hair, but the ones on his chest were small. Sometimes he forgot they were there.

"Do the women do that too?"

It wasn't the question Davad had expected. "Sometimes."

Her face was still flushed as she stared steadily at him, before abruptly pulling off her own shirt, standing there in just her skivs. A black band of skinsilk ran across her breasts, but it exposed more than it concealed. They were larger than they looked under her robes. The freckles ended abruptly at her torso, leaving the skin there a pale cream, like the underside of a drexl's wing.

He tried to think about swoop races, the histories of Jeddah, of Ossus, of the Jedi Code—and failed.
The pit had been full of ships, at least a dozen. Now there were only two, and even as Mekel watched, the smaller one lifted off with a roar of jets, temporarily blinding them all in a haze of steam and smoke.

"Mekel?" The sent calling his name was Human. Cute, if you liked muscular and blonde. Wearing knight's robes, but in that moment, Mekel had no idea who he was. "The ship to Hoth is leaving, Mekel."

Revan Fracking Starfire had walked off the lift, walked right by them, surrounded by Jedi masters as if Mekel Jin, her long-lost cousin didn't even exist. And Dak? Dak Vesser from Korriban had done the same fraking thing right after. Guy had almost washed out his last year, before Mekel shared those stolen exam notes with him because Lashowe DeVry thought he was cute. That wasn't even worth a hello, now. And Dear Old Dads?

Now that he had his reformed Dark Lord back, apparently a reformed Sith son wasn't worth a plugged credit. None of them had ever looked at Mekel Jin. Like now that he didn't have the Force, they couldn't even see him.

"Mekel. Master Loanin told me to make sure you were away safely."

Sure, he did. And then he wrote me off. "I don't have the Force," he told the blonde guy. "What's Mister Force Suck gonna do to me?"

"The… ground area of this mine may become unstable. We all need to go."

Some padawans were ushering in a group of Republic troops up the landing ramp of the last ship. No one Mekel recognized there either, but he waved at them, just to give his hands something to do, show blondie here that he didn't give a frack.

"Frack Hoth," he said. "I need to go to Kaas." *And probably get myself killed trying to save your ass, Telos.*

"*You need to go to Hoth,*" the blonde said. He was using the Force to say it, Mekel could tell by the way his forehead wrinkled, the way he looked like he needed to take a shit, but he sucked at it, because Mekel felt absolutely-fracking-nothing-at-all.

"I need to get out of this fraking sarlacc trap." *Like slugs in a salt trap, and it is really a salt mine. That makes us slugs, all right.*

*But there's the lift. Up and away.*

An alarm chimed, and the blonde glanced back. A pink Twi'lek was standing on the landing ramp of the last ship, the one actually going to fraking Hoth. And here, Mekel had thought Loanin was just cracking a joke.

"Devn?" the Pink called out.

"Jin is refusing to come," the blonde called back. Coru accent. Upper levels. Mekel hated him on principle.

"Leave him."

Mekel recognized that look on her face. He recognized her too, because she had a fantastic body
and she used to train in the cube opposite him and Telos.

"Hi, Aishe! Thought you were dead from the plague."

"We were in hiding," she called back, eye ridges wrinkling with that expression he remembered all too well. She'd always treated Mekel as if he was dim. There'd been a time when he'd used it as an advantage to get a look at her notes on Galactic History. "You need to come with us now, Mekel. It isn't safe here."

"You go without me." He forced a smile back. "I'll be fine. I like danger."

The Pink threw up her hands. "Leave him," she told Devn the blonde. Her skin looked pale and her lekku were wrapped around her head. Mekel had never seen so many Jedi so spooked before. (Blonde guy didn't look much better.)

The sound of guns came from overhead. When Mekel glanced up, he saw three fighters cross the sky above the pit, blue and red pulses flashing. "Are we under attack?" Maybe getting back on the lift wasn't such a good idea.

"Those aren't ours." Devn frowned too. On the ramp, Aishe tilted her head up. They all saw the next pass: a Jedi snub, and six fighters, chasing what looked like an unarmed shuttle. The whine of guns squealed overhead, but seemed to glance off the shuttle's surface.

"Those are Mandalorian fighters." It had taken him a second, had been so long since they'd studied the different ships in Dreshdae.

"We need to go," Aishe repeated, calling out from across the pit. "Devn, there's no more time."

Go to fracking Hoth or get blown up down here? One frack of a choice. Normally, he'd have gone with the Pink, but that one-time Mekel had seen snow he hadn't liked it much.

The sound of running footsteps interrupted before Mekel decided. A black-clad figure ran out of the tunnel at what seemed like Force speed. Like old times on Dreshdae, his foot extended. And like old times on Dreshdae, the old game still worked. The black-clad figure went sprawling ass over tit. And they weren't bad at all—the ass and the tits—

It wasn't until the ass and tits scrambled to their feet that Mekel realized who he'd been ogling.

"Shit," he muttered. "Um, hi, Dar-um, hi, Revan."

"Mekel Jin." Revan Starfire sounded astonished, like she hadn't ignored him before. "What are you doing here?" Her hair was brown for some reason—dark, almost black. Is she trying to look like me? His thought was random. She was wearing some kind of tattered flightsuit with fracking Imperial sigils on it. Did she change sides again? She looked like she'd never seen a fresher in her life—not at all like the polished chit he remembered from the Mandalorian camps. She looked like hell. He was disturbed to realize he still thought she was kind of hot. Cousin, he reminded himself. She is not hot. She is your older, scarier cousin. Telos would have busted a gut if he'd been here to see.

"Um, leaving." He took a step towards the ship—only to watch the landing ramp retract, Aishe and Devn had already vanished inside.

The alarm rang again, signaling the last ship's departure.
There goes my ride out of hell. "I was going to come!" he shouted after it—but it was too late.

Fingers closed around his arm as Revan pulled him out of the lift zone. Even so, he felt the heat on his face as they watched the jets rise, the cruiser bank and jet out of sight.

"Are there more ships somewhere else?" she demanded. "You can't stay here, Mekel. It's not safe."

"No kriffing shit!"

She blinked at him, eyes staring past, as if he was already not important.

Mekel swallowed. He wanted to be important. "There are supply ships, a few cruisers, parked along the shore. The Jedi hid these ships. I didn't know any of this was here. We've been here for weeks and I didn't know."

"Are you hiding in the Force?" Her head tilted. "I can't feel you at all. I didn't know you were here until I almost ran you over."

You didn't run over me, I tripped you. Not that he was gonna admit it. Ever. "I don't fricking have it anymore." Just a few fracked memories, courtesy of Malak D'Reev.

A disturbing one chose that moment to intervene: something about her and Malak mooning over each other like teen idiots. He didn't have time for Malak's insane banthashit, so Mekel blinked hard and willed that one to vanish. "Oerin Lin took the Force away from me when he fricking sent Darth Malak back to hell—"

Her head was turned up, cocked, as if she had stopped listening to him. The ship to Hoth vanished as they watched, blipping into hyperspace, a dot of white in the distant circle of the sky.

Revan let out a breath. "I—" she started toward the lift and then glanced back at him. "I—don't know what to do with you."

"I'm not your fricking problem." He sprinted after her, jumping on the lift as it started to ascend. Far as he could tell she hadn't even touched the controls. Her eyes were slightly unfocused, as if she was only half there.

"When we get to the top, find Canderous," she mumbled. "And the kids. Stay with them. Warn them. Tell to get clear of this site. At least a few kilometers, but off planet is better. The Jedi will blow this planet's core if they have to."

"Blow up the planet?" He stared down at the vanishing ground beneath. More explosions from the sky. "The entire fricking planet?" Way to go, Jedi. Out-Sithing the Sith.

"No. But this land mass will not be stable," she muttered, practically like a droid. "Earthquakes. Maybe tsunami—I-I don't—" her voice trailed off again, and her head tilted back up. "I'm coming," she mumbled to the thin air. "Hold your fricking hessi, Arkan."

Eerily, for a second, she reminded him of Mission.

A whine from overhead interrupted. Scream of engines nearly on overload.

Directly over their heads, a shuttle was falling out of the sky, wisps of dark smoke half-covering its surface. Falling straight down—down straight towards them. The smoke spread out from its sides like wings.
"Frack." There were probably better last words, but Mekel didn't have time to think of them. "Y-you know we're cousins? Did… did you always know?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I-I didn't know. Before. But she—" She lifted her hands. Maybe if Mekel could have felt the Force he would have seen something, but it looked like she was just lifting her hands, palms half-cupped above her head.

"Um, who? My ma?" She was pushing an entire shuttle away from them. He'd seen her work with the Jedi to land an entire hammerhead, so Mekel wasn't sure why he was impressed. Telos and I could have done that.

The shuttle veered away, still caught in the sky—away and out of their view.

"He's landing," she whispered. "He's here."

"Great," said Mekel Jin. And frack him. Frack him—whatever the frack he is.

XXX

"Your meat keeps escaping," Sion points out, as their ship lands on the surface of Katarr, next to the smoking snubfighter that still houses the shell of his cousin. Inside that one, Nihilus feels the meat twitch and turn.

{"I will eat the skyflyers later."} Nihilus can ignore the ache in his gut for her. For a time. She hears him. She truly hears him. {"Come,"} he tells her again. {"Hurry. Run to me—"}

{"yes."} Her thought back is small and subdued. But not frightened.

Not frightened because she is not prey.

"He's… not saying food anymore." Jasp Organa sounds tired and confused. "I'm not sure what he's saying."

XXX

"Our race?" She was smiling slightly, turning back to the water. That gesture afforded him the sight of her muscled back, the way her hips flared out and the fabric of her skivs shone, accentuating the high curve of her flank, the long muscles in her thighs.

"Go." Davad began at once to save himself more embarrassment, letting her outpace him, the Force flaring like a corona of light around her body as she raced into the water—or, Davad realized, above it, crossing several meters on what seemed like air alone, before splashing in, slipping beneath the soft waves.

By then he was on her heels: laughing, reaching for her, but she darted back, bobbing gently. The water was salty and brackish, a dark, clear brown color, that made her skin shimmer underneath. Her hair had been pulled back, but now it tumbled, loose like flames around her shoulders.

"You ran on water," he pointed out, trying to sound calm, trying to not notice how close she was standing.

"Only a few meters. You swam like a fish."

"It's not that different from flying."

She smiled at him. "I wanted to ride a drexl very badly when we came to get you, but there was no
You frightened them. But he couldn’t tell her that. "I miss it. Sometimes."

"You enjoyed being part of a large family? You had a lot of siblings, they kept staring at us."

Cousins, mostly. But they weren’t important. "Revan, I-I need your advice."

"My advice?" She chuckled softly. "Unless it's about languages or Force shields, I don't know what you think I know that you don't—"

"It's about... a girl." Perhaps being a prince had made it easy to impress the Beast-rider girls at home, but right now his heart thudded too close to his skin.

"Oh." She splashed backwards, her face flushing red all the way to the top of her nose. "I'm sorry, I really don't know. Jedi... we don't—"

"Attachments. I know." Hadn't Vima given her the same lecture about needs that he had received?

"Attachments. Y-yes." She flipped onto her back, paddling away from him. Her voice sounded muffled in the water. "You should ask Beya about this sort of thing. Or Suria. Do you know Suria? From the Alderaan Enclave? They... I think there are... places. Where people go."

"I don't mean... sex."

"Oh!" Her feet vanished with a splash and her head bobbed up next to his. One of her legs brushed against his hip—by accident, judging by how quickly she edged back. She rose in the water, its essence curling around her body, like a cloak, letting it raise her above him. He would have thought she was showing off, but her attention was entirely distracted, her gaze fixed to the shore. "Those bodies," she said. "We should... bury them. Or—burn. We shouldn't just leave them, it's not...."

"The beasts of this world will eat them," he told her. His first sentient kill. On Dxun, it would have been by duel, if anyone still followed the old ways. Here, it had been for justice. "I never killed anyone before," he added, suddenly feeling foolish, like his nakedness had shown her a soft underbelly, vulnerable to strike.

She glanced down at him, half-suspended in a column of dark water. "You still haven't. Those slavers were nothing."

XXX

Revan's racing footsteps echoed and vanished, fading to a grim silence, as Vrook tightened his grasp on the Togrutan knight's neck, keeping the blade of his ignited saber between her hands and her own weapon.

His arms trembled as the Force bore down, desperation ebbing under the weight of a dozen Jedi's collective strength. Without the wall at his back, Vrook thought he would have collapsed already, but as he felt his niece's presence leave the mine, he let his saber arm drop, the blade extinguish.

Knight Pakeek gave a startled yelp as she slipped out of his suddenly shaking arms, and back to the relative safety of the others.

Across the corridor, Dak Vesser's hostage—the Durian knight that had been trained by Croi before his death—did the same, rolling back with an indignant hiss as Dak extinguished his own blade.
"She's clear," Dak said. "Revan's out of the mine—I think." The two others who had joined their side, Da'Wit and Master Skokkar went one further, not only extinguishing their blades, but dropping them on the ground in a gesture of surrender.

"You're all insane," Master Hirut said, keeping her own hands outstretched and a shimmering web of Force between them and the rest of the Jedi. "Do you realize what you have done?"

"Do you?" He felt like a man waking from a long sleep. Whatever happens, we will not be saved by sabers. Not today.

Vrook let his own saber fall to the ground.

Dak scoffed, and shoved his own weapon back on his belt.

Master Lonna Vash bent to the ground, collecting the sabers by hand, as if she no longer trusted the Force. "This is what Revan has wrought." The Jedi Master straightened stiffly as if she had suddenly grown old. "Discord at the heart of the Order. Jedi against Jedi?"

"We made her." Vrook felt a curious acceptance. Above them, the void was screaming. If Kavar Vakla or the others still lived he couldn't sense them—but he did feel his niece, the Force in her flaring like a star. "Revan is ours, Lonna. A Jedi Knight. Following her conscience."

XXX

The lift's engines were pathetically slow, but Revan used the Force to speed their ascent, drowning out the words of the boy next to her in a rush of wind and sparking cable. The lift cleared the pit with a tired whine of its gears, revealing a plain of sand covered with blaster score, the shells of a few wrecked ships, one intact snubfighter, and a shuttlecraft that appeared to be smoldering about twenty meters away.

Mekel Jin made a retching noise in his throat. He looked pale. "You… took us up pretty fast," he mumbled.

"Yes." She stared at the shuttle.

"RUN."

This close, Davad Arkan's voice in her mind was a scream, not a whisper. "TO ME, REVAN. TO ME."

Far off across the beach, the door on one of the wrecked warflies slid open, and a figure in beskar staggered out.

"Leskal!" a boy's voice yelled out. A boy's voice near her. "Over here!"

"S'cuy, Kex!" The boy's voder crackled across the sand, echoing strangely with the pit.

Revan glanced to the side. Three Mandalorians were parked by the pit's edge, all wearing beskar, and surrounded by weapons.

"S'cuy, Revan." Canderous looked up from behind a fully-assembled rocket launcher, blank visor of his face turning towards her as he nodded.

As if none of this was a surprise. Or, only a minor one. Where the frack did he get all those rockets?

It didn't matter. They might provide decent distraction.
"Mekel Jin!" Millifar unshouldered her own cannon, and picked up the sniper's rifle on the ground next to the edge of the pit. She burst into an excited chatter of Mandalorian, followed by the boy's stumbled replies, but Revan was barely listening.

_How did Canderous get a rocket launcher? Don't tell me he smuggled all this in his fracking armor!_ But even as she wondered, her curiosity seemed to… ebb. As she watched, the missile Canderous had launched froze in mid-air, maybe a few meters from its target, the shuttle parked about twenty meters away across the sands. The blackness she'd taken for flames in the sky shimmered like oil on the gray surface of the ship, parting to reveal the gangway slowly coming down.

"YOU CAME," Davad said. His voice was a scream in her mind.

"You left me no choice," she muttered, stepping forward as her vision blurred again—

XXX

"Get up, Arkan. We're alone. You don't need to impress me like some groveling worm."

_His Sith-maddened eyes looked up at her. "I came back, Master. I came back for you."_

"I would have warned you—" I would have warned you but you would have betrayed me.

"If you had, I would have deserted." He laughed. "All that life on Onderon, I can't go back there. I want to serve you. It's what I always… always wanted."

"Why?"

"Because." He stood, approaching her. Shorter than Malak. His dark hair was knotted, twisted into hundreds of small braids ringed with bells. That meant something for Beast-riders, but right now, Revan couldn't remember what. Her hand reached out and closed on his arm, fingers digging deep into the muscle there. He didn't flinch, didn't move when she stepped closer, wrapping her other arm around his back, pressing their bodies together. One of them sighed, and the Force flared between them, igniting like a spark—

"Because," he whispered, softer still, and Revan silenced any further declarations with her mouth, hard on his.

_His reasons did not matter._

_It was a relief to be in a place beyond regret._

_The path ahead was simple. Harness the Star Forge. Rebuild the Republic and shatter the Senate’s games forever. Destroy the Sith Emperor possessing her husband. What had happened on that pyramid on Lehon was a minor setback—Revan would not show fear to Tenebrae again. Or weakness._

_Tenebrae's hold over Malak was a weakness Revan could not bear, but a cure for him would not be found with the Jedi—it would be found by deciphering the secrets of the Sith that had created Tenebrae in the first place._

_And those secrets could not be found by Jedi._

_Warm lips pressed gently against hers, almost hesitantly. So different. It had been months since she'd kissed Malak. His wound was festering again, like it couldn't heal. It gave him so much pain_
that even these small pleasures were lost—

Revan's mouth opened under the pressure of those soft lips. Davad's mouth tasted of mint and something sweet—

XXX

Sweet. For a millisecond, it seemed like he was there, wrapped around her, like the rest of the galaxy was gone.

One of the Jedi snubfighters lay to the side. Most of them were wrecks, but this one looked intact. She noted it, and then walked past.

The shuttle's ramp was down now, and the darkness around its hull began to coalesce, into the figure of a man.

"Run," his voice whispered in her mind, gentle again, like a kiss. "Run to me—"

XXX

Here is she. Here are they. His eyes split between the broken body in the snubfighter and what is left; Nihilus, starving next to Sion, who does not know how to eat.

{"Open the door!"} he orders Sion and the pilot.

"How are we still alive after that landing?" Sion snaps at the pilot, ignoring Nihilus completely.

"I didn't do it. Was all him." The Deralian is pale and shakes. But Jasp Organa's gaze is fixed on the shuttle's viewscreen. She is there.

"Polla," Jasp Organa whispers, like a man waking from a dream.

{"Revan,"} Nihilus calls. {"Run. Run to me."}

Her head turns toward his shuttle. The landing ramp is down. Her face is perfectly blank. She's heard—she hears him.

{"Don't hurt them,"} she warns. {"If I come, you must leave this place. Leave everyone on this planet alone."}

{"It doesn't hurt,"} he assures her.

She's dyed her hair brown, the color of mud. Her topknot droops like a defiant flag, half-vanquished. She's dressed more like a dockworker than a queen.

"Polla," Jasp Organa whispers again. His voice is a husk, dried and almost done. "She looks like my Pollie."

XXX

The halls of stone were cold. Davad had only been to the Dreshdae Academy once before. Looking for promising acolytes and settling for Bandon. But it was the truth of the Sith—the real truth—that the most promising students tended to have unfortunate accidents.

Like Bandon had, vanishing in the sands of some desert world. Sometimes, raw power was not enough.
Davad Arkan wondered if the women who called herself Deralian had learned that particular lesson of their master's yet.

"Polla Organa?"

Her head didn't turn at the sound of his voice, but those shoulders stiffened under the heavy black robes she was wearing, and when she did speak, her voice was so mocking and strange she hardly sounded Deralian—or even like Revan—at all.

"My name isn't Polla. It's Revan. Dark Lord of the Sith Revan? Take one step closer and I'll pull out your entrails through whatever ear-holes your species uses to hear. If you don't use ears, I'll pull them through your fracking assh—"

"Polla!" That blue Twi'lek child of hers—the same one that had so foiled his plans on Taris—broke the menacing effect by bursting into laughter. "Please. This loser? He's too chicken to even show his face!"

It was then Davad noted that the child had a small hold-out pistol leveled at him too.

"How-long?" How long had he imagined this moment? Being the one to tell her? How hard had he worked to slip his master's leash? All for you, Revan. "How did you... who told you?"

She turned towards him, her face twisted with a cold fury he didn't recognize. "Is that a serious question?" Dark energy surged forward like a thunderbolt, and only his animal instincts gave him enough warning to dodge her first attack.

Her lightning burned a trace across the stone floor, then guttered and died.

When he looked back to her hands, they were cupped, more energy sparking along her fingers, crackling, illuminating the entire room like a tiny sun—

"I think you should run, masked guy," jeered the Twi'lek. "Next time she won't miss—"

Xxx

"RUN."

"That was you?" She stops in front of the ship still meters away. He can see that every instinct urges her to run away. But still, she stops. For him. Perhaps not love, but a good imitation. "On Korriban—that was... you?"

{{"I came for you,"}} Nihilus tells her.

Her face frowns then. He doesn't like that she looks frightened.

"That was you," she repeats. Softer, softest. "And... before that. Y-you were on other planets. You... you helped me. When I was Polla. You helped. On Taris... I think you saved my life."

{{"Malak was supposed to die, but we were betrayed. With Malak dead, I would have ruled by your side. We were always destined. Still. Take comfort, my love. After you, I will eat the Sith Emperor."}}

He is starving, but she should know. She should know why the sacrifice. Why this matters. She has to know.

"No." Her fingers flex, but she does not go for her blade. The Force flares around her like a bright
cloak. Behind her, some nulls are retreating—he had barely noticed them before. To them, this must seem an instant. A heartbeat.

Their hearts are so fragile, not at all like hers.

She will struggle. He would rather it be painless, for the love he had shared with her ghost, but now….

Xxx

"You may go, Davad." The holocron copy of Revan Starfire stood straight-backed in Sheris's padawan robes.

It had not been very long since Davad's last meal, not long since he had begun eating the Jedi in the temple—and at that time, he grew full quickly. He knew rationally that he did not to eat again soon—but now, looking at her, he was suddenly starving.

Her face was flushed from their sparring and tendrils of red hair curled becomingly around her ears, escaped from her braids. "I will reset the droids for our next match. Perhaps make it harder next time." Her green eyes glinted in a way he might have called flirting, had she truly been Sheris.

But Revan had never played the tease with him, never trifled.

Is she Revan? Truly?

Her light flickered so faintly in the Force that his very breath might extinguish it—and he drew back, retreating to the door. There, something held him—the vulnerable curve of her white neck, perhaps. Or the delicate tracery of veins on her pale, freckled arm.

"I said, you may go." Diminished as she was like this, she seemed younger, like the padawan he had known, long ago.

His words felt clumsy in his mouth. "There's... another holovid you haven't seen. A new documentary. 'Revan Starfire, Conquest or Command' " It was little enough to offer her. "If you want, we could watch it now. Share a meal. I think you will find this one quite amusing, it concerns observations on your tactical methods by General Jiya Sand. You remember Jiya, of course—"

"I've seen enough." Revan sounded tired suddenly. Her shoulders slumped. In the Force, she felt like Sheris, and he had spent too long despising Malak's toy to desire her. It wasn't desire he felt. It was something deeper than that, older. Something just between them, in that place where the rest of the galaxy didn't exist.

Then, those green eyes looked up at him and for a moment he remembered the last day of her old existence; the morning it began when she stirred from the bed, half-wrapped in his arms. Her eyes had been yellow then, and her expression hard as stone on that day she planned to execute her husband.

If only she had.

"I've seen enough autopsies of our past," she added, voice breaking his reverie. "I already know we failed."

We failed. We. Small enough of a victory, but a part of him cherished the inclusion.

Xxx
Next to Jasp, the dead Lord Sion was cursing in his foreign tongue. Mandalorian, Jasp figured, although he wasn't sure why it mattered. He had learned some Mandalorian once, working with a few of them for the Exchange before he settled down with Molla, but that no longer mattered either.

"Eat Revan quickly," Sion snapped to Nihilus, interrupting himself. "She's standing right there. Eat her quickly, leave the rest for time, and let's leave this wretched planet. Perhaps the Ravager is even salvageable."

The Ravager was breaking up in atmosphere above them, according to Jasp's sensors, but he declined to offer that.

Nihilus just stood in front of the open airlock, a black hill of coruscating darkness and shadow. His thoughts were a dull roar in Jasp's head now. Jasp tasted copper on his lips and wiped his mouth, only to realize his nose was bleeding.

"What is he saying?" demanded Sion.

"I-I'm not sure. He's not saying it to me." It was a lie. Images flashed through Jasp's head too quickly to make sense. And all of them were her.

"Fond as I am of traps, and springing traps, this screams too loudly of one we won't win. Tell him—"

Nihilus's form shimmered, and his head turned, for a moment, looking almost like a man again. Just a man, hooded and cloaked, wearing a mask.

"Ah, can you hear me now, Arkan?" Sion wheezed. "Stay, Nihilus. Good boy. Run out and eat Revan if you must, but then, let's be on our way."

The masked head shook back and forth.

"He says no," Jasp whispered.

Xxx

Revan's vision blurred with the roar in her head, blurring her senses. Images. Feeling. Dar'Revan, she seemed—lost. But her thoughts were alien whispers, infecting her mind, mixed with her own jagged memories—

Davad. Davad was on Korriban. Following me. On Manaan. Where else? How long?

Behind her, the Jedi snubfighter cracked open. She turned her head and a man emerged, bareheaded and robed. Blood stained his robes and he was limping.

"Revan," Master Kavar Vakla frowned. He had bells in his hair, woven in on red strands of cord. He was too far away for her to hear them so clearly, but they rang in her head like memory. "You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you." The roar from the shuttle swamped her senses, sending the present careening off again into a flash of memory, sensation….

XXX

Bells in his hair she knew they meant something but she didn't know what. It didn't matter. Davad's
mouth tasted like mint—

XXX

Kavar shook his head. He moved jerkily, like his injuries were worse than they seemed. "Darth Nihilus grows stronger with every Force-user he consumes. If he consumes you, he may be strong enough to pull the rest of this planet into his maw. All of that strength—power—contained in one being—"

"Run," Davad Arkan whispered in her mind. '"Run to me.'"

"Oh, yeah? Then what's your plan?" It felt like she was screaming across a chasm, like everything was filtered. Her hand went to the useless saber on her belt again, and then eyed Kavar's and the distance between them.

The Onderonite Jedi slipped a little on his feet, as if the crash of his ship had made him unsteady. "He's calling me as well, but I will bring him to the Jedi. In the caves. They have laid a trap for him there, and if that fails—"

"If that fails, you'll all die." Revan could feel it in her bones. "Everyone will die on the entire planet. He wants the planet, he's driven—he needs the planet."

"Yes. You hear him too." His smile was crooked. A trail of blood traced the side of his skull. "You see… the flaw in the Jedi’s plan. Do you know why you hear him?"

Yes. No. It doesn't fracking matter why. "He's calling me. Like a scream." A part of her felt numb, almost sleepy. "In my head."

"Come. Come to me—"

"He must be stopped, Revan." Kavar looked almost apologetic. "Come. Come with me now." He limped toward her, his hand extended. “Together, we need to end this…."

The world seemed stilled and when she glanced back, it looked like Canderous and the kids were encased in stasis. Time telescoped, and Revan was no longer sure if she was standing there at all. If Kavar was there at all. If any of this was real at all.

Just the voice. '"Run. Polla Organa, you need to run—"

"Taris." It was disconnected, the thought. "He was on Taris too. He was following me…." But not to kill. He was following me not to kill me.

"You know how he…." Kavar's voice cracked, staring at the dark figure standing in the doorway of the shuttle. "I suppose you don't remember how he felt about you."

"I remember… pieces." More of them from his mind than her own, like afterimages overlaying the flat plane of sand and sea in front of them. "Davad was… loyal."

"Loyal," Kavar scoffed. The word seemed to echo in the air around them. "Loyal to who?"

XXX

Things were… slipping. No other way to describe it. Like a leg Jasp Organa had slept on for too long: suddenly sensation rushed back, a catch in the back of his throat, tears in his eyes, an ache in his gut that made him wonder, for the first time in weeks, when he'd had his last meal.
The viewscreen in front of Jasp blurred until he rubbed his eyes, then sprang into focus. A beach, nearly deserted—with what looked like a great chasm in the earth. Some crashed ships—fighters. Armored figures moving through the sand, setting up large guns.

"Master?" he whispered.

"In the airlock. With lunch." Sion answered him, his voice a harsh rasp. "It won't be long now." He yawned. "Perhaps you should catch some sleep while you can. The next jump may be difficult. Those Manda in orbit won't let us leave easily, and I think the ship's cloak is quite damaged." He sighed. "We should be able to make it through one hyperspace jump on this ship, but I fear we will need a new one after that."

"I thought I heard her." For a moment, it had sounded like his daughter's voice over the ship's speakers. Polla.

XXX

"Loyal," Kavar scoffed. "You think Davad was loyal to you?"

Revan blinked. The sea was gone. The pit, the Mandalorians. They were in a small room, walls curved, doors sealed. Airlock, she registered automatically. "Is this real?"

For a second, the lines seemed to vanish from his face and the Jedi Master looked like a kid, the paleness of his face darkening, his skin washing a warm brown. "I-I'm not sure." He smiled slightly, almost shyly at her. A bell rang, tangled in his dark hair braids. "I wish it was." His eyes were dark, nearly black in this light. Warm and kind. "We are both here. You and I."

"I'm sorry, I-I don't..." her thoughts felt caught in her throat. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

The brown face froze, its smile faded. Dimples in his cheeks winked out like lights. "Ah," he murmured. "Of course you don't."

The brown faded, planes of his face shifting like clay and she realized he hadn't been Kavar at all a moment ago. "You think Davad was loyal to you?"

Not Kavar's voice. Another trap. You fool—

The air seemed to crystallize, the temperature dropping like on the plains with a blizzard rising.

XXX

"Come in from the cold, Revvie. You'll catch your death!" The red-headed woman stood in the arched doorway, half-hooded in furs and the bulk of her enviro-suit.

"I'm not cold, Momma—" She looked down at her bare arms, tracery of blue dancing like magic lights—

XXX

"You think Davad was loyal to you?" the man repeated.

Revan's eyes couldn't help staring at that blood trail across the side of his close-cropped skull. Kavar Vakla's eyes were a faded blue. One of his lids drooped, half closed.

That vision. That was... different. New. That was—
Hoth. The voice whispered, a trace in her mind. *You must be like Hoth, Fragment. Or he will be the end of you.*

XXX

"Pollie! Just because the pond's frozen, doesn't mean it'll hold your weight. And it's sure not gonna hold Dancer. You need to get out of there. Get out of there now!"

*Her small feet slipped on the ice. There was a cracking noise. A creaking. Too late, she started to panic.*

"Da—"

"Grass Priests. Frack! Okay... okay, don't move. Not yet. Stay... stay still a sec, Pollie." Her father's face smiled at her from the shore. "See me? I'm at the closest point to you, but the ice is real thin here. So, I need you to run, kiddo. Fast as you can. Get as close as you can. I'll get you. If you fall in, don't panic and don't breathe the water! I'll get you out, I promise."

"But Dancer?"

"He's got fur, kiddo. He can swim."

"I can't—"

"I know." Da's voice was steady. "We'll fix that next. But right now. I need you to run—"

XXX

"You think Davad was loyal to you." His smile was sad. Now that Kavar had turned his head, Revan could see the break in his skull, the darkness there, blood staining the bells. His eyes were fixed and staring, and he stood crookedly, one shoulder slanted to the side.

"You just said that." *This can't be real. Frack this.* She focused on the door, willing it to break apart, willing herself to wake. A vision. Something from the past.

*Something not real. Like all the rest. Tell me I'm not standing in an airlock with Master Kavar Vakla, who appears to have his skull half-crushed, but he's still standing—*

"Revan."

Kavar's voice.

*Not Kavar's voice. Fool. You took his hand and let him herd you into his trap.*

Kavar's body stood next to hers, close enough she could see the blood on his robes. The place where his ribs had broken, the way one leg bent, hopelessly shattered, but suspended in the Force. Had they been that way before? Had any of this been like this before?

"No." Revan took a step backwards. The duracrete door was hard on her back. The ship rocked side to side, and there was the sound of an explosion, mostly muffled in the triple-hulled chamber. Her hand went to her saber—

*Her fracking non-working saber.* Her hand reached out, and Kavar's single-bladed hilt snapped into it.

Those pale lips smiled slightly, even as what looked like dark smoke eddied over his face, covering
it with a miasmic haze that set her teeth on edge. The lips moved.

"Do you understand, Revan? I-I want you to understand. She made us both."

"Davad?" Her pulse felt dull in her ears. "What have you done to Master Kavar?"

"Blood calls to blood." The body almost… shivered, those dark tendrils threading over it. *Like worms,* she thought. *Like he's carrion. Like he's already dead.* "I'm eating him, Revan. All that he was. But it doesn't hurt. He was nearly dead before. Only a few breaths left—but enough. Blood calls to blood. And now, he's mine."

The white teeth were black now. Was it her imagination or were they pointed too?

"Let me fracking guess. I'm next?" *Or is this happening to me already?* In panic, she looked down, but familiar skin was all she saw. Two hands, *her* hands, one gripping a saber's hilt.

"A blade cannot hurt us, Revan."

"Us?" *Keep him talking. Like he's a bad trade gone wrong. Someone's firing on this ship. Keep him talking and maybe he's not eating you. Maybe the someone firing on this ship will blow it all up—*

*Canderous. The kids. They're still outside. They're firing on this ship.*

"My own body is… faded. You could not hold what remains. And now, this mount. Enough of Vakla remains to serve me for now. His muscle and bone," He held out the Jedi's hand. "Take hold again, Revan. Now you see."

*Kavar was dead? He was almost dead? Davad brought him back?* She remembered Oerin Lin with a sharp chill.

"What did you do… what did you do—what are you doing to Kavar?"

That death's head smile. "I showed him Malachor. Do you remember?"

"No." Anger stirred for the guilt she couldn't remember. "You know I don't remember! You're fracking showing me… pictures of Malak at some cafe, you and I swimming! Do you think any of that matters? You think it fracking matters now?"

For a second, his skin darkened again. She heard bells, soft, ringing in his hair. "It's all there is left."

"It's not real." Revan felt her voice harden stubbornly. "Maybe it never was. Y-you said she made us both. Arren Kae made us both. Maybe that was all *her* too."

He nodded. **NOW YOU SEE.** Kavar Vakla's hand reached out and closed, warm, on her own. "Does that matter?"

The airlock vanished, expanding until its walls seems to envelop the world.

Or the bridge of a ship, looking out at a cluster of warships, banking like purrgil above the loose atmosphere of a sleepy, brown world—

XXX

*A sky of black, speckled with stars. Ships in orbit around a small, brown world—moonless, the fifth from the sun. Even at this distance, the sight of the Mandalorian warbirds, the larger, armored*
gunships, and their snub-shaped command destroyers caused something to curdle in Davad's gut.

Jedi should not hate, but his emotion was close to that, especially after that last battle, the one where she'd almost died, the one where the Fett Mandalore had shoved a vibroblade into Revan's gut. The one where Davad had done nothing but stand with the rest of her knights. Sworn to non-interference as if they all had not broken those chains long ago.

Helping Revan destroy the Fett Lin's accursed clan in the aftermath had been just. But a part of him... a part of Davad wanted more. A part of Knight Arkan wanted this hunt to never end.

But all things end. Even back then, he knew this to be true.

"It's a good view, isn't it?" The half-grown boy next to Kae had been presented with no explanation other than his first name, which was Oerin. He wasn't dressed like a padawan, but his presence in the Force was unmistakable. Davad was too old to be jealous that his master had found yet another pupil—a point he reminded himself of as he smiled back. "It is, yes. Much better than from my own ship. Thank you for inviting me."

"Thank Mother." The boy used the title so carelessly that Davad suspected it was true.

"I did not invite you for the view." Her voice was sharp behind them. "Tell me what you see."

"Two fleets ready to make peace at last." Davad was not regretful. Peace was a goal they had fought too hard to lose.

"Simple." She scoffed. "Like a beast indeed. Oerin?"

"Why are our ships here and not there with the Fleet?"

"Because Admiral Starfire ordered them here." Davad would ignore Kae's jab. She was only doing it to rattle him.

"Why are the largest Republic ships clustered like that?" The yellow-haired boy pointed to the largest flock of ships gathered in a near-circular knot above the planet's equator. "Republic ships don't use that kind of formation. It's a di'naa."

Di'naa. A Mandalorian word, meaning vortex. A formation Davad had seen more times than he could count over the last few years, but he had not seen it here, not expected to see it here. The boy had seen it—

The boy who knows Mandalorian Fleet patterns.

"Out of respect for Mandalorian custom." He tried to make the lie sound assured. "Admirals Revan and Malak set the coordinates for each ship themselves."

"Admirals." The boy scoffed. "Do I have to call them that, Mother?"

"If I am right, they will soon go by much different names," Kae said. "Butchers. Murderers. Betrayers—"

"What?" Davad tried to laugh.

"Your snubfighter is unsecured in the hangar?" Kae turned and began walking toward the stairs and the bridge below, without waiting for an answer.

"Yes, but I-I still don't understand."
"It's a trap," the yellow-haired boy said. He had a thin nose and clear blue eyes. "Obviously."

Davad had been trying to understand Master Kae, but her claims were impossible. Still, he fell into step behind her, next to the boy. "You think that Revan laid a trap at the armistice? For the Mandalorians?"

How can she trap the Mandalorian ships when our own are all mixed between? Barely armed?

His master glanced back at him, her gaze almost disdainful. "I should have left you longer with the royals, perhaps then you would have learned treachery."

"We are to be Revan's representatives for the armistice reception after the ceremony," he reminded her.

She ignored him, raising her comm to address the Ravager's captain, standing below them at the bridge. "Proceed to the hyperspace jump point near Malachor III. Immediately."

The Mon Calamari looked up, his eyes retracted with surprise. "But Master Kae, we are to stay here to record for posterity—the closest ship to the fleets. By Admiral Starfire's orders."

"Pull back." She rarely showed her strength so openly, and Davad felt a chill. His gaze went to his own ship, on the far edge of the viewscreen—Blood Moon and its crew that he'd seen through so many battles in the Mandalorian wars. Three ships, each under command of one Jedi at this far orbit—oddly spaced and clustered behind the rest of the Fleet, which was facing off against the ordering rings of Mandalorian might.

"I'm... sorry." The Neimoidian did look sorry, eyes wide and black looking up at them. "But the High Admiral's command was quite clear. We are to remain here until the armistice is complete."

"Pull back," Davad echoed, pulling at the Force himself. "As Master Kae said."

"I'm sorry." The man looked confused, his head swiveling back and forth between them. "But I... Admiral Revan said herself—she told me herself... I... her orders. I must follow her orders."

That was when he knew. That was the moment he knew.

With a chill in his gut, Davad noted that Kae's ship held a skeleton crew, a large number of droids, and that every sentient he could see seemed absorbed in their screens, not even curious why two of their highest Jedi commanders were arguing in front of them.

She gave Force commands to all of them. They're compelled. She wanted us here.

"The hangar bay." He grabbed Kae's hand, jettisoning any attempt at ceremony or appearances, dragging his master down the curving stairs to the floor of the bridge, making his way across it to the two guards standing at the end.

Her son trailed in their wake, wordless and wide-eyed.

"You need to remain here, Master Jed—"

Only one had spoken but both crumpled with a twist of Kae's fingers. Davad stared at them numbly, felt their lives wink out.

The boy made a soft noise in his throat.
Their own men.

"Come." Just one word from her mouth. A command.

Davad felt it now, prickling along his spine—fear. There was no time to talk, just that sense of impending dread.

The hangar bay was empty when they reached it, except for one small snub—the one he had flown here.

Later, he wondered if Revan planned for his survival and Kae’s death—but for now, he was pure instinct, saving the Matriarch and her cub as he opened the snub’s doors, ushering them both inside. The ship was built for two, not three, but the boy was slight and small enough still to fit on his mother’s lap. Barely. Without a word, Davad slipped into the flight-side of the craft, and sealed it, sparking the engines.

Skeleton crew, skeleton ships—he had seen the duty rosters for all of the ships. Save his and Surik’s, they were all undermanned. He should have suspected then—he should have known already.

Later, he wondered if that had been a test of his worthiness to serve.

It wasn’t until they were safely in the shuttle, the hangar bay shields shorted out by the Force, and launching out into the densely-packed orbit around Malachor V, that Davad thought to ask his master how she had known to summon him—for at that time, the ships had yet to be in their final formation.

He had often wondered if she had visions of the future.

"Meetra. The girl has some modicum of loyalty to her own blood." Kae’s mouth twisted bitterly. "But I should have known before her warning. I was a fool not to realize sooner. My apprentice is what I shaped her to be."

"I don’t understand."

"I know." She looked sad.

"A shaper," the boy said. "She means that Revan shapes her own fate. As will I, someday."

"If you are bold and clever enough," said his mother.

Davad’s eyes went to the New Hope, Meetra’s ship, as their snubfighter flew above it, heading out for the open stars. He opened his mouth to say something—

And then.

A ripple, an implosion, churning up from the planet itself; a vortex, a scream, a flash-flooded canyon—the force of a hurricane that ripped through all of those tightly-packed ships as if they were made of water.

The Force screamed the death of thousands.

A glimpse of her pale face staring out at a peaceful, white world, before it all burned away in fire.

XXX
"You see?" he asks her. Her face is blank as if she isn't there at all. He hasn't even begun to drain her strength, but he feels it slipping into somnolence, as if even the horror of Malachor V wasn't enough to trigger her instinct to be prey. A part of him is pleased by that. "Do you see now, Revan?"

A shudder runs through her, but when she answers him, her voice is half-dead. "That sound. I-I always—I dreamed of it. I never knew what it was."

"It's death," he tells her, using Kavar's mouth, using Kavar's hand to squeeze her limp fingers. He thought he would frighten her less like this, that the illusion would frighten her less, keep the meat sweet; but when he looks in her eyes it isn't fear that he sees at all.

"But you… you came back." A frown furrows her brow. "You came back to her—to me. Y-you showed me that memory before. I saw you, you were on your knees—"

"I was on the floor," he hisses. "A prince of Onderon, prostrating himself before you."

"Why did you come back? Because… was it because of… what you showed me before? You loved her. Me. You loved me. Is that why you came back to the Sith? For me?"

"It was her. " How can she not see? "She commanded me. She was my master. She was… always my master."

"Who?"

Rage swells. "Vima Sunrider. Arren Kae—"

"She was… she's been…." Her voice falters. "She's been there this whole time?"

"Yes." And now you see. "She made you forget. She makes you forget. She was good at that, but now that Oerin has taken the Force from her, she can't hurt us."

Does she understand? He raises Kavar's broken hand towards her face. She barely flinches as his fingers trace the curve of her cheek, cupping her chin, stepping forward. Her lips are parted slightly, and those green eyes fixed on his. He would kiss her, even in this numb and broken shell, but every muscle of her is tensed, and he feels the Force, that power of hers, battering like mynock in a cage against him. It is delicious.

He wants this moment to last forever, but of course, nothing does.

XXX

"Okay….." Mekel shifted restlessly on his feet, shouldering the repeater Milli had pulled out of a crate and handed to him. "Uh, what are we doing? Revan and that… and Master Kavar just… walked in that shuttle."

*And I think Master Kavar was dead, but if I say that out loud, I will sound fracking insane.*

Not even a pause. The ramp had opened and Revan had walked right on in, trailed by Master Kavar Vakla. Who was limping. And had a giant gash in the back of his head.

*And might be dead.*

"We could try blowing it up," Kex suggested. "Revan would probably survive. Didn't you say she fell out of the sky before?"
"So she bragged to Aemelie." Millifar adjusted her scope, tightening the gears. "But we have a rocket launcher with enhanced thermite self-burrowing shells. We have enough firepower to disintegrate Oerin Lin's corpse—so I don't see how Revan would live through it." Her voice brightened. "Of course, if she's turned back to the mad Sith, that may be the best option."

"Not yet, Milli." Canderous Ordo sounded like he really meant not ever.

There was a long silence. The Mandalorians were doing banthashit with the weapons and Mekel was watching that shuttle door and wondering why they all just didn't do something like Mandalorians usually did, and charge in all guns blazing. Seemed to work pretty well for them.

The silence went on too long, really, because it gave Mekel too much time to think about how he could be on his way to Hoth already. Aishe wasn't bad. Sure, she thought he was dim, and she wasn't Telos or Lydie Loanin, but she had a lot of tension in those pink limbs of hers. She'd probably need help relaxing them, and who was gonna do it? That blonde guy?

Telos would be calling me an asshat right about now. Because I'm being one. I'm standing next to this hot Mandalorian and thinking about some Twi'lek because I'm scared we're all gonna die—

"Hold," Canderous muttered. "She's in the doorway."

Just an outline, backlit from behind, but unmistakable. Lithe bod, lightsaber—

That's my cousin. Idiot. Telos would have a fracking field day.

XXX

Canderous watched as his daughter fitted another light beryllium charge in her assault cannon, setting its target on the shuttle. "Those aren't natural shields, Millifar" he pointed out over their commlink for the third time. "You're not gonna break through."

"I don't care," she snapped, letting the bolt fly.

It landed on the side of the shield at least—unlike the other two, which had frozen meters from their target and then fallen to the ground, their charges still intact. This time, the ship rocked a little on its struts, but nothing else happened.

The shuttle now appeared to be covered in mist—or grayish smoke. The readouts in his visor still showed three bodies alive in there—and as Canderous watched, the weakest one winked out. Revan's was easy to identify—rock-steady pulse with that infernal Jedi calm. But the other guy's was all over the place, whoever he was, poor sod.

"What's going on down there?" Aemelie sounded impatient in the sky. "Is the dead Fett Lin disintegrated yet?"

"Haven't seen him." Canderous sighed, tapping his commlink to an open channel, suddenly realizing that Mekel Jin was still standing there like a lost dewback, not able to hear anything they'd said.

Millifar was busy, setting up another bolt when he looked up again to see—

"Hold!" Canderous told the kids, opening the channel so Mekel heard too. "She's in the doorway." Thank the kriffing stars, he thought. Now let's get the hell off this cursed planet.

But Revan didn't wave, or call out, or signal. She just stood there frozen—outlined by some kind of
light from behind that looked disturbingly like a bomb in slow motion.

"Down!" he barked to the kids, tackling Mekel, who hadn't had the sense to put on one of their blast helms this entire time he'd been sitting next to a crate of supplies.

And then, as if they didn't exist, Revan started to run—darting down the landing ramp, heading straight for the acid sea.

What Canderous had mistaken for a bomb behind her shimmered, becoming humanid. The edges were indistinct and ragged, but it almost looked like there were two of them—whatever they were. Some kind of cursed Forge magic. Ghost men, trailing Revan like kath. And as he watched they veered away from each other, like outlines of light covered in ashes, speeding after Revan with inhuman speed, moving in sync to flank her from either side—

"Frack," the Jin kid muttered. "What the frack was that?"

"No kriffing idea," Canderous muttered, lifting the grenade launcher. "But we need to shoot them."

XXX

A few weeks earlier on Dromund Kaas...

When the world came back to Carth, it was clear that little had changed—and that everything had.

The crowd in the arena was hushed still—but whispers spread through it like dry brushfire.

The second rancor was dead now too, half collapsed on top of the other one. Carth's son was standing over her body, and the woman with Revan Starfire's memories seemed to be dying.

Carth's jaw was killing him too, like someone had laid one in. It didn't matter. What mattered was the woman dying on the floor of the arena, her blood staining the sand.

Dying, she looked too much like his wife on the Star Forge, when she'd collapsed after Bastila's death. A strange mix of bile and fear clenched his guts.

"Excuse me." Carth didn't wait for a response, just shoved one gawking Sith out of the way, and then another, all the way down until he had a clear run to Dustil and her. Close, her eyes were rolled to white slits, and as he watched, the veins in her shoulder from the stump blackened with quick-spreading corruption.

"Can you save her?" Even as Carth barked the words he wondered what he was saying. Save the woman who almost destroyed the Republic? Save the woman who caused… all of this? Everything?

"I'm trying," Dustil said back, terse. His face was knitted with concentration. Sweat on his forehead. His hands were glowing faintly. Carth had seen Force-healing before. It looked like this. Revan had never been much good at it, but Juhani had the knack. And Jolee, of course, when he'd joined them.

The face was Revan's—his wife's—and she, she was…she turning gray before his eyes, with lines of black spreading through the veins in her leg, and up her body. Foam on her lips. Eyes rolled back to white in her skull, half-cracked through red lashes. Freckles, dark splotches on her fair skin. The freckles were the same, that constellation on her leg, the one he'd used to trace with his mouth.

*I didn't save her to see you die like this—to see a woman with your face die like this!* She wasn't his
wife, he could never have trusted her, and yet—

*She could have just killed that kid, Phylus Blais. Instead, she fought two rancor. She fought Tenebrae with everything she had. She made him promise we'd be safe.*

Carth didn't have any illusions that safety meant a hill of grenades on this stars-cursed planet, but it was what his wife would have done *Tried. With everything she had.*

*When she dies now, what happens to the rest of us?*

"Terentatek poison won't kill her," Zepth said, perfectly pleasantly, with Tenebrae's voice. He'd snuck up behind them. When Carth turned around he saw the bastard had snuck up behind them with at least ten bodies.

"Good," Carth snapped, trying to sound relieved, like a man in love would.

Another damned Emperor voice piped up behind. This one barely old enough to shave. "Or, rather, terentatek poison wouldn't… if she was…if she was truly… Revan." The boy bent down, and grasped that pointed chin, forcing her head up. The dying woman choked and gasped, body shaking, but for a second, it looked like she was breathing more easily.

"Here, let me—" Carth reached for her, trying to keep his own body between Dustil and all of them.

"Be my guest." The boy's booted foot nudged her ribs, and then he dropped her again. "Of course, she's not, is she? She's Sheris Darkstar. Lord Malak's concubine." He lowered his voice, gleeful like a child's, and poisonous. "You know, there are a few distinct differences between them. I was in a… rather unique position to observe. Have you… noticed? I suppose, both of you, I should ask. Have you… seen the ah… differences between them?"

"Get away from her." Carth had his gun out, which was insane. Which was—

Zaalbar growled a threat from behind them. *Not just me then wanting to shoot the immortal Sith Emperor and all hundred of his fracking bodies that have us surrounded. Good.*

"Um… don't kill her." Dustil didn't sound sure. Or anything like Malak at all. "I would like her alive. She's… my, uh… girlfriend. She's my… she's mine."

"Where is your real wife, Malak? Deralia?" Tenebrae's voice echoed. "Shall we send an escort to fetch her?"

"I'll go," Polla Organa stepped forward. Carth hadn't even noticed when she'd left the stands, but there was Zaalbar behind her too. "Let me go, my Lord. I'll go fetch the real Revan for you. I work for her, right?"

Zaalbar groaned a protest.

"You?"

"Yeah." She folded her arms and glared Tenebrae down. "Me. I'll go to Deralia and bring her back for you."

"No. She's dead," Carth interrupted. "The real Revan's dead. Darth Malak told me." He tried to sound dead inside too, tried to feel dead inside. It could even be true.
And if she's not—whatever that one... whatever reason Sheris had for keeping her away from the Sith Emperor... she died for it. She must have had a reason. She did... all of this. She did it for a reason.

Until I get to the bottom of why, we have to see this through.

Carth tried to ignore the incredulous look Polla Organa was giving him. Tried not to feel guilty. I’ll get you out of here yet, Deralian. You and your husband. But not like this—not if it means he could trace it back to her—

"Yes, Sheris killed her. Upon my orders." Dustil deepened his voice, taking on a crisp aristocratic drawl that was too damn close to the real thing. "She was totally... she was... utterly insane. Raving. She wanted to destroy the Sith Empire. So we made an end."

His dry chuckle raised the hair on Carth's neck.

Sheris... call her Revan. She deserves that—bad or good.

Revan hadn't seemed like a crazy Sith—not like Malak—or, or Bastila, there at the end. She... she could have lied to me, told me I'd be safe. She could have killed me.

Carth figured they had little to lose if he was wrong. In his experience, the Sith only gave you the keys to a ship when it was primed to explode the second you hit hyperspace.

"I can still go check," Polla insisted stubbornly.

On the ground, Sheris's body started to go into convulsions.

"Oh, dear." The Sith Emperor said. "That looks quite painful."

"Then get her a medic? Medical droid? Doctor?" Polla snapped at him. Her voice sharpened. "What the frack is wrong with you people?"

Dustil looked up at them. His hands were... glowing again. "I'm trying, okay? I'm not great at this. But I can't let my girlfriend die."

"Lord Malak!" A dark-robed glowing eyed Human laughed, almost hysterically. "Don't sell yourself short! If you can truly channel the right side and the weak side of the Force, you may bring balance to the galaxy!" His snigger was ugly and raw, and Carth wanted to punch him suddenly, very badly.

"Get this mess off the floor," another red-eyed sent ordered them. "We have another match scheduled quite soon."

"You may try and save your concubine, Malak," Zepth added with Tenebrae's voice. "But do so in the quiet of your own chambers. It is a messy death, and oftentimes slow. I would prefer to look on beauty." His red-beamed gaze lingered on the Blais sisters, who curtseyed, smiling politely.

Xxx

Dromund Kaas, present day

Carth brandished his laser marker and waved it at the map of the galaxy imposed in the middle of the circular room." Here... uh... this is the Perlemian Trade Route." It was. The obvious truth had to stay the same. "Felucia and Tanaab are two of the main agricultural worlds in the Mid-Rim—"
"We are aware of the Republic's geography, Admiral Onasi," the black-masked woman to the right of Dustil folded her hands in a spire and leaned forward. "You may recall, we did invade it before."

"Recently," added Lord Iskay, chuckling with red, glowing eyes.

"Of course, Lady Blais." Carth hoped to all hells that the SIS still kept a base on Felucia. He'd try and warn them they were about to be invaded with a Sith Fleet if they got that far… but he was still hoping against hope that things went Hutt-shaped for this stars-damned Sith Empire first.

Early in the Mandalorian Wars, Carth had noticed that the more things they tried to fix, the more things went ass-up. Like on Serroco, when their supply chain in the Stereb cities led to Mandalorian scum nuking those cities—and all the civilians in them—into piles of radioactive ash.

Carth had tried to rescue his wife, only to find she wasn't the one in danger.

He had tried to save his son, only to have the effort put them all in worse straits.

And now, he was trying to pretend to be a Sith Admiral, to plan a war the Sith could not be allowed to win. With the way the galaxy worked, he thought that meant the Sith's damn victory was assured.

*Over my dead body! But I'll have a hard time explaining this one to Rew. Or Jiya—or anyone else in the Fleet.*

In his dark moments, which were many, he wondered if this was how Saul had felt—there at end. If he'd been alone, Carth would have considered doing what he'd so often wished Saul had had the guts to do and ended it. He knew too much that they could use.

But it wasn't just his life at stake on Kaas. And he couldn't give up, not when Dustil was trapped too.

Half the members of the Dark Council had red, glowing eyes. Those worried him less than the five that didn't. Zash, Scourge—and the three others who all seemed interchangeable with their masks and armor. They could be anyone under there—hell, they probably were all Tenebrae's minions too.

Sometimes, Carth even imagined one of them was Revan—the real Revan—come to save them all.

*But, how could she? Tenebrae has stacked the deck. He can't be killed. We still don't have a clue how his… power or whatever it is works. And the only person who might is in a coma hooked up to machines just to breathe. Mission said she looked better—but better than what?*

*Oh, and she's the same person who almost did win the war. For the Sith. She's Revan. The one who sent thousands to die at Malachor. And I still don't know why—*

Mission had tried to contact Deralia, she said, but no one had responded. Sometimes Carth wondered if she was just saying what he wanted to hear. Sometimes he thought his wife was really dead. What other explanation was palatable? That she'd leave them here? That she just didn't care? That she'd never wondered enough to *look*?

"Lord Malak, do you have anything to add?" Lord Iskay leaned forward in his chair, long-nailed hands clicking against the datapad he'd been given with the false coordinates, inflated troop numbers, and the wrong jump routes, all doctored by Mission in ways she swore the Sith wouldn't catch.
"If she's wrong it'll be fast."

"I want to see another feasibility study." His son was disturbingly good at that arrogant Coruscanti sneer. "We don't have the ships to take on the Core directly."

Lord Iskay was one of the possessed ones. His red eyes squinted at Carth. "I want you to know, Admiral Onasi, that I don't blame you for the destruction of the Star Forge..." His mouth made a tut-tutting sound. "I hadn't expected to need this invasion at all, but how else can I stop the Republic aggression? Plague-ridden dens of chaos at the heart of our galaxy. We have to cleanse them with fire. It's the only way."

"We don't need the forces when we have the Force," another one of Tenebrae's talking heads interrupted. "One Dark Lord per planet and we can easily process all who remain—"

"Except the vaccinated ones," Scourge, who was vaccinated added. "Those we would kill?"

"Of course," said the masked woman on the Council, the one who said she was Lady Blais.

"Another feasibility study," Dustil repeated, the words edging into a snarl. Dark energy coalesced around his fingers, and Carth tried not to notice the yellow gleam in his son's eyes.

Xxx
"How many votes are required to place a motion before the Derran Town Council?" Instructor Cee-Ate's voder sounded out the words so carefully, it made the droid almost sound like he was from home.

Korrie slumped further down in his chair, so the ancient, fifteen-year-old Corellian Learning Bot wouldn't call on him. He didn't know what he'd say if the droid did—he'd been too busy last night trying to play catch-up with Leeshy and Arry over their remote link to bother studying.

Deralians were all weird anyway. They kept talking about being independent, but their entire planet depended on one cash crop that could have bad harvests and market fluxings. Korrie had even read that there were some seed investors trying to grow eridu on Katooine VIII. Climate was similar and stuff... and the farmers were killicks, so they didn't need individual farms—or profits at all, first few years. It'd be pretty easy for them to undercut this entire planet, and then what would Molla do?

(A month ago she'd said to just call her Ma, and something in her voice made Korrie think she wanted him to. And he was trying it out, but it still didn’t feel... right.)

I have a mother. I have two. He didn’t think either of them were dead, but sometimes he wasn’t sure. He stared at the wooden surface of his desk, and tried to make his crossed legs not fall asleep.

“Chore?” The droid paused, and there was a long silence—too long—

“Chore Organa, how many votes are required?”

“That’s you, grasshead!” Layran Lee poked him with his elbow, voice raised in a too-loud whisper.

“Daydreaming again?” Polla Thiswait giggled. Pollanne, sitting between them, kicked him.

“It’s Kore. Not Chore. Kore.” He was sick of correcting the droid’s pronunciation. “If Deralia joined the Republic, they wouldn’t need some dumb Town Council.” That was obvious. A fact they should all know already. “There’s strength in unity. Independent planets are vulnerable. If someone wanted to invade Deralia tomorrow, we’d all be sitting borrats!”

They all looked at him blankly. Didn’t they have borrats here?

“Hessi,” Korrie changed it. “We’d all be sitting hessi. Everybody’s armed, but there’s no centralized regulation, no standing army, no naval forces at all. You can’t keep expecting the Republic to bail you out if you won’t contribute—”

“CHORE!” The droid boomed. “Proceed to the Headmaster’s office. Immediately.”

Predictably, the class erupted in chaos. They were all really into their planet. Korrie had learned that right off.
“Say that again after school,” Layran hissed, as Korrie was standing up. Layran had been nice at first, til Korrie had made that stupid mistake about the Sith. Korrie still didn’t understand what he’d said wrong. Korrie thought everyone hated the Sith!

Apparently, not on Deralia, because Layran’s cousin had been some famous Sith Jedi. And then, when Korrie tried to explain that ‘Sith Jedi’ wasn’t even a thing....

XXX

“How do you know, refboy? You’re just some Hutt rat missus Organa took in because she’s lonely —”

“I know cause I’ve seen a real Sith,” Korrie told him. “And real Jedi. On Nar Shaddaa. Where I used to live.”

“I have the Force,” Rannie said back. “And you're lying.”

“You do not have the Force.” Korrie should know, right?

“Oh yeah? They tested us for it last year. I got it. My sister has it, and our Ma.”

“Lots of people have it a little,” Korrie said. “Doesn't mean the Jedi would take you.”

“Who says I'd want to be taken by some stupid Jedi-Sith—”

“That's not a thing!”

“Are you saying my uncle’s a liar? Cousin Beya’s a hero! She saved the planet!”

“Saving one planet's not that hard—”

If Korrie had been paying more attention to the Force he might have ducked Rannie’s first punch to his guts.

If Rannie really had the Force, he should have been faster, and dodged Korrie’s headlock and flip-throw.

If either of them had been paying attention, they would have noticed Cee-Ate and the Headmaster coming around the corner—

The week of detenshun was a small price to pay, Korrie thought. But next time he’d be smarter....

XXX

“Sure.” Korrie felt a grin stretch across his face. “I’d be glad to teach you more about Galactic Politics, Rannie.”

“By the ag-shed,” the other boy whispered. “Don’t be late. Dirty ref.”

“Peasant.” Korrie cracked his knuckles.

XXX

Dromund Kaas, right after the duel....

The run back to their chambers was a blur. Carth lost consciousness to Tenebrae at one point, and
when he blinked again, he was standing in their quarters in Tenebrae’s palace, looming over the
dying woman on the medical trolley.

_Polla_, he thought nonsensically, and brushed her topknot out of her eyes. Her mouth was foam-
flecked, and her entire body stiff and twitching.

“Seiran!” the real Polla Organa cried out.

Carth didn’t look up to see their reunion—he was too busy trying to remember the basic training
he’d had as a field medic, too busy trying to stabilize the dying woman in front of him.

_Stop the bleeding first._ A dark red stain mottled the front of her tattered white dress, and Carth
ripped the fabric open. The gash beneath her ribs looked deep, and the scratches above it were red
and raised. In his mind’s eye the woman’s body dissolved into sectors, and he revealed and packed
each wound methodically—his thoughts numb, working from a place beyond reaction.

_She’s dying._

Her pulse was off the charts under his fingers, the skin of her neck almost too hot to touch.

_She’s dying. You know she’s dying._ Her body jerked again under his hands. Her foam-flecked
mouth opened in a soundless scream. Carth… Carth remembered all the other times he’d seen sents
die before.

And the one he hadn’t.

Morgana Onasi had slipped away, silent and still in that hospital bed. Carth hadn’t been there, he
should have been awake—he should have—

“It’s… okay,” he muttered, holding Revan’s remaining hand. “I need a blanket for her!” he called
out, not sure if anyone was paying attention. Carth didn't know if Revan could hear him or not, and
nothing was okay; but those were the words he whispered, leaning over her ear. “You’re going to
be okay… Revan. I’m… I’m here. It’s gonna be okay.” _Beautiful. Freckles_. Acid in his throat,
looking down at the woman who’d—who’d made his wife who she was. _Could be you dying,
beautiful, and I’m so glad it’s not—_

In the background, Dustil gave an incredulous scoff, and Mission rolled forward with a blanket and
what looked like a whole stack of kolto packs to add to the packs already open on the medical bed.
Carth let go of Revan’s hand and started ripping them open, spreading the thick paste around the
terrible wounds on the woman’s leg, the slash on her ribs, and the ruin that was left of her missing
arm.

Time seemed to slip and he remembered being on the _Hawk_ after the Star Forge, doing the same
for a dying woman there.

_I’m so glad it’s not you, where are you?_

Zaalbar whined somewhere in the background and Carth realized he wasn’t the only one
remembering.

“Terentatek poison on the claws.” Tenebrae twisted Zepth’s voice into a dark chuckle, alerting
Carth to the fact that they were no longer alone. He glanced up to see the Zabrak kids had joined
them. Possessed, of course. And behind them, those Blais sisters and their brother—not possessed.

“Did you know, the venom goes straight to the brain?” Takan’s mouth continued the thought.
“Disrupts neurotransmitters. Everything else is just an immunologic response. Terentatek poison was what the Krath rebels used on Ulic Qel-Droma—combined with torture, of course. To heal himself he had no recourse in his madness except the Dark....”

“Is that what you're trying to do?” Carth looked up to glare at the Zabrak kid, even if it wasn't the kid’s fault. “Turn her? Make her evil again?”

“Maybe if she was truly Revan,” Takan’s mouth hissed. “But this copy? Merely a medical experiment.” He shrugged, just as those Blais kids walked fully into the room and then the world went white again—

XXX

When Carth came to, Polla Organa and the dying Revan and Zaalbar were gone—claimed, Takan told him, by the Blais sisters who had requested to coordinate the burial rites.

“She—she died?” Carth stared at the bloody white fabric on the floor, the ripped bags of kolto, and wondered what he should feel.

“It is only a matter of time before she dies,” Zepth’s possessed voice corrected. “How much time? Care to place a wager?”

“No.” Carth didn't like the odds. Or the look on his son’s face, that ugly sneer.

“I’ll bet three weeks,” Dustil growled, folding his arms. His eyes looked almost feverish—too bright—and his skin was too pale, like he was in shock.

“It doesn't matter,” Carth muttered. “She fought your damned duel. You need to honor the terms. They—they’re free to go.”

“Who?” Zepth’s throat made an ugly chuckling noise. “Who is free to go?”

“Duh—M-malak.” For a second, he'd been about to say his son’s name. “The... the actress. This guy here—Seiran. Zaalbar the Wookiee.”

Seiran Wen was staring at Carth like Carth was a slug on his shoe.

“You were always free to go, Lord Malak,” Takan’s voice chuckled. “Although, your departure was not included in the bargain, was it?”

“Whatever,” Dustil growled, still staring at Carth. “I’ll stick around, Lord Tenebrae and help you and... you and Carth set up your invasion.”

“My wife and I are out of here,” Seiran Wen snapped. “Get her back from those kids. Now.”

“Your wife left with the Blais children. She's under their employ?” Zepth’s voice was flat, already bored. “That affair is between them. Your wife and that Wookiee fled my hospitality and chose servitude with House Blais. They are quite fortunate to be escaping the penalty that most escaped slaves suffer. But you, insect... are free to go... or to die... or to be silent like a good slave in the presence of greatness—”

Something flashed in the Deralian’s eyes. “You can’t—”

The Zabrak kid’s hand lifted, curling into an unmistakable fist. Seiran’s body stiffened, his hands clutching his throat as his feet left the floor and then he gasped—with the unmistakable, horrible
sound of choking—

“No,” Dustil hissed. He didn't even move, not a finger twitch, but suddenly Zepth and Takan both were thrown hard against the wall; and Seiran had collapsed on the floor. “My people,” he muttered, in a voice so rage-fueled Carth thought it could have been Malak’s. “Are not your fracking toys. Leave him alone. Get… get out!” Light sparked in his fingers. “Get out of them now or I’ll fry every damn body you have in this fracking palace!”

The room was suddenly too quiet, filled with only the ragged sound of Seiran’s breathing and the whir of Mission’s motor as she glided over to the Deralian on the floor. “You okay?” she asked Polla’s husband, extending an appendage like she could help him stand again.

“Yeah,” the pilot muttered, glaring at all of them. “I’m great.”

“Ow.” Zepth was rubbing his head, his eyes clear. Next to Takan, who clambered to his feet slowly, cradling his ribs as if they hurt.

“Dust—”

“I’ll dust this room now,” Mission snapped icily. “You guys made a huge mess. Shut up while I sort it out!” She beeped and whirred. Carth caught the beeps for 'system reboot,’ but he couldn't figure out what she meant.

“I’m gonna take a walk,” Dustil muttered, not meeting Carth’s eyes. “Get some fracking air.”

Zepth was holding Takan’s hand—no doubt communicating silently about what had just happened. Seiran had gotten himself up and had walked to the window, his back to them all.

It was only then that Carth noticed the other missing party. The droid was so often deactivated, he'd almost seemed a piece of furniture lately… but HK was gone from his position as silent sentinel in the corner of the room.

“Where’s HK-47?”

Seiran turned to look at him, just as the door slid shut behind Dustil’s departing back. “He went off with Polla and the Wookiee. Said he could keep the Bitch alive.”

“Oh.” Carth cleared his throat. “Seiran, I’m sorry. We… we’ll get her back. Polla. We’ll get her back.”

The man just stared at him. “I will. She’s my wife.”

“I-I know that. That isn’t what I—”

“Just get us out of here,” the Deralian said. “Pollie and I… we didn’t sign up for this.”

Except she’s why we’re all here. If Polla Organa hadn’t tried to swindle a blasted Sith Lord, none of us would be here.

But Carth wasn’t going to say it. The man needed his space. They… they all needed space. Not just the Deralian. Dustil was… Dustil needed some space. He’d… he’d calm down. He’d just been defending them—

My Revan will come for us. She has to. She can't be dead. The thought was more invocation than prayer—more magical thinking than faith.
In the weeks to come, Carth would often look back and rue his own gullibility.

Xxx

*Four weeks later on Dromund Kaas....*

Carth marked up the Corellian Spire on his screen, making suggestions for space battles that could never happen.

*Cluster your forces around Peragus Station,* he suggested. *It’s a good point of entry for the Outer Rim.*

*There’s a secret beryllium mine on Dagobah. We’ll need twenty thousand ground troops to look for it.*

*Hoth might not look like much, but it is a strategic waypoint between Mustafar and Donovia. We can build an underground shipyard there.*

*If we overextend our forces along the Spire, we can intimidate the Republic Fleet and force their surrender.*

*Argos VII is not as geologically unstable as reports indicate....*

It had been a while since Carth had been privy to Fleet commands. He could only hope that none of what he was saying was true.

A transmission blipped on his console, interrupting his stream of lies: *Sending droid 2u with present. Happy birthday, Captain Obvious. —POW*

Despite himself, Carth snorted. His birthday had been a week ago. He wondered if the Deralian had known—or if it was just another joke.

He wished Polla Organa Wen would stop calling him ‘Captain Obvious.’ How did she—she’d never spoken to his wife. He knew that. She’d said that—along with a list of things she would say to Revan, if she finally got the chance.

But she still—

Was this present another attempt at a bribe? He knew what Polla wanted.

She wanted her husband back.

Since Carth had become an admiral in the Sith Navy, a trusted advisor to the Sith Emperor, he could probably give the order—or get Dustil to give it—and have Seiran sent to the Blaises. But if he did, he knew the Deralians would leave—or, worse, be killed trying. He knew her. Hells, they should leave—it would be safer for them to go...(if they could) but—

*But who will watch Revan then? The Blais kids? HK? Zaalbar doesn’t have the hands for changing her feed lines. And if she dies—*

*If she dies, then what? She tried to save us—she fought so hard to save us—*

Carth knew he was losing it. An irrational part of him still expected the woman in the coma to wake up and save them all. Or maybe that part of him was still waiting on the real Revan. His Revan. To end Tenebrae like she’d ended Malak—
Not the same thing, is it? She ends Tenebrae, she ends you.

Not that he wasn’t willing to make the sacrifice; Carth just wanted it to count. And Mission seemed convinced that they had to patch up this Revan, and keep the real thing well away. She’d said the galaxy depended on it—the kind of hyperbole you’d expect from a teenager; but not from an ancient computer.

Carth believed her.

Mission said she’d linked back into Republic networks and found nothing at all about the real Revan Starfire’s whereabouts on the nets either, aside from a vague rumor of her death—some explosion on Coruscant that had taken out Malachi D’Reev.

Good riddance.

“Hells!”

A shadow fell across Sith Admiral Carth Onasi’s desk, blurring the chart he’d sketched out on the navboard for an invasion of the Mid-Rim that he planned to lose very badly—or preferably never fight. Carth looked up to see a triangular, metallic face. Familiar as the whirling lights of its eager red eyes.

“HK! How did you get in here?” Polla said she was sending you, but I didn’t expect it to be so fast!

“Critical Observation, Former Master’s Former Concubine: For a Human with your distinguished service record and impressive tally of enemy kills, you are quite easily surprised.”

“Yeah, well… I posted guards.”

“Conciliatory Statement: Yes you did. I left them alive outside. For you.” The droid’s metallic voice developed an inquiring whine.

Carth pushed his pile of datapads and star charts aside for now. “Is—is something wrong?”

“Philosophical Inquiry: Does the Concubine mean within his own character? Was the inquiry rhetorical?”

“Huh? I meant… is it… is Polla okay?” Is Revan finally dead? He could not say the last part out loud since Tenebrae seemed to buy that she already was.

Awfully convenient of him, buying our lie. It made Carth suspicious; but there was no one he could share that with either—not without worrying Dustil. Not with his own brain compromised. The Emperor seemed to take a perverse pleasure in possessing Carth. It had been happening more and more lately. And for longer than five minutes. But he couldn't voice that fear out loud either—that the madman was gaining control.

Takan had said it could happen sometimes. Incomplete bonds becoming stronger. Carth truly becoming a vessel. If it wasn’t for Dustil and the galaxy, he’d—

The droid made a clucking sound. “Reassurance, Meatbag: the Deralian is thriving in her servitude in the House of Blais. Snide Observation: More than You.”

HK’s appendage extended, with a blaster pistol clutched in it and Carth grabbed for his own—only to see HK cluck again, and drop the small hold-out on the desk.
“Encouragement!” the droid hissed. “Pick it up, Meatbag. Polla Organa sent a gift.”

“Why—?” Warily, Carth did, half-suspecting the thing would explode. The last time they’d had a chance to speak alone, Polla had commanded he find a way to get Seiran to live with her at the House of Blais, her orders sounding uncannily like Revan’s own.

He’d told her it was impossible. I don’t trust you not to leave, Polla. And you have every damned right to go, but we need you—

The gun was nothing remarkable: a small, Czerka hold-out, designed for close range. The entire thing was polished and gleaming, as if freshly oiled.

“Polla said to give this to me?” He opened the chamber to check the cartridge, but there was no note hidden with the power cell. “Any other message?” Does she want me to shoot someone? Myself? He knew the smuggler was still pissed about Seiran, but there was nothing Carth could do —

We have to keep Revan alive and sabotage this damned war—


“Farewell?” Carth looked up at the door, but the droid was already vanishing through it.

“That was weird,” Mission commented from the corner behind his desk. She’d come up quietly too. In fact, Carth could have sworn the office was empty. Did I lose more time? “Not like HK to give up a perfectly good weapon. You sure it's not rigged to explode?”

“Pretty sure.” He’d taken the power cell out, just in case. “Since when does that thing say goodbye?”

“Like I said, weird.” Mission whirred to herself. “Still nothing on the nets.”

She means about Revan. “Did you get through to Canderous?” She’d assured him that she had disabled all the bugs in their suite. Carth had to hope it was true.

“His wife is a—” her voice turned guttural and she made a sound like cars crashing. “No. But I’ll keep trying, Flyboy. Cool your jets—”

“Mission, don’t.” His temples throbbed. “Where… where’s—?”


“No.” How could he? The Blais kids were monsters.

Xxx

Dromund Kaas present day….

Carth’s head ached. Another long session with the Dark Council, where he had to feign interest in a war they couldn’t be allowed to win… and now he had to follow his son dressed like a Dark Lord down the hall towards their armored palanquin.

That damned black cape. Malak had worn a cape like that. Uthar Wynn had worn a cape like that. It set Carth’s nerves on edge, watching it billow across the shoulders and down the back of his son.
“Lord Malak!” The red-skinned Sith who called himself ‘Scourge’ met them at an intersecting corridor, falling into step with Dustil as if they'd planned it. (Had they? There seemed to be so much these days that Dustil didn't share with Carth.) “I wanted a word.”

“Just the one?” His son sounded weirdly adult when he imitated Malak. It made the hair on the back of Carth’s neck rise.

The two of them launched into a conversation in Ancient Sith—as Dustil called the Dromund Kaas vernacular. It was a language that sounded like snakes hissing, and glass cracking, and Carth didn't want to admire his son’s proficiency.

“Mind filling me in?” he snapped, when Scourge finally left them near the entrance of the maze-like structure that contained most of Kaas’s bureaucracy.

“Lord Scourge did not want to trouble the Dark Council with trivial banthashit, but he noticed an uptick in death counts among Kaas City’s commoners.” Dustil shrugged. “Rumors says it's some kind of illness.”

“Illness?” Carth coughed.

“Scourge is afraid it’s the flu.” Dustil didn’t sound worried at all. “Like on Coruscant? I told him that’s impossible.”

“Of course, Lord Malak.” Carth nodded his head. *How the hell would you know?*

Dustil blinked at him, his face perfectly calm except for those eyes. Those cursed, Sith-damned, ever-lightening eyes. “Lord Scourge keeps wanting to meet with me. I don't know what he wants.”

*I don't either.* Scourge had practically said he was one of Revan’s allies, but he hadn't offered up more than that to either of them. “Be careful,” Carth offered. It was all he had.

In wartime, you get used to a lot of hopeless crusades. Desperate stands. Times you don't expect to win, but you go ahead and fight because there's nothing else to do. Times like that... you learn to wait. You become a sniper behind a blind, a bomber on a run sweeping for the precise coordinates to drop the payload. The *second* Carth found a way he’d get Dustil out of here… but it wasn’t simple—and it wasn’t just about them. If the emperor found out Dustil wasn’t Malak, his son’s life would be worth nothing. And Tenebrae had a billion faces, a billion bodies—even in the Republic. Where could his son run to? Where would be safe?

Hell, Carth was one of those bodies. *I’m not safe.*

But you had to have hope. He had to hope sticking close to Dustil was helping. Had to hope the way his son’s eyes had lightened from a deep brown to light amber was just… something in the air. All the Sith here seemed to have eyes like that to various degrees—almost all. And Carth had seen sents come back from darkness before—he’d… hell, he’d helped *Revan* come back before. And Dustil hadn’t… done anything. Nothing bad. Nothing that he couldn’t come back *from.*

Not yet. Carth just had to keep it that way and wait for his shot.

“Shall we go?” his son drawled in a Coruscanti accent that put Carth’s teeth on edge. “Our palanquin is waiting outside.”

Xxx

*Dromund Kaas, right after the duel*....
All banthashit, Dustil thought. Like he'd landed in some strange fake universe, where Father was
his new best friend and everyone thought he was Darth Fracking Malak.

Total banthashit. Dustil had watched Father trying to patch up the dying woman, and wondered
why the frack he had bothered trying to heal her on that arena floor.

Everything —everything lousy in his life boiled down to Revan—and Dustil had still tried to heal
her. He'd been a fool.

But seeing Dad trying to help made his gut feel funny, as if a part of him wanted all that kolto Dad
was slapping on her to work.

“Seiran!” Polla Organa launched herself in her husband’s arms.

Revan (fake Revan) went into convulsions again, and Mission (fake droid) was pumping her full of
kolto like there’d never been a shortage. Fake Revan had been convulsing the whole time they’d
run down the hall, Zaalbar pushing the hover trolley the Sith had loaded her onto like garbage,
growling the whole time like some kind of crazy bantha.

Even more fracked, Dad’s eyes had been glowing half that time and they were suddenly glowing
red again now—as Tenebrae left off trying to save fake Revan, and started using Dad to make a
long speech—maybe to himself—or maybe to the Blais sisters and their brother, who’d all
wandered in behind them—about the death of Revan.

Dustil wondered if he should look pissed, or sad. What would Malak do? The short-haired Blais
girl kept smirking at him slyly. Her sister fluttered her eyelashes and waved. Mekk probably would
have winked at the long-haired bint, so he tried to do that. His face felt stiff and strange—like
nothing was real.

“Lord Malak?” Inse stepped forward, interrupting Tenebrae’s list of Revan’s accomplishments,
which made Dustil up their family status another few notches. “By your mercy, may we have our
slaves back? They can help us take care of disposing of the body, a task surely beneath your
notice. ”

“Your slave and my slave look kind of busy, Lady Inse,” Dustil pointed out. He meant it as a joke.
Mekk would have made it a big joke.

Inse frowned. “Seriina? Step away from the guardsman.”

“He’s a pilot,” Polla snapped, like she had no idea who she was talking to. Her arms tightened
around her husband again, like she could protect him—or he her. But the galaxy didn't work like
that. She was old. Didn't she know?

“Oh, ho!” Tenebrae was using Dad to talk. There was no way Dustil could ever get used to that.
“Did you wish to buy the male, Lady Blais? I have no need for him.”

“Yes, please—” the long-haired sister began, before her sister turned to give her a long, slow stare.
“I mean… no thank you.”

“Mother said we aren't to have any more male slaves. It isn't proper when we’re unchaperoned.”
Inse shrugged.

“Seiren’s my husband!” Polla Organa interrupted again like a fracking idiot. Like Revan on
Korriban defending Dad all over again.
Good job, letting them know how to get to you. Even Selene wasn't that fracking dumb.

“Slaves don't talk back,” Mydia said sweetly. “Do we need to go over this again, Pollo?”

“Seriina,” Inse corrected her. “Like the actress.”

“Seriina. Seriino?” Mydia made a face, and switched back to Ancient Sith. “Why does a slave need so many names?”

“Allow me,” the Emperor murmured, with Dad’s mouth. He extended a hand and—nothing happened. “Oh! I forgot!” Takan’s hand shot out instead and Dustil felt that familiar jolt, like ionization in the air about to charge—

“No!” Like an idiot, Dustil stepped between the dumb smuggler and the Sith fracking Emperor before he could fry her. Like an idiot he raised his hand and the Sith’s bolt—not very strong as far as these things went—glanced off his hand and sizzled into the floor. “The guy—that man… slave is mine! The… male is mine. I don't want him hur—damaged. No damaging.”

“No damaging of the male,” Takan agreed. “But the girl… Revan’s first pathetic imposter? She was amusing, but do we really need her alive now?”

“The girl? Uh… woman? Do you think she looks like my wife?” Dustil’s forced laugh came out wrong, like his voice was cracking like a kid’s. “I might find a use. Later.” He wanted to puke. He wasn't even sure how he’d come up with that. It was a little scary—like when he didn't think about pretending to be Malak he did a better job. “But as the Blais ladies said she’s their property. Right? Her and the Wookiee?”

“By my grace,” Takan’s mouth said. “All beings in my empire belong to me.”

“We are mere caretakers,” Inse broke in smoothly. “Isn't that right, Mydia?”

“Whatever.” The long-haired Blais sister simpered at Dustil.

Mission beeped and the Wookiee growled.

Dustil raised his right hand, suddenly unsurprised to see a globe of ball lightning hovering in it. A trick he’d never mastered before—him or Mekk. Now, suddenly, it felt easy. This fracking planet. “Of course they do,” he muttered.

“Polla,” Seiran whispered behind him, blowing his wife’s cover, if she had any left. “Don't. Don’t argue with… with… them.”

“That’s right,” Dustil said coldly, turning his back to Dad and Takan and Zepth. He felt cold sweat break out along his spine, but he couldn’t show fear. “Listen to your mate, Polla. You are both nothing here. Any one of us could end you.”

Fake Mission beeped, basically calling Dustil an idiot in machine code. He didn't dignify it with a response.

The Deralian bit her lip, glaring at Dustil with those fake green eyes.

I just saved your life. You should be grateful. He wanted to puke.

“I suppose… since this slave won the match, I won't include her in this evening's sacrifice,” Tenebrae told Dustil with Dad’s mouth.
“How kind of you, Great One,” Dustil snapped in Ancient Sith, before the bint could say something really fracked.

Xxx

**Four weeks after on Dromund Kaas....**

It was easier for Dustil to visit the House of Blais than dear old Dad, so he tried to stop by every few days. Saved him the grief of hearing Seiran whine about his wife. Right now, Seiran was upstairs—getting laid—Dustil assumed. He’d told the man to check in on Fake Revan.

Dustil didn't like to look at her. She looked weak and sick.

Today Dustil, otherwise known these days as Darth Malak, High General of the Sith Empire (at least that's what Lady Vash from the Dark Council had said, when she came to pay her respects) was supposed to be meeting the Lady Inse Blais for tea.

He’d had tea with Mydia three days ago in the green room, but apparently Inse had bigger plans, because she’d taken him down at least three flights of spiraling stairs and was now leading Dustil through a narrow, dripping, underground corridor.

Dustil had a really bad feeling, but when you were Dark Lord of the Sith, you couldn’t just say you had a bad fracking feeling. “We’re… uh… are we having tea in the basement?”

Inse Blais shot back a confused glance. “Basement?”

“Torture cell,” Dustil amended, since there was no word for 'basement' in Ancient Sith.

“In the tombs below the torture cells.” Inse Blais shot him another sly smile. Her eyes were enormous under her close-cropped hair. “I want you to meet my family, Lord Malak.”

**Great.** Dustil shouldn't have listened to Father, who’d wanted Dustil to check on Revan-in-a-coma today; or Seiran Wen, who kept demanding Dustil take him here to see his wife. Dustil needed to stay in character, and that mean he should stop listening to anyone, because Lord Malak wouldn't have listened. And Dustil needed to start acting like Lord Malak, or he wouldn't be believed and they’d all be fracked.

“It’s a security thing?” Dustil guessed. “The rest of your family living down here in the… tombs?”

“Why, yes.” Inse giggled. “It gets quite messy when the dead escape. Force possession… hauntings… I don’t have to tell you about it, Dark One!” Those yellowy eyes narrowed, gleaming in the dark. “Or do I?”

“You don't have to tell me,” he agreed, reaching for her hand. Somehow the words came out smoother than Dustil expected.

Her fingers were cold. Inse moved through the dark, yellow eyes gleaming like a Cathar’s, her presence at his side a swish of soft robes and a smell like cinna. Dustil struggled to remember the banthashit Ban had tried to teach them about summoning lightning to see by without burning the frack out of yourself, but his concentration felt jagged and all his summoning did was make a few flashes.

Inse chuckled, and put her hand out to stop him. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to see.” Malak probably wouldn't have admitted it. “Why don’t you go fetch a mag-light
for us or something, Lady Blais? I’ll wait.”

“You can't see?” Inse sounded shocked. “Oh! Of course. Humans.”

“You're human,” Dustil pointed out.

“Not entirely. Every few generations we take a few purebloods back into the Blais line. It keeps us strong.”

“Oh.” Mekk probably would have taken that as a personal challenge, bagging a pureblood. Pureblood Sith. Inse meant like that loser Scourge, who kept asking Dustil to come to dinner. He couldn’t figure out if it was a pass—or because the man wanted to discuss some kind of fracked-up secret plan. Either way, Dustil figured it was safest to keep saying he was busy.

One thing he was learning pretty fast was that no one expected a Dark Lord to do what they wanted. Instead, they asked. And when you said yes only occasionally, they were grateful. If you did it right, they were so grateful they’d do whatever you asked them and be happy about it.

“Well, I need light to see,” he commanded the Blais girl.

“As you wish.” Inse snapped her fingers and a string of regular old overlights came on overhead, making Dustil feel dumb. If he’d known they were there he could have done that himself.

“Thanks.” He squeezed her hand.

“Thanks?” She chuckled, and patted his. “Here we are!” The girl stepped back, her arm brushing against Dustil’s, and his forearm tingled, like her skin held an electrical spark.

Her face was tilted up towards his, those giant eyes of hers shining. Not entirely human? In that instant, Dustil knew he could kiss her—and probably do even more. He’d practically gotten to the third parsec with Mydia Blais by just sitting next to her on the chaise in the green room. One minute she’d been handing him a cup of tea and the next her boobs had been practically in his lap. But Inse was more reserved. More… refined.

“Credit for your thoughts,” he whispered. It was a line from an old vid he’d seen once. Their clasped hands were folded between them, and he could feel her heart beating.

“I’m still trying to decide,” she said, meeting his gaze directly. “Hello, Grandmother.” Her head turned and Dustil followed her gaze…

There was no one there. Just the carved wall of a tomb.

But what a tomb. That feeling of near-expectation shrunk like his choobs when Dustil took a closer look at the carvings in front of them.

The tomb was inset into the wall, embellished with a bunch of weird-looking babies with wings and impaled and naked screaming men. Some were, as Inse had noted, Sith purebloods. Some… seemed to be enjoying the impaling experience.

It was the grossest fracking Sith thing Dustil had ever seen and he’d been in Kressh’s tomb. Seen pictures of the Nadd ruins too.

Fracking Sith planets. Mekk would… Mekk would make a joke about the size of those poles.

“Grandmother—this is Lord Malak.” Inse smiled at the statuary. With all the impaling going on, it
actually took Dustil a second to notice the carved woman wearing robes who was slightly off center, holding what looked like a lightsaber or sword in her hand.

“Hello,” Dustil said to the statue coldly, because how else could he say anything? “Your daughter—granddaughter… told me… uh, it’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

Nothing happened. No glowing blue light. No voices in his head.

It occurred to Dustil that maybe Inse was as banthashit as her sister.

“Oh! Can you see ghosts?” Inse Blais smiled at him. “Unusual in males, but I suppose you were one. Weren’t you?” That smile seemed to take an edge that made Dustil paranoid, wondering what she knew—or thought she knew.

“Oh, I did. I did see one—them once.” The Force felt weird and clammy, like it was pressing in. Was that her or the ghosts? “I don’t see your grandmother… but I sense… what was her name?”

“The Lady Poxia.”

“Poxia,” Dustil repeated, trying to keep a straight face. Mekel would have made a joke about the Rodese itch. “Uh… were… were you two close?”

“Of course. Mother used to leave me down here as a child. Mydia was quite jealous.” Inse turned away and walked to the edge of the tomb. Alongside the coffin-like box that Dustil assumed contained a body was a row of carved flowers. Inse pressed on the third one and a drawer popped out of the coffin’s base.

“Here.” The crazy Sith knelt down and extracted a crate from inside. “Here is Lord Revan’s secret, the one Cook Deckna died to protect.”

“You shouldn’t have?” Did she want him to take it? Was he supposed to know what the frack it was?

The crate popped open, exposing rows of glowing yellow-green vials.

“Don’t be silly. It’s not a gift. I just wanted to make you… aware—” Inse’s voice broke off and her eyes widened, fingers running across the contents within.

Yellow light from the crate illuminated her features, the smug smile abruptly changing to shock. “Hell-spawned, dung-eating, thieving MYDIA!! MYDIA???”

Inse Blais straightened, light suddenly flaring around her; the Force expressing itself with the intensity of a grenade.

“She’s strong, Dustil thought. Stronger than I expected, but not stronger than me. Still, going down into the deserted tombs with a crazy Sith suddenly seemed just as fracked an idea as that time he’d gone down into the deserted tombs with Lashowe Devry on Korriban.

Despite trying to play it cool as Malak, Dustil took a step back. “Um…” he called to the Force himself, but fear made it feel slippery. “You okay, my lady?”

“No,” she growled, still bending over the box. “Look! There are three vials missing!”

Yeah, the case wasn’t full. The stuff inside the vials was glowing though. Dustil hoped it wasn’t radioactive. The Force felt like cold oil, sluggish and congealed.
“There’s still a lot left….” Dustil knew as soon as he’d said that that it was the wrong thing to say. *Idiot. Stop being Dustil. Be Malak—it’s Malak she expects—*

“If your sister betrayed you, she must pay,” he added, in a deeper voice.

“Oh… she will.” Inse put the case on the ground and turned to him, planting both hands on his arms, hands tightening like claws over Dustil’s biceps. “But the larger consequence, my lord… the fate of our world! You know what this means?”

“Uh… that this stuff is fracking dangerous?”

“It’s plague. *Revan’s plague.* When I first found the crate, I had Deckna tortured. I threatened to have her son the groom drink a vial….” she giggled a little, which didn’t make her look less nuts. “I didn’t, of course—I just killed him—because I’m not insane… but Deckna made a full confession. The Builder’s virus spreads by air. If even one flask is opened….” Inse shrugged and made an exaggerated coughing noise, then rolled both of her eyes up in her head, feigning collapse. “You know.”

“Right.” He had no fracking idea, but Malak would have. *A plague? Like on Coru? Korriban flu was pretty bad, but it’s just a flu—so what?* “So, it’s a weapon? For our… for our cause?”

“Not an effective weapon. Not without the *vaccine.*” Inse shook her head in disgust. “Isn’t that what Lord Revan had you making on Manaan?”

“Right,” Dustil nodded. “Sure. Maybe we should….” He tried to remember anything he could about Manaan but the only thing he saw there from the traces of Malak’s mind were some fracked-out images of Revan. Or the *other* one, maybe. Sheris. He gritted his teeth. “Republic has lots of vaccine. When we invade we’ll get more.”

“Ah. There’s that keen military mind Mother was telling me about,” Inse murmured, rolling her eyes. “I will be glad to help you, Lord Malak… once we deal with my traitorous sister.”

“I will deal with Mydia,” he promised. Knowing Mydia, that would involve a back rub. Him giving her one. “If she has the vials I’ll get them back for you.”

“Would you kill her for me?” Inse’s eyes were wide. When she tilted her head like that, looking so fake, she actually reminded him of Mekk, sizing up a mark to roll.

“No.” Dustil wondered if kissing her would shut her up like it did Mekk. *I’m the Dark Lord of the Sith here.*

“Do you….” Inse’s small white hand reached out with sudden boldness and traced a line down Dustil’s neck. Her fingernails were polished black and sharp. Her teeth bared in a tight smile. “You know… while Mother is off hunting with Nereal, I’ve been attending Dark Council meetings in her stead?”

“Under that mask? I sensed it was you.” It was true. She felt like scorched rain in the Force. There was something clean about it, like all the muck was gone.

“I sense you too.” She blinked, and the pause was just long enough to be uncomfortable. “Lord Malak… since we’re both members of the Invasion Committee… shall we draft an assessment of the Republic’s armada for the next General Meeting?”

“Sure.” Dustil remembered all those days he’d spent as a kid with the toy ships Father bought him. Did she think he hadn’t noticed her scorn? *Two can play that game. I can lie my ass off about the*
Republic Fleet, just as good as Dad. “I know all the kinds of ships. Numbers… locations. Everything.”

Inse smiled and sat down gracefully on the stone floor, next to those vials of plague of hers. “Then tell me,” she purred. “Tell me everything.”

He sat down across from her, on his knees, back straight, just like she had. “I thought you said there’d be tea.”

“I did.” Inse’s lips were thinner than her sister’s and she didn’t have dimples. Her smile was still pretty—smarter-looking, somehow. “But I lied.”

Xxx

Dromund Kaas present day….

This Dark Council meeting passed just as boringly as all the other ones had. Inse under her mask sat next to Dustil and kept kicking him playfully under the table. If she’d been Mydia, she’d probably have stuck her foot in his crotch, but Inse was more restrained.

Was almost funny, too, when she interrupted Father to remind him the Sith understood galactic geography.

“See you later,” she murmured as she brushed past them in the hall.

“Soon,” Dustil answered back. Why the frack not, after all? They could go visit her right now. Would get Seiran off his case for a few more days.

Then Scourge accosted him before Dustil had a chance to tell Father—babbling on about how there were rumors of plague in Kaas City. Since Dustil had retrieved the missing three vials (still sealed) from Mydia’s underwear drawer himself, he knew that wasn’t true.

Outside, the air was damp and smelled like lightning. The remains of some poor slave were being scraped away by an industrious cleaning crew. Seiran stood next to their armored palanquin, surrounded by their Gamorrean carriers. As Dustil and his father approached, the Deralian took off his hat and bowed, finally getting it right.

“Allow me,” the man muttered, opening the door to their car.

Dad did it right too for once—he didn’t thank him.

Dustil sat down inside opposite his father, and reached for a bulb of blue milk from the fridger inset into the carved burled wood wall. “You want one?” he offered graciously.

Their car shifted as the Gamorreans picked it up and started forward.

“No, I-I’m good.” Dad looked worried. Like always. “That was… that was good in there… Lord Malak. You—you did well.” Because dear old Father was paranoid, they only dropped the act in the privacy of their quarters that Mission swore she’d checked for bugs; so now Dustil could look forward to more awkward banthashit while they were carried in this claustrophobic armored palanquin, while Dad cracked bad jokes, and tried to bond with Lord Fracking Malak. Like that was believable.

“Really? You sure you don’t want to do a feasibility study on my performance?” He felt his face twist with disgust. Stall them, Dad had said. Tell them you need feasibility studies before the
invasion. Didn't Dad remember Lord Malak was the fracking cretin who had bombed Telos?

Lord Malak would probably shove a feasibility study up the Emperor’s infinite ass.

“Hah. Good one.” Dad looked like he was trying to make it a real joke, but his jaw was clenched pretty tight there.

“Hey, driver—?” Dustil glanced up at the narrow slit of window near the top of their armored car, using the Force to crack it open so the man could hear. “Driver?”

He wasn't sure what the real Malak would have called Seiren Wen in livery steering the Gamorreans who were carrying them, but he didn't want to sound too familiar. The man was already getting on Dustil’s last nerve with the endless demands about his wife.

“Divert to the International Quarter, will you? I want to see the Blais twins.”

“They're not twins,” Dad noted, half-smiling as if that was part of the joke.

“Whatever.” They might as well be. Inse had shorter hair, a larger rack, and a lust for fake Fleet intel. Mydia seemed more stupid, and was a lot more naked; but the way they both fawned over Lord Malak made them interchangeable to Dustil. There’d been a whole thing with Inse a week ago after she dragged Dustil down into the cellar; and then with the sister later, when Mydia came running to Dustil to save her from Inse… and Mydia all the while swearing that those missing plague vials had just shown up in her underwear cache… which had somehow led to Mydia trying to show Dustil her underwear cache, and Inse trying to burn down Mydia’s room…until Dustil intervened and made them both swear allegiance to Lord Malak.

If he had to choose, he would have picked Inse because she didn’t keep throwing herself at him. And she was cute. But they didn’t even want him to choose. They just both wanted him. They'd made it pretty clear.

Dustil was... considering it. An alliance with the House of Blais was coming in handy already.

“Thank you—” Seiran glanced back down through the window. Man was too much of a hayseed to know you didn’t just fracking thank a Sith for doing you a favor, you were supposed to grovel around for a while and they didn't have time.

“I said, go.” Dustil allowed the ugly tone to bleed into his voice.

Seiren barked the order, and their palanquin changed direction, rocking back and forth as their eight Gamorreans kept it in the air.

“Sure that's the best idea? Seeing the Blaises now?” Dad apparently didn't think so. “I thought we were expected back at the palace.”

“The Eternal One will figure it out.” Dustil shrugged. “Do you think questioning me is the best idea, Admiral?” He held up a fist, not really planning on doing anything with it….


It made Dustil feel funny, the way Dad had flinched.

The palanquin lurched forward again—and then abruptly stopped. “You’re going to have to move,
my lady,” Seiran said from outside, in a garbled attempt at the Sith language.

“I need to speak to Lord Malak.” A woman’s voice. Sultry and low, just the faintest hint of a Core accent on her Ancient Sith.

“No.” And with that Seiran had exhausted his repertoire. “I’m sorry,” he added in Basic. “Uh… do you speak Standard? Basic? Lord Malak doesn’t want visitors.”

“I think he’ll see me,” the voice said. Dark and amused, in perfect Galactic Standard. “We’re old friends.”

Dustil’s brain froze, because there had once been a time when that woman’s words had been the only thing standing between him and death. He could never forget it.

How can she be here?

When was she old friends with Malak?

“You okay, s—Malak?” Dad was asking. “My… lord?”

“It’s okay, Driver,” Dustil called out, loud so the Deralian on top of their vehicle could hear him. “She’s… I do know her. Open the doors.”

The street noise muffled any other responses; screech of a service carrier, maybe, rumbling by. Not so far away came the normal the sound of screams—so fracking typical for a Third-day on Thule that Dustil had stopped noticing it usually. But right now—well, frack, he was already on edge.

Right now, the screaming reminded him of shyrack wings and that taste of dust in his mouth on Korriban—

Then the door slid open and there she was: fracking Yuthura Ban, with yellow eyes and veins all over her face, looking like a bad dark side dirtnap.

Mekk would have thought she was hot like this.

They had… they had never always liked the same things.

“Carth Onasi!” The Twi’lek seemed startled to see dear old Father too, but just for a milli, and then she got into the car next to Father on the bench opposite Dustil like Lord Malak’s private palanquin was some kind of hover-taxi.

Dustil noted the twin sabers at her waist, and let his own hand rest on his. It was new—a gift from Tenebrae, who’d said it used to belong to Exar Kun. Dustil assumed that was banthashit—had Tenebrae even known Exar Kun? But it was a nice piece. A fine weapon.

“Yuthura.” Father half-turned in his seat, shifting away from her. Cute, the way he’d pulled a gun on her immediately. Dustil thought that’d give the man an extra five seconds—maybe—if she wanted him dead. Good thing I’m here, because I could end her in two.

“What do you want?” Father demanded, leveling the blaster at her guts.

“How are you even fracking here, Ban?” Dustil added.

“I saw the broadcast of your arrival from Coruscant. I thought you needed my help…” she glanced at the palanquin’s still-open door and then waved it shut with the Force. “Dustil.”
“Malak,” he said coldly, glaring her down. “I am Darth Malak. The boy is gone.”

“Dustil,” Ban repeated. Those yellowed eyes looked him up and down as she rested her hands in her lap, but close to her left saber (Dustil couldn’t help but notice). “All of my lectures about presentation and you still fidget when you’re on display. Like a stimmed-out mercenary.”

“There’s a holo-recording?” Father interrupted. “Has… has everyone in the Core seen it? It’s on the Net?”

Your wife’s not coming, Dad. She’s probably dead. Dustil didn’t say it out loud again. What would be the point? The man wanted hope, and things were fracked enough.

Have more faith in me, Dad.

“Not at first... But on my way here I saw that clips were shown on all the major networks.” Ban blinked. Her eyes were really yellow. “Some say the return of Revan and Malak is a call to war.”

“Great,” Dad muttered. “It’s... more complicated than that.”

“I saw the duel,” she said quietly. “Where Sheris fell. It... was Sheris, wasn’t it? I saw the arm.”

“She isn’t—” Dad looked like he thought he had to explain. Wasn’t he the one worrying about bugs? “She’s not Sheris. Anymore.”

“I’m aware of that.” One purple eye ridge raised. “You’re using the present tense.”

“What do you want, Ban?” At that moment, Dustil felt like Malak, and he was pleased to see her eyes widen, as she sensed the power he'd achieved.

“I want to help.” She frowned looking between them. “You. Both of you, of course; but you especially, Dustil. This planet is... unsettled. Dangerous. Especially for... you.”

“Dustil doesn’t need help from another Dark Jedi,” dear old Dad snapped, apparently dropping the ‘don’t-say-your-name-in-public’ thing. Dustil didn’t think the Gamorrean slaves spoke Basic; Dad was the paranoid one. “If you came here for the Sith, join some others.”

“I came here to help. Apparently, just in time.”

“I said,” Dad gestured with the gun, “Dustil doesn’t need help from a damned Dark Jedi. Get out.”

Yuthura blinked, as if she didn’t understand. Then she began to laugh. “This?” She traced one of the dark lines on her lekku. “All illusion. Implants and body paint. I needed to attract notice on this world to find you, and being just another Twi’lek here is...” Her voice hardened. “Kaas has too many of my kind with slave brands as it is. Trust me, Captain Onasi. I have not fallen. But what in star’s name are you both doing here?”

She said both, but she was staring at Dustil.

“Being Lord Malak,” he replied coldly, glaring back. She’d noticed his own eyes, he could tell. Weird, but Dustil felt almost proud of them for once, instead of ashamed. Back on Dreshd’ they’d studied why Dark side corruption happened, tried to make it happen even—but only Bandon the asshole had ever gotten anywhere and he’d killed a lot of people in the practice rooms to do it.

Dustil hadn’t killed anyone recently. It wasn’t murder that changed your eyes, he knew that now. It was opening yourself to power. Becoming real. Allowing your anger room to fuel your strength.
Maybe that was what Ban had been trying to teach them that all along——

But now she's soft and she fakes it. She’s so soft maybe I can find a use for her——

Mekk might have made that into a dirty joke, but Dustil could think of better things to do with her.

Make her stand off against one of Tenebrae’s assholes, maybe even one of those Zabrak kids dear old Dad treats like second sons——

“So I see.” Yuthura’s headtails flicked, maybe a message, but too fast for Dustil to read.

“Apparently you still have the Force, Dustil.”

“Yeah. When he died I got it all.” He looked out the window slit instead of looking at her. Outside through the screen, he saw other palanquins being carried by slaves. A crumpled pile of clothes in the street that might be a body. His nails were digging into his palms so hard he knew they’d bleed.

“Darth Malak… he's entirely gone then?” Yuthura’s voice sounded as if she couldn’t fracking tell.

“No one in my head now but me.” He turned his head to her again and watched that sink in. Dustil didn't think he was flattering himself, but he thought he caught a glimpse of fear.

“Put the gun away, Dad,” he added. “I can handle Master Ban just fine.”

“Are we still going to House Blais?” Seiran called down through the porthole at the top of their armored car.

“No——” Dear old Father began, but then interrupted himself with a sneeze. His head jerked suddenly, eyes going red. “Oh ho,” he chuckled, voice shifting in that way it did.

“Yes!” Dustil called out.

Yuthura Ban froze.

“Who is this lovely?” Tenebrae purred in Father’s voice. Father’s features shifted, and his eyes glowed red, that smile pulling his mouth too wide. Father’s eyes were too wide open too—like every part of Father had to be opened to be… to be used.

I’ll kill you, Dustil vowed. I don’t fracking know how, but someday. I’ll kill you, Tenebrae. Vitiate. Eternal Fracking One. I’ll kill you. I’m getting stronger every day and someday I’ll kill you.

“Emperor, this is my old… an old teacher whom I’ve employed.” Dustil let his anger at seeing Dad possessed fuel the hate in his voice, swelling like a warm tide in his guts. It felt—it just felt better that way. “Master Yuthura Ban, this is Lord Tenebrae, the Eternal One, Emperor of the Sith.”

“Master.” Ban’s voice changed too, grew soft and silky, and she slipped down onto the floor between their seats like a joygirl sliding off a pole. “You do me a great honor. My own title is nothing compared to yours. I am not fit to lick your boots.”

“I could judge that.” Father’s mouth opened, and his foot nudged Ban, boot resting lightly against her chest. She wasn’t wearing much more than a few strips of leather, and Mekk would have noticed that first, not her eyes or those (fake?) Sith tattoos.

“Tenebrae,” Dustil cut in. “Ban is mine.”

The Twi’lek shot him an unreadable glance, and drew back slightly. “My lords,” she murmured,
bowing her head. Dustil saw the slave brand there, between her t’chun and her t’chin. At the Academy he’d never known that was what it was; but he’d seen plenty since. On Coru and on this chivhole. “No need to argue over a work as insignificant as myself.”

*You’re right*, Dustil thought.

“Are we still going to the House of Blais?” Seiran repeated from the top of the palanquin. Really, he wasn’t showing enough respect. Tenebrae could fry him, and Dustil wanted to because he was being so stupid—

“Of course,” Dustil folded his arms and leaned back in his seat. “I’m sure the Blais sisters will *love* Master Yuthura Ban.”

*Maybe I’ll give her to Inse. She was complaining about finding good help.*

Xxx

*Dromund Kaas, right after the duel….*

Aftermath was a blur: cheering crowds, a dying Sith Lord, an angry Wookiee, and a mad rush down a hallway and up several lifts. Polla’s entire body was shaking with a mix of adrenaline and fear. She was pretty sure they were all about to die.

But then, standing in the middle of a circular room… there he was. Crooked topknot, bags under his eyes. Wearing some kind of inexplicable dress uniform. Just standing there. Solid. Real. A pissed-off look in his eyes—but not at her.

“Seiran!” Polla ran to him, and buried her head in his chest. Wrapped herself around him and shut the galaxy out. “Seiran. You’re here.”

“You’re shaking.” Seiran's arms tightened around her, helping to silence the dying Sith Lord, the roars of the Wookiee, the voices of their crew. “Pollie, you idiot.” Her husband’s voice cracked. “Don't ever do that to me again!”

“I won’t.” Her laugh came out broken. She looked up at him and then he was kissing the tears off her face, almost hungrily, and she was kissing him back. His cheeks were oddly smooth, but he smelled the same. “I won’t ever impersonate a Dark Lord of the Sith again,” she whispered. “Not for twice the fracking money. How’s Abasen?”

“Doing better than us, probably. Missing you. You know, I left him with your ma—”

“Yeah. *She* told me.” Polla peered through a gap between his arm and his shoulder at the woman who looked more dead than alive.

Seiran’s breath ruffled her hair. “We saw the fight. Mission broadcast it for me.”

“You mean the droid? The astromech?” Polla couldn't stop watching from the safety of his arms as they loaded her into a medical cart packed with that new kind of kolto. *Her*. Revan. The real one. Captain Obvious was fussing over her like she was his actual wife. The man looked like he might cry.

What did that make the other one—the one that had Polla’s memories?

Made *her* not here. *Made her* fracking off *someplace with my memories and our kids*. In that instant, Polla would have cheerfully plugged the woman in the eye, just like that rancor. Didn't
seem fair, that she and this dying woman got crap, and the Hero of the Star Forge got off.

“Yeah.” Seiran wouldn’t let go, which was a bonus. *Stars, he smells good.* “That computer seems like a real kid… kinda. You know?”

“What I know is, we need to get out of here.” No offense to Carth Onasi, his son, and the dying copy of his wife, but this was all seriously fracked.

And then it got worse, when the Emperor took over Carth again, and the Blais brats chimed in about property rights.

Polla started to tell Tenny-Bro off… and then it just got messy. Seiran freaked out, the droid was beeping, Wookiee growling ‘danger’ at her, the Blais brats laughing, (their brother cowering in the corner, next to the deactivated HK-47), Tenebrae threatening her with *lightning*— and—

And then Dustil Onasi stepped between them and the fracked-up Sith, holding what looked like a ball of lightning in his hand like he was gonna start juggling.

“I suppose… since this slave won the match, I won't include her in this evening's sacrifice,” Tenebrae told Dustil. He was using Carth’s body. Like a sacrifice had been an option on the fracking table? (Had it still?) Polla’s legs felt weak and she crashed into Seiran, who grabbed onto her as if he never wanted to let go.

She felt safer there, but still pissed off. *Never back down, Da says. Look them in the eyes.* “Oh, yeah? Well, I—”

“&%$**^*^$ ^*%*&%%%%$$#*,” Dustil Onasi interrupted, in a voice so dark it made Polla want to piss herself. Her own tirade died in her throat.

“Let him do it,” Seiran whispered in her ear. “We’ll get out of this, Pollie. I promise.”

Across the room, Phylus Blais gave a yelp like he already had pissed himself.

And next to him, Revan’s *other* droid—the deactivated one in the corner—suddenly switched back to life.

“Statement: Emergency override of failsafe complete.” The thing’s voice clanked, but it moved soundlessly. “Performing triage on the Master. Statement: Move aside, meatbags, or be vaporized.”

“A medical droid,” Tenebrae murmured with all three mouths. “*And* an assassin unit—all in one carapace? Revan was such a clever Sith’ae’rah… go ahead.” He waved it toward the dying woman. “If you prefer to prolong her suffering, I have no objection.”

When they told her that Seiran had to stay—and she had to go—it felt like the whole world was collapsing. Polla wanted to fight, but she was terrified. Something about the look in that kid’s face—

Tenny-Bro was insane. Random. Evil. But he was predictable. Polla knew how to handle him. She *would* have too, if everyone had stopped interfering.

But the way that kid’s cold dark eyes looked at her made Polla suddenly feel microscopic.

“You’ll see him soon,” the T3 chirped. “I promise, Polla Polla!”

“Be careful,” her husband warned. His arms were shaking as bad as hers—both of them in a place
somewhere between pissed and terror.

Zaalbar took Polla from Seiran’s arms like she weighed nothing at all, and carried her away down the hall, following the Blaises and the HK droid pushing the dying woman’s cart without looking back. “Rescue all,” he growled. Or maybe he was just saying “Wait.”

XXX

Four weeks later on Dromund Kaas....

“Hi.” Phylus Blais had been ordered by his two hideous sisters to look after Polla and the breathing corpse in the Blaises’ attic room. He’d come up there once to set them up, and she hadn’t seen him up here since. He’d looked twitchy then.

Now he looked worse—even had a nervous tic in one eye.

At least, Polla thought, he obviously wasn’t dying, because dying men rarely ogled her chest.

“Hi,” she said back to him in Ancient Sith. The word wasn’t really ‘hi,’ probably; but Polla had given up trying to learn the literal translations when they started giving her nightmares.

“Hi,” the kid repeated, and then switched to Basic. “Is she going to make it?”

“I don’t know.” Polla walked over to the window and sat down in the comfy chair, leaving him the other one—the one with barbs all over it that made your ass go numb.

“Assured Threat: The Master’s death will come later than yours, young meatbag. Do not speak of organic mortality in her presence.” Polla’s new best friend, the HK-47 Protocol Droid, whirred to life, locking his targeting scope on Phylus. “Emphatic Declaration: I will not have the Master upset.”

“Can’t have her upset—you heard the droid.” Polla rolled her eyes.

On the floating bed, the woman in the coma did nothing because she was in a coma. She didn't look upset. She looked kind of gray. They’d had to shave her head for the electrodes. Polla was secretly glad her topknot was gone.

“Oh!” The kid nearly jumped out of his skin, which, Polla suspected, on this planet might not be just a metaphor. “Inse said the droid was deactivated.”

“It was.” Polla got up and paced to the window. How did Inse know? She’d given up trying to figure out alliances here. The Blaises had claimed Revan’s dying body as some kind of fracked tribute, (along with Polla, their slave), and the Emperor had granted it.

There had been a lot of yelling, and the only moment that meant anything—seeing Seiran again—followed by the moment when Polla realized they were still fracking trapped, followed by weeks of being trapped, and seeing Seiran every few days to keep her from losing it. “It wakes up whenever she’s close to actually dying.”

The HK unit woke up a lot. Polla hadn’t slept more than a few hours in weeks. Sometimes she thought it must be affecting her judgment, because she had no fracking idea why she was still here.

“Clarification: The Imposter and the Wookiee switch me off constantly. But when the Master’s life functions come near to cessation, I regain full cognizant control of my cortex, overriding any additional programming. It is a most rewarding sensation—”
“Droid guy here says he has medical training. He’s doing what he wants, so be careful.”

“Assurance: I will not let the Master die. Addendum: I have no feeble-minded, corpuscular qualms about either of you.” HK jabbed coma-Revan with something. Polla had stopped checking what.

“See?” Polla sighed, and sat down in the comfy chair again. “HK and I are old pals. What can I do for you, Phylus?”

“Oh.” The boy looked between them nervously. He was fiddling with something in his pocket. “Um, can the droid make her wake up?”

“Aggrieved Retaliation: Sentients who ask extraneous questions are not required to keep breathing —”

“Stop teasing the kid, HK!” Polla drew her own blaster fast, pointing it at the thing’s beady eyes.

“Amused Cackle: It will feel good to see your blood spatter the walls, Imposter—”

“This again?” Polla thought they’d come to an understanding. “Revan Starfire wants me alive. I told you.”

“Oh!” the HK said. His head dropped forward.

“What?”

Polla got up to see if he’d turned off, but as she approached, he whirred to life again, his voder practically crackling with glee.

“Smug Assertion: I know what they are. Oh glorious planet, that has such wonder left,” the droid burbled in the way that Polla had learned was his happy noise on the day Mydia let him execute her chamber maid and the gardener.

“Look! You can’t kill the slave. Do you think my sisters are going to listen to a droid?” Phylus interrupted their daily banter, his voice sounding braver than the expression on his face looked. “You need Polla, okay? And Lord Revan needs you. We’re all on the same side.”

“Objection: I am most assuredly not on the same side as some jejune, squelching Human—”

“Stop!” the boy snapped. He pulled something out of his pocket. Three glowing glass bulbs. Medical vials, all stamped with an Imperial sigil.

“Uh… what are those?” Polla asked. Because the weird thing was, HK had stopped, and usually he’d go on like this for fracking ever.

“Oh,” the HK said. His head dropped forward.

“Huh?”

We have to get out of here. We have to get out of here—She took a deep breath, reining in her panic.
“My old cook was Revan’s loyal servant, so I guess I am too.” Phylus shrugged. “I-I got these from the tombs. Lord Revan asked us to keep a bunch.” The liquid inside the vials was green and glowing, like hyperdrive coolant, which probably meant it was something worse. “Inse found the crate, but I found where she hid it. Deckna said the vials were really important, and really dangerous—so I took some. I don’t think Inse knows what to do with the rest, or she wouldn’t have stashed them with Grandmother, in the ancestral tombs. Mydia’s scared of ghosts… and my brothers can’t see them, so that’s where she hides stuff.” He shrugged. “She thinks she’s so… smart.”

“Dangerous?” HK sounded cheerful. It clanked towards the kid, shouldering its rifle, and retracting the flechettes it had on its arms. A beam of light extended, scanning the vials. “Nostalgic Elegy: Only hazardous to sentient organic lifeforms. The boy Blais has found stored reserves of the Builder’s virus.”

“Ancestral tombs? Here?” Polla felt prickles on the back of her neck, thinking about the grossness of living on top of dead bodies. “And when you say cellar, you mean in this building?”

“Oh.” He rubbed his long nose. “Deckna said… Lord Revan didn’t want to kill everyone. Just block them from Tenebrae’s Kiss.”

Weirdly, she felt guilty, even though she’d only been asking for research. “I was asking how we could get rid of them, not use them!”

“You heard what he said about mortality rates?” The kid frowned at her, like Polla was the evil one.

“Primary Assumed Rationale: The Builder’s virus has an approximate sixty per cent chance of overwriting the corrupted Tenebrae programming, eighteen point three per cent higher among
nulls. Supposition: The Master still needed a work force on Kaas, and the high conversion rate would have further exacerbated our labor deficit. Had the Master gone ahead with the manufacture of more of my kind for her war machine, these labor issues would have been resolved. Secondary Rationale: Utilization of the virus on any Sith planet would break the Lehon Treaty, causing a potential act of war—"

“Overwriting?” Polla held up her hand. “Wait! Hold on. What do you mean by overwriting?”

“He means that sents who are graced by Tenebrae's Kiss sometimes lose their connection to the Eternal One if they get the plague,” Phylus said. “It happened to Lord Wistal of House Sol. She had to go into exile so Tenebrae wouldn't kill her.”

“Someone getting sick stops Tenebrae from being in their head? For good? So… if someone gets sick, they get cured? No more Sith possession?” Polla fingered the vials in her pocket.

“Compliment: Imposter, you have an excellent grasp on the facts. Yes. Yesss.” The droid’s red eyes gleamed. “Some species are immune, but not Human meatbags, or Twi'lek meatbags, or most of this world’s meatbags.”

And… you’re welcome, Captain Obvious! I just found you a way out. “So we can use it on Carth Onasi, right? Contact… what does that mean? Does he need to drink it?”

“Statement: the surest method, Master Imposter, would be a liberal application of the virus on an inanimate object, and the transfer of that object to the Onasi Meatbag. Helpful Assurance: In my disguise as a programmed automaton, I possess the means to bring the object to Admiral Onasi in the most expedient manner.”

“It might kill him through.” Phylus could be such a killjoy. “Or he might not catch it at all. Deckna said not to open those vials. She said it’s dangerous. She said only Lord Revan should decide what to do with them. That’s why I think we should try and wake her up and ask, before Inse does something crazy.”

“Interesting…. An object, Polla thought, looking around the room. “What was that you said about Inse?”

“Inse is up to something with Lord Malak.” The kid looked down at the floor, a sly smile creeping across his face. “But when Inse finds the vials missing, she’ll blame Mydia.”

“Do you want your sisters to kill each other?” Funny, how weeks as a slave on a Sith planet were starting to make that outcome seem reasonable.

“They can’t. Mother compelled us not to.” He brushed the hair out of his eyes. “I stole six vials, but I replaced three with some of Inse’s facial mask—” he chuckled. “That should keep the two of them busy for a while.”

“Not bad, kid.” Color me impressed.

“Inse killed Deckna.” The boy sounded pissed. “And the new cook doesn't make the cinna rolls right. Besides, Deckna told me Lord Revan was planning a way to have all the slaves rebel… if I help, a lot of them will be grateful to me, not my sisters.”

Polla decided to let that one alone. “Do you know how she was planning that?”

“No.” The Sith brat looked at Polla like she was the slow one here. “That's why we need to wake her up.”
“Statement: The Master’s condition is stabilized. Assertive Action: Imposter, let me bring the Concubine Admiral Meatbag a present. Now.”

“I gotta talk to Zaalbar first. Uh… give those to me.” She extended her hand and the kid obligingly handed Polla the vials of deadly plague.

*Great.* She wondered where she was supposed to stash them. Not like slaves had lockers. Or personal possessions. Or anything.

*A fracking revolution isn’t the worst idea… but right now… I need something a lot more basic.*

“Phylus,” she barked. “Go fetch Zaalbar. And give me your gun.”

XX

**Dromund Kaas, present day….**

Polla Organa Wen wasn't crying so much as she was trying not to scream with tears running down her face, curled up in the comfy chair with a blanket over her head.

Sometimes… this whole damned planet… it was all too much.

“Aggrieved Statement: Your sniveling is not helping the Master. Please desist.”

“She's not my master, HK,” Polla snapped, peering out from under the blanket. “She's a veg.”

“Fervent Objection! The Master is merely recovering her strength!” The way Revan’s scary droid whined its voder when it was upset reminded Polla of Bolts—a little—which was bad, because it made her homesick all over again.

*By rights, Seiran and I should be gone by now. He wants to make a run for it. And logically, he’s right.*

They could make it. The *Ebon Hawk* was still parked in the Emperor’s palace garage. Seiran had lifted the ignition chip from Carth weeks ago. All they’d need to run the planetary defenses was some luck and two pilots like… them. They could see Abasen again. Ma and Da. Home—at least until the insurance inspectors checked. Hells, if the *real* Revan Starfire was lurking around Deralia now, instead of dealing with her own, Polla could shoot out her kneecaps.

*But Carth and Zaalbar put their necks on the line for us. And even that bratty evil kid—*

When Polla thought the whole thing through, she had the uncomfortable reminder that all of them being here… was pretty much *her* fault.

Dustil had told Polla pretty clearly that it was all her fault that his boyfriend was dead. Yeah, she got it. If she hadn't asked Tenny-Bro to get Malak when she was pretending to be Revan, Dustil Onasi wouldn't be here, and Mekel Jin, that son of a whore she’d met in the Coruscanti Underground, would still be alive.

If she hadn’t been pretending to be Revan, Dustil’s dad wouldn't be here.

Zaalbar wouldn't be here.

Coma-Revan wouldn't be here.

Those two Zabrak kids wouldn’t be here.
Seiran definitely wouldn’t be here.

Guilt was all tangled like guts inside Polla—so tangled that sometimes she wasn't sure where it even began. Was the bad choice trying to fool Suvam Tan? Grabbing a ride with Therion? Faking their deaths? Or was it long before that—was it Polla deciding to run the loop in the dark and cracking her head open on that damn stone wall?

If I hadn’t tried to impress Seiran that night, none of this would have happened.

But then, we wouldn’t have Abasen. And I wouldn’t have Sei.

“Interrogative Demand: The Master will recover? Her vital signs have improved by an aggregate of three point zero two nine percentage points towards the normal Human levels this week.” The querulous whine at the end of HK’s voice would have been funny, if Polla hadn't seen him shoot those poor people.

The T3 was moody and this HK unit was a fracking sociopath.

“You're the one with the medical programming—not me.”

“Affirmative Objection: But the organic brain is so squishy, with so few reparable parts—”

He kept talking (and that's how far down the sarlacc hole Polla was these days, she was calling one droid a 'he’ and the other one ‘Mission Vao.’)

Polla wiped her eyes and unwrapped herself from the blanket. She went to replace the waste feeds and renew the liquid ones. Dark-Lord-of-the-Brain-Dead was packed in that newfangled kolto. The mask on her face made her look like a Quarren, with the tubes fitting into the breathers.

“Pleading Request: Give me a response!”

“What?” The old thing actually sounded upset. “Sorry, I was just thinking… about… stuff.”

“Let me take another walk for you. Good master. Clever master. Please?”

“And by walk you mean…..”

“Undignified Prostration: Yes, Master. Let me take another gift to the Concubine Meatbag.”

“No.” She would smash the vials, if she didn't think that wouldn't make it worse. Had the HK been lying when he said flushing them down the sewers would be an excellent method of distribution? “It… might have been a mistake, what we did with that one.”

Just a drop on HK’s appendage and an instruction to take one of his blasters to Carth.

A few days later, their neighbors on either side of the Blais residence might just have gone on vacation. That’s what Polla had thought at first. Except for the increasing stacks of bodies in the morning.

Shirel in the market had been sneezing yesterday and not at the meat counter at all today. The market itself had been quieter too. Not half as many public floggings….

Maybe a coincidence too?

Maybe you want it to be.
“I… shouldn't have listened to you.”

“You asked for my help, Cringing Imposter—”

“Stop.” She heard the familiar creak of gears as the T3 rounded the stairs. “Remember. You have to do what Zaalbar says and he says obey me. So… obey me. Shut up about it.”

Maybe we did let that plague thing loose, but frack if I’m gonna admit it.

“Approval: For a sniveling null, you can quite take the Master’s tone when provoked.”

“Is that what this was?”

The HK whined and whirred.

“Hey, guys!” Mission rolled into the room. Her dome swiveled. “Have you been crying, Polla Polla?”

“No,” Polla lied.

“There, there,” Mission chirped, all way too cheerful. “Have faith!” She made a dir-whee noise. “I think she looks better, don’t you?”

Where are my credits, you lying piece of bolts? When it became clear they were trapped here, Polla had asked for at least a down payment—only to have Mission make up some excuse about exchange rates and unexchangeable currencies. Kaas credchips would be fine, Polla had said back, but then Mission had hemmed and hawed, and here it was, weeks later, and Polla was still unpaid slave labor for a bunch of crazy Sith, and an (also unpaid) nurse for a braindead Dark Lord on the side.

And… and maybe a mass murderer to boot. They were evil. Most of them... were probably evil.

“Hrmmm…” Mission rolled past her, extending a long, skinny appendage and examining Revan’s artificial arm, now pitted and scratched, that HK had reattached, like Revan Starfire would ever need an arm again.

The droid poked the meat of the palm and a golden finger twitched. Then, she rolled around to the other side and did the same. This time nothing happened. “Poo-doo!”

“Statement: Perhaps the Master’s own neural attachments all need replacing with the same silicose filament used to transmit signals through her superior arm.”

“Why are you even still here, HK-47?” Mission’s dome whirred back toward Polla. “Didn’t we agree to turn him off for good?”

“He’s helpful.” Polla tried to look wide-eyed and frightened. Not a stretch on this fracked planet. And not her problem if the astromech didn’t understand how the HK worked. “The Blais sisters are afraid of him. Plus, he’s keeping coma-Revan here alive.”

“Concurrence: Without my presence guarding the Master, they might be tempted to turn on us.”

“Not as long as Dustil’s giving both of them those… looks.” The T3 managed to make her voder sound like a real pissed-off teener. If Polla hadn’t also seen her calculating galactic wargames with Zaalbar and talking about terraforming, she might have even bought the act.

“Don't count on Darth Moody.” Polla picked up the waste bags and started feeding them down the
incinerator chute. “He’s not looking so good, lately.”

“He’s fine!” Mission sounded like her circuits depended on that, so Polla didn't argue.

The doorbell took that moment to ring.

Both droid heads swiveled to Polla, expectantly.

“What?” Did she look like a butler? Back home a droid would do that work. “Fine. I'm going.”

Polla turned and left the attic sickroom, taking the spiraling stairs because it was faster (and safer) than the lift with no railings that creaked like a dying bantha. By the time she rounded the last corner, Zaal had already answered the door and Seiran was halfway up the landing. Below him, Captain Obvious and his Sithy kid were talking to Zaal, but Polla didn't give a frack right then.

“Sei—” His lips planted on hers, solid as duracrete, and he shoved her against the rails. It wasn't so much a passionate embrace as a relieved one. “You okay?” she whispered in his ear.

“We need to go home.” His forehead rested against hers. “Frack, Pollie. You have to see that—”

“I know.” They'd been over this before. “Look, when… Darth Malak invades the Republic, we’ll catch a ride back to the Rim, okay? Inse says it won't be long.”

He scoffed, like she was serious. “You—”

“I’m… working something out that might be better.” Zaalbar had thought it was a solid plan too. Solid as anything else. HK had translated for her. Zaalbar knew these sents. He knew how it was.

Onasi won't leave because of his kid and his kid won't leave because Onasi’s possessed.

So, we get Onasi not possessed. That still leaves coma-Revan, who Onasi won't leave because he's too fracking noble; but we can throw Revan in a crate or something and smuggle her out—

Or maybe she’ll actually die.

The flaw in this plan was that it had been a week, local time, and Onasi had shown no signs of getting sick at all. Other sents seemed to be getting sick… hopefully just a coincidence… but not Carth.

And if this plan didn't work— Seiran’s not wrong. We should run. I want my kid—I want our old life back—

“How is she?” Speak of the nerf and there it comes. Captain Onasi himself, coming up the stairs, looking healthy as a hessi, except for the shadows under his eyes.

“Same, she says.” Seiren wrapped his arms around Polla's waist, pulling her back against him protectively. “Take a look for yourself.”

“You know I can’t… can’t risk it.” Carth glanced up toward the top of the stairs and then back down. “Tenebrae thinks she’s already dead.”

“How are you?” Polla asked more pointedly. “And Lord Sulkypants?”

“We’re… still here.” Carth grimaced. Did he look pale and sweaty? Feverish?

Polla narrowed her eyes. Wishful thinking. “Feeling all right?” she added.
“Fine.” He looked confused that she was asking. “You? Are you…”

“Great.” She turned her head back to Seiran, trying to hide the disappointment. “Fracking fantastic.”

“Lord Sulkypants was wondering…” a cold voice said from the stairs below Carth, “... have you seen the Lady Inse, slave?”

“Frack off,” Polla snapped. There was no one around but them. At least for another hour. Inse had her advanced mathematics course in the Dark Temple Academy, and Mydia was busy doing... someone. Maybe another groom. “You can't talk to me like tha—”

The merest pressure on her throat, a gentle squeeze, like a warning and then Sulkypants himself came into view, looking paler than ever. Were those veins on his forehead? Or just dirt?

“I need to go,” his father muttered, beating a retreat back down the stairs. It looked cowardly but they had come to realize it was smart. Tenny-Bro seemed to delight in catching them all off-guard.

Get sick soon, Polla thought at Carth’s retreating back. I just want to go home.

“It's generally considered poor manners on Kaas for slaves to insult Sith Lords,” a new voice murmured and a purple Twi'lek rounded the stairs, coming up as Carth descended. She inserted herself between Dustil Onasi and them, making the landing feel really fracking crowded. “I would advise caution.”

Her eyes were even more glowy and fracked than Sulkypantses. But she looked familiar—

Dustil Onasi smiled thinly at Polla’s involuntarily blanch. “Master Ban, this is Polla Wen. And her husband, Seiran Wen.”

The purple Twi’lek who looked like she'd tangled in a dark side blender nodded, a frack of a lot more politely than Sulkypants. “You're her caretakers...” her voice trailed off and on brow ridge arched. “... Deralian?”

“I'm Polla Organa Wen,” Polla snapped. “Of course I'm looking after her. Apparently cleaning up after revans is my job.”

“The Polla Organa who—”

“Is not dead,” Polla nodded, slightly savoring the moment. Grass Priests, on this planet you never knew if you'd get another one. “That's right.”

“Who are you?” Seiran demanded. “You look... familiar.”

“I'm Yuthura Ban,” the purple Twi’lek said. “I'm here to help. I was Dustil and Mekel's teacher on Korrib—”

“She's here to help me,” sneered Sulkypants. “Frack lot of good she did Mekel.”

“There was nothing more I could do for him,” Yuthura said slowly. Really, for a Darksider, she was acting polite. “That's why I came to you, Dustil.”

“Malak,” he muttered. His eyes seemed to be almost... glittering. Skin looked paler even than a few days ago. “Call me Malak.”

“I'm glad I came,” Yuthura Ban said quietly. For a Sith, she actually seemed sane. “I want to help
you… Malak. When the bond was broken, it must have been a terrible shock.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, so much that when Polla breathed out she half expected to see her breath coalesce.

“Mekel died,” Sulky—Dustil—muttered. “He’s dead now.”

“Oh.” The Twi’lek twisted her head tails around her neck. “I’m sorry. You could still sense—was it Katarr?”

“What?” The kid’s voice deepened, weirdly echoing. “I said, **I don't want to talk about it. Forget it.**”

“Dustil….”

Was there something going on between them? It was then that Polla realized who Yuthura Ban was. A few months ago, she’d have gotten it instantly; but the strange thing was, the more people she met ripped from the headlines of *Revan Starfire This is Your Life,* the fewer she actually wanted to meet.

“Yuthura Ban? Revan’s best friend? I saw that vid! You were talking about her! The *Official Coruscanti Version?*”

“Yeah,” Sulky muttered. “They were pals. Good old days, back in Dreshdae. Fun times… **bonding.**”

“I—” The Twi’lek seemed spooked. She opened and closed her mouth a few times. Maybe she had bad memories.

“Lord Malak…?” A cheerful voice trailed up the stairs from down below. “The Wookiee said you’ve come to visit! What a lovely surprise.”

“I think Inse likes you,” Polla told Sulky, because she knew it would piss him off. “She’s just more subtle than Mydia. No finger bouquets.”

The purple Twi’lek frowned.

“Those are bouquets made of fingers,” Seiran muttered, just in case Yuthura Ban didn't get it.

“Yes….” The Twi’lek seemed even more distracted now, glancing down the stairs and then back up at them.

“Lord Mal-ak!” Another voice. **Mydia. The crazier one.** “You brought Admiral Onasi for Inse? How did you know she likes old things?”

“Better go,” Seiran told Sulky. “Don't want to leave your da alone with that lot.”

“Take the Twi’lek to Revan,” Sulky told Polla and Seiran. “She **claims** she can heal her.” His kid’s face twisted with unkid-like hate. “I've got better things to do.”

“Okay….” Polla said, looking up at Seiran to check.

He shrugged and gave her a slight nod.

“Right this way.” Polla didn't look back, and didn't let go of Seiran. “It's about five more flights. Good exercise.”
“How long has he… been like that?” The Twi’lek asked behind her as they ascended the spiral.

“How the hell should we know? Maybe all his life?” Polla scoffed.

Xxx

**Deralia, Present Day….**

The ag-shed was where the threshers were stored when they weren't harvesting. It was on a deserted part of the school grounds, past the shooting range, and the archery range, and the grenade factory. (Where they made only fake grenades like smoke ones and flash ones, because something about safety regs.)

The field was muddy and wet, and Korrie’s boots squelched in that mud as he tried to tame his mad feelings, because they'd be bad in a fight. It had been stupid — stupid — to let Layran get to him. Stupid not to fit in better. Both Mothers had told him he needed to hide here and Korrie was pretty sure he'd just done a craphole hell dammit job of fitting in, and not drawing any attention.

Ma-Moll would be upset too. The school might call, even. He didn't like to upset her. He knew how worried she got—

*Stupid. Stupid to get mad.*

*Not just stupid, Mal. Dangerous.* He wished the voice in his head still sounded like Father, but it didn't. It was just his own conscience. Ma-Moll said you always needed to listen to your conscience, but what was the point when the only thing it said that made sense was that it wanted to go home?

*Except home's gone. Like Grandfather.*

Korrie could *sense* Layran up ahead. The Force was good for that much. And he wasn't alone. One, two, three—the sleemo-pit had brought along companions.

*Dishonorable.* Egs didn't fight real battles, of course, just Sims until they became Amaltines; but they fought their own. With their chaps—but no one here was rich enough for their own hunter killer chaperone droid.

Korrie let his hand fall on the pistol on his belt and edged behind one of the target dummies because he was no dummy.

“I know you're there!” he called out. “Come over here, Layran, so I can kick your ass!”

“Fierce,” said a voice behind him. Almost conversational-like. “But you'll have to show them you mean business. Could get messy. You prepared for that?”

Korrie froze. The Force hadn't—the Force still wasn’t showing him anything there at all.

“Are you a droid?”

The voice didn't sound like one, but he couldn't think of what else it could be.

“Trained to act like one… sometimes.” Something hard and sharp poked at Korrie’s neck and he froze, feeling like his heart was gonna jump out of his chest. “Drop the gun, kid. And no funny business.”

“Okay.” Korrie swallowed hard. “Can I turn around?”
“Not yet. Any other weapons? Knives? Saber? Anything I need to know about?”

“Uh uh.” Breathe, he reminded himself. You’re not dead yet. He has to want something. Find out what. “No. What do y-you, what do you want?”

“A nice bottle of Yu-Phaedran ambrosia, maybe a fishing hauler.” The man’s voice was flat now. Not angry at all. “A sweet piece of tail. No more orders from the hollow men. They have us hunting deserters now—know why? Because we know. We all know too much, we ran too close. I had to put a bolt through sweet Naula’s lovely, horned skull at fifty meters out. Never even got to say good-bye…and now this.” His laugh was hard. “You. I was already in the neighborhood so I got the babysitting gig too.”

“You can’t kill me. You cannot kill me.” Negotiate in a hostage situation until the odds change. There’s always something they want. Always something you have—

“I—I’m rich. Do you need credits?” They’re all on Coru. Ma-Moll would ransom me but I hate to ask—

The blade pressed a little harder. The voice behind him chuckled. “Kid, everyone needs credits. But credits didn’t do Naula any good, did they?”

“I—I’m sorry about her.” Korrie knew a Naula, she was the one with the ships, who had sold Mother that ship. “I know another Naula, she—”

She’s Devaronian, dummy. They have horns. She could be the exact same one. She probably is.

“She’s dead? Naula’s dead?” His voice came out in a squeak. He’d only met her that one time.

Don’t cry, Korrie commanded himself. Don’t cry don’t cry.

“Naula. Kiril. Gaston. Benife. Yeah. Deserters. All dead.” The blade lifted abruptly from Korrie’s neck and he took the chance and dived instantly to the ground, willing for his blaster to snap into his hand as he rolled, aiming and firing before he’d even looked up, trusting the Force like Father always said—

And it worked it worked Father was right!

The training bolt glanced off black body armor, straight in the chest. A Human man stared down at Korrie. He was smiling. One thick black eyebrow raised. “Nice shot.”

Korrie fired again, and a blue shield shimmered before the man’s face and then the bolt glanced off there too.

“Not bad, kid. Not bad at all. You’re fast. No one will expect that. Not with how big you are.”

“If the laser bolt hits your eye it can blind you,” Korrie warned him. Ma-Moll had said so. Permanently.

The man nodded, and raised his vibroblade. “You wanna try again?” He sounded serious.

“What do you want?” Korrie repeated. The glint of a red light from behind the ag shed caught his eye. It was to the left of the man—so maybe he didn’t see.

“Doesn’t matter.” The man frowned. “That woman you’re staying with. She knows who you are? She treats you okay?”
“Do you know who I am?” He willed his voice to get as mad as Mother’s. “You leave her alone! You need to leave—”

The sharp burst of repeater fire drowned out Korrie’s words, and the man staggered back as the rounds peppered his chest. With the armor, they didn't seem to be going through, but they were enough distraction that Korrie took the chance and rolled into a run, pumping his legs as fast as he could toward the grenade workshop. Lots of places to hide in there. And there's smoke grenades and stuff—

“Chore! Chore! Over here!”

Korrie veered left toward the strand of trees and the voices. Every nerve in his body felt electric, like the Force was with him. He vaguely felt that presence behind him—that guy that evil assassin guy—wink out—hiding, he’s hiding—before he reached the clearing.

Layran Lee, Jesp O’Sip, and Pollanne Dinana stared at him, with eyes big as goreapples. Pollanne held the repeater that had just started to take the evil assassin guy down. Layran was sitting in a speeder. Its engine was revving. Jesp had a pair of field goggles in his hand with the projector switched on, like they’d been spying on Korrie. Like they’d seen the whole thing.


“You moved fast,” Layran told him. “Never seen anyone move that fast except in the vids.”

“Those vids are fake,” Jesp muttered. “What are you, refboy—some kind of freak?”

“Maybe.” Kore was taller than Jesp, and Jesp looked away first. “Is that a problem?”

Jesp shook his head.

“If there's some creep hunting kids we need to run,” Pollanne said seriously. “Get in, Kore. We know some hiding places.”

“If he comes after you again down the canyon way we can drop rocks on him.” Layran added.

“I was watching in the scope,” Pollanne said as they drove away. “You hit him dead-on. Nice!”

“Thanks.” Kore frowned. “I don't think he wanted me dead.”

“Doesn't matter,” Layran said. “Nobody messes with our gang! Specially some foreign creep with swords—”

“He had two swords!! Did you see that?” Jesp broke in. “Like he was some kind of Jedi Sith!”

“They weren’t lightsabers,” Rannie argued. “Jedi Sith woulda had lightsabers.”

“Jedi Sith’s not a—” It didn’t matter. Kore laughed. The wind blew on his face as the speeder sped along. It didn't matter. At least for now, it didn't matter. “You know what? I’ve *seen* a Jedi Sith. Or two. Jedi Sith are *much* more badass than that loser guy.”

The man between names watched the speeder take off, trying to mask the first honest laugh he'd felt in fracking years. First since the war, maybe.
“What’re the odds,” he said out loud. “Watch their kid? Make sure he’s safe? Kriffing Malachor D’Reev!”

Life was funny. Three knew he didn't have to take the job. No more voices in his head. The Blades were done and dusted—and cleaning up deserters had been mercy-kills much as anything else—even poor Naula, with her shop and her scores and her nightmares….

Call it a hunch, but the man was pretty sure he coulda ended the kid and no one’d be the wiser. Hell, he coulda stayed on Peragus Station with that soft redhead from engineering, ignored this assignment, been retired for good, and probably made it through.

The grappling vine said the old woman was history. The Beast wasn't a man anymore. And the Manda was dead.

Nobody would care about a former Three of Twelve. Nobody was left.

Except... probably somewhere out there… someone else’s job to make him dead too.

“Not today,” the man between names muttered.

Their kid—he just had to see. That stunt in the school today—more pride than sense. A lot like the kid’s father, the man thought—not that he'd known him. Hadn't really known the mother either… no one really knows a legend.

“Maybe they'll treat you nicer now, Malachor,” Three muttered, picking another slug out of his armor. “Everyone always wants to be the kriffing hero.”
“Here.” The old woman was frail, although Brianna supposed she wasn't truly any older than Atris—perhaps a decade. Less than two. She cradled a small, triangular bundle in her arms, wrapped in gray fabric. Brianna held her upright by the elbow, supporting Master Kreia as she walked to the table, where Brianna had already laid out her plate.

“Would you like to put your bundle down, Mother?”

“You have no curiosity about what it might be?” Master Kreia didn’t seem to react at all to being called ‘Mother;’ perhaps she was arrogant enough to think Brianna was merely following Atris’s orders to call her such.

The barb did not dignify a response. “I’ve prepared a soup. Master Atris said you like papish spice. We had some imported from Tanaab, just for you.” She pulled out the chair, keeping her voice even.

“And will your foster mother be joining us?” The old woman settled down at the head of the table—a table usually set for seven; now merely for three.

“She wanted Mical and I to dine with you alone.” Her brother—as she had been told he was—was late.

“Can you put on the news? I would like to see what has happened in the galaxy today.” The old woman set her wrapped bundle next to her at the table. One corner of the gray fabric covering it slipped, revealing a gleam of blue. As if Master Kreia had noticed Brianna’s glance, she folded the fabric up again.

“Certainly.” Brianna switched the viewscreen, currently showing a golden plain of rikash wheat on Echanis, to the Telosian wideband of the HoloNet.

Jokka Rai: “...build-up of Imperial forces along Gordian Reach seems to indicate a resumption of hostilities in the near future—”

Likana Aree: “When you say Imperial you mean, Sith? You’re saying the Sith are back?”

Jokka Rai: “I’m saying we’re getting some conflicting information from our allies in the Outer Rim. Imperial-class freighters have been sighted near the Foerost shipyards, which you may recall was the sight of a surprise attack during the Exar Kun Wars—”

“Not this,” Kreia interrupted. Her face turned, half-covered with her ocular visor, to scowl at Brianna. “Is there another news channel?”

Brianna flipped through the bands, but similar stories were appearing on them all. “I’m sorry, Mother, this seems to be all of the news.”

“Nothing about Katarr?”
“I can run a search—” Brianna’s voice trailed off, for the old woman was watching the duel between Revan Starfire and the rancor again. One of her hands absently patted the pile of cloth next to her—as if for comfort.

“No. If it hasn’t reached the HoloNet yet, they may not yet know. Nihilus takes his time… the Fleet attempts a cover-up… it’s all—all fine.” She dimmed the sound, not taking her eyes from the screen.

**REVAN STARFIRE: DEAD ON SITH PLANET**, the headline read. **LORD MALAK IN CHARGE?**

“Here is the first course.” Brianna had prepared the soup for serving before fetching Kreia, sprinkling each bowl with a dollop of crema friz and chopped onna. If Mical didn’t arrive soon, his would grow cold.

“I’ve never been fond of soup.” The old woman sighed, but picked up her spoon, bringing it to her lips.

Brianna enjoyed the moments of silence where they were both engrossed in the indulgence of their meal above all else.

Then the door slid open.

“Hello.” His hair was more yellow than white, his eyes more blue than gray; but Atris had told Brianna that Mical Jorde wore her mother—and her father’s—face even as she did.

“Mical—” her mother leaned across the table, reaching for the soup tureen Brianna had placed near his setting. Her elbow hit the wrapped bundle in a way that could only be deliberate—

The bundle fell on the thickly-carpeted floor. And… since when had the floor been covered in rugs? The floors in this wing had always been bare and cold.

“Oh!”

*What a contrivance,* Brianna thought, as Mical gathered the bundle up again. Some of the fabric had fallen open, and the man who was her brother plucked the blue crystal that had fallen to the ground up—

And froze halfway, his eyes going terribly, terribly blank.

“What have you done?” Brianna demanded of Kreia. She pushed her chair back and stood. She wanted to go to Mical, but something held her fast: the presentiment of caution—some emotion too instinctive to be called fear.

“Would you like to know?” Kreia murmured.

Mical’s eyes opened—

“Medriaas,” he whispered. “Nathema—”

XXX

**Run.**

Revan ran. One moment, she’d been frozen, staring at the ghost of a man she barely remembered
—and the next she’d been running, feet pounding across the sand toward the sea.

Malachor V.

A ripple in space, an implosion, churning up from the planet itself. A vortex, a scream, a flash-flooded canyon—the force of a hurricane that ripped through all of those tightly-packed ships as if they were made of water.

The Force screamed the death of thousands. Tens of thousands. A hundred thousand—

Revan ran toward the sea. Malachor echoed in her mind like the deafening rush of a deepwater tide, the roar of a thousand ships with all the lights in them screaming….

She’d seen it before, but she’d never known what it was.

XXX

Revan had more questions for Dar, a galaxy full of them. Instead, all she said was, "Show me. Show me what you did." Her mouth felt chalky and too dry. "Show me Malachor."

Dar nodded slowly, still looking away. "You are right. You should know." She began to sketch charts on the now-black glass.

It was oddly beautiful, the graph that showed the death of two armies and the forced conversion of a third.

XXX

Dar told me what happened, but I didn’t know then that I already knew.

I heard the same screams when Taris died. I heard them on Manaan. On Korriban. I heard them in my nightmares, but I never knew why—

Revan’s feet pounded across the sand. It was more impulse than idea that made her speed toward the shoreline with the two shadow-men at her back—both of them all that remained of Davad Arkan.

She raced along the shore—trying to put as much space as possible between her and the Mandalorians—between her and that pit that hid the Jedi. Incoming waves splashed across her feet and hissed, steaming as the water from the sea began to eat into her boots. The water from the sea….

The acid sea.

Run, his voice murmured in her head.

An explosion behind Revan made her look back—only to see her allies setting up their rocket launchers. One missile soared through the second shadow-man and past him into the water, where it splashed, yellow-bright, in a plume of gray acid.

Canderous, you fracking di’kut—explosives won't work!

Revan put on another desperate burst of speed veering inland, away from the acid tide. The plan in her head was still tangled and confused. The scream was still echoing, the images from Arkan’s mind still echoing like drumbeats in her head.
Again, she saw Dar’Revan in the Jedi Temple. Again, she felt Arkan’s memories washing against her mind.

**For you, Revan.** His thoughts were *in* her head. More echoes, another scream.

Again, that image of Dar in the Jedi Temple, her face bleak and hopeless in a way that Revan had never seen it before—not even in the mirror: seeing her duplicate through Arkan’s eyes; his thoughts—his emotion—swamping her own semblance of control—

Revan’s feet pounded across the sand, heading for the scrub bush, the low hills of the valley — away from the Jedi, away from populated areas—

XXX

“I’ve seen enough autopsies of our past. I already know we failed.”

“It isn’t over,” Davad told her. So far from over. *She had no idea.*

The woman in Sheris’s body went to one of the practice remotes they’d disabled, kneeling down and reactivating its controls. The droid whirred, clucking—and rose.

“I know.” Her voice was a stubborn echo of its former strength. “We need to stabilize the Republic as much as we can. Bulwark our defenses here— and then go after Tenebrae. Directly.”

The boldness of her words seemed in direct contrast with Sheris’s cringing demeanor. The contradiction made Davad nauseous.

“You… want to invade the Sith Empire? Now?” Cracked, he thought sadly. Nothing more than a shell.

She stared at him as if Davad was the one who had gone mad. “Don’t be a fool. We need to make as many sentients immune to Tenebrae’s Kiss as possible—here and in Sith space. My virus is the key.”

“This virus? The one they call the Jedi Plague?” Is your virus the one the old woman began spreading on Coruscant with Arca? Are these her words or yours?

“Yes. I’ll need your help, old friend.”

You’ll have it, his mind vowed, although his mouth had more sense. Davad had never been privy to the precise nature of her plans before, although he supposed his master would want to know. “How?”

“Betray him. We had an accord. It must break.” Revan’s voice trailed off and those hard eyes clouded again, her voice slipping back into Sheris’s weak bleatings. “I-I don’t know if it will work. Many sentients will die—and… there will be reprisals. Personal. Possibly planetary.” She let out a slow breath, frowning. “The Sith worlds are more vulnerable to the plague’s effects than ours.”

“You mean the Sith will die? Our enemies?” Weak, he thought. You care for them now when you spent years sacrificing the rest of us—

*In that moment, Davad thought he understood dead Beya Organa’s treachery above Deralia.*

XXX

Beya’s… treachery? Arkan’s thoughts were tangled with webs of associations, memories that
Revan could only see in flashes.

*Dar was the one spreading that fracking virus? On purpose?*

A chill shot through the Force, as Revan realized she’d slowed, realized the two shadow men were flanking her again.

*Where am I?*

A cluster of huts appeared over a hill. Lights twinkled inside the largest building. She veered away, sensing the life within—sensing the Force-users within, but too late—

Revan felt more than saw the shadows’ attention shift. The shadow on her left split away from pursuing her; heading toward the largest dwelling. A window revealed a woman’s silhouette inside, smaller figures behind her. Then, the shutters slammed shut as the inhabitants tried to hide themselves from monsters.

*Miralukan Force-sensitives in that house, each one a bright spark in the Force.*

*Snick,* murmured the dark voice in her mind—and the other shadow turned too.

The first one reached the door, slamming into it—testing it, *toying with them*—

She’d seen Arkan rip the door of the shuttle open as if it was paper. She felt the power in him, the power he’d used to raise Kavar Vakla’s corpse, the power screaming in her mind—

The door rattled on its hinges and the walls of the house itself began to shake as the monster tested their strength—using barely a fraction of his.

*Or me? Is he testing me? Using them as bait for… me?*

“*No!*” Revan stopped running and waved her arms. “*Arkan! Hey! Hey, asshole! Come back! Over here!*”

*I’m hungry.*

The plaintive cry brought back a strange memory of Polla Organa—age eight—the summer she’d nursed the ground-chip pup who’d fallen from its nest.

*Please. So small. It won’t take long.*

“*No!*” Kavar’s saber was in her hand. The Force seemed everywhere in that moment: in the air itself, and all around. The Force was *hers*—except where he stood, twinned and empty, the shadows of his faces swirling and reforming—

Her wrist unleashed the hilt, letting it ignite as its spin reached the two shadow-men.

It cut through one at the forearm, and then snapped back into her hand, running straight through the other with no effect to the man at all.

The arm from the first one fell to the ground.

The figures moved slightly apart. Waiting. The larger one raised one of its two hands toward her, and beckoned.

*Come, Revan. Tell them not to be frightened. Help.*
Revan took a step toward them, the anger at her own helplessness rising in her throat. She’d had this feeling before—so many times. Trapped into playing a game with invisible, recondite rules.

The fracking game she couldn't remember.

Frick that game.

“No,” she said again, “You come here.”

The shadow man… dissolved into the other, and then vanished.

A shiver ran across Revan’s spine, like a hessi walking over her grave. Not vanished. Turn around—no, don’t—don’t turn around—

She turned. Arkan was less than two meters away; he’d been creeping up at her back: a man-shaped swirl of coruscating darkness. This close she could see that he was clad in a ragged black cloak and mask, white and skull-shaped. Red diamonds ran like tears from the holes for the mask’s eyes. But the head under the mask seemed to have no eyes at all.

**You said to come here. Here I am, Revan.**

Dark, this is dangerous—-

She took a step backwards then another, trying to get both shadows in view; heading back up the hill, trying for higher ground—

The shadow nearest to the hut suddenly sharpened too. It was wearing the remains of Master Kavar’s robes, features still indistinct above, a blur. One of its hands was gone.

I’m hungry. The words echoed, doubled in her mind. Please. Let me eat them, and I won’t eat you. Not yet. Not until you see.

Somewhere, there was the sound of bells.

Come, both shadows said. Two quiet, twinned screams, ringing in her mind.

“You haven’t eaten me yet.” Her spine was sheathed in ice. She felt like a trapped nerf, caught between two nexu. It took effort not to let her voice shake with fear. “Why is that, Arkan?”

**You will understand why. You will understand HER.**

I understand Dar’Revan as much as I fracking well have to—I understand she took off and went back to the Emperor and I understand you can destroy them both—

The thought was one Revan had had before. The Fleet’s High Admiral—her mind skipped over the woman’s name—*not Dodonna, Forn is dead*—had wanted to use Arkan to destroy Tenebrae.

Revan could see the practicality of that arrangement.

“You want to me to understand?” She took another step back, forcing a smile to her lips like these two shadow men were some port officer, some Hutt she needed to impress—or charm—

**I will show you.**

“If you want me to understand, why don’t you tell me about it while we run?” Her legs twitched
with the need, with fear. “I’m going this way.”

By the door, the Kavar-shaped shadow took a step toward her. Where?

“I-I don’t—” Revan’s head turned back toward the direction where they’d left the crashed shuttle, the snubfighter—now out of sight beyond the rolling hills. She didn’t think either vessel would fly—certainly not enough for hyperspace.

I need to find a ship that will fly. I need to find a ship that I can fly.

“What if I told you… what if I told you… what if I said there was a place where you could have lots to eat? Entire systems?”

I know already. I will go there. I will eat them all.

She blinked and the shadowed man in Kavar’s robes was closer, three meters away now. The other still stood, closer still: just a mask and a tattered black cloak.

Behind them all, a retractable gate slammed down over the door of the hut. What looked like an energy shield sparked, surrounding the dwelling.

That might buy those innocents minutes.

“You know about Kaas? Don’t you want to go there together?”

Food, echoed the one that had been Kavar Vakla. Its features shifted like lava.

It was so wrong, that the illusion superimposed over Kavar’s face looked more than familiar: dimples flashing on each side of his smile; light-colored eyes contrasted by choca-brown skin; the skein of braids and bells trailing down his back. Revan had no memory of this Davad Arkan—no memory except what he’d shown her.

The image was all illusion, a lie—and yet a part of Revan felt nothing but a soul-crushing guilt—

I did this to him. All my fault. I used him at Malachor. And Malachor did this to him—

Don’t cry.

“I’m not.” Her eyes were dry anyway. The guilt felt cold and empty—a dead battery. Nothing more than a shell. “Follow me, Davad. Trust me.”

Do you see? It was to be one of us. Always one of us. Now, do you see?

See what? That you loved me and I loved Malak? See that I used you? See that I made you—made all the Jedi who followed me fall? I made you to fracking stop Tenebrae and it didn’t work?

Anger was a bright spark inside her guts.

“No, I don’t fracking see!”

Revan turned and ran.

It wasn’t you. Voice in her head as another wave of images washed over her. It was her.

The image of Dar appeared in Revan’s mind again—dressed as Sheris—or dressed like me. Like I was. Fracking Revan Starfire, Jedi Knight—
Mother. Wife. Savior. Conqueror—
Murderer.

Look! Look! You have to see.

She increased her pace, turning away from the hut toward the sea again; well aware that the two shadows had turned away from the innocents, were now trailing her. She’d won that much of a victory.

Revan ran toward the sea.

The acid sea.

XXX

In a sparring room in the Jedi Temple, the woman in Sheris’s body paced back and forth like a trapped manka before stopping in front of Davad, cheeks flushed, breasts heaving. Her words fell like stones.

“When Tenebrae retaliates, the Republic will have no choice but all-out war. But with the Sith worlds decimated by plague... he will lose. I hope he will lose... hope.” Revan’s voice trailed off. “I don’t even know if it will work.” Her hands were curled into angry, impotent fists. “I don’t know how to make it work. We need a means of distribution for the virus. And ships—I don’t know how we’ll get ships. The Mando’ade follow her, not me. And my allies in the Fleet are—”

“Mostly dead,” he supplied.

It was not like the woman Davad had known to admit defeat, but this woman was defeated.

“I don’t know what to do.” Her lower lip trembled.

“Don’t you?” he asked gently. The heady blend of love and disdain was so strong that in that moment, Davad imagined the unthinkable: he imagined crossing the room and crushing her in his arms; taking her life just as easily as he had taken the half-dozen others since that first padawan in the kitchen, the day that Oerin left.

Taking Revan as if she were purely sustenance, and not the woman whose fate had steered his own for two decades.

I could take her now and the old woman could not stop me. A dark thought.

A moment of weakness.

The shell of her laughed bitterly, eyes untamed and raw as they looked up to his. “The Republic will not allow me command of their ships… ever again. If Tenebrae infiltrates our navy, the Emperor could win the war without a shot fired. I can make one generation immune using the virus, but the next—even if we manage to inoculate the Core worlds, in thirty years... in fifty, it will all—it will all go again....” She closed her eyes. “My son will not be safe. No... no children will be safe, no one—if we can’t stop him now.”

“You once said the only true failure is death.” Davad remembered trying to take comfort in that, as Malachor died around them; trying to take pride in the fact that he had not died too. “We’re not dead yet.”
Revan’s shell smiled slightly. “You… fought well for me, Davad. Thank you.”

His stomach growled softly, reminding him that the nagging hunger he felt was not purely for more Force-users. “I loved you.”

“Yes.” She had the grace to look awkward at his confession, that pink darkening her cheeks as she ducked her head to fall behind a curtain of red braids. Then she looked up again—those leaf-green eyes meeting his so coolly that he could not tell if her poise or the first blush was the true feint. “Would you like me to say it back?”

“A little late now.” He laughed as if it no longer mattered. In truth, it did not.

Xxx

I’m sorry, Revan thought. I’m sorry I’m not… her. The rest of the vision did nothing but raise more questions.

If Dar had a plan, why didn’t she use it? Why the frack was she standing around healing sents for so long? Why the frack didn’t she tell me any of this?

I am not sorry. You will be delicious. If she is alive on Kaas, I will eat her too.

Revulsion washed over Revan then, increasing her speed. I’m apologizing to the thing that killed all those Jedi! Those bodies in the Temple. The thing who wants to consume this entire fracking planet—

Anger was fuel: anger at her helplessness, the futility of this chase. Anger was power—

Another missile launched, and exploded uselessly somewhere to her left. Revan veered right, predicting the next trajectory. Somewhere behind them were allies. Fracking idiots!

She needed to lead this monster away from them too.

This time, the shoreline gave Revan no hesitation. Her boots splashed the tide as her speed increased. She adjusted her velocity, the air around her thickening—and beneath her—the Force guided her steps—

Revan ran across the tops of the waves, straight into the acid sea.

Follow, she thought bleakly. Comforting a madman, to soothe him, to stay alive. I’m sorry I’m not her. Would you like to see her? We can go to her. I know where she is. Do you want to go there? If you don’t eat me, she’ll be happy. You want to make her happy, don’t you?

No! The thought pulsed in Revan’s head like a shockwave, coupled with a wave of longing that disrupted her steps across the acid water, almost sending her splashing through. Not her. She was a morsel and you are a feast—

Her legs felt like they were on fire— if I falter, I’ll die.

Go to hell then. Follow me, Arkan. Follow me—

The blast of his mind brought another wave of his memories. YOU HAVE TO SEE. YOU HAVE TO SEE WHY.
The Jedi Temple. The woman in Sheris’s body rubbed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped.

“I’m... sorry, Davad.” A breath. “Sorry, that I can’t recall more of our last day together. You were... there.” Her eyes grew distant again, lost in paths he could not follow.

How would it be now—now that Davad was the Sith Lord and she the lover? Would she be his lover still? Would it be different?

Better?

It was good she was weak in Sheris’s body, Davad thought. The other Revan—the amnesiac with all of her power—would be too much of a temptation. But this one—this one he could have. Take in his arms and only kiss. It had never been her power that drew him—

Fool. Neither are for you. Leave her now before you lose yourself. His master’s voice interrupted Davad's reverie, cracking like a lash across his back.

XXX

What? In the acid water, Revan slowed for a moment. Who was that? Who else was there?

You know. You know already. You must see—

Agonizing pain seared her feet, and she took off again like a scalded hessi.

I’m running, I’m running on top of the kriffing water—

XXX

Fool. Neither are for you. Leave her now before you lose yourself. His master’s voice interrupted Davad's reverie, cracking like a lash across his back.

“I am in full control of the situation, Master.” Davad’s words came out too loudly.

Revan looked startled, as if she thought he meant her. “Thank you for that,” she murmured. That braided head tilted, as if Revan was trying to hear—as if she could—almost—hear the old woman’s whispers herself. “Do you sense someone... here?”

“These halls,” he joked. “The Jedi Temple is full of old ghosts.”

“And newer ones.” She shivered. “You know Jedi are dying? Master Croi—I gave him the vaccine myself. He shouldn’t have died. The virus may have... mutated. The science—I tried to learn, but he tricked me—so many times—I could have been wrong....”

Master Croi had come to Davad with his concerns and suspicions about Sheris Loran. Master Croi had been delicious. But Davad did his best to look suitably concerned.

“I do not know,” he murmured. “Perhaps Croi died from other causes.”

“At least Malachor is safely away.” She frowned. “I will see my son—soon. I will see him—”

“Is he vaccinated?” It was a cruel question. Any question about her son was cruel. He knew her too well. He knew his own place. The boy was in all of her thoughts; but she would not see him because it was not safe.
She was right. It was not.

Her eyes widened. “Mal’s a child. He’s too young to need it—”

“He’s big for his age.” It was cruel. A part of Davad… relished the blank shock in those green eyes, the way it replaced the calculating edge—

XXX

The Mando’ade fired another useless rocket, arcing past Revan, splashing into the sea.

Don’t look down. No sooner did Revan think that than she was—looking down at the acid sea underfoot as her feet slammed against it. Wet splashed her flightsuit as she began to sink, followed immediately by what felt like flames on her skin.

You pathetic fool, lift yourself before you lose more of your hide. Does Carth like scars? He hardly seems the type—

Not Arkan’s voice, this one was feminine. Arctic. Familiar.

Dar?

Silence. Revan felt her legs start to churn through the water, rising up, until Arkan’s memories overwhelmed her again.

Xxx

Mention of her son had dimmed her spark.

Now, the woman in Sheris’s body was frowning at her own hands, as if she could see the blood on them.

“Malachor is safe,” she repeated stubbornly. “From what you’ve said, the imposter is capable of protecting him. He is still too young to fight—”

“Of course.” He calmed her fears with a gentle smile, nodding to the training sabers stacked against the wall. “Would you like to have a go again?”

“No.” She stared at her hands, flexing the metal one. The gold was flashy and looked cheap. Not something Rev would have chosen at all. “Master Croi should not have died. And others—others too.” The gold fingers curved on empty air and then opened again. Davad remembered her nails raking down his back.

She looked up at him, gaze sharpening. Suspicion—or hope? “Master Atris is gone.” That mind of hers when presented a puzzle would worry it like a kath with a long-dead bone. “Did Master Atris flee the plague? Or was she one of Tenebrae’s all along?”

If Master Atris had been the Emperor’s under their master’s very nose, Davad would owe poor, dead Oerin Lin five meaningless credits.

Again, the old woman intruded, her thoughts like a hammer to his skull. You joke of wagers? A fool indeed, beast. Atris is mine, even as you are. She has always been mine.

This time it was Davad’s head that turned sharply toward the door of the sparring room. But there was no one there.
Revan gave him a quizzical glance. “Is everything all right?”

“Atris is not a threat,” he soothed. “Wise to have some Jedi masters leave—to keep our knowledge safe—”

Her continued persistence is dangerous. Make an end to this inquiry.

Green eyes widened. “Did you hear that? Feel that? There’s something—”

That blasted empathy of Sheris’s! In her own body she had been oblivious as the sun.

Careful, apprentice. Her mind is still fragile.

Revan twitched again. “There! There it was again! A-voice. A... a shadow?” Her head turned, and she turned, backing round in a circle. “Who’s there? Davad? Do you feel it too?”

Careful, he sent back. She senses you, Master.

Sheris was always too sensitive.

“No,” Davad lied.

“Do you remember? The day I... was reborn. Kae was there too when—I think it was Kae.” She paced towards him, restless, nearly with Revan’s own grace.

Her voice was a low murmur and her head shook. “I think it was Kae, but she looked like my old master, Vima Sunrider... Vima, she looked like Vima, because Vima—she was—”

Careful, the old woman whispered again, claws in his mind.

Davad was tired of care. He had been careful far too long. Exasperation colored his words, leaving behind caution.

“Vima Sunrider was Arren Kae. She... she took the redemption at the beginning of the Mandalorian Wars. Her mother’s... death, the double-edged blade of her Battle Meditation, her padawan’s many failings.... All too much for her.” He would not look at the blank space near the door where he suspected Kae lurked unseen.

His voice hardened. “Vima Sunrider was too weak to live in her own skin. She took the redemption and became Arren Kae.”

Admit the truth, and hide the lie. Good.

I did not do it to please you, Master. Some small satisfaction, childish really, at the chance to taunt her.

“Her padawan’s failings?” Revan’s cold voice became brittle. “Do you mean me?”

“Only conjecture.” Davad shrugged. “Vima had several padawans. No one knows the truth of that woman’s heart.”

You certainly cannot, Beast. Poor, blind, fool. It is not in your nature.

“But that... Vima was and she... she was there. That day on my flagship, Kae was there too. The day I—” her voice faltered. “I... remember Kae—she was there when I—”
“She was on the Aleema when you died, yes.” Had she forgotten so soon? Was she forgetting again? Even as he watched, those sharp eyes clouded, and Sheris’s braided head tilted to the side as if she heard a voice in her mind again.

Whispering lies and promises—to her, even as their Master whispered to him—

Oh, what arrogance—you still think you know her—still think she can be yours—

XXX

Acid splashed against her legs, burning holes in the fabric.

Pain helped. Revan focused, trying to drown out the wave of images from Arkan: the Jedi Temple, Dar’Revan—

That old woman. It always comes back to her. Arren Kae. The Sith Lord I saw on Coruscant! The one Lin and Arkan promised to kill.

What did she do to them? What did she do to Dar and Davad? That was… that was more than compulsion.

She manipulated us all. Is she dead now? Is it over?

Who fracking cares? I'm going to die out here. I'm running on top of an acid sea, being chased by... monsters. Arkan is inside my head—

Her feet were churning over water again, and the acid water splashed against her arms. Revan turned, and one of the figures—that shell that had been Kavar Vakla—was entirely gone.

But the other… the masked shadow rose, meters higher than it should have been able to—pacing behind her with the deliberate grace of a nexu on the trail of its prey.

Davad Arkan cannot be killed. But he can end the Sith Emperor. I don’t even know the fracking Sith Emperor!

Dar’Revan knew Tenebrae. Dar’Revan did everything she could to stop him because—

Tenebrae took everything from me.

Stark words, and a bleak emptiness.

And Arkan can take all that he is. Every planet. Every soul he's possessed. The Empire’s power depends on the Force: without it, their civilization is crippled. Arkan can end them all. And I hold his leash.

His hunger screamed in Revan’s mind, deafening the rest of the planet. And a part of her, a weak part of Revan wanted to help him: put an end to the suffering cries she could hear—

But I can’t.

A thing can be controlled, if one has the will. The Republic had a plan to destroy him before: fire on his body, with all of their ships. Atomize him in the vacuum of space.

After he destroys the Sith, see they carry it through. Or use the Mando’ade Fleet—you control them. You...
The voice in her head sounded like Dar, but Revan knew better. She’d heard the voice before. On Taris. Manaan. Korriban—in the heart of the Star Forge, facing the laughing madman. The voice was the part of her that had been there all along. The fragment that had never been completely scrubbed out.

Her lungs felt scorched from the fumes of the acid sea. As Revan watched, the shadow seemed to cross the distance she’d won as if the meters were nothing at all. Closer, closer still, until she could make out the blur of a face, hands like claws—

*Did the other one sink? Is it really gone? Is this another trap?*

Fear gave her new energy. She thought of that thing swimming through the depths of the acid sea like a firaxa shark, fear of those jaws closing around her leg and dragging her into the depths—

*Fool. Kavar was still flesh. Flesh dissolves. See your own does not—*

XXX

*In the Jedi Temple, the woman in Sheris’s body shook her head, her slender body trembling, those leaf-eyes nearly blinking back tears.*

As Davad watched, those shoulders slumped again—and he knew, with a sudden rage in his heart, that the old woman’s voice was inside her head, twisting in its knives.

*“Don’t worry,” he said gently.*

*This urge to protect her. Had it been Davad’s master who had put that want in him all along? Had his master put him forth as her defender? Had any of what they’d had been real?*

*Too much strain and she will crack. The overlay stabilizes, given time; but if you disrupt her now—*

*The bright head cocked as if she could hear his master’s voice. Those leaf eyes narrowed. “Are we alone, Davad? Tell me.” Her voice wavered, and he scented her fear. “Please—please tell me. You were always loyal... you were always....”*

*He shook his head.*

XXX

Revan’s feet were moving again, now splashing in the shallows near the shore, as she tried to sustain enough momentum to keep herself moving on its tensile surface. The soles of her feet stung, and Revan realized her boots and the lower half of her flightsuit were half in tatters already.

Her legs burned and she put on a burst of speed.

He was still behind her, and there was nowhere left to go. Nowhere except—

Revan turned toward the crashed *Harbinger* listing in the waves.

XXX

*“Tell me,” she repeated. There were tears in her green eyes. She wiped them like a child would, using her entire sleeve. Revan had never been so clumsy. “I trust you. You love—loved me. You*
were always loyal—"

Yes, but not to you.

Davad had no choice. He made his voice gentle, even as his gut burned with hunger. “You will forget this, Revan.”

“No!” Revan’s voice pitched high and wrong. “I can’t.” Her lip trembled and she was nothing like his Starfire at all. Just the copy. Only Sheris.

Only Sheris and he no longer cared.

He smiled, as if it were a comfort, and increased the strength of his command. “You need to forget—”

“I-I need to… forget.” Those green eyes dulled, still fixed on his. Her shoulders sagged.

“You will continue to help heal sentients in the Underground,” he continued, feeling the power swell within his breast. “You enjoy it.”

“I do.” She blinked. “I-I do enjoy it. I want to help—”

“Leave her now, Beast-Lord.” Scrape of footsteps behind him. His master could move in silence—that she did not was a warning for him, a threat. “Others need your attention. There remain some among the Council who suspect… to keep her safe, take care of them.”

“You will not hurt her before my return,” he growled, watching those green eyes widen again with confusion, focusing blankly on Kae as if she did not know who it was she saw.

“Master Kae? I did not see you come in.” It was Sheris’s weak smile the woman gave, and he sensed no deception. “May we be of assistance?”

XXX

Her again. Kae. Arren Kae—the former Vima Sunrider. Fracking with Dar’Revan’s mind… frack her! Is she still alive?

It was impossible to find purchase on the shifting, liquid surface of the sea, impossible to jump. Revan’s first few attempts at a Force leap to the safety of the Harbinger’s bow ended dunking her under. Pain shocked her body and the Force propelled her up again, like a cork shooting out of a bottle—

Shields, hold shields, don’t let them fall—

Revan bobbed up and down in the sea, with only the Force between her and the acid. She felt a splash sizzle on her hair. Her faintly-glowing hands scrabbled on the ship’s metal sides for purchase, as the current slammed her into the hull—everything a battle as he drew ever-closer—

A wave washed her up, and her hand almost grasped a protrusion—one of the cannons, maybe—its edges sharp, yet worn away already. Her hand slipped, and she bobbed back down.

Force, Revan thought hopelessly. This can’t be how I fracking die! Panic fueled her shields, strengthening them, until the world was encased in blue—changing the soft light of the planet’s red sun to a lilac haze, making her skin a lurid corpse-color like she was already dead. The wave pushed her forward again, ducking her under—
“Davad?” Sheris’s mouth gave him a gentle smile. “You seem troubled.”

“Many thoughts on his mind,” Kae murmured, trace of a smile on her saccharine, lined face. “Did you both enjoy your sparring?”

“I’m so out of practice.” Reva rubbed her head again, as if it hurt.

Davad was grateful that his master had kept them both: one Reva with all of her power; the other with the broken memories. He took a deep breath. “You are calm, Reva. You will forget. There is no Vima Sunrider. Arren Kae is a loyal Jedi, and your friend. You can trust her—”

Reva blinked Sheris’s gullible eyes. “Sorry. For a moment, I thought—”

“Sheris.” The old woman folded her arms in her sleeves and bowed. “I only came by to see how you were doing. Did you both enjoy your sparring?”

“That was kind of you, Master Kae.” Voice wooden and weak, all the fire in her extinguished. “I’m so out of practice.”

“Shall we spar again tomorrow?” Davad’s voice felt like broken glass. Hunger surged in his breast. At that instant, he knew he could consume both of them in two heartbeats, if he dared—if he thought it would end the war.

Which war—

At that instant, he did not know which war. He only knew what he could not consume them. It was not allowed. Davad only knew the war would not end—not as long as the Force survived.

Reva rubbed her temple. “I-I guess. Yes. After the clinic. I-I like my work in the clinic. I like helping others. I like healing. I-I was good at it—”

“Indeed,” Kae nodded. “One of your many gifts, padawan.”

“Don’t hurt her,” Davad muttered to Kae and left, turning at random down one of the corridors. Somewhere ahead of him was better prey.

XXX

I am calm. I will forget. No! I can’t forget, but I—

That fake calm, that mind-fracked peace that Davad had felt in Sheris’s mind washed over Reva.

No! That woman. Kae. She made her forget! She made them both forget!

Anger at the illusion made Reva struggle harder. The waves closed over her head. She was sinking, she was drowning, the acid sea surrounded her, deafening, blinding. She closed her eyes, maintaining her shields, and falling—

Fool. Calm yourself or die. Master this simple task or you will never master Arkan.

I-I’m drowning—

It was like falling. Just like that. And she’d fallen before.
All of Revan’s muscles relaxed. Her limp body rose with the next wave. Gentle. She bobbed back to the surface, her mind repelling the deadly water from her skin automatically. Her mouth opened and she gasped for breath—all she could do was gasp for breath—slowly, evenly, calmly—

Like letting go.

Now you see. Now you SEE.

Now I see—another wave splashed her face. It would have blinded Revan except for her shields. The sea was as inexorable as gravity, slamming her against the ship’s hull.

XXX

“Now you see, my padawan. What do you see?” Echo of a memory, a woman’s voice.

“It’s beautiful. The Force—”

“No.” Hint of reproval in that voice.

“The world—”

XXX

NOW YOU SEE. Arkan’s voice in her head.

The wave washed Revan up like it was a sentient thing, depositing her on top of the Harbinger’s bow. She lifted her head, and stared down at her burned legs, the tatters of her flightsuit. Her topknot flopped in her eyes and she pushed it back.

Her hair was dry. Her hands were dry—the burns stung, but the pain was manageable—

Revan stood up slowly, standing on the curve of the capital ship’s bow.

Right next to an open airlock door.

Xxx

There were two shadow freaks chasing Revan—who could apparently run on fracking water… because… why the frack was Mekel even surprised?

Four Mandalorians were chasing the shadow things down the beach, stopping occasionally to fire off a grenade or a plasma rifle, which did frack-all.

Looked fun, maybe. It’s all fun and games until the Sith Lord notices you’re lobbing grenades at him and comes and kills you—

Mekel stayed put, because what else was he gonna do? Canderous had waved vaguely at the supply crate before he’d taken off—suggested that Mekel grab some supplies, weapons, and maybe follow—but then he and Milli and Kex left so fast. Leskal, too—Leskal who had joined them from that crashed warfly. Kex was kind of a prick with a saber up his ass about Milli, but Leskal was alright—Mekel would have—maybe he should have joined them, because what the frack else was he gonna do?

The sky was slowly turning pink as the day faded. Revan Starfire was… running on top of the water. Beyond her, the hulk of that Republic ship steamed, as the acid sea worked through its hull. As Mekel watched, one of the shadows sank, steam rising from where it had vanished. The other
one skimmed the water’s surface just like Revan—more of an amorphous blob now than anything else—looming over her like a black cloud, getting closer and closer—

Looked like it was winning the race.

*That’s kriffing fracked. But what the frack can I do about it?* Mekel glanced down at the weapons crate, pulling out one of the mismatched beskar chestplates. You were supposed to earn this crap, not borrow it. He didn’t know how to put the armor on. The time he’d worn beskar before—what seemed like ages ago at that fracked Mandalorian party on Coruscant—Milli had helped....

He looked up again. Revan had reached the Republic ship. The water splashed and steamed around her. Mekel had been on Katarr for weeks. No one swam in that fracking ocean. She should be dead.

Suddenly, she seemed to falter, and then slipped.

“Oh!” He stood up. He hadn’t been expecting that, hadn’t been expecting her to lose, even if he didn’t see how she could win. “Frack!” Mekel reached for a gun.

Maybe she’s diving for a doorway or something?

*In acid?*

“Mekel Jin.” A familiar, twisted voice interrupted his search. Closer to Mekel than should have been possible for anyone with Korriban training. “Did Ordo leave you behind?”

Mekel grabbed the blaster on the top of the stack in the crate, whirled around, and fired.

The smoking patch in the middle of Oerin Lin’s ribs was satisfying. Very satisfying.

Less so was the dead man’s laugh—a horrible, metallic wheeze.

“You should have waited for Millifar’s return to shoot me.” The man took a step forward, and Mekel felt that unmistakable drop in temperature that came with the Dark, even if he couldn't feel the Force causing it. “Impress her with your bravery.”

“Sure. I’ll shoot you all fracking day,” Mekel muttered, raising the gun for another go. He was so fracking dead anyway. “Stick around.”

The asshole Mandalorian Sith smiled with his cracked mouth. “Ah. Perhaps you found a spine after all.”

*I'm going to die.* “Give me the Force back and we can fight like men for her.” Mekel lowered his voice to a growl, and levelled the blaster again. If his hand hadn’t been shaking it would have looked better.

“That's not how it works, Mekel Jin.” Oerin Lin shook his head. There were holes in his neck, and something black oozing from them. “Ask Ordo to explain our culture to you before you damage your standing with his daughter irrevocably.”

“What do you want?” It was easy to be brave when you thought it was over. Mekel had been here before. Too many fracking times. He fired again, a perfect shot through the chest again. Hard to miss. The wound closed up behind his bolt as if it had never been.

I was thinking of going below…?” Oerin nodded toward the lift. “I suspect that the Jedi went to a great deal of effort to construct a trap for Nihilus down there. Seems a shame to leave them
cowering in the dark...” His smile widened, and Mekel felt the fracking chivhole shoving into Mekel’s mind, peeling back his thoughts—

Too much. Get out!

“Would you like to come?” One of the asshole’s eyes was a white orb. The other, yellowish-black and seeping. “We could make the Jedi pay for leaving you behind, Jin. Make them pay for using you to trap us—”

The words echoed with a surge of emotion, and for a second, Mekel did want to make them pay. He wanted them all to pay—and if this fracking Sith needed Mekel to be his to make that happen—

His teeth locked down hard on his own cheek and Mekel drew blood. Pain can break compulsion, pain is effective for so much—

“I think I’ll stay here.” Mekel spat on the ground. Spit, mixed with blood.

“What if I insisted?”

Pressure in his temples like a vise.

Am I supposed to stop you? Mekel’s mind had no fracking clue why, but Mekel’s head didn’t seem to be in charge because he leveled the blaster again instead of bowing. “No.”

“No?” The man’s face was cracked and scabbed, creased with a web of scars and deathly pale.

Mekel heard himself begin to choke. Black spots danced before his eyes, obscuring the swiftly-tilting world; Lin’s fracked-up face, behind him that lift to the pit.

That lift that runs down to the pit—

This is it. This is the most fracking useless death in the fracking galaxy. Dustil—if you ever find out about this, you’ll kill me for dying so fracking useless—

His blaster fired once more before Mekel dropped it. A millisecond later, a blast of Force made the world tilt and Mekel followed the blaster down, crashing back into the ground, bruising his ribs on the edge of the packing crate.

The lift’s control panel sparked and blew.

The platform screeched as it fell back down into the pit, gears screaming, leaving them both trapped above.

“Try going down there now, asshole!” Mekel muttered. He wiped more blood from his mouth.

“That was brave,” Lin chuckled.

Then, the dead man leaped into the pit, feet first. No fracking lift needed. “Brave and uselessss—”

Oh. Oh, frack. Of course, he just jumps.

The echo of the Sith Lord’s broken voice vanished into the pit, as Mekel tried to recover his breath.

Xxx

The Kavar shell cannot not withstand the acid sea. It burns away in bubbles. But Nihilus feels his
true self rise from the sea bath with all of its mortal shell expunged. The remains of Davad Arkan are gone. Now, he is a harder thing, a pure thing.

He rises over the bow of the crashed and dissolving hulk, only to see her standing there with Kavar's saber lit. As if she was waiting, the saber a beacon to guide his path.

When she sees him, she takes a few steps back, and what little color remaining in her face pales. Her skin is pink and splotched through the tattered flightsuit, red and raw on her arms and legs. There is a bald, burned patch on her scalp above her reddened ear.

“Davad?” She whispers his true name into the wind, but it echoes in her mind, mixed with the memories he has given back to her.

Her mind shrinks under his; a small, furred animal. Musk of her scent in the air. Delicious.

{{I ate Croi. So strong. Delicious. Croi sent Sheris to work with the children in the sublevels. He thought he could make her more Sheris than Revan that way. Amusement. Croi did not know Sheris—}}

*If you don't kill me, I can take you to a feast,* she promises him, finally speaking mind to mind. *A billion meals for you. I promise. I know the way.*

He knows she is lying—not about the feast, only the way. She has lost her way. He can see it in her thoughts: frightened, and scurrying away from him. Dec-bugs shown to light.

{{The man knows the way.}} He tells her. {{I have a man who knows the way. Sion made him write it down.}}

*How are you in my head?* she thinks. A smuggler’s thinks, too simple for Revan. Were she fully herself, she would already know. *It doesn’t matter. You will follow me.*

{{Hungry!}} He wants her to see him as he was, but in his eagerness, he makes his form too large and she shrinks away, cowering beneath.

“Why are you showing me… Arren Kae now? I don’t understand. Do you know you’re doing it?”

{{You need to see.}} Does she know yet? {{It was her. Her all along. Our Master.}}

Revan’s legs have borne the brunt of the damage—the boots are gone, and a few burns along her calf look deep, almost to bone. A sudden memory strikes him, of slipping her toes in his mouth, like tiny pink plumcots.

He can feel the pain she is concentrating to forget. He wants to take it from her, but he only can if he consumes her. And he wants that to last.

“Yes, I got that. Arren Kae.” Anger laces the name, that spark of green fury. “But you destroyed her, you and Oerin. She’s dead—isn’t she? You said you would kill her. That’s why I—that’s why I let you *leave* with her!”

Was she? Was she dead? {{“Better. Suffering.”}}

But Nihilus does not like seeing Revan suffer. Soon, she will not need her legs at all. The pain will end for her; she will not be one like Sion, forced to feed on it, to use her own body to break and remake the Force, again and again.
“I can take away the pain,” he promises. “I will. I promise I will.”

Revan’s eyes are wide, and her mouth set in a grim line as she shakes her head. No. She takes another step back and beckons with the lit saber. The wind whips her topknot in her eyes, thinning her words. Her thoughts are nearly visible—hate, fear, pain—and an overwhelming need. For him. For him!

Her words are whispers. “I can give you what you want, Davad. But you will follow me.” Her voice hardens as if she remembers, although that is impossible. She can only know what she has been shown. “Follow me.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Come to me, my love, and I will go.”

Revan shakes her head and takes a step backwards, vanishing into the craft’s interior. Follow. Her mind-voice is a sharp report. A blaster bolt to the head.

Davad would have thought she would want to meet her end under the sky, but Revan had been a child of ships and of war as well.

“I follow,” he tells.

Xxx

The inside of the shuttle was quiet now—now that Jasp’s masters had gone.

As always when away from Sion and Nihilus, the man’s mind began to clear.

Again, he remembered that he was Jasp Organa. He remembered their landing had been very bad. The shuttle’s front stabilizer was bent—possibly smashed by the whirring noise it kept making. The ship was never going to be the same again.

He glanced automatically at the screen above, just in time to see the last pieces of the Ravager burn out, sensors from its command panel dark now. The sky above only marked enemies now, outlined on the shuttles sensors in burning red.

Something. There was something I saw. Someone—when the masters were here—

It was something—someone—important.

Sion had turned the outer cameras to track movement—and now, on the viewscreen, Jasp saw who they had been following.

“Pollie.” He adjusted the magnification to see more clearly, watching as she ran across the sea, running on water just as easily as he’d seen her fly. He blinked and she bobbed down under the waves. His breath caught, and time slid and there she was again, now on top of the Republic cruiser, a brown and black speck on the gray behemoth.

And something was… chasing her. A shadow that looked like a man.

Jasp Organa blinked. For a moment, he had no idea where he was. Even the instrument panel in front of him seemed unfamiliar.

Pollie’s in trouble.

Not my Pollie. Not my daughter— that wasn’t quite right. But still, Jasp’s hands went for the
controls as he lifted the shuttle off the sands, steering it toward the crashed ship.

Revan felt Arkan lurking behind as her footsteps echoed in the hall of the deserted ship.

“Follow me,” she snarled again with a voice so dark she barely recognized it. Her fear had vanished with the near-drowning; the realization that he hadn’t eaten her yet giving her courage. “Follow me. You followed me for years, Arkan. In every memory you showed me. Maybe Kae was behind it all, but you followed me. Revan. Follow me now. I demand it.”

I hunger, he whispered.

That plaintive cry. It made her breath catch with emotions she could barely understand: guilt, shame, fear. And loss. Revan had sacrificed friends; Dar had sacrificed more of them.

Davad Arkan was just one more. And it was already done. The man he’d been was already gone. He’s a monster. All those bodies in the Temple were Jedi he killed. You don’t pity monsters—you use them. Use them to destroy other monsters.

Salt spray had dampened the hall, even here, and Revan’s feet felt numb and clumsy. It probably wasn’t good her feet were numb, but she stumbled on, heading by instinct more than sense. Her vague memories as Polla Organa on a ship like this only included being lost on a ship like this—or, vaguer still, being herded by others on a ship like this.

But somewhere in this direction, Revan thought she would find the hangar bay—and hopefully ships that flew.

“Follow,” she whispered again to thing behind her. “Follow me one last time, old friend—”

Xxx

Their jet packs were slow, but Canderous waved his hand, signaling as the kids moved into formation around the crashed Harbinger that had so recently been their temporary prison. Hull didn't look good, he thought—with patches of it eaten away down to the struts at the waterline.

Why'd you lure him here? Canderous could usually figure out Revan’s strategy—but this left him flummoxed. Acid had taken out one of the mystic bastards, but they'd all seen the other shadow follow her into the hole.

Sea hadn't affected that one at all.

He looked down at his wrist and tapped the comm he'd jawa-rigged to replace the one he’d forgotten aboard the Aleema.

“Can you make a hit from orbit?” he asked Aemelie. “Burn this Republic wreck?”

“Do you have coordinates?” Aemelie was all business, but he could hear the underlying excitement in her voice too.

“I'm sending, but hold. Revan’s in there. We need to get clear first—”

“Mekel!” Millifar interrupted. She was hovering next to him above the waves, holding a magnifier to her visor pointed in the direction of their previous position near the pit. “Osik! That walking
piece of filth! I think the Dar’Lin just shot Mekel Jin!”

“Lin? He’s here too?” Canderous followed her gaze, upping the range on his own helm’s sensors to see what she could. In-helm viewer wasn’t as good as those binocks she was holding, but it was still clear enough for him to see the limp figure on the sand. “Haar’chak! Where’d he go?”

“He jumped into that pit,” Millifar snapped. “No doubt pursuing the cowardly, hiding Jedi.”

“I know we cannot kill the shadow,” Kex said. “But Lin—”

“Dar’Lin,” Millifar corrected them both. “He is Undying now. He is nothing.”

“You kids go after him. I'll follow Revan, get her clear of this mess.” If the damned acid water didn’t melt that Sith, our guns won’t either. Need to get Revan clear—looked like it had its hooks in her mind—

After nearly two years of Jett’osik, of seeing what their magic had done to the Starfire’s mind, Canderous couldn’t say he was sorry they seemed to be losing their war.

“Try and salvage that Pinion-class fighter.” Aemelie’s voice crackled in his helm. “Did you fix its engines as I requested?”

“Was busy.” Canderous loved his Second Wife, but when did she think he’d had the time? “I sent one of the Republic techs to ready our ships when we started taking over the Harbinger, but I don’t know if they got to it.”

“Republics.” Her disdain was clear even over the comm. “I will give you the span of Ordo’s rotation around Malachor II before I commence bombardment.”

That means less than an hour. “I will hurry,” he promised.

Xxx

{{“Where are you running?”}} The halls all look the same but these hammerhead ships are all the same, and Nihilus knows them. He remembers. {{“We can stop the chase now. Here.”}}

Fitting, like the place he'd found her sleeping and mind-wiped not so long ago. That had been a ship like this too.

Revan doesn't answer him, not with words, just with another burst of speed that makes him feel the distance between them.

He lessens the chase easily. {{“Let me eat you,”}} he begs. {{“It will not hurt. I promise. After that, the man will take me to Dromund Kaas and I will eat your emperor too. I promise.”}} It does not hurt. He has eaten so many. Davad opens his mind to show her—

Xxx

The Jedi Temple on Coruscant. At that time, Davad still bothered to hunt only for strays. The quiet Jedi unassigned to padawans or to masters. The ones least likely to be missed.

“Knight Arkan.” Master Zhar Lestin startled him, appearing out of a doorway so abruptly he might have been stealthed. “Do you have a moment?”

Zhar Lestin was a member of the Council. Zhar Lestin had a current Padawan. Zhar would be
missed.

**That one is not for you!**

*Her voice. Real or not? His gut rumbled, and Davad took a cautious step back. “Actually, I… may be coming down with something. I should go.”*

“It won’t take long.” The Twi’lek raised his brow ridge. “To be honest, I haven’t been sure how to approach you.”

“A bit late for an ambush.” Davad didn’t have to feign the yawn, even as he felt his gut rumble, his mouth begin watering with need. The man was strong. So strong. “Perhaps tomorrow…?” He would send to Arca for a few shadows and eat them first. Sate him enough to avoid temptation.

“No. Now.” The Twi’lek gestured toward the door of the chamber.

Short of an attack, Davad could find no way to refuse, and so he followed the man inside.

Two glasses and a bottle on the floor of the room seemed to indicate this was a planned intervention. Davad allowed his eyebrow to raise, eyeing it. “Is that… Onderon brandy?”

“A taste from home,” Zhar agreed.

“Not easy to get.” Illegal, in fact, to be exported.

“I’ve had this bottle for a long time.” Zhar paused, watching him. “Since we came to Iziz for you. Do you remember?”

“Of course.” The man was so powerful—aged and ripe, like a fine cheese. Davad felt his mouth water. Davad hid it by seating himself on the floor, reaching for the brandy, not bothering with the glass.

The cool liquid was like spice on his tongue, the taste of flowers, a long-ago drexl’s scream.

“I trained Revan,” Zhar said bluntly, settling himself down opposite. If he was rattled by Davad’s lack of manners, it did not show on his face.

“Yes.” Where was this going?

The man’s brow ridges lowered, obstinate as a dewback. “I remember… how well you knew her.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Lestin took a sip from the cup he’d poured for himself as Davad drained more from the bottle. “I’m worried about her.” He paused. “Both of them.”

Davad felt his careless smile freeze. He put down the bottle slowly. “I don’t understand. Both? We speak on the comm from time-to-time, but I haven’t seen Revan since she left the Temple and went to live with her son at House D’Reev.”

Zhar merely blinked. “Sheris Loran has changed. A holocron of Revan’s memories is missing. Naturally, the conclusion I must reach is—”

You will not tell him. This one is not for you! He will be missed. Leave him, Beast-Lord. Leave him and look for prey elsewhere—
No. Need burned in his core. The man was strong, the man was here, the man knew too much—

“Sheris requested Council permission to take Revan’s memories. Perhaps she grew tired of waiting for approval.” Davad took another gulp from the bottle. It tasted like night-blooming flowers, morning mist, a cancock’s bellow. Instead of sating Davad’s hunger, the brandy seemed to ignite it.

You will be silent, you will leave. You will make him forget—

Zhar’s strong, it may not work, Master.

“How is she?” Zhar smiled at him, hesitant. “I had hoped she would come to me, but she has not. But I sense no darkness—”

It was not the question Davad had expected from Zhar Lestin. He blinked, trying to hide his surprise.

“Who else knows?” Davad countered.

“I only speak for myself,” the Jedi disassembled. “How is she? I… would like to speak to her. You have her confidence. Do you think she would be amenable to speaking with me?”

You sense no darkness because you are blind. Like all Jedi. A blind fury there in his master. Davad felt her resolve falter, even as his own need surged.

“Does anyone else know?” Davad repeated, this time imbuing his words with the Force. The man was strong, but trusting.

“Croi suspected, I-I think. And of course, Jo—” the Twi’lek broke off mid-sentence, eyes widening. “Knight Arkan?”

Davad had risen from his place on the floor.

“Lord.” Davad reached his hand out and grasped the man’s shoulder. “It is Lord Arkan. And you are right. I sense no real darkness in her either. Not… yet.” The man was strong. He took a deep breath, breathing it in, relishing the taste. “Would I could say the same for myself, old friend—”

Master Zhar Lestin’s body collapsed across the floor.

Xxx

“Is that supposed to fracking scare me?” Revan tried to channel as much scorn as possible into her words as the vision cleared. It was dark in the ship’s corridors, emergency fluorescence activating on the walls to guide her through the corridors, as if through a darkening dream.

I have to eat, Revan. I had to eat them. I am still starving—

The death of a man she barely remembered.

Master Zhar had trained Polla Organa on Dantooine; but for such a short time.

Revan had barely seen him again on Coruscant—just his body in the morgue.

“I know what you did. I need you to do it again. When I say. To who I say.” Her voice lashed out
again, crack of a whip. “Follow.”

Revan had reached the main hangar bay. There was the Pinion, bolted in one corner—and a motley collection of other ships nearby. Most of the fighters were gone—perhaps due to sabotage or taken by evacuating crew members during the Harbinger’s takeover.

The Pinion’s fuel line lights blinked green, as if at some point during their captivity, some tech had repaired the damage to her engines.

The blast doors were closed, but the floor tilted up towards them. Revan hoped that meant they weren’t fracking underwater.

I follow, the monster murmured at the entrance of the hangar.

“Stay,” she snapped. “Right now, stay right there.”

The hangar’s centralized control was a mess of lights and dials, more complicated than anything Polla Organa had ever dealt with in her smuggling days. Revan frowned, trying to make sense of the flashing lights and levers. She released the bolts to several ships, including the Pinion, before she happened on the blast door controls. Gears ground as the hangar bay slid up, revealing a sullen horizon of sea and shore, heavy clouds, the darkening sky.

Thank Force—

No. Thank you, Arkan said.

Xxx

She is standing far away across the hangar. She is waiting. Waiting for him next to these ships, with her promises of emperors and stars. After Nihilus has eaten this world entire he will see them. But first, this. This special moment. Theirs—

Her back is stiff, the cropped hair exposing her vulnerable neck, the coiled springs of her arms visible through the ripped flightsuit’s fabric. The sea has left its burns on her skin. He can feel the pain that she denies, a soft scream in the dark.

{{“It will not hurt,”}} he promises her. He focuses himself, assembling his shade into the man she once knew. His hair chimes with phantom bells and he summons that smell of soft spice she once favored, the fragrance that perfumed her state room. Without the template of Kavar’s flesh, it takes a great effort, but he does it for her. {{“Thank you, Rev. Thank you for the gift of your life—”}}

Xxx

Across the room, the shadow resolved again into that face: Davad’s soft smile, the chimes of bells from his braids. “Thank you, Rev.” Somehow, he’d made his voice seem ordinary. “Thank you for the gift of your life—”

“No! I said, stay!” Revan pulled on the Force, lashing the words into an order.

All those images he had shown her were of a man obsessed. A man in love.

But never a man in control.

“Stay until I tell you to follow!” she commanded. I need a ship. I need a ship and place to keep him—
Can a locked door stop him? Will an airlock?

The thought of being alone with him in a cramped snubfighter made Revan shiver.

Arkan is yours. He would follow you to the end of the galaxy. A far more faithful kath than Malak ever was. That voice from her own mind again. Like a blast of ice. You control him. You remain the master.

I don't even know the way to Dromund Kaas! I don't know if the Pinion is fixed. The last time I tried to fly, I ended up trapped—

He knows. He knows the way.

“I know the way, Revan.” Across the room, the man smiled at her. He had dimples. “I have a man who knows—”

A strange warmth on her skin, the smell of something sweet and spicy all at once and strangely sensual.

No, she objected, but none of her muscles moved. She was undoubtedly losing her mind, but Revan heard the sound of bells grow louder, the roar of beasts—

She stared at the sky through the now-open hanger doors, fighting the false calm.

Get him away from here! He’ll eat them! He’ll eat everyone on this hell-spawned world—

“Follow,” she said again, taking a step toward the Pinion. “Stop fracking around, Arkan, you promised to follow—”

“And I have, Revan.” His voice was all the more terrifying for its sudden normality. “But now, I’m hungry—”

The scream of overtaxed engines was deafening, as a battered shuttle burst through the open hangar, skidding past her astonished face and crashing into the wall.

Xxx

Nihilus’s attention is focused on his illusion—still meters and meters away from her—so formal, like years ago.

Nihilus is so focused on his illusion that he does not see the shuttle craft until it barrels into him, upending physics, and preparation, and his fragile corporeality—sending him crashing and sparking underneath its ruin on the duraplate floor.

XXX

He was still a man enough, still a pilot enough to have strapped himself in for impact, but the velocity hurt his bones, and the abrupt stop sent Jasp Organa lunging forward in his seat and then back again. His neck flopped too fast forward—saved only by the sense he’d had to wear the flight helm.

Shuttle won’t fly again, was his first thought, as he pushed up the visor and discarded it. Followed quickly by fear he had for his Pollie.

You know she isn't Pollie, Jasp. The voice in his head sounded like Moll’s, like his conscience
always did.

“Doesn’t matter.” There was blood in his lips. His nose was bleeding again. Jasp had rammed the shuttle into something black and shadowed and seeping—something he knew was his master. But it wouldn’t hold Nihilus for long. “She’s the one fighting. She’ll help me find Polla.”

Pollie could be already dead. Probably was. Jasp had no illusions about how the world worked. Pollie might be dead, but those Sith bastards would pay, and no one was better made to deliver than the woman who’d blown up their bloody Star Forge in the first place.

He had always taught Pollie to be a fighter, and this one had taken down Darth Malak.

The world was patchy and strange as Jasp staggered towards the door. Land ramp rolled down on a slanted bay, collection of ships. (Need to pick one—pick the best one—his eyes zeroed in on the Aurek-class snub nearest the door. It had the tell-tale curve of a modified hyperdrive engine under its bow. Newfangled, compared to what he’d been used to once, but it would do.)

The woman in the ragged flightsuit stared at him, her eyes round as moons, mouth agape with surprise. Skin on her legs was red. Eyes looked like she’d been crying. Her hair stuck up like eridu half off its pod.

“Da?” she whispered, voice husky and scared. Polla’s voice. Or it could have been, even in that wrong, pale face. “I’m dead. I must already be dead.”

“No yet,” said a voice from the aft side. Gruff, male. A metallic rumble from a helm, appearing in the doorway. “You okay, Revan?” The large figure in battered Mandalorian armor called something else out at her, almost too fast for Jasp to catch.

Pollie responded, rapid-fire, was still talking to the Mandalorian when Jasp stepped forward and grabbed her arm. It was too wiry and thin, like Jedi didn’t eat enough.

“Come along now,” he said. Gentle voice. Gentling a kid wasn’t so different than gentling a hessi. Right now, she was just as wild-eyed and prone to bolt.

Behind him—Jasp didn’t know how, but he knew—the Master was reassembling himself. She wouldn’t be safe then.

“Canderous?” The girl frowned at the man in armor, oddly passive in Jasp’s grip. “Get out of here. Go… get your ships. I—I’ll need you.”

“Came in here to get you.” The helmed figure seemed to be staring at them from behind his battered, reflective mask. In it, Jasp saw his own face. The man pulled a heavy blaster out of a buckle on his belt. “Who’s this guy?”

*I got old, Moll,* Jasp thought, looking at his face in that reflection. *When’d I get so old?*

“Polla Organa's father.”

“Small galaxy. Good job killing that hu’tuun Sith. We tried three different types of projectiles. Was gonna nuke him from orbit next—soon as we got clear. Should’ve realized, dropping a ship on someone always works.”

“He’s not dead.” Poll—Revan—sounded sure of it. She was staring fixedly at the ruin of the shuttle. “And orbital bombardment… you'd overload this ship’s reactor. Cause an environmental
“That's why we need to run, Pollie.” Jasp tugged her arm again.

“Get out of here, Canderous.” Her eyes were half-focused. “Take him with you.” She twisted out of Jasp’s grasp. “Jasp Organa. Arkan’s still coming—but I can handle him—”

Jasp knew Lord Nihilus was coming. He grabbed her arm again, tugging her toward the other row of ships. “No, you can’t. He’s coming so we need to go, Pollie. We need to go now. Lord Nihilus… he gets in your head and then things get really hard to see. We need to go.”

“I need to go to Dromund Kaas. He needs to come.”

“I know.” He smiled at her. “I’ll take you. I know the way.”

Xxx

The ship crashing into him breaks his careful illusion into pieces, it breaks Nihilus too. His rage is boundless, and he screams his displeasure like a baited dregxl, bound too tight to reach the trough.

“I need to go to Dromund Kaas. He needs to come,” she says. **Dromund Kaas,** her voice whispers in his mind. Cold as a lover's touch. She whispers promises. **You swore to follow me.**

{{Yes,}} he promises, rising from the wreckage. There is a Mandalorian shooting bolts at him, but he is not important. Nihilus raises his reassembled arm and the man slams into the wall. {{Yes, I did. Yes.}}

Xxx

A black shadow rose from the wreckage of the shuttle, even as Revan thought she’d finally gotten control back. Canderous fired at it.

“**Canderous!**” Revan realized she was screaming. She lunged forward, but somehow, Jasp Organa’s gentle grip held her back.

Arkan had slammed Canderous into a wall.

The Force didn't register the Mandalorian’s death, but he wasn't moving either.

*He's wearing beskar. We've been through worse. I need to get fracking Arkan away from here before he really hurts him—*

“Come, Pollie.” Jasp was leading her like a recalcitrant hessi towards one of the snubs.

“Da.” **He's not your father. He's nothing like him. You have no idea what your own father was like.** “How are you here?” A bubble of hysteria burned in her throat. “You can’t be here. You’re another hallucination. I’m losing my mind.”

“Come on, Pollie.” Jasp Organa’s hand was frail but uncannily solid latching on her arm, tugging her toward the **Aurek-** class snub.

“**Revan! Look at me. Look.**”

The command rang in her head, and Revan lifted her eyes. The man in front of her was insubstantial as a holo. Black hair trailing down his back ringed with bells. A smile on his sad face.

*Lead him,* the cold voice in her mind echoed. *Make an end.*

“Come on, Pollie,” the old man said. He tugged her hand again, but then he dropped it, moving behind her. Dimly, she sensed his fear at Arkan’s approach.

Her eyes went to the mass of beskar in the corner, but Canderous didn’t move.

*Follow,* she thought. Her head made it a command. *Follow me, Arkan. You swore you’d follow me.*

“You remember.” He smiled and she felt a feeling of… happiness. *His* happiness. “**Remember how I helped. Remember that I loved. Remember me.**”

XxX

*The phantom touch of her lips down his spine. Her small, white hands. That low grumble she made when sated. The way her back curved into his when he wrapped his arms around her.*

*Below them, the colony moon of Chassna burned. She’d given Davad command of the fighters, setting it ablaze like a beacon for her Republic trap.*

“So you like it?” he murmured. “The burning atmosphere matches your eyes.”

*Revan turned her head. Her face was inhuman, etched with dark corruption, like rays on a mask.*

“**Sentiment, Arkan?**”

“**Onderon,**” he countered, keeping his voice carefully light. “I was thinking of collecting it for you. Would you like the pearl of the Rim for your crown?”

“**For me?**” Her eyes widened, the color of coals and ash and the yellow clouds of xoxon poison. **“Careful.”**

*Her warning was not concern, but the spark of his passion reignited and he caressed her silken skin—*

Xxx

“Follow me onto the ship,” she repeated out loud, blinking back the sudden blur in her eyes. “I’ll take you to Kaas, Davad. Katarr is one world, I will give you systems.”

“But I’m starving *now.*” His eyes were large and liquid, a color between gray and blue and green—paler than his golden-brown skin, the color of Derran wheat. Stubble stippled his smooth cheeks, roughening them. If Revan closed her eyes, she thought she would feel the scrape of it against her face.

“I know. But follow me. You promised.”

*Billions. Sith or Republic lives. I must choose—*

The man in front of her looked so real. Revan reached out a hand and touched one of the braids in his hair. Bells rang softly, and they meant something, but she had no idea what.

“Please,” he whispered. “No pain. Come. I love the taste of you—I will show you—”
“No—” She shook her head, biting back the urge to apologize, the ineffable sadness, of this—of him. The remains of the man she had made.

“I’m starving, Revan.” His smile was apologetic, almost shy, but she felt the darkness too, creeping at the edges. “This world is so rich.”


Her breath seemed too loud in the echoing hangar. Arkan wasn’t breathing at all. Jasp and Canderous were somewhere behind her—she couldn’t afford to check, couldn’t afford to look back.

The man in front of her shrank, like a shadow under the sun. There was a soft clink of bells as she felt Arkan retreat; saw him suddenly appearing a meter away, then two; the edges of his form shifting and blurring like a bad holo-image.

He still looked like a man, but his movements betrayed him. He moved like a shadow now, one-dimensional and hollow: nothing more than an illusion of the man he’d been.

“I swore to her,” he said softly. Five meters away now, but the words echoed in her mind. “I swore to her that I would always follow you.” His smile twisted. “It wasn’t all a lie, Rev.”

Her? It didn’t matter. No more lies. “Then do it,” she snapped, forcing the Force into her words. “Here is our ship. Follow me onto it.”

XXX

“I can’t.” In this now, he has her. In it, he is solid flesh. All illusion, but true. He reaches out. If he were closer, he would trace the curve of her cheek, and for a moment in his mind, she is close, is his old lover again—the real one—her eyes as hot and yellow and bright as the passion in her breast. “We can’t fly in the same ship, Rev. I would eat you.”

“But...” she frowns, not understanding. “I said follow.”

He looks past her to the old man. The old man understands. He is a good pilot. A good drexl. He will bear her to the stars. He knows the way.

Jasp Organa gives Nihilus a nod. The man has no Force, but he is still a mount.

“He says he’s starving,” Jasp mutters. “But you are not food. You must not be food because you must end her. He needs his own ship, because if he flies in ours he’ll eat you.”

“Her? Dar’Revan?” She looks so confused. “I will. I will destroy—”

“No.” The bells ring and he shakes his head. “Not yourself, Rev. Her. Our old master. Vima Sunrider. She calls herself Darth Traya now, and she shaped us both.”

“Isn’t she dead already?” She takes a step backward.

“Pollie,” whispers the hollow man. The old pilot takes her arm—he is a good drexl. He will fly her to the stars.

XXX
“Pollie,” Jasp Organa said again. It was only then that Revan noticed how much he had aged since
she’d last seen him: all of his hair had whitened and thinned. She could see the skull under his face,
the flesh on it drooped, the frail bones of his arms.

“I’m not—” but she let him lead her toward the snub, feeling a dull relief he hadn’t chosen
the Pinion.

“ I know.” His trembling hands were deft as he did something to the ship’s dock, and the door
opened. Two seats, with an area in back for a small galley, a primitive fresher. He closed the door
behind them. “I know you’re not her, Pollie.” He moved slowly, pushing her gently to the pilot’s
chair, adjusting her buckles before settling in himself.

Revan. Arkan called again, his voice once more relegated to her mind. Revan wondered why he’d
let her go at all. He could have overcome them in a heartbeat. Revan.

Command him. The cold voice again. He let you go because you command him. He is your
creature.

Follow, she told him in her mind again. The link between her and Arkan reminded her suddenly of
the bond with Bastila. And that was terrifying. “Follow me.” Her voice was hollow out loud and
Jasp Organa looked at her.

“Yes,” he nodded. “I’m following. You remember how to start her up, Pollie?” He was sitting next
to her in the co-pilot’s chair. He’d produced a flight helmet from the overhead and put it on,
handing her the other. “Take her out gentle. There's a wind, and with the grav so light she’ll buck
like Dancer.”

“I'm not her,” she mumbled, but her hand found the yoke and she switched on the sights. The ship
hummed, full bar of fuel, airlocks sealed, circulators on…. “You should fly, I'm not… I'm a terrible
pilot—”

“Pollie,” Polla Organa’s father said gently. “No time for all that. There's a monster at our backs.
Go.”

His gentle, knobbed hands were warm on hers as he moved the stick forward, guiding her motions
like he had when the real Polla Organa had been six and he’d taken her on the Corellian Run.
“Punch it,” he murmured. “Go ahead. She won't bite, but watch the wind.”

Revan, whispered the monster in her head. Revan, Revan, Revan. For a moment she wasn't sure
which monster it was—Davad or Dar—

Not Dar. It can't be Dar. Just you, the real you—all that remains. All of this: the consequence of
your own actions—

The Aurek lifted forward, nose pointed toward sky, wobbling a little in the crosswinds.

A moment later, the black-taloned Pinion followed.

Even without seeing, Revan knew why Davad had picked that ship; his thoughts were a steady
drone in the back of her mind.

Pinion-class. Hunting ships. They latch on with their plasma-made claws, capable of following
any ship across hyperspace—
And somehow she knew that, as much she knew Arkan could fly it—a ship Force-designed, made
to be steered with the will as much as with its fuel—

\textit{I follow you.} Voice in her mind again. Something mindless and terrible in its inflection. Contrasted
against the kindness she’d seen in the dead man’s eyes, it made Revan want to weep.

But tears were useless.

\textit{What can I do to fix this?}

“You okay, kiddo?” Polla’s father asked her.

“Yes, I—” Revan stared at the readings in front of them. The green flashing lights. Her hands
reached for the yoke and they lurched forward towards the hangar bay tilted skyward.

\textit{Run. I follow. I will follow you into the Dark.}

“Where are we going?”

Do you remember, Biscain?”

\textit{I'm banned from the fracking planet since that spice run—Therion and me got banned and they
sold us that fracked mited-up spice—}

Revan blinked. “Yes.” She pulled on the thruster and they shot forward, climbing up. The
crosswinds rocked their craft back and forth.

“Easy!” Jasp put his hand over hers, slowing their ascent. “You’ll burn her stabilizers if you go
vertical—can’t lift against winds.” Their small craft bobbed and bounced, as Revan swiveled the
inertials, tipping them down—

The world twisted, and her head nearly banged against the ceiling as they rolled, her stomach
twisting in knots, heaving—

\textit{I’m going to be sick. I’m always sick in hyperspace and we’re not even there yet!} She fumbled at
the buckles across her chest—wondering if she’d make it to fresher or end up smashed against a
wall—

“What are you doing?” Polla’s father grabbed the yoke, half sliding out of the co-pilot’s seat, as he
leaned over her board. \textit{“Never unbuckle on lift-off! I taught you better than this!”}

\textit{It wasn’t me... Da.} Revan remembered the lessons, all too well, but this ship was different, it
moved differently—too fast—and behind them, she could still feel Arkan, murmuring like an echo
of Malachor in her mind. “I’m trying!” She glanced back, only seeing the back of the \textit{Aurek}, the
gunner’s bay, its window still darkened transparisteel. “I’m trying but it’s not \textit{working}!”

“Get up.” The old man unsnapped his own harness and pushed her to the side with no ceremony,
shoving Revan out of the pilot’s seat and taking over the controls.

She scrambled back, dragging on the Force to compensate for the awkward lurches, the craft
twisting and bobbing under feet when—trying to use it to keep the contents of her stomach down—
Then, abruptly, their trajectory smoothed.
“He’s on our tail,” Jasp noted. The blip on their close-range was steady and clear—maybe a little too close.

**I follow,** the voice in her head agreed.

“I know, I can hear him.” She felt numb. All of this could be an illusion; she could be dying in Arkan’s arms. The interior of the ship seemed hyper-real—the edges too bright and hard, the Force blazing through her, linked somehow to the darkness behind.

*Carth,* she thought.

“We can jump as soon as we clear atmosphere,” Jasp said. “I don't want to push her.”

“Wait,” she commanded. “I-I don’t know… can we open a channel to the—” Revan realized Jasp would know as much as she did. Less, without the codes. She slid in next to him in the co-pilot’s chair, and thumbed open the channels, immediately overwhelmed by a blast of static—

Xxx

“There appear to be two ships lifting from sea. And Canderous has not given us the order to strike the *Harbinger.* The remainder of our people on planet have gone dark as well.”

“Kex said they were descending into that pit. It's possible the planet’s crust is blocking our transmissions.” Aemelie reminded herself that did not mean they were dead—any of them. “Can you identify the ships?”

“One is *Aurek-* class. In pursuit appears to be your *Pinion V.*”

“Then Canderous and Revan must be on that second vessel. And our enemies have taken the *Aurek.* Fire on the *Aur—”

“It's hailing us.”

It was. Aemelie wasn't blind. She swiveled the controls to herself and pulled up the comm image.

“This is Revan. Are you receiving this transmission?” The woman’s hair was as wild as the expression in her eyes, evident even through a blurred comm-link.

“Everyone in earshot will if you persist on using the open comm protocol,” Aemelie snapped. “Is Canderous flying the *Pinion*?”

“No. I-I had to make sure to reach you. Switching to secure—”

“Put Canderous on,” Aemelie barked, even as she noted that Revan had adjusted the frequency.

“He’s… below. On the *Harbinger.* Injured. I-I had to leave—you… you’ll need to collect him.”

“You left him behind? I will.” *Careless, Third Wife. As was leaving my ship to be flown by others. Although, considering how you would fly it—*

“Send the *Aleema* the jump coordinates,” Revan commanded someone on her vessel. “All the way to Kaas. Aemelie, I’m sending you the route. You need to follow us.” Her voice was beskar. **“Bring all the ships. All the forces you have.”**
“To Dromund Kaas? Now you want to launch an invasion into Sith space?”

“Stay cloaked. I-I don’t know. I want allies. I don’t know what will be needed. We may need to destroy… a target. We may need to… show force.”

“Canderous is Mandalore, not you.”

“Do it.” Third Wife rattled off an impressive number of oaths in her accented Mandalorian, reminding Aemelie (unnecessarily) of Revan’s Jett’ai powers, her victory over the former Mandalore, and an offer to break both Aemelie herself and Canderous in the dueling circle when they met again.

“If my husband agrees,” Aemelie said reasonably. “But the Republic scum destroyed our main guns. We can hardly burn worlds until we enact the proper repairs.”

“Get on it. I’ll comm again.” Revan cut the communication.

“The coordinates are mapping—” Dessa nodded toward the nav-board. “The first jump is Biscain—”

“You have the bridge,” Aemelie told her. “I’ll retrieve Canderous and the children from the planet’s surface. Then we will see what he commands. Remember, Dessa. It is the men who choose the war—”

“As they are told,” Dessa finished the old saying. “But we’ve been pawns of the Sith before. If Fett Revan will lead us to victory against that oath-breaking schutta Jana Novasun—”

“We will see.”

XXX

“You want to make the jump, Pollie?” Jasp kept his voice gentle, so as not to frighten her.

“You can do it.” She looked terrible. Older than she had on Deralia, too pale and too thin. Her hair was lank. The ripped flightsuit she wore stank of sweat and her skin was abraded everywhere the acid had touched it. As if she’d noticed his noticing, she glanced down at herself and grimaced. “Just give me warning. I… hyperspace doesn’t always agree with me.”

“There’s a fresher in the back,” he told her softly. “Next to the galley. It pops out. These old tubs have more room than you’d think. Check the storage under that portside bench too. Probably a fresh suit.”

“I will, when we… when we’re in hyperspace.” She rubbed her arms together as if she was cold.

“Now, kiddo.” Jasp punched the board, and the Aurek shot forward, purring just as clean and as clear as he knew it would. The viewscreen in front of them dissolved into a thousand points of light —

**Intruder alert,** chimed the sensors, noting the Sith warbird clamped on their exhaust trail.

“Now,” he repeated.

“Oh!” The girl with Pollie’s memories covered her mouth and retched suddenly, then ran to the fresher.
“Are you okay?” he yelled back at her, keeping his eyes on the screen. Some sents got affected badly by the jumps, but never his Pollie—

XXX

When Revan came out again, twisting her hair into a topknot, dressed in a clean Republic flightsuit, Jasp’s eyes were closed, and his head was tilted back.

As she crept closer, those eyes cracked open and stared at her.

In her head, the sense of Davad Arkan still coiled, like a shadow at her feet. *Like a loyal kath. The Onderonite was always a loyal beast—*

“Better,” Polla’s father said softly. “Last time I saw you, you was in a coma, Miz Starfire, being as you'd just fallen out of the sky. Suppose there's been a lot of grass grown between our paths since then.”

“Mister… Organa.” She didn’t know what to call him. “How are you… here? Moll said you left —” A chill seized her chest. “Arkan and Oerin—did they come to Deralia?”

“Nobody came to us.” He shook his head. “I went looking for Polla at Yavin Station. Then, well… they needed a pilot, and so—” his easy smile faded, and Revan noticed again how frail he looked. “I could hear them. *Him* especially. Lord Nihilus. He said I have to serve him—”

*You don't,* she whispered. The feeling of Davad’s command was like a mist over his skin, a gray sickness in the Force. *“Him or anyone else.”*

“I don’t.” He nodded. Did his eyes look clearer? “I know I don't, Pollie. I know that *now*— but when he's close it gets… it gets confused again. Called Moll a few times to check in. The boys are fine—yours and ours.”

*Thank the stars.* “I'm Revan, Jasp. Not her. Not Polla.”

“You think I don't know?” He snorted. “Might have been slaved by some crazy Sith, but I know where my Pollie is. And that's where we're going. Dromund Kaas. To get her back.” he paused, voice weakening. “You're gonna help me, Pollie.”

*Not Pollie.* “You know the way. You said that. Before.” *He said they too. He must mean—was Lin with Arkan? He can't mean the old woman!*

“I was their pilot. They got the coordinates from some Jedi—maybe the Jedi want Lords Sion and Nihilus on the Sith world as much as you.”

*Sion and Nihilus both. I've got Nihilus—so Sion's still down there.*

*Sion can't help with Tenebrae. What could he do? Kill the possessed Sith one-by-one?*

A wave of exhaustion hit, making Revan’s limbs suddenly feel like lead. Her legs and feet stung, and she noticed a blistered burn on her arm. “You keep calling me by her name, Polla. But you know—you know I’m not her.”

“I watched you fall out of the sky,” he muttered. “Thought you were dead, and that boy of yours… the look on his face—” Jasp blinked rapidly, rubbing his eyes. “The way you looked at me, when we met—your son told us you don't remember your own family.”
“Not really.” *Fragments.*

“You might be all the kid I have left.” He coughed, a deep rattle that set her teeth on edge. It was then that she felt it in the Force, that rotting weakness inside that could end him. “I might be all the da for you too, right? I’ll be damned if I’m gonna call you by some blasted Sith Lord’s name. You strapped in yet, Pollie?”

“Yes,” she said, sinking back in the co-pilot’s chair, punching the buttons that snapped the restraints over her body for the acceleration.

He coughed again, and it hit like a punch in the gut how frail he was. How old he looked.

“Da!” The word came out before the thought. She had to let it go, reaching out her hand to cover his. “You need—” a medix, maybe even a hospital.

Polla’s father looked up at her and Revan knew that he knew already.

“—dinner,” she mumbled, trying to think of what Polla, the real Polla, would say. “Think this Republic flycrate has supplies?”

“Protocol keeps ’em stocked.” He jerked his chin toward the galley. “Why don’t you check, kiddo? We have a day til the next jump—standard. That Pinion’s locked on tight. Won’t have to worry about him til then.*

*Except I can still hear him.* A low roar in the back of her mind—wordless now, like a sleeping scream. “I’ll see what I can rustle up,” she promised. “Soon as you take us into the jets, Da.”

Xxx

“Stay away from the windows!” Vizzy told Vic. Her father was sulking after her latest round of ‘I-told-you-so’s,’ and her other sibs were engrossed in a game of Galactic Acquisition, pieces laid out on a primitive holoscreen jammed onto the crowded table, which still held the remains of yesterday’s breakfast. “Those monster-ghosts might come back!”

“There's a ship!” Vic pointed.

“There have been lots,” Vizzy said. The Mandalorians had said some were theirs before she left them.

But then… she felt it. Pressure, like her ears popping.

“He’s leaving!” Vic pointed toward the slatted wood window, and they all lifted their heads, not bothering with their ocular patches now, not when the Force blazed a double-trailed comet across their sky.

Vizzy sighed with relief.

Her father chuckled. “They’re not getting that deposit back, I’ll tell you that. Jedi!”

“Next time, just rent to a Gamorrean fighting troupe,” Vizzy told him. “They’ll do less damage.”

Xxx

Mekel Jin was breathing shallowly and there was a darkening bruise on his brow that might have seemed been an honorable battle wound. His brows drew together darkly, and he looked capable enough in the borrowed beskar Kex helped him assemble. She handed him the helm, she’d selected
—large for his head, but marked with Ordo’s sigil.

Kex frowned at that, but she ignored him.

“Did you push him over the edge?” Millifar asked again, just to be sure. “And did Lin fall to his death?”

“He… jumped, I think.”

“On his death?” Millifar frowned, kneeling beside him.

“He was already dead, I thought.” Leskal was so literal.

“I broke the fracking lift.” Mekel looked down the shaft. “I shot the control box to stop him. I didn't think he'd jump— it’s meters down. A whole kilo, maybe .”

Lights glimmered below them, inset in the walls. By Millifar's guess, the shaft could be one kilometer deep. Jin’s estimate seemed reasonable.

“We have enough power for the descent with our jetpacks,” she said slowly. “I'm not sure about the ascent, but the barbarians must have another access point. This is a working mine. It will be accessible from several areas along the routes of its mineral extraction—not to mention ventilation shafts—”

“What about the Jedi ship?” Kex pointed at the crashed snub recently piloted by the unfortunate man who had become a wraith. “We can all fit for a short enough journey—”

“Yes, we can fly the Jedi ship down!” Millifar nodded. Much better.

“Mekel Jin, perhaps you should arm yourself,” Leskal suggested. “Even with the Force—”

“I don’t have the Force. Not anymore.” The Coruscanti picked up a vibroblade from the crate and motioned with it. At least, Millifar noted, he did still have the stance of a warrior. He put on his helm, and his voice crackled over their comm-channel. “Let's go.”

A noise overhead made Millifar look up at the door of the snub. Two ships, ascending rapidly to the stars. Ahead was a dreary Republic scow—one of their clumsy Aureks. The second ship had the sleek lines and black exterior that had made Aemelie so obsessed. As she watched, they both flickered into hyperspace at the exact same moment—

“Aemelie will be upset she took the Pinion ,” Millifar noted. For it could be no one else but Revan in those ships, she assumed.

Milli was wondering which one her father was on when his commlink crackled in her helm.

“I'm coming your way,” Father grunted. “Don't shoot me.” A third craft emerged from the downed Harbinger, this one small and relatively mobile—one of those cheap Republic fighters they used for defense of their own clumsy ships.

“Oerin Lin may have fallen to his doom, Father…. ” Millifar began filling him in.

Xxx

“The darkness. It's gone.” Lonna Vash turned her head towards the sky more than a kilometer above their heads. “Darth Nihilus is gone.”
“So is my niece?” Vrook hadn’t protested when they’d taken his saber and bound his hands his back: him and the other three rebels who had backed Revan—and he wasn’t going to protest now.

But he relished a small, smug glow of happiness. He’d been right all along. His faith had been warranted.

She’s led Nihilus away. But to where?

The logistics of how Revan had contained and left the system with Nihilus were also concerning; but quickly overridden by the presence they all sensed in the Force—suddenly revealing itself to them like a moon coming out behind an eclipse of a sun.


The other one. The other Sith Lord. Sion. Formerly Oerin Lin.

“What is that?” Knight Pakeek’s skull-spots paled.

“Sion,” Vrook told her. “A dead man held together entirely by his own will—and the Force.”

Master Vash nodded grimly. “We may have the chance to test Master Loanin’s chamber after all.”

Xxx

Long ago, when Sion had been Oerin Lin and had been young enough to believe his mother’s tales of how to save the galaxy, she had promised that someday, they would show the Jedi their due. It was not revenge, she had counseled—not revenge for what the Jedi had done to Grandmother.

Not revenge, merely a reckoning, a way to balance the scales.

Now, Sion thought this day might have finally come. For ahead through the tunnel, slightly blurred as if through mist, he could sense them: the pack of them: frightened Jedi cowering in the dark, waiting, no doubt, to unleash their trap on Darth Nihilus.

More fool they, for the Beast had already fled.

Sion advanced slowly, enjoying the moment of victory. There was precious little left to enjoy in his world, besides the challenge that a dozen-odd Jedi might bring.

“Do you know how this was supposed to work?” he called out, as they came into view? “In Mother’s original plan?”

A few of them looked puzzled. Perhaps they didn't know who Mother was. But most looked away as if they couldn't meet his eyes.

Revan’s uncle, Vrook Lamar, cleared his throat, braver than most. “Hello, Oerin,” he said. For some reason, his hands were clasped behind his back. It took Sion a moment to note the poses of three others next to him, all standing the same way, and the aggressive postures of the rest.

Those four are prisoners of the other eleven. He'd managed to count them all, even the short Sullustan lurking at the back behind two Rodians.

Eleven and four prisoners. Not even twenty. If the Jedi persist on capturing each other, I'll hardly need more shadow blades to do it.

“Master Vrook!” Sion called out. “Am I here to rescue you?”
“No.” Rev’s uncle shook his head. “But we… we all feel your agony, old friend.” There was hesitation, but his words were sincere. “We can make it stop.”

“I’ve grown rather fond of pain,” Sion called back. “But you seem unquiet. Should I make the same offer to you?”

It took him only a few seconds more to note the strange double echo in the middle of the room, as if the Force there had ceased to exist. Metal plates set into the floor might indicate the reason why, but he was done with curiosity. Some trap, no doubt. Meant for Nihilus. Vacuum containment? Nuclear explosives? The Jedi themselves would have no escape from that, but they were a self-sacrificing lot.

“In Mother’s original plan, you would have made me a Councilmember,” Sion told them. “Master Oerin Sunrider, the youngest elected to the High Council on record. Instead… here we are. Is that a bomb on the floor there? Any other traps?”

Some other had claimed the honor of being the youngest member of the Jedi Council… that sniveling Senator who had been working with Kavar. (And was not here now.) Sion, at this precise moment, did not find the man’s name important. Azal. Loaine. Something inconsequential.

The Jedi were still, irritatingly silent.

Sion’s bones still ached from the fall. Even with the Force helping him use the sides of the shaft to slow his descent, his legs had shattered again. Only the Force held them up, now, as sinew knit. Not only did they hurt maddeningly, but they itched too. “Under my rule on the Jedi High Council, we would have followed Revan and Malak to war, and weakened Vitiate.”

The Jedi still looked blank.

Oerin sighed. “Vitiate. Tenebrae. The Emperor?”

Mother had never been clear on ‘how’ they would win against the man with a billion voices. Mother had never been clear on much—except that Oerin was to have a great destiny—but he had a sinking suspicion having a great destiny was a line Mother used with all of her children: be they flesh or foster.

No doubt one of Mother’s children would win the destiny she promised; but since his death, Oerin had come to suspect it wasn’t him.

Ah, but my people, Mother. They have broken your yoke. Yours and the Emperor’s both. Your war games will need to find other armies to plot your predations.

The Mando’ade will return to a simpler time. Nihilus will end Revan and they will be free.

And I am free of Nihilus and you both.

Those happy thoughts almost made up for the agony of shattering his body to pulp on a kilometer-long fall.

“You are outnumbered, Sith.” One of the others—a grim Togruta—found her shebs, because her blue blade ignited.

Four others followed, all foolhardy knights from the look of their robes. The array of particle blades might give a sentient pause… if one’s limbs didn’t reattach of their own accord.
“Free us,” the knight next to Vrook was arguing with one of the others. “Free us! We can help!”

“Who would you be helping, Knight Vesser?” the older Human woman snapped. “That Sith was allied with Revan—and she left with the other one—”

“We don't know that,” Vrook barked.

“I do,” Oerin offered. “The three of us are still bound… Mother was always one for bonds. Rev and Lord Nihilus left the system. In separate ships, I think… either that or Rev was lunch… but I would know if she died.” He smiled at them, feeling his jaw pop, as the ligaments snapped and mended themselves. “I expect I would know. Do you think she sensed my passing?”

“What is his mother?” One of the knights asked another.

“Arren Kae,” the other said, frowning with that strange blankness that showed Mother had left her claws in him as well. “I-I think his mother was Arren Kae. We had a Council meeting… she was… they said she was….”

“A Sith,” Oerin prompted them. “That’s right! Mother was a secret Sith. But only to overthrow the real Sith, you do understand? Just like Revan. Revan was her finest work, Mother said that when she was trying to make me eat my veggas, or practice Force persuasion.”

“Oerin,” Vrook repeated. His hands—were they tied behind his back? As a Jedi it seemed like he could easily free himself. And yet, he had not. Nor had the other three that were similarly disabled. “Where is your mother now?”

Sion noticed that one Jedi—an older brunette Human woman, had five sabers clipped to her belt, presumably because she’d taken their weapons from them.

*Pacifists.* He would never understand.

“In hell?” Sion shrugged. “I took the Force from her and left her on the side of a volcano on Malachor V.”

“You should have stayed there yourself,” the Durian hissed through its voder.

“Gratitude would be more polite, but it’s not expected from the damned.” His smile made a few of them flinch. As did his saber, as it sprang to hand burning soundlessly—its crystal resonating so perfectly that there was no hiss upon ignition—only the cool, red bar of light. He brought it forward, waggling it at them. “Shall I come to you, or would you like to come to me? One at a time? In pairs? All at once?”

Silence. And then Master Lamar stepped forward—or began to, before the brunette scowling woman jerked him back, (although, Sion noted, she did not free his hands). “No,” she snapped. “Don’t be foolhardy—”

If they were going to quarrel among themselves all day, Oerin assumed he might as well make an end. He leaped—making sure to steer well clear of those metal plates on the floor—raising his own blade above his head, intending to land among them, and carve it though their bodies in a tidy circle since they’d been so kind as to cluster together.

That was Oerin’s intent.

What happened next began differently—
“Don’t bank so hard,” Jasp Organa chided. “You're driving her like you've got a lead foot to the floor!”

“I'm not using my feet.” Should I be? Revan glanced under the console but there didn't seem to be any feet controls.

“Expression.” He chuckled. “Tubs we flew in the war had em. Crescent X-Niners. Four men in the cockpit, barely had room to sneeze so they stuck the gyroscopes underneath the nav-boards. Worked great for Besalisks… rest of us, there was a learning curve.”

“I didn't—” what? “I didn't know you fought in the war.”


“Exar Kun.”

“Wasn't his war, no.” He made a disgusted face. “The other one.”

“That was… Fett Mandalore the… the Extreme? The Awesomely Extreme Ultimate Guy?” They'd—Polla—had studied history (a little) in school, but Revan could barely remember the details. What she remembered learning on Deralia seemed to dance overhead, overlaid by the phantom presence of another story. “I didn't know you were in the war. You never told her. Polla didn’t—”

“Pollie didn't know.” Jasp coughed again. “Deserters don't brag.”

“But they lost, so how can it matter? You—did you fight for Ulic Qel-Droma? With Ulic Qel-Droma?”

“The traitor bastard? Of course not!” From the way he was looking at her, Revan wasn't sure if he knew who she was. His smile was…too kind. “Wasn't that different from you, Pollie. Wanted adventure, to see the stars… left Deralia and I enlisted. Had two years at the Fleet Academy on Coruscant.” He spoke the words with quiet pride. “Officer training too, enough for my nav license. But third year of cadet training, they stationed our class in the Auril Sector—at a jump nexus known as Kemplex IX.” He paused, and something in his eyes made Revan think he expected her to know it.

“Kemplex….” her mind was irritatingly blank. “Wait, those were the Toydarian-designed stations, right? Civilian ones? Didn't they decommission them after—”

After what happened to Kemplex IX.

It blew up, her thoughts whispered. It blew up with the Cron cluster implosion—

“I thought everyone died on Kemplex IX. The star—a bunch of stars went nova….” Her thoughts went to Polla’s Galactic History class on Deralia, that gut requirement she'd needed for the pilot’s license—but aside from 'a lot of people died,' her mind drew a blank. Or—almost. “Aleema… that Krath woman. She was—she blew up the stars?”

“Didn't you name your flagship after her?” He frowned—then spat. “Hell if I know why. Aleema Sato was a murdering Krath bitch.”

“I don't know why I did a lot of things.”

“What do you think happened?” Half of Revan wondered if Jasp was just trying to distract her—or more likely—himself. She didn't like the color of his face, the bluish tinge to his lips.

“It’s a long story.” He picked up the bulb of water she’d handed him and drank some of it. “But I expect we have time.” His hand holding the water trembled.

“Sure. But… hold a moment…” Revan had packed her own wounds in kolto, but there’d been a medical pack under the fridger in the galley. Without waiting for a response, she got up and retrieved it. “I’ll be right back!” she called out reassuringly, when he half-turned, like he was going to follow her.

“Oh,” Polla’s father said as she came back with the medi-pak. “You…you don’t need to go to the trouble of fussing over me.”

“I need you alive to fly the ship. I'm a terrible pilot,” She didn't know if Polla would have said that as a joke, like she'd meant it. From the expression in the man’s eyes, maybe not.

*Two things Da never jokes about. Flying and politics—*

“I taught you better than that.” His voice was gentle.

“Da—” her own cracked on the one syllable. She wasn’t sure if she was saying it for him or for herself. “Please. Let me take care of you.”

“I'll try,” he promised. “Had one of those kits on my old bunk too. The scanner won’t say anything good. What's wrong isn't gonna get fixed with a few derm patches or kolto.”

“It's your heart,” she said. “I think.” *I should have learned to heal. Jolee wanted to teach me. And all those conversations with Dar and I never once asked how she did it—.*

“Maybe.” Jasp shrugged. “Maybe… some other things too. Nothing to worry your head over.” He smiled slightly. “Programmed the jump points in already, and wrote em down for you on plasti. I know that lift was rough but you can handle the landing—and we should have enough fuel for a straight run, if you're careful—”

“I have to be careful. Arkan would stand out at a refueling stop. We can’t stop. We can’t afford to stop.” *Even if you need a hospital, I can’t take you. I need you to fly the ship—*

The Sith's voice in her mind had quieted to a low ache now, a burn on the edge of her consciousness. Revan was trying to wall him off, and talking—talking was helping.

“You're not going to die,” she added. “Polla Organa would kill me!”

“Can you tell if she's alive?” Those dark eyes were just like she remembered, even if the new grooves around them made Revan’s chest ache. “Some kind of Force… thing?”

“No.” *I don't even know if Dar is alive. She'd started having bad dreams about Dar'Revan weeks ago. But that might have nightmares. Once, she'd even thought she'd seen Polla’s face; but somehow that had shifted, and she was back on the Star Forge with Malak and his eyes were glowing a hellish red—*

*Red eyes are bad.* Revan remembered that almost child-like thought on Taris—
“Oh.” Jasp nodded slowly. “Well then, let’s see if we can fire up the wideband on this tub and patch through to Deralia. Moll and your boy will—”

“No.”

“No?”

“We—we can’t just call—it’s not safe.”

“Never know when you might not have another chance,” he said. “I’ve been checking in regular, when the masters leave me on the ship—I always call.”

_The masters._ “They’re not your masters anymore,” Revan told him. “You saw—Arkan is mine now. I won’t let him hurt you—I won’t let him—”

“You’re _his_ master now.” His teeth were yellow, when he smiled at her. She’d found nutrabars in the galley and he’d barely touched them. His scalp was patched with brown spots on his where his hair had thinned. “I saw.”

**Get some sleep,**” Revan said gently. Her eyes went to the galactic chronometer set on the comm-deck. “Too late in Deralia to call now,” she lied. “When you wake up, maybe…”

His eyes fluttered shut. “Missed you, Pollie. Your ma’s gonna be so proud—”

XXX

The Mandalorians moved down the corridor like a hunting pack. Mekel had seen them do it before—guarding the Senator on Coruscant—falling into formation at the slightest hint of danger as naturally as breathing—but this was… tenser somehow. As if the attempted assassinations and threats on Coru had just been for fun. This felt real.

“What—?” Milli’s gloved hand banged into his teeth, she slammed it down so hard on his mouth. If Mekel hadn’t been trained to expect the unexpected assault or two, he was pretty sure he’d have gone down right then and there.

She shook her helmeted head at him, and shoved him back. Kex moved into Mekel’s place, smooth as if they’d planned it. Leskal didn’t look at him, just crept forward, but Canderous Ordo made a snorting noise through their comm-link, like it was funny.

Mekel hated the helm he’d grabbed, but he put it on anyway. It was loose, and the borrowed chestplate wasn’t much better. The vibroblade was nice, but the weight was all wrong compared to a saber. Had been ages since he’d taken practicing with anything else seriously.

They were creeping down a narrow, dimly-lit tunnel carved into the rock, or salt, or whatever the ground here was. It was like a cave, and Mekel didn’t like caves. They lacked the tidiness of a decent sewer pipe—with a cave, you never knew where you’d end up.

And then up ahead there was the sound of screaming.

XXX

Vrook stood witness as the Sith Lord Darth Sion leapt into the air, past the plate in the ground that was nothing more than a metal plate in the ground—nothing more except a marker... except, as the Sith passed its surface, the sensors half-buried in the salt ground activated, extending from the walls, ceiling, and floor; dropping their hollow, transparisteel tubes into the shafts provided for
Within each tube, a branch. Upon each branch, a triad of ysalamiri, mature enough to have fastened their hook-like tails and grown into the wood.

“Back,” Vash ordered, as Loanin’s creation activated. They had marked its range carefully, so as not to be overcome themselves.

Vrook stumbled back, his arms hitting Dak’s who shot him a glare. The Force surged with the younger man’s anger—but his was not the only darkness Vrook felt, among the Jedi.

Six ysalamiri tubes slammed down so quickly in front of Sion that the dead man was knocked backward. One of his knees bent the wrong way. Another thwack as more came down from the walls, forming the grid. All four sides, until the dead Sith was surrounded.

There was a slight pause, as the dead man took in the seemingly fragile cage that bound him. Then he chuckled. “This? Do you think these pathetic lizards will hold me?”

His saber slashed forward, glancing off the tube he’d tried to cut. The cortosis weave would hold, Vrook had been informed, but it made the glass brittle. A flaw in the design there had been no time to overcome. A direct blow would shatter it, but they were hoping there would be no time—

Darth Sion’s foot lashed out and one of the bars cracked.

“Now,” Master Vash said to Knight Pakeek.

The Togrutan nodded, and pressed the transceiver on her wrist.

The ysalamiri tubes began to glow as the gasses inside ignited slowly, amplifying the Force-nullifying signal. The first wave of dullness washed over the Jedi as its range expanded, dimming the Force, dimming all of their senses. The color and life in the world seemed to ebb, darkening, and Vrook’s awareness of the others faded, until they were nothing more than bodies next to his.

“Step back again,” Vash ordered. Dak had gotten his hands free, as had Master Skokkar. Da’Wit’s round eyes met Vrook’s and the Rodian gave him a resigned nod. Vrook knew the man—he would not try to free himself. Skokkar had always been rebellious—as he watched, she reached over and plucked Knight Ir’eee’s lightsaber from the hapless boy’s belt. The boy didn't seem to notice.

“Fools,” rasped Sion. “The Force is in me, it cannot be contained!” His battered and bare arm slammed into another tube and it cracked too. There was no blood where the transparisteel cut into the Sith’s flesh. The light of that tube blinked out.

“Amplify it now,” Vash murmured, and Pakeek pressed the controls again. A high-pitched sound like a shrill scream was faint at first; but it increased quickly as the ysalamiri’s frequency hit the salt crystals in the walls, amplifying the Force-deadening effect. The tubes glowed brighter, white hot, except for the two Sion had cracked. The dull edge of the Force ended abruptly for the Jedi, as they had kept walking and were now out of range; but inside the cage, where the ysalamiri burned in their prison—

Inside the cage came a cracked wail—what began as a scream—

XXX

The sound was like nothing Mekel had heard, and lately, he’d heard a lot of really fracked-up shit.
When they rounded the bend they saw the source of the screaming: Oerin fracking Lin, standing in some kind of glowing cage. As they watched, the light around him grew brighter, like a small sun going nova.

“Back,” Canderous snapped. “He’s triggered some kind of Jett’ai trap.”

“He’s not their kill,” Milli growled in that way she growled that Mekel found both scary and exciting. The cannon she was carrying was almost as long as she was. She fired it. Once, then again.

Her first blast hit Lin in the base of his spine, causing him to turn toward them. The second shot went wild, cracking another one of the cage bars. The glowing stopped and the bars shattered, just some kind of glass. Something fell out of it the glass—what looked like a tree branch, with blackened and twitching things attached to it.

Took Mekel a second; but he should have known immediately. He’d seen them so recently, back at the hospital with that asshole Klee. And Lin.

Ysalamiri. How the frack do you like them ysalamiri now, Lin?

Under his helm, Mekel felt his lips smile. He stepped forward, jostling with the others for a front row fracking seat, bringing his vibroblade up, poised to strike.

“What the nine hells is it?” Kex’s voice on the comm-channel.

“Ysalamiri,” Mekel told him. “They block the Force. He’s in some kind of ysalamiri cage.”

Lin was in it and he was screaming. The man’s stomach was gone, sheared away by Milli’s blast. But that wasn’t all. As they watched, his entire body began to shake. Pieces… pieces of him fell off. His nose was more of a skull, bare sockets of his yellow eyes. His lit saber fell out of his suddenly fingerless hand—sparkling and burning on the ground.

And the scream grew louder, desperate. Pain.

Good. You took the Force away, asshole. You should suffer. Maybe if you die, I’ll get it back.

Mekel stepped forward and slammed the hilt of his vibroblade into one of the glowing bars. The bar shattered too. Lin seemed to fall back, more a cloud of rapidly-disintegrating flesh than a man now and Mekel kicked another broken tube out of the way in his urge to gut him while there was still something left—

“Stop!” someone was yelling. Somewhere. Sound was muffled through his helm’s mic.

Overwhelmed by the screaming. Mekel realized the screaming wasn’t just Lin—it was the things inside the tubes too—screaming with Lin. Like they were injured too.

“I’ve got this,” he vowed.

“No.” Millifar shoved him out of the way, and fired her gun again. It took Lin—or what was left of him through the legs. More glass broke, as her bolt took out the tubes on the other side too.

Rapid fire from Kex and Leskal’s guns peppered the enclosure as the glowing bars popped out.

Mekel stepped back, because he didn’t want to get mowed down. The world became a blaze of noise and light and flying glass, and voices screaming—more voices screaming—
As the light from the cage died out with each bar broken, Mekel began to see more of the tunnel past Lin. There were sents standing there. Sents with lightsabers.

One of them was dear old Dads, right in front—no lightsaber in sight—his hands behind his back, glaring. “Stop!”

“Our kill.” Millifar kicked another tube out of the way and brought out her flamethrower, stepping into the cage’s enclosure. “Hu’tuun dar’jett can leave now. Oerin Lin is ours. I will sing his death song. I would have been his wife. I will burn him to ash.”

“His wife?” Fracked, that the first thing Mekel felt was a twinge of what he thought might be jealousy.

Canderous Ordo chuckled, and pulled Mekel back. “Never get between a woman and her kill,” he said.

“No!” Dear old Dads cried out again. “You don’t know what you’re doing! The cage is the only thing holding—”

His words were lost as Millifar ignited the flamethrower. Mekel couldn’t really see much except the white of Milli’s armor and the red of the flames, but he could smell cooked flesh easy. Not a smell you ever forgot. 

Brings back home. Good old Dreshdae— Funny, how he’d never realized until that moment, a part of him still thought of it as home.

“No!” A wave of something knocked them all back, knocked Milli back too, staggering her, making the flame go wild.

A wild-eyed Jedi woman was standing on the other side of the broken cage with a lit saber, the others crowded behind her. “You fools! What have you done?”

“Hello again, Dads,” Mekel called out. “Looks like you Jedi needed the Mando’ade to bail your asses out again!”

“Mekel?” Dear old Dads blinked at Mekel, but didn’t remove his hands from his back. He looked puzzled. Of course. The helm. Maybe he hadn’t realized—hadn’t even recognized his own son in the Force. “What are you still doing here?”

Mekel smiled back at him. “Saving your ass, Dads—”

Maybe he would have too. But the world chose that moment to end.

The world blew back with the force of a grenade’s explosion. The world became small, and screaming, falling white, and something red, half-moons of red burning through air. Screams turned to sobs. There was the sound of sabers clashing: snap hiss, snap, hiss-hiss—like one after the other, they’d all gone out.

Someone on their comm channel was making a whimpering noise, like they couldn’t stop. Someone else roared and a bulk of beskar shot forward, past Mekel, flash of a vibroblade extending with a snikt.

Mekel sat up slowly, whatever had exploded had dulled his senses even more than the lack of
Force. The world was in pieces:

Here, a piece of a beskar-clad arm. Looked ripped from its socket. He couldn’t tell whose—he didn’t want to tell whose—

But he knew anyway.

*Small. Small bones,* he thought, looking numbly at the ragged stump. *She has such small bones.*

Mekel didn’t want to, but he had to. He had to look up to see.

XXX

There was a reason, Canderous knew, why attacking a *thing* that had reassembled itself from ash and then ripped his daughter’s arm from her body in a mortal instant was foolhardy; a pointless suicide for a man with infant children, a man already too old for a glorious end.

But when Milli fell so did Canderous’s reason. Blood rage consumed him. All there was, was the enemy: the shell of Lin.

Guns did nothing against the shabuir hu’tuun, but a blade could cut to pieces what a bolt scattered. A frost grenade could freeze. And frozen parts he could *crush.* His vibroblade snagged on the former Mandalore’s spine, and Canderous sawed harder, a roar forming in his throat. His gauntleted fist slammed into the dead man’s neck with a satisfying crack. The dead man’s saber clashed with his blade, strangely silent for a dar’jett weapon.

Canderous dialed up the stims in his system with a twitch of his ocular controls, felt the battle augmentation kick his adrenals into overdrive, enhancing his reflexes, and used his boost of strength and speed to fall back and undercut the red blade.

His own connected with flesh again—severing one of the damned corpse’s legs.

But the man did not fall. The leg reformed itself near-instantly. Dar’Lin’s ruined face stared at Canderous’s helm: scarred and broken. “Mand’alor, I did not expect—”

A thrown blur of blue from behind Dar’Lin cut into the dead man’s side, interrupting his clumsy attempt at distraction. The Jett’ai weapon stuck in the dead man’s flesh, sizzling, like pure invitation.

Canderous didn’t hesitate. He swapped the vibro to his off-hand, and grabbed the saber’s hilt—thrusting an uppercut to take off the dead man’s head.

He slashed only air, because Dar’Lin had moved on.

Dar’Lin had jumped to the middle of the brown-robes on the other side of their ruined trap.

Canderous watched as Lin’s red blade blurred into a circle like a bloody sun, scattering pieces of Jedi like the wreckage of war.

Canderous did not realize how loud the sounds of battle had been until they stopped.

In sudden silence, the only thing he heard was someone sobbing softly over their comm-channel.

It sounded like Jin.

XXX
Her flamethrower was still burning into the wall, making a smell like charred salt. Other smells were worse. She lay in a pool of blood—still pumping not dead not dead but not pumping her arms gone it’s bad really bad—

There was… there was a lot of other stuff. On the way to her, Mekel tripped over another body. This one cut in half with a lightsaber. Sabers shouldn’t make it through beskar—that was the fracking point—but this one had. Kex. Or Leskal. Up ahead, Canderous was fighting the Sith. The blamming noise of Canderous’s cannon began as he threw his vibroblade again.


“Stop,” Mekel whispered. He crawled over to Millifar, grabbing for the torch on her wrist, the small one, the detachable. He had it lit and burning into her shoulder—cauterize—he was squeezing down on it—so fracking easy with the Force. It would be so fracking easy with the Force—or a lightsaber, even—what happened to all the lightsabers?

It was hard, fracking hard because there was barely enough shoulder left, not enough to tie a tourniquet over, just some of those battle gels that sealed over wounds, and Millifar had those too—he’d gotten those too—strapped in the holster along her thigh, and Mekel snapped the holster open, slapped one over the mess he’d made on her poor charred stump, and then he started unbuckling—her chestplate first and he couldn’t tell if she was moving, if she was breathing and in the background he heard someone yelling in Manda—

He couldn’t tell if her chest was moving so he moved to her helm. Her neck flopped back when he pulled it off; her hair braided so tightly in neat golden rows, eyes closed and white, purple-white shadows beneath, smeared like pain. Her lips were white too.

Mekel pulled his own helm off too. He parted her white lips and breathed through them, pressing down on her chest.

She didn’t breathe back. She’d lost a lot of blood, it was sticky and still warm. His knees were soaked in it. But the bleeding had stopped—mostly. He thought it had stopped.

There was more yelling somewhere while Mekel kept trying to make her fracking breathe.

Her lips were cold. It wasn't a kiss. He forced his breath down her throat.

XXX

Canderous fumbled for the switch on the Jedi’s weapon and switched it off, clamping it to his belt. He pulled out both repeaters. Had enough charge to keep blowing holes in the dead man’s flesh for days if the self-chargers kept up, converting the overheating energy back into bolts—

“Mand’alor.” The dead man wheezed the words out. His hand went to his throat and he fiddled with a metal plate there. The voice got louder. “I will not kill you, my Fett.”

Irritating the way the dead man knelt. Canderous blew pieces out of his head, only to see the pieces reassemble, nearly as fast as he blew them away. “Then die already,” he ordered Lin. “Millifar deserved a better death than you gave her.”

“I will not kill her either. I would never—”

Canderous was not usually one for ceremony, but the old words came to him. The Dha Werda Verda, the ritual battle chant song by his forefathers (in deed if not in blood) millennia ago.
“The gauntlet of Mand’alor strikes without mercy,” he muttered, advancing on Dar’Lin. “We are the rage of The Warriors of the Shadow, the first noble sons of Mandalore. Let all those who stand before us light the night sky in flame—"

“Duum motir ca’tra nau tracinya,” Dar’Lin’s broken voice echoed. “Gra’tua cuun hett su dralshy’a —"

“That’s right,” Canderous told through clenched teeth. “Our vengeance burns brighter still. This is for Milli.”

He dropped the smoking repeaters and switched on that blue saber again, jumping through the air, raising it down to cut the blasted bastard in two—

He landed on slick blood and the ruin of Jedi bodies, because his target had moved faster than his eyes could track.

Lin was off to the side again, staring past Canderous, back the way they had come.

“No—” the hu’tuun wheezed. “No!”

Despite the obvious risk of a ruse, Canderous followed the dead man’s gaze. Jin there, bending over his daughter, frantically pumping on her chest. His mouth pushing breath into her lungs. Crying between breaths. A whimpering soft sound that had words in it.

“Dontdiedont—"

“I didn’t see her.” Lin’s breath wheezed like bellows. Was he laughing?

Canderous took the time to shoot through his neck. And then followed with his blade until it stuck on something. Pretty funny, how a dead man looked with a lightsaber stuck in his gut. Canderous twisted the hilt—

One yellow burning eye blinked and the white orb next to it rolled. Then the dead man’s hand backhanded his helm.

“Sleep,” the hu’tuun muttered.

XXX

Somewhere, in a place beyond Mekel, another round of weapons fire rattled the corridor.

Then the sound of something crashing into the salt wall.

And then it all stopped. Silence. Silence over the comm-channel coming up from Mekel’s helm, staticky clicks that were nothing at all.

Mekel’s eyes were leaking, wet and leaking. Her lips were cold. So were his.


For a second Mekel had lost all time and that voice could have been Malak. Later, he would hate himself for it; but for a second, the words my lord formed in his mind. Automatic, like the gag reflex on a dead Hutt.

But when Mekel looked up, it was only fracking Lin. The wreck of him. Bald and gray and charred and dead as ever. That stomach that Milli had blown apart was blackened, but whole, as if someone
had set the pieces on fire and then put them back.

Mekel didn’t really see—he just launched up, not even a fracking blade in his hand, no Force, just claws—his fist. His fist slammed into Lin’s fracking face like a rock hitting meat. Nothing stopped it, just sank in. Lin didn’t even move. One of his eyes was dead. The other stared at Mekel, unblinkingly. The eyelid looked torn.

“I didn’t know it was her,” the Sith Lord rasped. “I wasn’t myself.”

Mekel punched him again. Kicked him in the choobs. No fracking reaction. A part of his mind told him this was suicide, but the rest of his mind didn’t give a shit. He lunged for his dropped vibroblade, sweeping out a leg, to trip the dead man. Stop him from stopping Mekel. With the Force, such a move would have thrown Lin back into a wall. Without it, Mekel tripped and fell. The vibroblade didn't move the six centimeters it needed to land in his hand. A sob welled up in Mekel’s throat as he rolled for it, bringing it up, stumbling to his feet—

*Clumsy, he’ll kill you. He’ll kill you now—*

Lin didn’t move for another long moment. “One of the Jedi ran off,” he offered. “I’ll be right back.”

Mekel blinked and the dead man had vanished.

*One of the Jedi ran—what the frack did the rest of them do? Why aren't they helping? Why the frack isn't dear old Dads—*

That’s when Mekel looked across the ruins of the Force cage and saw what the rest of the Jedi had done.

They had died.

XXX

For a moment, Oerin Lin had actually been dead, he thought.

The pain he thought as omnipresent in his life had ended—dissolved into a wave of black mist.

And at that moment, Oerin thought he’d even heard the sound of his mother’s voice singing his death hymn.

But then the world roared back: hard-edged and brutal. Something burned deep in Oerin’s guts and his eyes snapped back in their sockets; good eye and clouded one revealing a world of smoke and flames to his consciousness, the barrel of a gun in his face, blaster bolts overhead—and in the midst of the chaos, a white-armored figure, short as a boy, burning his body as over and over the Force reformed its shape.

Time was agony once more: an endless burning, a shifting in his guts: as ash became flesh became ash became meat—became ash—

Oerin just wanted it to stop. The Force in his newly-recovered hand ripped the burning gun from its root. The white-armored figure screamed, high and shrill and fell backwards. Red flames became a river of blood. And the death song ceased.

More armored shapes tried to kill him and then the Jett’ai fools who had sought to trap him… they tried as well. *So careless with their painless lives.* In their ends.
Last was the Mand’alor. He wore the helm Oerin had worn but never fully earned. Oerin would not kill the man, but the man wouldn’t listen.

The man said her name.

_Millifar._

When Oerin looked back, he saw Jin kneeling over her. The perfection of her still, white face was a blow to what remained of the shriveled organ in his chest.

Ordo, the Fett Mandalore, was still attacking—badly, now—weakening—as if sorrow had blunted his edge.

Oerin would spare him further shame.

_“Sleep,”_ Oerin growled, and Canderous Ordo—usually as Force-resistant as bedrock—collapsed on the ground.

Surprisingly, Jin took longer, attacking Oerin with hands and fists like an untrained child, and not the warrior Oerin had seen before in the battle circles.

Millifar was still—the spark in her nearly guttered to nothing. It was a shame that death had eliminated his ability to heal, a shame Mother had never taught Oerin to restore the Force to Mekel Jin so that he could heal—although if such a thing were possible, wouldn’t Mother have used it on Ulic, the man she considered her father?

Wouldn’t she have used it on herself?

It took Oerin nothing at all to find the one Jedi who had fled instead of dying. He had not gone far, was merely cowering in the first branch of the corridor.

The Human man glared back at him furiously, showing every sign of preparing an attack, a last-ditch attempt to die with the others. Oerin wasted no time with finesse—Millifar had no time left. His mind carved the commands into the Jedi’s soul as he dragged the man back to the dying girl by the scruff of his robe—

_“Heal her. Don’t let her die, even if it takes your own life—”_

Dak Vesser, former Korriban recruit, reformed Jedi Knight—and coward—was no match for Oerin’s will. His mind bent, shaping easily to its new purpose.

Oerin did not lurk around waiting for success. If the girl was to die, he did not want to see. He wrapped shadows around his person and vanished from mortal sight.

Xxx

_A/N_  


"I saved you," cried the woman
"And you’ve bitten me, but why?
You know your bite is poisonous and now I'm going to die"
"Oh shut up, silly woman, " said the reptile with a grin
"You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in"

— *The Snake*, song by Al Wilson
Paradise

Chapter 61 / Paradise

The sound of coughing woke Revan from a tangled sleep. She'd had a garbled dream, where Uncle Vrook was trying to say something, but the roar of the Star Forge's enormous turbines kept drowning out the words.

And she was starving. Hard to focus when she was so hungry–

That cough again. Rattling, like the crackle of blaster fire. She opened her eyes with a jolt and the galaxy came back: Katarr. Arkan–Jasp Organa–Polla's father–

Ship. We're on a ship.

Polla's father was sitting next to her in the pilot's chair. He had a half-finished nutrabar in one hand and a datapad in the other that he was using his finger as a stylus to scribble on. Revan had a sudden memory of him doing that with Polla's astrophysics homework.

"Race days in the Biscain system." He smiled at her as her eyes opened, continuing without preamble. "Means traffic will be shunted between the jump–point and the viewing orbits. We're gonna need to get across the system to their outgoing jump–point fast, before they notice." He leaned back. "Least this crate should be able to outrun most of the civs–except the racers. I'm not sure if we can outrun BisSec." His eyebrow raised. "That part's up to us."

"Outgoing?" the memory came, unbidden. With its double star and asteroid field, Biscain had strict traffic controls, even in the best of times. For race days, they'd have laid down interdictor fields all over the course to make sure that every spectator paid their ticket without jumping out free–and stayed out of the way of the racers.

"Right." Revan nodded. "We… can we cloak?"

Jasp coughed again, a sound that seemed to take up his whole lungs. "She's not wired for it."

"A fast run, then." Revan nodded, trying to think of Polla's memories of navigating Biscain space. "Sure. Easy as thisla pie."

_Jasp needs a hospital. He needs a healer. But if I say that—_

There was an escape pod on the snub. Revan had seen it when she was in the fresher–a clearly–marked hatch in the floor, green lights blinking to indicate the pod beneath was in working order. She might be able to convince Jasp to use it–and then hope someone picked him up–

_But you need to get through that asteroid field first. Be realistic, Fragment. You need him to fly the ship. You’ll never make it on your own._

Not Dar's real voice, just the echo.

_Hungry._

Arkan's voice broke through her mental shields again like they were plimsi.
The words blended together until they sounded like Malachor.

Malachor, Arkan whispered, as if agreeing.

"He sure is loud this morning." Jasp Organa absently wiped a trail of blood from his nose. "Used to be better. When they first brought me on, Lord Nihilus made more sense." He chuckled. "Used to ask for things. I tell you that?" He blinked. "Had me calling folks… sending orders… I'm sorry. I don't always remember what I tell you."

"You hear him too?" But you don't have the Force. They tested for it on Deralia–as they did on a lot of Outer Rim systems. Jasp had always bragged that their whole family was Force–blind as banthas… except Bendowen's kin. Except for Beya Organa. My old friend.

Cousin. Sara and I went to the concert and Beya got us out of that jam–

"How's Sara?" she asked, not sure why she cared.

"You remember, she married that shopkeep from Derra City. Their boy's about the same age as yours." He paused. "Your boy, I mean. Not my… not my grandson."

Malachor, Arkan whispered, the word gradually increasing into a scream. Malachor malachor–

"She had a wedding, I…" Polla Organa hadn't been home much for most of the last decade–too busy running routes through the Outer Rim. Revan could only remember that the woman hadn't cared about Sara and her stupid wedding place setting patterns. "I didn't know she had a kid."

Jasp Organa launched into a list of their various cousins' progeny, marriages, divorces and bankruptcies, and Revan kept the smile pinned to her face, trying to ignore the other voice, incessant and increasing, in the back of her skull.

Malachor.

There was no space between the cockpit and Arkan's vision–just the sudden, sharp intrusion of his memories slamming into her consciousness with the weight of a planetary implosion.

XXX

The atmosphere was breathable on this speck of rock–barely. Breathable for them, at least–but Davad didn't like the way the rad tickers spiked as he descended through the clouds.

His master had commed late. No message; just these coordinates on a remote moon of Endar, scene of their first victory against the Republic. The glow from the fires they'd set in the Republic's ammonite stores still burned on the planet below. No doubt Endar's cities were hellscapes now. Davad wondered if any of its pathetic inhabitants had slithered back.

If so, they were wise to keep well away from this moon. Davad could sense nothing in the Force except her: glacial and encompassing, like she'd wrapped half the moon in ice.

He banked his own Pinion down next to the plain, unmarked cruiser she'd taken to Ziost. The hatch was open, and from the way the landing gears were smashed into the rocks, he knew Revan hadn't brought a pilot, or even one of her droids to help fly the ship.

Still stubborn, even with the galaxy at stake. Even with all of her calculations, she still took
foolhardy risks–

The Force led him to a cliff face, about a kilometer away from the landing site of her own shattered light cruiser. The cliff itself was easy enough to ascend, and need for her gave him near wings: his fingers and boots needing only the lightest of purchase to scale the rock wall.

His lover sat at the top, dangling her legs over the edge. It made her look small and young.

Davad did not like that. Words of reprimand formed in his throat, as he scrabbled to the summit a few meters from her perch—and then those words died at the expression of abject misery on her face.

"Are you hurt?" He saw no wounds, but her dark robes were stiff and matted with gore. He had returned from battles often enough like this—and that brute Malak was nearly always drenched with the spoor of his kills—but never Revan. No, when his lover killed by her own hand, she did it cleanly—efficiently, like a simple chore.

"No," she said, looking up at him. "But my ship crashed." She held something in her hand, pulling and twisting it through her fingers, her yellow eyes gleaming like a manka's.

In her hand was a hank of red hair, fine and faintly curled, the exact shade of her own. It looked ripped from a scalp. What remained of her own hair was immaculate and unblemished, each row of thinning braids fastened tightly to her skull in a series of overlapping coils.

She's done it, he thought. She's finally killed Sheris. Malak will retaliate, but we are stronger than he—

"I crashed my ship," she repeated. Her lip trembled slightly. "It was a foolish miscalculation."

"Why here?" It had been three days since Davad had received her distress call. He wondered if she'd moved in all of that time.

"I needed to think." Her thumb moved over the braid again.

"Don't... cry." Sentiment felt odd and unpleasing.

"I am not." Her eyes were perfectly dry, but he felt it inside of her, a grief so vast and deep it seemed to encompass the entire moon. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize... not to me." The tenderness in his breast felt fragile as an egg.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "Everything we've done has been steps along a circular path. Every victory is just another obstacle, another defeat. He calls it balance."

"Malak is hardly a judge—"

"I mean Tenebrae."

"That old man?" Davad scoffed. "You are the true Sith Emperor! You control his planets. You control his fleets. He is a figurehead at best—"

She fingered the hair in her hand. It was a braid. Small, a little clumsy. Like something a Beast—rider child not yet earned in bells would have made. Her voice was quiet and stubborn. He had never seen her so vulnerable. He had never loved her more.

He had a sudden urge to push her off the cliff.
Her voice was steady, as if the words were one of those false mantras of peace they had learned as Jedi, so long ago. "He is less today than he was yesterday. That will have to be enough."

XXX

*That's nice,* Revan thought acidly at the scream in her mind. *I'm glad you both had a moment. I guess she didn't kill Sheris though. Maybe she scalped some other redhead—*

**Malachor,** Arkan's scream repeated. Like a threat.

*Stay away from my son!* A wash of anger brought Revan back to herself.

The lights on her console blinked, warning them they were close to exiting hyperspace. Another hour—give or take.

"I—I saw Uncle Boon," she said out loud. Her voice felt too loud. Jasp's nose was bleeding again—she handed him another wipe. "On Coruscant. Did I tell you?"

"Heard he got arrested." Polla's father leaned over the board, and adjusted one of the dials for no reason she could see. "Man always was a hothead."

"He… he wanted to have me killed," Revan muttered, half under her breath. It wasn't a good story. "H—how was the harvest this year?"

"Not bad. I irrigated the south field—"

**Malachor?** Now the word sounded like a question.

Her stomach rumbled.

*Stay away from Korrie!* What if she couldn't stop Arkan after he destroyed the Sith? What if stopping him didn't work?

There was a stack of nutrabars on the console. Revan picked one up and shoved the entire thing in her mouth.

**More,** Arkan whispered. It sounded like Malachor.

XXX

Canderous Ordo roared like a terentatek when the stims Aemelie injected kicked in, sending his entire body arcing out of the chair and to his feet, screaming curses. "Where is that stinking shabuir—" the way he gripped imaginary guns in each hand told Mekel where he still thought he was.

"Gone," Aemelie said flatly. "We had patrols sweep the area, but they found nothing. Word came from the Miralukan spaceport that a dead man stole a ship. The Dar'Lin could be anywhere."

"He can hide in that kriiffing Force. Need to catch him unaware—or lure him back out—" Canderous shook his head, blinking. "Milli—?"

"Alive," Aemelie glanced at Mekel, who was standing on the other side of the room, next to her bed. "Mekel of Clan Lin saved her life. He found a Jedi to heal her."

Mekel had tried, at first, to explain that he wasn't the one who found Dak, but no one had been listening, and Dak wasn't really speaking, just kneeling beside Millifar's body like he was in some
kind of trance. When they'd moved her—when… when Aemelie and the others had found them—a pack of Mando'aade and their Miralukan escort—Dak had refused to leave Millifar's side, walking next to her floating bed, his hands still glowing.

They were still glowing now, and it was morning. Felt like weeks, but Mekel thought it had only been a few hours.

Xxx

Vrook Lamar's hands had been tied behind his back, like he'd been a prisoner. Lin's prisoner? The Jedi? He couldn't have fought back, but he'd still been dead.

What was Mekel supposed to feel?

There had been too much time to feel anything at all. Nearly an hour sitting down there watching Dak kneel above Milli. Mekel had taken off Canderous Ordo and Leskal's helm. Both were breathing. Ordo didn't have a mark on him, but Leskal had a gash in his side through the beskar that Mekel had packed with kolto. Leskal kept drifting in and out of consciousness—kept trying to talk.

Dak Vesser refused to talk. When Mekel looked into his eyes he saw nothing. His pupils weren't even the same size. He kept forgetting to close his mouth. But blue light poured from Dak's hands like raw power. Even without feeling it, Mekel could see the results, feel Millifar's pulse strengthen under his fingers, watch color return to her ashen face.

Mekel himself had nothing to say. He had never felt so fracking helpless in his life. When their rescuers finally came—that Miralukan farmer, his cute daughter, and Aemelie Ordo with her Mandalorian hunting party—he'd had to tell the whole story about eight times before they seemed to believe him. For some fracking reason they couldn't believe one Sith had taken out twenty Jedi. Had they not met the fracking Jedi? Some of the Jedi had had their hands tied—Mekel's father's hands had been tied, but Mekel wasn't an idiot who thought it would have made one frack of a difference if they'd been free.

It hadn't looked like Lin had been the one to tie his father's hands. Lin had been trapped, maybe dying forever before they came and fracked everything up. Before Millifar had fracked everything up.

Aemelie had wanted to hunt down Oerin Lin, but then for some reason (after one of the other headwomen talked to her) she decided that was Mekel's fracking job.

"For your honor," she'd said.

Mekel wished he had lied and told her the dead Jedi had killed each other. Wasn't until they saw footage from the local news showing Lin mowing down everyone at the nearest spaceport and taking off that Aemelie shut the frack up about Mekel's honor to Millifar and Clan Lin, and started talking about how they'd organize a hunting party 'to take down both deathbringers.'

With Mekel leading it. Of course.

Xxx

"Where are we?" Canderous asked Aemelie now. The man looked like hell, which was better than Mekel felt.

"Hyperspace," his wife told him, and then went on with a story about them following Revan to
fight some woman named Jana Novasun. Wasn't the Sith Emperor a man? Mekel couldn't catch all of the discussion that followed—when he'd had the Force it had been easier to understand Mandalorian—but he'd sat there anyway, trying not to wince when Aemelie mentioned his name, and Milli's, and the dead Jedi they'd left behind in that tunnel like so much meat.

Xxx

"There's no time," one of the Mandalorian kids told Mekel when he asked if they shouldn't... do something for the dead. "The Jett'ai died fighting a superior foe. There is no dishonor in that."

There was no time, not for Milli and Leskal, who both needed kolto tanks, and more medical attention that one blank-faced Jedi with glowing hands could provide—especially when he refused to look at Leskal at all.

"What's wrong with him?" Jirgo asked Mekel as the Mandalorians brutally and efficiently stripped a few Jedi corpses and made makeshift litters for Milli and Kex from cortosis robes and a few deactivated rifles. "That Jedi get hit on the head or something?"

Dak had... almost growled when someone tried to separate him from Milli. Had been a long time, but Mekel had seen a few cases of compulsion that deep before. Bandon once compelled one of the prospies to scrub the entire Dreshdai Academy with a toothbrush made from... the man's own pubes. Made more of a mess than he'd cleaned.

"He's compelled."

The Mandalorian just looked at Mekel blankly. Mekel tried not to flinch and pocketed a few lightsabers from the pile Jirgo was making. Yeah, he'd probably decapitate himself trying to use them without the Force for anything more complicated than cutting through metal; but you never knew when that might come in handy.

His father's saber was one of the Force--locked kind. Useless for a null like him. Mekel left it behind.

XXX

"You. Kid." Canderous Ordo's granite eyes focused on Mekel. "Thank you."

"I--I didn't--" why the frack was he protesting? If they were following Revan, they'd be going to Kaas, wouldn't they? Wasn't that where she'd be going to get her husband? Her other husband? If they were going to Kaas, Mekel had to come, right? "I speak Ancient Sith," he added. "If you're going to Dromund Kaas, you'll need me."

"You're Clan," Aemelie interrupted. "Of course we need you."

"You've earned your place," her husband added. His eyes went to Dak Vesser again, who was drooling again. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's basically brain--fried," Mekel told him. "Oerin Lin told him to heal Millifar and so that's all he's gonna do from now on. It's all he can do."

"Hrm." Canderous grunted, his eyes going to the displays above his daughter's head, the med readings all in normal range. (Far as Mekel knew anyway, frack if he was some expert, but in the torture cells on Dreshd' they'd say she was healthy enough for the full course.)

XXX
"Move," Jirgo told Dak again.

The former Sith raised his hand and Jirgo slammed into the nearest wall, before bouncing back up with both guns in his hand--

"Don't!" Mekel felt like a real asshole jumping between them, but he was afraid Jirgo might hit Milli. "Please! He's compelled! He doesn't have a choice!"

"Compelled?" Jirgo squinted, not moving his guns, looking like he was trying to aim a shot around Mekel. Or through.

"The Force. Oerin Lin used the Force on him. He's... he's not all there right now."

"Will he get his brains back?"

"I don't know."

"Dar'jet magic." Jirgo shoved Mekel, pushing him to the side. "Kinder to end it."

"He's still healing her!" Mekel would agree, otherwise. "Wait--"

Xxx

"Thank you, Mekel." Canderous Ordo nodded toward him. "You and the other Korriban kid saved her life."

Oerin Lin saved her. He did something to Dak. I didn't do anything--

"I'm sorry." We fracked it all up. The Jedi had Lin in that trap. If we hadn't broken him free, none of this would have happened. Kex would be alive. My dads would be alive too. "We didn't know. That cage held him--"

"Now we do know." Canderous's expression was unreadable. "When we get the chance, we'll build another cage for that hu'tuun sheb. For now we follow Revan."

"Like tame dewback," Aemelie muttered.

Her husband said something soft to her under his breath and stood up. "Not tame," he growled.

The woman ducked her head, a slight flush on her dark face. "Headwoman Sinae is constructing a prosthesis for Milli--"

Canderous grunted approval. "Show me."

"She's stable." The other headwoman--the one who had been hovering in the background all this time--walked over to them, holding a long tube sealed white. "Best to attach it soon when the nerves are fresh." She tried to push Dak Vesser aside, but the man growled at her.

"Move aside," she commanded him. She reached for his arm--

In the next instant, the headwoman was hurled across the room by what had to be a wave of outflung Force. The crack of her skull against the duraplate wall was as loud as a blaster bolt.

Dak Vesser's hands went back to the hole where Millifar's arm had been, still glowing. Queasily, Mekel started to wonder if he was trying to grow her a new arm. Was that fracking possible?
Canderous stood up, a little awkward in his sleeping robes, and looked at his wife. She nodded and handed him a small needle–nosed blaster from the holster on her hip.

"She's better," Canderous said, cocking the weapon to the side, waving in front of the Jedi's dead eyes. "She doesn't need more healing. You gonna move, kid."

The only response was a low growl.

There was a sharp report, and Dak Vesser fell down, one blaster bolt to the skull. Mekel glanced down, because you never knew, but Ordo hadn't used a stunner. Dak was one poor sheb who wasn't getting up again.

*Mandalorians,* Mekel was already moving across the room to make sure the headwoman who knew how to attach Millifar's arm wasn't fracking dead now too.

Xxx

"The *Aleema* jumped to hyperspace." Rew Ekkumi watched High Admiral Rensha's face carefully for clues, careful to keep her own expression blank. "Destination unknown. Chatter from the planet is that a Republic ship crashed in a remote mining area. And that there were casualties."

"Anything more from that mining area?"

Surely, Rensha had been expecting to hear nothing from the planet but panic–did she looked relieved to be wrong? Concerned?

"There was some buzz about traffic along the hyperlanes–otherwise, no."

"The Jedi's refuge was an island," Rensha mused. "Perhaps Darth Nihilus consumed everyone on the one island and then departed. Or perhaps consuming a world takes time. Until we know--"

Until we know if we've killed everyone on the island we should do nothing? It was on the High Admiral's head, not hers, but Rew still felt a slow burn of anger--perhaps guilt. "What about the crew of the *Harbinger*?" Rew asked.

"No word." Rensha turned back to her datapad, her eyes scaled slits as she scanned it. "There should be soon."

The silence hung between them like the countdown of an explosive charge.

Finally, a console beeped. "Incoming broadcast," Rensha murmured. "From Katarr."

Rew Ekkumi looked over her commander's shoulder at the screen.

"While no formal charges have been filed, the salt farmer Verax Marr's assets are frozen and his actions are currently under constable review. The mysterious deaths of the visiting Jedi are under full planetary investigation, and we are attempting to reach Coruscant for some kind of official statement--"

Death of the visiting Jedi, but not the Miralukans? Still tragic, of course, but a part of Rew breathed a sigh of relief.

"Set a course for Katarr and order the rest of Fleet to follow--cloaked," Rensha barked at her hapless ensign sitting on the tier below them. "And scan all channels to see if there are more broadcasts."
Visas Marr had always wondered what it would be like to be famous, to not be mothering a pack of sibs, to not be studying to be an accountant. She'd even dreamed of a different fate—once or twice—traveling the galaxy, learning the ways of the Force from a Jedi—a man. Only in the dreams, she never saw his face.

But this—this sudden assault of infamy on their family—was never what she'd had in mind.

The local reporters started to arrive on speeders and cutting boats, along with an armed response team composed mainly of Human nulls, each one a patchy scab in the Force. Their uniforms marked them as part of the ruling Governor's Security Force. Visas wasn't surprised to see the outsiders, but so many all in one place gave her a headache.

Dad was all decked out to meet them, wearing his best veil, and making Vizzy corral the smaller kids into their school uniforms, as if this was a formal holiday—and not the day after what could have been the end of the world.

"In your own words," the HoloNet reporter repeated, as Vizzy tried to make Vic stop giggling. "Begin at the beginning."

"The security cams," Dad said. "I got it all on vid!"

Vizzy didn't have to look at the security cams, she'd been there. That Human woman, waving and yelling at the two shadows that had made their house rattle and shake with nothing more than the Force. And that terrible, empty scream that had just…

"left."

She didn't want to remember that terrible silence in the halls of the mining tunnel either, the sounds of that pissing guy's sobs, or that other Jedi—the one with the crazed, blank face, who kept channeling the Force into the unconscious Mandalorian girl like she was some kind of battery. Inside—most sentient looked like a seething mass of energies and emotions in her Force sight. But that Jedi had just looked black—a roiling pit of black. Like there was nothing left.

Now the mic was being shoved in Vizzy's own face. "And you, Miz Marr? What did you think the monster looked like?"

"He just looked like a man." Two men, but one was already dead. In her internal Force sight, he'd just looked like a man—even when the sensors clearly showed him dissolving and reappearing like a ball of mist—and that was perhaps the most terrifying thing of all—that he'd been a ball of mist, but also a man. A Human man. As far as Visas was aware, there were no races in the galaxy who could become incorporeal, not even the legendary shapeshifters, so what—

"The dead Jedi in my mine," her father interrupted. "Who's gonna take responsibility for them? The governor? Are you contacting the Republic?"

"I'm sure the intergalactic networks will pick up the story—but before they get here, can you tell the people of Katarr... again, why you rented your farm to a group of dangerous Force-user—placing our very planet in jeopardy?"

Dad's mouth set in the Force, as dark as a mine itself. "For credits. I got mouths to feed!"

"Who is that woman?" another Miralukan reporter interrupted. "Is it just me or does her light refractions on the vid have a shape like... Revan Starfire?"

"Revan's dead," the reporter from Akarine—a know—it—all who usually just did the morning news,
puff pieces about recipes and homeschooling—interjected. "If you ever watched the wideband, Kannis, you'd know already."

"Those light refractions are brown," another reporter commented. "Starfire had red hair, I thought."

"Who was that thing?" Vizzy's dad interrupted. "The Mandalorians said a Sith killed the Jedi. Was that thing that menaced our house Sith?"

"Revan Starfire was Sith," Puff–piece noted.

"Vizzy, I have to pee." Her youngest sister tugged on her arm. "This is boring."

"I'll take you." Visas turned her back on the nest of gagging cacklers and led Vichy back toward the cabin before any horrible accidents could happen.

Through the sky she sensed an incoming ship, descending fast.

"Great!" Dad grumped behind her. "See that? That's a wide–beamer van driving down now. Intergalactic leeches! HoloNet! Soon we'll be infested–worse than the Jedi!"

"You said before, there are dead Jedi–" someone else interrupted. "How many?"

Xxx

**Malachor**, Arkan's voice whispered. **More.**

Again, the image of herself on that cliff appeared.

Revan's memory was a dead blank.

*Shut up.* Her eyes kept fluttering closed. The burns on her legs hurt. She kept talking to Jasp, to keep herself awake, to hear his voice.

*I'm so glad you're here, Da. Like that time I almost fell through the ice—* "On Yavin Station, you said before. You went there looking for Polla."

Jasp nodded. "Never found her. Just Lords Nihilus and Sion."

"Don't call them that!" Lin. *I forgot about Lin. He must still be on Katarr. The Jedi can deal with him. They should do something—*

"Those are their names." He sounded puzzled. "Lords Nihilus and Sion."

"Not—it doesn't matter. They don't matter." *You don't matter, Arkan. You're just the means to an end.*

**Malachor.** His voice was oddly subdued. That image of the cliff face flashed in her mind again, like some fracked–up message, followed the image of Dar'Revan in the Jedi Temple again, staring blankly at him.

"Moll said Seiran commed her—did I tell you?" Jasp asked. "I call them when I can. Pollie's on Dromund Kaas, and Seiran was going there with the other you to get her out. Did I tell you already?" He glanced at her, almost hopeful. "Will they get her out?"

"We will," she lied. It was hard to meet his eyes. "Y—you… I promise." *Da. We'll get them both out. If they're not dead.*
"Huh." He snorted.

Revan didn't glance at the comm board, for fear Jasp might try and call Deralia again. *Nothing can trace back to Korrie.*

**Malachor,** the voice in her head echoed.

*Leave him alone.*

**Malachor.**

Was it better that Arkan seemed to have replaced 'run' and 'food' and 'hungry' with her son's name? It was not. Revan rubbed her eyes. Her stomach rumbled. "What else did Seiran tell Ma-Molla?"

*Dar'd need him for a pilot. She'd tell him anything to get her to Kaas. He's probably dead now too, now that she's there.*

"Moll said they were on some space station–Peragus, I think. Says she hasn't heard from him since."

*So he's dead. Change the subject. "How is… how's Korrie? When you talked to Molla? And Abasen?"*

"They were fine, last time I checked. We could call again–" Jasp coughed again. "I–I'd like to."

*No. We can't. It's not safe.* She fumbled in the cabinet beneath her seat and found a med–cloth. "Here. You need to rest."

Jasp took it from her, wiping his nose with a nod. "Don't nag me, kiddo." His smile hurt as much as a ghost.

"If anyone is monitoring us, they'll find them. If anyone's monitoring them, they'd find us. We can't risk… anything." Revan's eyes went to the planned hyperspace route again. *Biscain. Jirulla. Medriaas. Syskulla. Aer'bak'tai. Thule. Ziost. Kaas.* Save the last three worlds of the official Sith Empire, most systems were uninhabited.

A certain grim reality was setting in. Davad Arkan could consume all the Force in Sith Space. Then, maybe the *Aleema* could take him out… but would Revan herself survive the encounter?

And what if he evaded them? Or… worse? The fracking Sith Emperor probably hadn't started out possessing billions of sents either. What he became had… evolved. If Arkan was eating all of that living Force, it stood to reason that he would… grow too.

**Malachor,** Arkan whispered again. The word sounded real, like a breath in her ear, the whine of a jerrysh–snake before the strike.

"Hungry," Jasp muttered.

"I am your master," she said out loud. Maybe to them both. She didn't feel like it. She didn't like the feeling.

"Follow," Jasp muttered. "We're coming out soon, Pollie. You want to steer her?"

Revan had felt this grim fatality before. On the *Leviathan,* and with everything that had happened leading to Malak's death. When Malak's death had become her sole purpose.
Was that what she'd felt before? How Dar had felt when she–

Malachor.

Leave him alone!

"My lord used to make more sense," Polla's father offered. "You want to steer her?"

"We should give this ship a name," she drawled, trying to match his accent. It had seemed so easy once. "This crate of bolts. Give her a name. It's lucky."

"Sure." The way his hands moved on the board, Revan wasn't sure if Jasp heard her at all first. Until he spoke again. "Naming a ship's a powerful thing, kiddo. What was your mother's name?"

"Mol–" her traitorous jaw clamped down too late. Her mind went blank.

"Oh!" He turned to look at her, eyes suddenly focusing. They were kind. The color brown she remembered in the mirror–but faded and bloodshot now, the whites yellowed. "I meant your mother. Your real one."

"I don't know." Dar said she'd tell me about her once. But she never did. I never asked. All those times that I could have asked–

"You don't–" He leaned over the bar separating their seats and pulled her to him suddenly, close enough she could smell the rot in his breath, feel the delicate bones of his shoulders. "It's okay. Can't call her after Mollie because–"

"Bad luck. She's alive. I know." Molla's name had just slipped out.

He'd been tall and strong once. He'd been a giant to the real Polla. A hero. Now Jasp felt like Revan could crush him with a breath.

"We could call her Mita, if you like, Pollie." His arms were slack and trembling, but they wouldn't let go of her.

Auntie Mita said Organa women were like flowers, she said– "Call her Jopheena. She was kind to me. Or–or Dancerto, after Polla's ship. I don't… it was a foolish idea, naming her anything." Call her Bastila. Call her Juhani. Call her Mission.

"Jopheena." Jasp pulled back, scanning her face. "It's a good name. Was that the name of your master?"

"Not mine." The images from Arkan's memories danced in the back of her mind. That old woman, skulking in the shadows. At least she's gone now. Lin and Arkan took care of her.

"My master had too many names."

Malachor. Arkan again, nudging her. Always that word.

"I'll give you Malachor," Revan muttered. "Just leave my son alone, Arkan. Leave him alone and you can eat every one of those miserable fracking Sith–"

"Language!" Jasp coughed, so much it rattled his frame. "Are you gonna steer her out of hyperspace or not, Pollie? You always liked that part."

XXX
Millifar Ordo awoke to familiar faces: her father, looking drawn and furious; Mekel Jin, standing next to him. And Headwoman Sinae of Zal, who was a skilled healer and medix, hovered in the back, with a purpling bruise on her temple and a kolto pack on her head.

That was all rather strange, but for a moment, everything was fine. She felt as if she was waking from a long, dearly-needed sleep. She felt uncommonly refreshed. Millifar tried to sit up, but one of her arms wasn't responding, and the gesture slumped her forward. Her left hand shot out to stop herself from tilting over—but there was nothing—

No left hand there. No arm. Nothing, when she glanced down, but a bandaged place above the support for her breasts, covering a place where her arm was supposed to be.

"The prosthesis." Sinae stepped forward, holding a white metal tube. "Now that you're awake we can reattach the nerves."

"I'm pleased you're recovering," her father said gruffly, pushing past the headwoman. He planted a rough kiss on her forehead like she was a stripling again before stepping back, head properly down.

"Are you okay?" Mekel Jin asked. He didn't look like he was. Half of his hair was sticking up and his face looked rough and unshaven. "Do you feel—"

"I feel fine." She frowned down at the arm again, trying to spark the memories that would inform her of how this unfortunate mutilation had occurred. "Was I unconscious for long?" The faint hum in the background told her they were back aboard the Aleema. Aemelie was standing by the doorway, her eyes further registered. They hadn't been on the Aleema before, they had–

"When did you get here?" she asked Mekel.

"I—I came when you," he frowned. "You were dy—"

"You're better," her father interrupted. "You fought well."

"I fought…." Her mind was oddly blank. And someone was missing. Someone she'd grown rather accustomed to seeing, even if his courtship was futile and sad. "Where's Kex?"

Her father shook his head slowly.

"Oh. Was it…" her voice trailed off, still with that irritatingly blank space. She should remember something of the battle. Obviously, they had been in battle. Katarr. We were on Katarr. We were on Katarr and—

"Did we win?" she asked, to cover her confusion.

"We will," Aemelie assured her from the door.

XXX

Malachor.

"You were telling me a story about your deep, dark past before." Revan tried to change the subject, take both their minds away from the scream behind them. "What happened after the war?"

"I married your—I married Moll. We had her… Pollie." Jasp shrugged. "Guess you know most of that."

The monster behind them was proof enough that Revan wasn't Polla Organa—just in case she forgot. Still, she *remembered* sitting like this. This was the man who had taught her to fly—given Polla Organa the stars—

Xxx

"That one, Pollie. Always punch in your final destination first—then mess with your details. Auto-pilot'll calculate the route regardless, but our real art's in the margins. Look." Jasp pulled up the Perelman Spire on his old ship's primitive RGB screen. "See how she's marking through Kessel like a sack of tomatoes? What would you do to shave off a day there?"

"You could run straight through here, slingshot off the moon of this gas giant, if it has enough pull?" Her hand traced the route.

"Show me." Her father beamed as Polla stood up and went to the navboard, clipping off angles from the velocities based on the gravitational pulls of the planets in that system versus the star they orbited.

"Good," he beamed. "Course, you gotta understand, no system's Sec team is gonna let you run through off their hyperlanes with no inspections, no taxes, no tariffs on an off-system product—"

"I know, Da." Polla laughed and glanced back at their audience, the half-naked hulk of a man in the kolto tank and the injured Jedi with his arm in a sling, both of them watching silently, and not at all giving her the creeps even if—

Wait. That's not right. That's wrong.

Polla laughed. "Don't worry. I have this. I'll fly the ship." Before anyone could protest, she turned and bent over the navboard—

The galaxy shifted.

It was wrong of Davad to admire her supple form bending over the navboard at a time like this, but they'd jumped out of hyperspace straight into a cloaked Mandalorian ambush, and if they were going to be atomized, he wanted one last good memory.

"Let me." Davad stepped forward, glancing down at the board, too many lights flashing red.

Behind them, Malak made another frustrated groan from the bacta tank where he bobbed half-submerged, courtesy of the Mandalorian basilisk that had sprayed half their base with xoxon mist, before Dodonna had called the evac order.

"You only have one good hand, Davad." Revan turned a dial—to adjust the stabilizers, perhaps was her intention.

Their ship's engine lurched, and what remained of breakfast almost came up in Davad's throat.

"Not like that!" Malak's anguished scream from behind them. "Davad! Don't let her fly the ship!"

How was he supposed to stop her? Davad gentled his voice. "Revan." The pain in his shattered arm didn't lessen, but a warm feeling courséd through Davad's veins as he reached for her hand with his unbroken, clumsy left, pulling it away from the dial.

"Knight Arkan's still twice the pilot you are," Malak said from somewhere behind them. "Even with one hand. Let him fly the blasted ship!"
Davad's hand closed over hers on the yoke. Revan looked up at him, startled, as if she'd felt the same spark as their hands touched–

"Let me fly, Revan," he murmured. "If you do it, we'll probably crash into a sun–"

Xxx

I get it, Revan thought acidly at the mad Sith in her head. I know I'm a terrible pilot. I know Dar'Revan was a terrible pilot. Why are you showing me this? Why are you gatecrashing my memories?

The answer came again: that same blasted word. Malachor.

"He's hungry," Jasp said. His nose was bleeding. In front of him, their slingshot through the Biscain system was neatly mapped, like a flock of migrating orrigeez outlined in blue. "It's good. We're going to see Pollie again. Soon."

Malachor. The word was hungry. Her own stomach growled again, and Revan reached for another nutrabar, trying to find her way back to polite fracking conversation.

"It's good she's not Force-sensitive, Polla and Carth aren't Force-sensitive. Seiran–" If any of them are still alive. Will Carth still love me if I have a monster eat his son? If he watches me destroy an empire?

Does it matter?

"Seiran Wen tested for it," Jasp said. "The Force. I don't know if you remember–"

"Sure," Revan lied. They'd been in the same class, but Revan only remembered Polla's test—such as it was: two minutes in a room with some robed old guy, being asked to guess some cards behind a screen. Had he been a Jedi? Why did Deralia test its kids in the first place? "So… Seiran has it. We'll have to keep him clear of Nihilus."

The man's already dead. You know this. For some reason, she thought of the way Abasen's fingers closed around her thumb, the way his eyes kept looking at her—dark and almost angry—as if he knew she was the reason his ma wasn't there.

The clean jumpsuit felt smooth and cool on her abraded skin. The kolto pack on her leg itched. The controls on the navboard blurred and their next jump point, superimposed in holographic glory in front of them, nudged a memory–

Xxx

"One load of spice." Polla kicked one of the crates over. In the vids, it would have popped open, revealing its smuggled cargo to her lying cheat of a boyfriend. In real life, her toe hurt. "Ow! You said one crate of spice."

Therion D'Cainen had that cocksure smile that said he knew she was staring at his bare chest. "You said it was fine when we left Byss."

"You said it had tax stamps already. You said, even if it wasn't strictly by-the-books it was one crate!" Polla felt her voice rise. "There's at least ten crates back here, Joyride, and I don't know if you've heard, but they have some ban against weapons exports now too, so that deal we set up with Suvam is fracked. The fracking war–"
"It's just another war, come here." He grabbed her arm. He smelled like engine oil and leather, and healthy male sweat—and he kissed her over and over until she was weak-kneed and stupid.

"You know you want me." He was too smug by half, but she did—that was the damnable truth of it—she did want—

The galaxy twisted again, bathed in gold and red fire.

"Yes." Her voice was a whisper in his ear, the bite of her small teeth was silken pain. "Yes."

Her eyes were yellow slits, gleaming in the half-dark that hid the cream of her flesh beneath his body, that soft of her, the cold stone under his palms on the floor of the Rakatan Temple. "Do it now—"

The thrust was like coming home, a blaze of light, an endless spark against the cold, a light in the Dark. The two of them locked like drexl in flight—flying, mating, falling—

Xxx

"Revan?" The sight of Jasp's gray face, furrowed with worry was like a shock of cold water, slamming Revan back into her own mind, into the present.

Malachor, the voice murmured in her head.

What the frack was that? Her skin felt hot and Revan had the uneasy feeling that she was blushing. What the frack was that? Don't do that again!

"Revan? We're coming out of hyperspace soon. You... are you okay?" Polla's father touched her arm, and Revan jerked away from him, skin still crawling from that vision.

"I'm banned from Biscain," she muttered. "I mean she--Polla is banned from Biscain. She ever tell you about that? There was--it was a spice run. It--she got tricked--the spice had kanna mites and it was worthless."

"No." Jasp laughed, but it turned into a cough. "No matter, we'll be in and out before they know it. Just keep sharp." His skin was too pale, and his life in the Force felt dull and faded.

"It's her that's banned." She tried to make a laugh. "Not us, Jasp. Are you--are you okay?" She handed him the cloth to dab his nose again.

Malachor.

"Your nose is bleeding too." He coughed again awkwardly, gesturing to her, and Revan put her hand to her face, startled to find it true.

"Cabin pressure--?" But all the lights were gold on the board. Everything looked normal.

"Sometimes he doesn't know his own strength." Jasp coughed again. "He can't always talk but he shows... is he showing you things?"

She willed herself not to blush. "He's showing too fracking much."

Xxx

"Do you kids want anything else?" Layran's mother fussed a lot, Kore thought. Now she was standing in the doorway smiling at them, even if she'd already put the plate of cookies down. Moll—
Ma would have made Kore fetch them himself from the tetra-wave. "Fizz-pop, Lema-ice?"

"We're good, Ma!" Layran sprawled out in one chair and Kore was in the other. "Just gonna watch the Biscain Hundred now. See what's what."

"The gold heats start soon," Miz Lee said, clapping twice to turn on their holoscreen. "I'd watch myself, but I promised Kira I'd help her with her test prep for Smuggler's Academy."

"Bye," Rannie told her, making a waving gesture with his hand. "You like the screen?" he added to Kore as his mother left them. "It's got quad-diodes for the widebeam!"

"Yeah, you said before." Kore smiled at him, and reached for a cookie.

Layran was really proud of that screen, and Kore had decided it was probably mean to tell him that the rezz was bad and it looked old, like a holoscreen from one of the old vids he'd seen about the workers in the Coru Underground.

"Did that guy ever come back?" Layran asked Kore when Miz Lee was out of ear-hollering distance.

"The guy from yesterday?" Kore crossed his legs, leaning back in the seat. "Nope."

"You sure he wasn't a Jedi–Sith?"

*Since they're not real, yes. You dope. But friends were nice to have. And Rannie and Pollanne and Jesp had got Korrie’s six yesterday. That meant he owed them. "Yeah," Kore said. "I have the Force, remember? He wasn't in it."*

That wasn't totally true. It was more like, it felt like the guy had been cut out of it. Like Mother felt a little, when she was hiding.

"Show me something," Rannie asked.

"Huh?"

"With the Force."

"Not now." *Don't show off*. Mother had warned him. *Both* mothers had warned him.

"*And now…*" the announcer on the screen began. "*First of our gold heats is up! Anything goes with these ships—and, as you can see—we've got a wide range of contenders!*"

"Corellian disc ships," Kore noted. *Like the* Ebon Hawk. "Sure are a lot of them."

"They got popular because of whatshername." Rannie helped himself to a cookie. "You know about Moll Organa and whatshername, right? Guess that's why they got you from Nar—cause whatshername killed their kid."

"Revan. And she did not." He bit his lip.

"My cousin Sispo says she did. " Rannie looked like he was trying to look crafty now. "Rev–ANN. That's how it's pronounced. You say it funny."

"I do not." Kore told himself it didn't matter. "Look." Grandfather always said most sentients were easily distracted by trivial wonders. A few dropped credits, a free light-show. Kore levitated a cookie, focusing to keep it in the air. "The Force. See?"
"Wow." Rannie's mouth dropped open. "All I ever did was guess cards behind a scree–"

"And they're off!" the announcer proclaimed.

XXX

"You can't let Nihilus eat Seiran if we get there. Pollie… Pollie wouldn't have it." Jasp sounded worried.

"I won't. If I can stop him. They're probably already dead. Revan needed to change the subject. "Tell me about the war. You were starting to tell me before–"

"Not much to tell. Didn't like our orders, so me and my squad quit the war." Jasp Organa cleared his throat. "I mean it. You have to bring Pollie and Seiran both back. Molla… she needs them both, even if his own family's not worth a damn. And Abasen needs two parents."

And you. They need you.

But Polla's father was coughing again, and the sinking feeling in the Force eddied around him; dark–edged, strangely gray.

Malachor. The monster's thoughts broke through.

Shut up, she thought at Arkan. His need was like a hole in the Force, a nightmare that she couldn't wake from. I'll give you food. I promised, didn't I?

"Tell me," she told Jasp, trying not to shiver. Even though it wasn't her own hunger, she crammed another nutra bar in her mouth, trying to breathe. "Tell me the rest about the war. You're right. I should know about it, but I don't. So tell me. You said… before. You were stationed at Kemplex Station?"

Polla's da nodded slowly, leaning over the navboard and bringing up another map–this one a three–dimensional trail of jump points, terminating in a blaze of white light. "They left us there, sent most everyone else to Coruscant. Rumor was, the Krath were gonna hit Coru again. They'd already played that game once–sent us to Kemplex when Coruscant got hit instead… but this time, the Krath hit Kemplex. Looked like a thousand ships to our thirty. We had no choice but to run, hope they'd peel off and leave the station alone–"

"You had no choice," she echoed, even as her mind noted the obvious.

Blow the station, everything in the system that could be of strategic value. Leave nothing but stars. Give them no targets, and there is no victory.

Malachor, the voice in her mind whispered–and this time she heard screaming. The deaths of so many–what he had showed her before.

Malachor. Not my son. The place.

How many billions in the Sith Empire? There will be more death than Malachor. The screams will be louder–

"Jedi brought reinforcements," he added. "Too late. They left us scrambling through the space lanes to get there in time to help. We ran escort to them–thought they'd try and evacuate the station but they… didn't."
Revan stared at the cluster of stars mapped in front of them, overlaying the hyperspace blur. *Cron implosion. It took over a year for the light to reach the Jedi Enclave on Ossus.* Someone had told her some of this before. "They died." She nodded. "I think I… I've heard this story before." *They died. Everyone on the station, everyone in the system–uninhabited, but all those ships. The entire Krath Fleet. It was like–*

**Malachor.**

She twisted her head back, uneasy at the coincidence.

**Malachor,** Arkan repeated. As it if was not a coincidence.

Polla's father was still talking. "Aleema Sato—that Dark Lady, or however she styled herself–she had some kind of superweapon. We flew escort, got Jedi there soon as we could–but that one girl—the Jedi Miracle–she did something. That's what the rumor said. I wasn't on the Jedi ship. But they left us with orders to stop anything from leaving the sector—"

"Even the Republic ships—"

"Anyone." His voice darkened. "Whatever happened out there, they didn't want anyone to know."

*The destruction of the Ossus System is what happened,* Revan's mind supplied. *The Cron cluster implosion. Aleema Sato's ship set off some kind of chain reaction that took out the Cron cluster and half its neighboring systems within the year. The Cluster was uninhabited, except for Kemplex IX station, except for the troops who were stationed there—*

"Which Jedi girl?" For some reason she thought of Arren Kae–of Vima Sunrider.

"You know." He shot her a puzzled look. "Pollie used to watch the cartoon. Nomi. Nomi Sunrider. What ever happened to her?"

"I don't know." Revan frowned, wondering why that was.

Xxx

The circular table held chairs, empty except for one, but each place setting had a holotransmitter, and the senior officers of the Republic Fleet all stared, flickering and blue, at their High Admiral. The woman they had followed loyally for the good of the Republic… at least this far.

*Not much farther,* that woman thought. The signs were everywhere: from Cein's inattention, to Ubuta's glare. The strange passivity of Admiral Ekkumi, the glaring, nearly open defiance of General Sand.

Together, they all watched the footage from the Katarr local broadcast again: the woman throwing her saber at the two shadowed figures by the simple hut. The severed arm falling, the shadows flanking, the desperate sprint–

"That was Revan." Rensha's tongue darted out, tasting stale air and the dull roar of hyperspace. "You all see–there is no doubt. Revan led the Force–eater away from the Miralukans, into the sea–and less than an hour later, two small craft entered hyperspace above the planet." She paused. "Hours later, according to the local government, the cloaked Mandalorian ship *Aleema* also left orbit."

"It appeared to be her." Admiral Cein's holo–image looked grim. They all did, all of her admirals and generals–superimposed in the conference room like a row of cowardly executioners, daring to
pronounce judgment on Rensha—when all of them had agreed—and any one of them would have done the same thing.

But we are military, and there is always someone who has to fall on the blade.

"It was her," Rensha repeated. "Did Arkan consume her? Perhaps Revan Starfire's sacrifice was enough for him to leave the planet."

"The reports say there are Jedi deaths—but nothing like we… expected." Rew Ekkumi was the only officer here in person, sitting in a chair while Rensha stood. It was an inversion of order, but in these times, it scarcely mattered. This was not her tribunal—that could still come later—but it had the air of one.

Any one of you would have done the same—she slicked her tongue back, and relaxed her jaw.

"There was also a mass exodus of small craft from the Jedi's location in the hours leading up to… that." Rensha pointed her primary claw at the screen. "Were they forewarned? Did they evacuate?"

"Should we try and arrange another demise for the remaining Jedi? Hire mercenaries to hunt them down?" General Ubata was a hypocrite—he had stood with them before. Or was that sarcasm? Mon Calamari were so difficult to read, especially over holo-transmission.

"About those Jedi…" General Sand's voice trailed off. "Master Atris is calling a press conference from the Telos orbital. Something about appointing herself head of the new Jedi Council?"

"Then the Councilmembers must be deceased," Ubata said. "They sense each other's passing in the Force. I saw it many times in the wars."

"The citizens of Katarr are safe," Rensha folded her talons, willing her scales to stay flat against her skull. "For that, we are all thankful. Casualties can't be large, or there would be more reports, yes?"

"There are a few wondering why the Republic Fleet left at all," Admiral Cein said. "And the Senate is requesting a private report, before we give any public statements."

Those same words had been sent to Rensha as well. She was still trying to decide what to do.

Any one of you would have done the same. The Jedi promised us Darth Malak would be destroyed, and we all saw the footage he was not. Now, with any luck that Force-eating Sith is gone toward Imperial space. If the Hunt-Goddess is kind, we stand upon the precipice of victory.

My victory. Mine. If I must sacrifice my rank to see it, it still becomes my prize—

"The Mandalorian ship could have been captured by the Sith Lords Nihilus and Sion," Rensha posited to the group, trying to regain control. "The next jump point on the way to Dromund Kaas is Biscain—is it not?" Rhetorical question: as soon as the Fleet had received the coordinates from House Racharn she had memorized each one—as simple a task as counting the points on a youngling's first skin—markings back on Trandoshas.

There was a long pause, as if none of them still thought it was required to show her deference.

"Yes," Ekkumi said finally.

Yes, High Admiral Rensha. "Then you go," Rensha ordered her. "Go to Biscain immediately. And from there, continue along their route until you find them. I have a small cruiser in my hangar that
is faster than most of the Mandalorian Fleet."

*Probably. Not than the Aleema. Nothing we have is faster than that cursed Sith invention—*

"The Sith may take an incursion into their territory as a sign of war—" General Sand protested.

"Go cloaked. And they are Sith," Rensha hissed. "Of course we are at war. Are there any objections?"

"**Not yet.**" Cein murmured.

"I'll go," Admiral Rew Ekkumi agreed. But she was staring at Cein, and not Rensha when she said it.

XXX

"Three, two, one." Jasp coughed and smiled as he released the *Jopheena's* lever, winding their hyperdrive down gently, each of its couplings purring. "There. Here we are–Biscain System. Ain't it a beauty?"

On the screen in front of them stars had blurred back into existence, lines snapping suddenly into crystalline clarity revealing several flotillas of ships, lazy, orbital observers, the sleek brights of the racers waiting for their heat, media satellites, and a series of flat reflectors positioned in an orbit around their jump point.

The space in front of them was further demarcated by a rectangular array, lined with blinking flashing lights.

"**Unknown vessels!**" someone broke into their comm channels. "**You are entering restricted airspace. Please proceed to eleven–oh–niner, in your epsilon quadrant for inspection. Biscain airspace is closed for the next three days, which you should know since it's on transmit on every HoloNet around here—**"

*Hells! "Frack," Revan muttered out loud.*

"**Language—**" Polla's da warned.

Biscain system had one binary star, its orbs clustered closer together than most, and a dense internal web of asteroids, which made the system's bi–annual race fun–or a death run, depending on who you asked.

Therion used to brag that he could've been a contender on the Biscain Hundred, but Polla had always preferred credits to cheap thrills.

*Or I was smart. She–she was smart? No. Not so fracking smart if her big plan was to pretend to be me.*

The route for the race was marked automatically on their screens in flashing red, showing they weren't carrying the transmitter to run it. The interdictor fields surrounding them pinged alarms, warning that any ship trying to enter hyperspace on this end of the system would be ripped back into the satellites mirroring its signal.

"**Unknown vessel—**" the locals began again. "**You will move immediately to epsilon—**"
"I've got this," Revan told Jasp, reaching for the comm. "I'll tell them we're in distress and need a military escort. While they're trying to figure out what's wrong, we'll gun--"

Polla's old man thumbed open the throttle, running straight at the guardian cruisers in front of them.

"The hell?" Her voice sounded like a squawk in her own ears. "D–wha–what the hell are you doing?"

"Talk to BisSec? Don't be a kidder, Pollie." His hand moved the yoke and they shot forward like a thranta out of hell–faster than Revan had thought the ship could move, that ticking lurch behind them proof that Arkan was still pinned to their tail.

Malachor, Arkan added, as if she'd forgot.

"Gonna be close..." Jasp began punching their main cannon hard on the rectangular shield barrier in front of them, his plasma battery glancing uselessly off the BisSec barrier.

*It's a shield. Why the frack would you shoot straight at it?*

She was still gaping stupidly when five red bogeys coming in from three lit the screen.

"Incoming!" Jasp nudged Revan's elbow. "Pollie! Niner!"

Revan's hand closed on the trigger control, as her feet scrambled to find the valve that would let her seat swing free–

Xxx

"They're just drones, Pollie. Unmanned. Shoot em down." Her da was busy trying to land their tub through the windstorm as Polla swiveled her turret controllers to light up the targets in front of her. "You don't think I'd take you here to practice on live–"

The galaxy twisted.

"–ones. Look sharp, robes!" Corporal Okkina had shared Davad's tent for a week in training, but she was all business in the skies, pacing the length of Dodonna's *Winged Victory* like an avenging wraid, hovering over their station as if they answered to her.

"There." Revan sounded almost bored, pointing at the screen in front of them. "Their main forces will come from behind that star, they're cloaked, but they're also using its radiation to mask the signal from you while they get the rest of their squads space–borne–"

Davad was still trying to sort through the life screaming on their own capital ship, the radiance of her very presence, but Revan had automatically known from whence came their greatest threat–"

"Good." Okkina nodded. "We'll send them to hell–"

Xxx

"Get your array up!" Jasp barked at her. "Revan! What are you doing? Now's not the time for space dreams!"

"I–" The present slammed back with a lurch as their shields activated. "I'm here, D–I'm here."

"You'd better be! Those other ships are gonna try and flank our tail, ram us into that shield gennie
ahead, but we gotta grab its frequency, watch their incoming—they modulate their own guns not to
burn it—once we have it we can slip through—"

Revan didn't have time to hear more, she was hammering at the trigger of the Jopheena's rear guns
like crazy as Polla's crazy da kept slamming bolts on the shield in front of them with their ion
cannon.

On the display, the close–in laser turrets she controlled spat red fire at the BisSec drones closing in
on them. Given a few minutes barrage, she'd have them—as long as the auto–target kept working.
But any security system worth its creds would have better guns, tractor beams—maybe even a stasis
well to stop this kind of assault.

Polla and Therion hadn't made it off the planet last time she'd been here, but she'd seen enough of
BisSec to know how fracking well–funded they were, this was fracking insane–

"Pollie! Look sharp!" Jasp's hand grabbed the trigger control from her, and twisted it sharply to the
right, bringing her display aft just in time to show another line of incoming security drones. He
fired a round that took out two before going back to spinning their ship in a dive, sending Revan's
stomach to the bottom of her toes.

"Thought you said we were going to come in quiet." His pulse was too fast in the Force, too rapid
and thready, but adrenaline had reddened his face, put grace in his movements. She didn't have
time to look over their course or correct him for calling her Pollie. In addition to the drones, BisSec
was now launching what looked like a targeted missile barrage on their ass. Lethal.

In the space of a few blinks they'd somehow gone from trespassers to hostiles. It… reminded her of
one of the stunts she'd pulled on Tatooine, with those fracking hunters–

*Now I know where Polla Organa gets it from.*

**Malachor!** Behind them, Arkan whispered only that one word… but as Revan watched her
viewscreen, the missiles glanced off the side of the Pinion, and slid off–course, colliding into one
another in a white–hot clout of energy.

"**Unknown vessels. This is your last–**"

Revan's head slammed back into the brace of her seat as Jasp sent them into a steep climb,
somehow slipping around the BisSec shield, with a maneuver too deft for her to have any idea how
the hell he'd done it.

There was no time to ask, because now Jasp Organa's course had them immediately thick in the
asteroids—a shifting morass of random death, further complicated by the camera drones, the bright
flashes of weapons fire from the guards they'd left in their ion wake.

The **Pinion** hung on doggedly to their tail, a stubborn blot on their displays.

"It's gonna get rocky," Jasp quipped, maneuvering them through the belt, with the precision of a
machine. His hands trembled on the controls, but the grim smile on his face was achingly familiar.

**Oh, Da.** A part of Revan rolled her eyes. Another part wanted to cry. "Tell me what to do now."

His voice creaked with surprise, rattling that cough in his lungs. "Don't you know?"

"No, I don't know how the hell you're doing—"
Divert the power to the shields in back until we're drifting in, then spike the front turbines. Watch for bogeys—anything bigger than a ten will ding the hull. Best avoid, or shoot em. Use the close-in guns again. They're slow, but they slice. Keep an eye on Jasp, I don't like his color—

That voice. Her own thoughts. Right or wrong—but determined.

"I'm not sure."

"Doubt is for politicians and prayers, Pollie. I told you that." He coughed. "You know what's what."

_Doubt is for amnesiac Sith Lords_, she thought blackly. _Dar wouldn't have any doubt right now. She'd do whatever she wanted—even if it was fracking wrong—_

Divert the power to the shields in back–

One of her hands steadied on the trigger control, as Revan set the parameters on the dial to flag anything bigger than nine on their screens, strengthening the shields in back. The viewscreen ahead was littered with ash and dust—sweep from the racers that had already crossed this territory. It was also, thankfully, clear for now.

Red race beacons blinked angrily at them, lighting the path.

"Unknown vessel! You are trespassing on a registered event sponsored by the Merchant's Guild. Further interference will result—"

Revan leaned over and cut the comm. "I guess we don't need to know they're not happy." On the display in front of them, the path Jasp had plotted deviated from the racer's route. That nagged at her, something about it was… off. Something was wrong. "That's a steep dip you put in there, Da." The numbers bugged her. They were reassuringly green—signifying safety—but they were high, they were too high. Temperature, rads, the ratio with their shields–

_I'm no pilot and he is. He must know what he's doing._

"We need the speed," he said. "I might black out, Pollie, but you're tough." He glanced at her sideways. "Your kind… you're tough. Only one ship made it out of the Kemplex System that day, and it was hers. Nomi Sunrider's. We watched them come out of that star when space was on fire. If she can do that—"

Revan tried to laugh. "Believe it or not, I'm no Nomi._ Neither was Bastila Shan, poor kid._

"And I saw you fall from the sky. This is nothing. Just a quick burn—you… you've got it."

"But you're not… tough, Da." _The escape pod._ But it was already too late. "Da! You're not tough." She glanced toward the back of the ship. He'd programmed in the coordinates all the way to Kaas—if it wasn't for the asteroids and the weapons fire at their backs this would be a safe place to leave him—but as it was–

"Promise you'll bring them back to Moll. Polla and Seiran." His fingers punched the coordinates, sending them into the run before she could respond.

"Don't—" Her senses were suddenly flooded with a sense of danger, menace—blind, implacable—Revan shot out her hand and a large meteor on their screen went spinning off milliseconds before it hit their shield. Behind them, she felt Arkan's energy—like a thrum in the Force—a wave of darkness, rippling out and over them–
"It's gone, Mama!" The little girl tugged at her mother's sleeve. "That bad ship they were chasing! It's gone!"

"—vanished from our sensors. What was that, Kyomak?"

"I'm not sure Blankaff, but it looked like some kind of stealth ship attached to a navy snubfighter."

"I thought they banned militaries from this competition! Ever since the Jordo upset three years ago!"

"They did. But I'm not sure what that was we're seeing—"

"That was an Aurek-class ship! Attached to a Sith tracker—" A new voice broke in, but Meetra had already stopped listening. She knew what both ships were—just like she knew those grappling missiles hadn't just flown off course. Not luck. Just because she couldn't feel the Force, didn't mean she had lost her ability to think. Or to see.

"The black ship attached itself to the Republic Aurek's ion trail," she told the wide-eyed little girl and her mother, still standing in the rapidly-emptying observatory. "The Mandalorians theorized such tech was possible, but I don't think any of them got built until Revan stepped in with her Sith factories. The black ship is definitely Sith-designed. Have you seen the vids about her Star Forge? I have. I've watched them several times—"

"Is that why you have a star on your face?" the little girl interrupted her.

"Yes," Meetra told her, although, of course it was not.

"We've got to go, Gramercee." The woman tugged at her daughter's arm.

There were no coincidences, were there? The old woman had said that to Meetra the day she'd come to Balmorra and taken Meetra away from hell and brought her to Jedi paradise.

Paradise is a lie.

"Did they blow up?" The girl was wide-eyed, her mother furious, trying to shoo her away. "Did those two ships blow up?"

"I need to go." Suddenly, Meetra felt too conspicuous, too raw and exposed. She still wasn't used to crowds, and the gravity hurt her bones. Perhaps she shouldn't have come, but she'd had an idea—a germ of one—that in a galaxy where the Glorious Revolution at home had dimmed to an ember, she might find funding and fulfillment by wagering on the high-stakes Biscain Hundred. Or, failing that, pick up some work as an enforcer for the Exchange… there were several job booths in the main lobby of her hotel on the orbital.

Until she could get to Revan, it was something to do.

Meetra Surik joined the exodus of onlookers from the viewscreen, trying not to flinch at the press of so many sentients, so close that their voices all began to blur together into one long scream—

"There! It's back!" Rannie was hunched forward in his chair, all of Kore's Force tricks forgotten
now. "That ship! It blipped out and now it's back!"

"They used cloaking tech," Korrie crossed his arms behind his back. This was kind of fun. "Isn't it cheating to cloak if you're in a race?"

"That wasn't a cloaking device." Layran rolled his eyes. "We studied them in physics last year. Cloaks don't work like that–was cloud covering them maybe. If it'd been a cloak they'd have just gone away all at once."

"Yeah, well I studied too, and there's nothing else that can hide a ship from sensors–" Kore broke off because that probably wasn't true. One thing Grandfather had always said was that there were no absolutes.

"The ship's back now." Rannie frowned at the screen. "Why's it got that black triangle–thing hanging off its ass?"

"Because it's two ships. One's a Republic snub. *Aurek-class*. They're fast, and good shooters, but kinda ugly. That thing on its tail is…" Kore frowned, because whatever it was kept flickering, like it wasn't there at all. And now both ships were flickering, as they seemed to be diving straight toward the binary stars instead of following the racing markers–so they were cutting ahead of a bunch of other ships.

"That thing on its tail is a Sith Imperial *Pinion-class* interdictor! " Kore felt like a dolt, not realizing it earlier. "My fa–my da sent me a model of one. It wasn't a toy–it was like a pre–production, special–crafted–"

"Yeah, right." Rannie snorted. "Your Da's some kind of tech?" He squinted at the screen. "Anyway, big deal. Nyla, down at the shipyards, she has one of those *Pinion-class* ships cause she used to be a Sith?" He glanced at Kore. "Don't tell anyone that last part, it's a secret."

"I'm good at secrets." Kore frowned. And then… then he started to get worried. Because *Mother* had flown away in a ship from Nyla Nadua's spaceyard that had looked very much like the Sith Imperial *Pinion-class* interdictor that was currently flying off–course, following the larger ship straight at one of the suns.

He'd say it was a coincidence except Master Croi in the Jedi Temple had said the Force didn't have any.

Xxx

Black spots danced in her vision as the gees slammed Revan back against her chair. Her breath seemed to freeze in her lungs and the world moved forward in flashes. It took effort to turn her head, they were diving so deep; effort to lift her hand and put it over Jasp's cold one. If he had a pulse, she couldn't tell–the world was nothing but a rapidly–increasing scream–

**Malachor.** Arkan's voice again. That want–the need in her mind–

*Not Korrie.*

*Yes. I'll give you Malachor , she thought. A thousand times over. All the damn Malachors you want–just get us through this–*

She felt, more than saw, the Force envelop their ships like a black tide–her strength and Arkan's combined–plowing both ships through the asteroid field as if it was water.
Her black robes were a bitter cliché, as much as his grovel before her was: he, a prince of Onderon, kneeling before the daughter of an exiled Jedi rebel, the stock of Hothan peasants.

Revan moved from the viewscreen, and Davad saw that her eyes had turned—from the green of life to the color of twin suns, yellow and hard, blazing like the birth of the galaxy itself.

The power in her… it surpassed anything Arren Kae had ever possessed.

Her voice was hoarse, a harsh whisper, as if she'd died screaming with the rest of them too. "Get up, Arkan. We're alone. You don't need to impress me like some groveling worm."

But I do. My master commanded it. He would have laughed, had it been possible. "I came back, Master. I came back for you."

The twist of her mouth downward, the drop of those red lashes was a weakness, a hesitation. "I would have warned you—"

"If you had, I would have deserted." A lie. His true master would never have permitted it. "All that life on Onderon, I can't go back there. I want to serve you. It's what I always… always wanted."

The truth. My master gives me what I've always wanted. I saved her life and she's given me you—

"Why?" Revan took a deep breath. Those yellow eyes clashed with the freckles on her nose, the spacer's tan of her skin. How long had Fleet kept her on ships, squandered away from the ground and life like some grafted zirlla orchid? Davad would have given her a drexl's egg and a kingdom, seen her with mud on her feet and leaves in her hair.

"Because." He stood, approaching her. The bells rang in his hair. Her hand reached out and closed on his arm, fingers hard enough to bruise. The pain was momentary, forgotten when she stepped closer, her body brushing against his. The war had left them both hard and lean, and her hipbone dug into his side as the Force flared between them, igniting like a spark—

"Because," he whispered, softer still.

Her mouth was hungry and soft—tentative at first, but opening under his touch, becoming wet, insistent. Everything he'd imagined. Her mouth was warm under his.

It was a relief to be in a place beyond regret.

The path ahead of him was simple. Follow her. Obey his master. Use the strength that had been given to them from the death of the thousands at Malachor to obey his master's bidding—

Xxx

The gravity of worlds pressed down on them. Tears welled in Revan's eyes, the air too thick for them to move. Jasp's hand under hers was a rock, her fingers were carved to it, her body to its seat, she felt her bones ache with the pressure, as if they'd go through her skin.

Her eyes were fixed on the path Jasp had set, and Arkan's memories screamed in her head—

Malachor.

It wasn't Korrie he meant, it was everything: the past, the present, the promise.
Tenebrae's destruction will fuel the rest. With our enemies crushed beneath our feet, the Republic will be safe, Malachor will be safe, I will be safe, you will be–

**Malachor**, the voice in her head agreed, as they slung, abruptly out of the dive and back along a straight track. Gravity released its gees with a vengeance, and Revan thought she heard her ribs crack, as her body slumped forward again.

She turned her head. Jasp's light was a feeble flicker—dulled by the triumph of Arkan's roar. Their trajectory pinged on the screen in front of her: a series of dotted lines, slingshotting them between the twin suns, once again following the path marked by the racing beacons—flashing an angry red at their intrusion—but still the shortest space between the stars for maximum velocity–

Or it would be maximum velocity, except the screen lit up with a cluster of ships in front of them, narrowed to a channel at the closest point.

*Can't fire on them, they're too thickly clustered, it would make things worse–too messy*–

A bogey lit up their screen suddenly and she slammed the yoke hard as it veered past—automatic, not even thinking first. The sensors registered one of the racers speeding past them. They'd met the main pack.

*Jasp gave me full nav*. The implications of that would hit her sometime, but now there was no time. Another meteor she deflected with a twist of her hand, and then, ahead, one of the racing scows—some kind of modified star-cruiser—Nabooan, she thought. Or one of the Corulag copies that were so popular in Exchange circles. Clumsier and twice as fast. Fastest way through would be to burn it, things had crap for shields–

Something she'd neglected to steer around hit them, glancing off. Maybe another ship—but if there was life inside it was drowned out by Arkan's quiet roar.

Revan slammed the yoke hard to left, veering off—course. The prox alarms pinged a warning at her, and gravity tugged again. They were close now, running in on the path between the stars. Here, every ship would be instrument-blind, relying on their calcs as their sensors fried with the radiation overload. The viewscreen in front of them dimmed automatically, reducing their visuals to bulks of light and shadow, each ship in the pack ahead nothing but a rough outline of white in a sea of black.

*Star's gravity—it pulls—that's why they're clumped like that in the safest place*–

Revan jerked her ship farther to the left, feeling the engines whine into higher gear as they started to burn. *Faster. If the shields hold, we can go faster—we can get past them*–

*And I hold the shields*–

**Malachor.** Arkan murmured the word like a promise of help.

XXX

"Those two unknown vessels have just passed *Radiant Locks* and *Stellarjammer's Crossing*! Ladies and Gentlebeings, if those ships were *registered* for this race, this would be one for the books! They plowed through the belt and they're already closing in on the front pack—"

"What kind of ships are they?"

"The lead is a Republic *Aurek*—class, but that thing pinned to its tail… I'm not sure—it looks
like something from the Mandalorian wars--"

_Not the _Mandalorian _wars._ Meetra began making her way rapidly toward the exit. Whatever business a ship of Sith design had with a Republic snub was none of her concern. She still remembered that first battle—when Revan and Malak's new Sith armada had ambushed what remained of the Republic Fleet in the Navaris System, above Endar. The image, broadcast on holovid of thousands of diamond–shaped black ships swarming like zeldrate lava over a stinking corpse—Meetra had been in a bar on Coruscant by then, waiting for the next ship gone, the world around her strangely silent and empty since the Jedi had ripped the Force from her mind—

"Excuse me." Someone bumped against her arm. Fingers closing on her flesh—uninvited, unknown, blind—

"Buzz off!" Meetra turned indignantly—pulling her arm free—

"General." Technician Third Grade Bao–Dur, formerly of the _RNS New Hope_, blinked at her, the diamond–shaped patch of skin below his horns furrowing as his only indication of surprise. "Forgive the intrusion, but I called out to get your attention, and—you did not seem to see me."

"I'm not part of Fleet. Not—not anymore, Tech… Bao." _Tech Dur? _Strange, how the two of them had conspired to destroy two fleets and she didn't know what name the man preferred—or even if it was one name or two.

"Citizen Surik, then." The Zabrak tech nodded slowly. "It's been a long time." He paused. "I am also no longer with the Fleet."

_Clearly, since you're dressed like a starport mechanic._ "Not really so long." Meetra took a step back, trying not to look over her shoulder to see if anyone had noticed them—if he was truly alone. "Five years?"

"Six Iridonian years."

"Oh." She paused a beat to sound polite. "Did you return to Iridonia?" After the gravity well's implosion, after half her ship's sensors were stripped and the _New Hope_ 's hyperdrive barely functioned—after Meetra had made her near–mutinous crew make the jump back toward Coruscant—she'd quite lost track of the man whose technical brain had supplied the mechanical expertise to fulfill Admiral Starfire's request for an atmospheric inversion generator capable of destabilizing an entire star system.

"No." The indentations around his mouth deepened. "I just… I suppose we all count down from the world where we were born." He shrugged. "I was on Telos for quite some time until recently, but it never felt like home."

_Perhaps because Malak and Revan turned it into a toxic wasteland_, Meetra thought acidly. But there was no point being rude to an old friend.

"I don't count from my planet." Meetra shrugged, through it was a lie. "They'll probably blow Balmorra up too one of these days."

"I'm sorry." Bao–Dur shrugged. He stared at her blankly, as if he wasn't sure what to say.

Meetra glanced back at the screen. Looked like that party-crasher was crashing now—good riddance. "Why don't we catch up over a drink?"

He had a rare smile. She remembered it because it happened so infrequently. "Yes, General."
Malachor.

"Right." Was it warm in here? Jasp had done something to the sensors, to hide the rads they had to be getting on this route he'd mapped.

The Pinion tugged at her ship's tail—at the Jopheena's tail, jolting them off-course enough that she had to keep swerving to correct it, rocking them back and forth across the spacelanes like a drunk rancor. The Force sang in her ears, enveloping everything in a haze of blue—

Something splashed on the navboard and she realized it was blood. Nose. My nose. She wiped it with her sleeve, as the roar in her mind increased—

Malachor.

XXX

"It won't be easy," Revan reminded Davad and the knights he'd brought to her. "We're asking you to defy the Council."

"We are all Jedi knights. It's a matter of conscience." Davad smiled reassuringly when he said the noble words. They were a lie, of course. It wasn't a matter of conscience, it was her. It was no sacrifice to follow his master's command to follow this woman. Standing before them now, Rev looked like a Jedi of legend, her hair twisted in thick-roped braids, her robes armored with modified plate, and the sun above lining her delicate beauty in gilt and red.

The group behind him—the ones he'd recruited from the Wayland Enclave—murmured in agreement, just as captivated as he.

"It can't just be... your choice." Revan frowned, looking directly at Davad, even as she spoke to them all. "I'm not asking for your help as individual knights. I'm asking you to follow. For this to work, you must take orders without questioning your conscience. Accept commands blindly. No matter what they are."

"Of course." Knight Cariaga Sin was as tall for a Rodian as Pando was short. "As long as they are within the vows that we—"

"No." Revan's voice hardened. "That was a questioning of my authority, Knight Sin. A doubt." Her hand rose, and she actually... Force—pushed the Rodian back a few steps. "There can be no doubt. We had doubts on Dxun and Serroco and they nearly cost us the war. If I am to lead you all—to use my gift—I have to be the... the leader. You must follow. Is that clear?"

"She gets to be the master," Davad clarified. "Master Starfire." He smiled to make it a joke.

"But we're just supposed to be... Force detectors for the Republic Navy, aren't we? What does Master Kavar say?" Knight Xaset Terep hadn't been a knight for very long, and her voice was high and thin and bleating. Xaset was a quiet slip of a thing, nearly seeming to melt into the walls. She rarely spoke at all. That she dared object raised her estimation in Davad's eyes. At least a few notches.

"Kavar's gone," Revan said flatly, her eyes slits of green. "And with him, all of the Council's control. It's up to us to make order out of this chaos. Clean up the Republic's catastrophe—"

XXX
Malachor.

Was Arkan reduced to being a holo-player, whose only job was to send her images of the past she couldn't remember?

The Force-shield surrounding their ship wavered. Revan yanked the yoke to the right again, sending them veering back toward the racers and (relative) safety. She was flying by sight now-fracked as it was—by sight and something she couldn't quantify: a small, steady voice from someplace inside.

*Listen for the ticks, long as they're even you're good, if she hitches, if the engines catch out you'll tip—she's bottom-heavy, she's got that asshole Sith latched on to her ion trail—if the engine cuts and he drops you'll swing off course and that gravity-stars—flying blind—*

Her hand moved the yoke again, and she turned a margin starboard, compensating for the white-outlined disc ship coming up hard on her port, as if the asshole expected her to move—

Malachor.

"Oh, I'll give you Malachor." She made the words a threat this time.

They were back, abruptly, in the safe zone, the channel between the stars. The tears in her eyes slid down her cheek, her nose dripped, her breath came out hard. Normal gravity. Air rushed out of her lungs.

Under her hand, Jasp's fingers moved. He groaned faintly. "Pollie?"

"Looks like we're running the Biscain Hundred, Da." He felt like a whisper in the Force. Revan kept her voice bright. "Bet you never thought we'd get the chance!"

"Pollie—"

"Do not die on me now!" She kept her voice bright, wishing to frack she knew how to heal him.

He coughed, but when she glanced over, Polla's da was smiling. "N—not when my kid's dumb enough to get herself banned from the system—" He coughed again, and she didn't want to look, because it sounded like half of a lung had just rattled loose.

Xxx

"I'll bet," Kore offered. "I will bet you five hundred credits that the black ship wins the race."

"It's not even *entered.* And it's attached behind the other ship—thing! So that one's gotta come in first." Layran looked at Kore like he was crazy.

"Yeah, but it… so it's easy money, right?"

Rannie looked at him suspiciously. "Why d'you think it'll win?"

"I know someone who flies a ship like that." Kore shrugged, like it was no big deal, because he could be wrong and it was only five hundred credits. "She's a really good pilot. She's really good at *everything* so—"

"You said it's a Sith ship. Is she a Jedi–Sith?"

"Yeah, but that can't be her, she's too *busy* to be flying in some stupid race—"
"For someone who doesn't want to talk about the Jedi–Sith, you keep bringing them up," Rannie said. "That ship flew off. Probably crashed already."

"It did not!"

This was the part of the race that didn't get vidded because the space between the stars was too hot. Lots of guessing went on.

Kore told himself he wasn't guessing, that he had a feeling.

But the truth was, he wasn't sure.

Xxx

The cam–views of the main pack of racers were absent while the ships were in the "Hell's Channel" between the twin suns–and so the crowd at the bar had turned to other pursuits. Hover–darts, dejarik, and drinking.

Two veterans from the Mandalorian Wars were just two more sents in a crowd.

"What brings you here?" Bao asked.

"You first." Meetra gestured toward the pitcher of Griff's Tarisian Ale, emblazoned with a tacky logo that appeared to be two Twi'lek females, legs crossing in profile, wearing nothing but vibroblades. Meetra nodded as he poured her a glass. They were drinking from the same source, so it had to be safe.

"I came here looking for you." There had never been any artifice in Third Tech Bao–Dur. That was why she'd trusted him with their secret.

Xxx

The officer's mess was crowded, but no one was paying attention–words that some kind of accord was coming on the wake of Admiral Revan Starfire winning the duel against the Mandalorian Fett were on all the channels.

Everyone was getting ripped now on the promise of peace.

Meetra was tipsy enough not to think about the lie. She inhaled hard on her death–stick, the affectation she'd taken up last week, when she'd realized what a child of Balmorra should have already known: life is short.

"I can build the device to these specifications," the technician her sergeant had recommended said slowly. "But–do you know what it will do?"

"We need a gravity well that will self–implode in atmosphere. Will it do that?" Meetra coiled a strand of hair around her finger and smiled at him.

It took a moment longer than it usually did with sents for him to smile back.

"Yes," Third Tech Bao–Dur said quietly. "It will do that, if you have a fissionable power source."

"I do." Meetra nodded. "This is how the war will truly end," she told him, just as Revan and Malak had told her. "One last spark, and then forever peace."

Bao–Dur's mouth twitched. "That sounds like paradise."
"Yes," she murmured, feeling those amber eyes soften as he stared into hers. "It does."

Their eyes always softened when they committed to her cause.

Xxx

"Looking for me?" Meetra was startled now, and too surprised not to show it. That was the problem with nearly five years of self-imposed exile: you lost the social niceties.

"About a week ago I received an order from Ord Mantell." Bao blinked calmly. Maybe too calmly. "My… employer sent me to help you."

Uneasy suspicion bloomed in Meetra's chest. "I thought you said you were on Telos."

"I was—for years." He frowned, the skin crinkling around his horns. "I was… assigned there—after—"

The roar of the crowd interrupted any reaction Meetra could have feigned.

Xxx

**Malachor.**

"A thousand fracking Malachors," Revan muttered. "All for you, Arkan."

*Dar would be so proud of me, planning an entire Empire's destruction. She'd probably be fracking jealous she didn't get to do it herself—he should eat her first—*

*Eat her first, Arkan? Do you hear me?*

That image flashed through her mind again: her former self on the cliff, legs dangling over.

Revan took that as a yes.

"Are you okay?" In the center of the pack pulling forward, their readings were near-normal. Jasp blinked at Revan and she tried to ignore the tremor in his hand.

"Yeah, I just—" *Just daydreaming about genocide, Da. It's what we Dark Lords do.*

How many sents were there on Sith worlds? She had no memory of them, and there was no one left to ask, or almost—

*How many sents on Sith worlds?*

**Malachor.**

*Billions, probably. At least millions. And they're mostly Force-sensitive. Dar said that—*

"He used to ask me to do things," Jasp mumbled. "Asked me to have someone look after your boy. Asked me to comm folks." He chuckled. "When I first started working for my lord, he asked me to steer us into a sun." His chuckle turned into a cough. "Lord Sion put a stop to that! As I guess you'd imagine…"*

"I'm glad you didn't listen, that would have killed you." Revan was only half-listening to him as she watched the viewscreen for openings in the pack. "Wait—he asked you about Korrie?"
"Malachor, Arkan agreed.

"Shadows. He ended up eating most of them, one's that worked for him and Sion and that lady, but there's a few left. He sent one to guard Korrie. My Lord Sion used them too, but he did his own work."

It gave her a chill to hear Jasp talking like this.

"They're not–please don't call them lords. They aren't–they're monsters–killers."

"Malachor.

You wanted to die before, huh? Maybe you should eat a few billion Sith first–"

"Malachor!

Her vision dissolved again–XXX

Korriban.

Confronting the newly-awakened Revan Starfire on Korriban had been a disappointment. Instead of finding a woman worthy of fealty, Davad had found a shadow.

Her lightning had been nothing compared to the raw power Revan had once possessed. "Go away–" she had hissed, but Davad hadn't gone far, just far enough to cloak himself in the Force, and wait, to listen and see what kind of Sith the woman he'd loved had become.

Apparently, she had become one that still allowed a Republic war hero into her private chambers.

The man's voice was hard and furious, mumbling, as if speaking Standard was a stretch for him. "Mission, I–beat it, okay? I want to talk to Revan. Alone."

"Whoa. That's major. Are you guys getting back together–?"

"Mission!" Two voices, one pitched high, one low.

"Fine, I'll go! I need to see a man about some cargo anyway. If it wasn't for me we'd all starve!"

Clop of footsteps as if the child was being deliberately clumsy stomping off. Davad wouldn't put it past the urchin to eavesdrop, but she was inconsequential.

"Revan–" the man began.

"You're calling me that now? Instead of 'hey you,' 'ma'am,' or 'that bitch?'"

"Y–you weren't supposed to hear that. Jolee and I–that was a private conversation." Brave man, to sound so furious at a woman who could end him with a simple electrical charge.

"I am a bitch, Carth." Her laugh choked. "I'm the baddest bitch in the frack-damned galaxy. I killed I–I don't know how many–there's a krieffing statue of me in this hellplace's lobby. They're building my frackin' tomb in the Valley of the Dark Lords like it's some Sithspawned shrine–"

The man echoed her laugh, as if she were joking. "I wonder what poor sap they killed to put in it."
"It doesn't matter. It's the symbol of the thing!"

"Look, sister. I didn't come here to hold your hand. I only came to ask if there'd been any changes with Dustil."

"Ask Mission. He listens to her more than he listens to me. I only managed to save that kid, his roommate—"

"Mister Sith Congeniality? Thanks for that."

"You're welcome." Revan paused. "He's just a kid, Carth. They're all—most of the students in this school are just kids."

"Think I haven't noticed?" The man certainly was emotive. He had that—and nothing else—in common with Malak, Davad thought. "You founded it. You designed—everything around us—"

"I don't remember." Her voice cracked, but there was an edge of durasteel there, a ripple in the Force that made Davad smile. She might not remember, but this place still called to her—as it did to them all, those who had truly tasted the Dark. "Grass Priests, Flyboy, if I turn back into Darth Revan, you have my permission to put a blaster to my head and pull the trigger."

"Grass Priests? You're praying now? I thought you lot worshipped Naka Shadow or Ludacris Crisp."

"On Deralia, they—" Her voice hitched. "Frack, it's probably not real."

"What?" The pilot wasn't the brightest, Davad thought. Again, like Malak.

Malak, who no doubt had his own spies in this place. If he found out Davad had come to her—

I would challenge him. I would rule by your side. I would help you make the galaxy burn for what they did to you, Revan.

Their conversation continued without him, as Davad lost himself in the pleasant illusion of control. But then—

"—not like a coin, Carth. You don't flip from light to dark. It's more like a fall. They call it that for a reason—like you're slipping in ice on a hill and no matter what you do you'll slide back down—"

"A fall? I won't let you." Low and fierce. Love and hate throbbing in the Force like the man's puny—

"You can't help." Her voice was tired. "Stars, I wish you could. If you want to help, Carth, promise me if I fall you'll make an end of me—"

"I should, but I…"

"Just put a blaster to my head and do it," she said flatly.

Xxx

Malachor. Arkan cut off the vision so abruptly that Revan was left blinking in the sudden silence.

I can't, is what Carth said after that. He said he couldn't kill me. And then, I—

"Pollie? We're stuck."
Revan opened her eyes. The comm board was lit up a furious red, as if everything in range was hailing them. Sensors showed Arkan locked securely on their tail. Everything else was running smooth, except for the gridlock–

*Blast your way through. There's no time. BisSec will notify Republic authorities—even you can be captured. It's happened before–*

**Malachor!** Arkan screamed in her skull before Revan could form a coherent answer.

Xxx

"...if I fall you'll make an end of me–"

*Her voice was the same when she said those words, Davad thought. Nothing Deralian in it at all.*

*Hidden in the hall, he smiled–*

XXX

Revan blinked.

"I ever tell you about how when I first met our master, he asked me to fly the ship into a sun?"

Jasp laughed as if it was a joke. "You know that's what happened to Bendowen's girl? For some reason, I keep remembering that." He coughed again. "Do you think it hurt?"

"I don't–"

"**Malachor.**"

Her vision blurred again–

Xxx

"**If I fall, make an end of me.**"

*Over her, through her, like two drexl falling toward the sun–*

*They fell, interlaced–*

*She sat on the edge of the cliff–*

*She ran on water across the acid sea and he followed, sinking and burning with each step but he followed–*

XXX

**Malachor.** Strangely, now the word sounded like an apology.

Revan's voice felt small in her ears. She was suddenly all too aware of the close confines of their ship, the recycled air, the sweat beading in her forehead, misting the visor she wore over her eyes.

She squeezed Jasp's hand because it was real. "You said–before you said Arkan said he make sure the boy was safe… that my son was safe."

"I did." Jasp nodded. "He's safe, Pollie."

Xxx

Her mouth was warm under his.

Like two drexl falling.

Falling.

Xxx

Malachor.

The empty scream again, ripping through her mind—so many minds—one moment there and then gone. Lights gone out in a flash. The Jedi—almost of them, all of them going mad and all the deaths—

*How many billions on the Sith worlds? Are they all Tenebrae? Are they all corrupted? Carth is there—and his son—his son will die and Seiran. How many billions and it's all down to me—I'll bring them death—*

Xxx

A tomb on Korriban.

A blaster to my head.

He asked to steer the ship into a sun—

A sun.

Xxx

"Da?" Revan whispered. Jasp's hand was moving over the controls again. Their sensors were still blind, but the blind trace of their projected route overlaid with the computer's approximation of their position. "Da, that course—"

"It's just to get us through the stars faster, Pollie. Runs a little hot, but you'll see—"

Revan smiled at the lie. There was nothing else she could do. *That level of gees, you'll be unconscious, Da. You won't feel a thing, and I—*

Malachor.

Her stomach growled with his hunger, but Revan understood now. It wasn't about hunger, or a desire for another apocalypse.

Malachor. The word was a warning. The only word Arkan had left.

*Malachor, she thought back. I understand, Davad Arkan.*

Their ship began to pitch forward, edging past their closest competition by sliding under it. The pitch increased and she felt the tell-tale whine in her ears.

Revan grabbed the yoke and closed her eyes. The parabola Jasp had plotted etched in her mind like
the death wish it was.

Xxx

*Drexl in flight, falling together--

*A tomb on Korriban.

*He had the sudden urge to push her off a cliff.*

*Put a blaster to my head--

Xx

The scream of the engine kicking into overdrive drowned out all else.

Revan opened her eyes and stared at the screen. After a certain point, the velocity of two ships propelling into the heart of the sun would make the conclusion inevitable.

Xxx

"The frontrunner's out of the channel! Hell's Bells has taken the lead, and then it's Princess Naboo and coming in third is--"

"Gentles, it's our gatecrasher! That double ship's coming out in a fast burn, but they're turning back!"

"The interloper ship's veered off-course! It seems to be heading straight back to the suns!"

The local transmit was on all bands and it crackled across the Aleema's bridge the second they dropped out--still cloaked--from hyperspace into the Biscain system.

"There are interdictor screens surrounding us," Dessa noted, her voice as brisk as a man's. "We won't be able to exit the system without traversing its length, or disabling their meager defenses."

"Something is disrupting their race. The barbarians are screaming in every channel." Aemelie turned on the receiver's screen to local transmissions and an image resolved: a close--up of a falling ship--rather two ships--backlit by the fiery orb they seemed to be descending into. "Curse her! That's my Pinion!"

"What?" Canderous sat up, scanning the feeds. His eyes locked on the main image--those two ships--unmistakable. "Sha'buir, that's gotta be Revan in the Aurek!"

"It appears we have arrived only to witness her death," Dessa said.

"That's my Pinion!" Aemelie repeated, stubbornly refusing to see the larger issue at stake. In that moment, Canderous loved his wife for her blind fierceness--even as he wanted to sternly remind her that as a requisition of war, it was now his ship.

Proximity alarms keeled, interrupting his thoughts as their starboard side scraped against the interdictor receivers. On--screen the cloaking field's sensors rippled, but the field held--for now--somewhat uselessly, as they had just punched an Aleema--sized hole in the hyperspace gateway.

"Unknown vessel! This airspace is closed to ships over fifty meters long! You have exceeded that measure by several percentages. Furthermore, cloaking in civilian airspace is considered"
an act of piracy by the Huttese Covenant. Uncloak and prepare to be boarded—"

"Yeah, right." Canderous chuckled. The hilarity of the barbarian orders knocked sense back into him. This wasn't the end of Revan. He'd seen her through worse.

"Get the kids to work knocking out those interdictor screens," he commanded. "Whatever Revan's playing at—looks like we can catch them at the next jump. We'll go soon as she's clear."

Xxx

"Your ship's falling, Kore," Layran noted. "Both of them. Did they break?"

"Guess I owe you five hundred credits." Kore shrugged like it was no big deal, because it couldn't be. It couldn't be Mother because she had more important things to do than some stupid race—

Xxx

**Malachor.**

It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Revan tried to remember the meditation exercises she'd only half-learned. *Slow your heartbeat, pause between breaths, make yourself quiet to consume as little oxygen as possible—*

The gees of their acceleration pinned her limbs to her seat, but she stared at the yoke fixedly, the calculations she'd guessed still dancing in her head. *Only one chance. Tilt the nose up, get her nose down at the vertex—that's your chance, that's your only chance—let gravity work for you—much as it can—*

Xxx

"*Everything, Pollie, has an equal—and opposite reaction. That's what the Grass Priests say. Every movement, every person, every action. Look.*" Her father tapped the row of swinging beads on his desk and they began rocking back and forth. "*Momentum. See?*

"*So for me sneaking out with Sara, the Grass Priests would think there's another me who stayed in and did her topographical space assignment.*" Polla scowled. "*Really, Dad?*

"*That's physics, kiddo.*" Her father shrugged. "*And right now you're sitting your ass in this chair until you get that paper right.*"

Xxx

"What?" Meetra turned her head toward the vid–screen. Whatever Bao was babbling about would have to wait.

"*Something big just jumped into our system, folks. Took out half the interdictor grid by running over them. It's a cloaked ship, but anything this large, we've gotta wonder—*is this some military invasion? Another example of Fleet incompetence or over–reach? Or is it—*

*It's war. Whatever it is, it's war.* A child of Balmorra knew all the signs.

"That isn't good." Her voice was quiet. "I came in on a touring cruise. Do you have your own ship, Bao?"

The Zabrak nodded.
"Let's go."

Xxx

"I always watch the Biscain Hundred this time of year." Helena Shan gestured toward the vid, suddenly embarrassed, because her guard and sober companion was frowning at the holo-screen as if she had never seen an open race before. "Abasen and I used to love it, you know. He placed bets. Small ones. Just for the sport."

"Something appears to be wrong with those two ships." Cally Lee was chopping onna with raw nerf strips for their luncheon salad. Her eyes had been bothering her of late, so she had taken to wearing a pair of ornate, concealing goggles that Helena had originally used on Tatooine to shield her eyes from the sand.

"Casualties." Helena shrugged. "You know the old saying, you can't make an omelet without cracking a few Moffa eggs."

"We had a saying on my homeworld as well," Cally murmured. "There are always more eggs."

"Oh?" It was always interesting to hear about other planets and their customs. Especially from a distance—not like when she'd been young and Abasen had dragged her everywhere. "Where are you from, dear?"

"Nathema," Cally chuckled, an old sound in such a young girl. "I don't suppose you've ever heard of it. It's quite far away from here."

Xxx

*Only one chance.*

"You're a terrible pilot."

"You almost crashed the ship!"

*Listen. Feel. It's not something you learn— it's something you know.* That last voice was calm and assured, nearly smug. A hint of laughter there, complicity. *Just wait for the right moment—*

*Vertex, the vertex. The final point of the parabola: high or low, it's a matter of perspective and you won't know until after—*

Revan's heart thundered in her ears. The right moment be taking forever, the entire screen was yellow and blazing, barely contained by the ship's filters. She pulled on the Force, trying to use it to shield their ship, but she had no idea if the Force barrier was doing anything—

*Now.*

Revan didn't need to look at the yoke, couldn't move her head in their ship's steep dive but her eyes went there anyway. She felt a fingertip twitch as she directed the Force to flip the switch.

The *Jopheena's* ion engines cut out lights in the cabin died. The recycler whined, circuits half-melted—

Their ship shuddered, and lurched forward, abruptly lighter, still falling, but falling alone—

Xxx
Falling free–falling back, falling into his arms –

She turned laughing, rising up in the water.

Xxx

Not yet. Not yet–

**Malachor.** Voice in her head, happy now. The images again: two drexl entangled; her own face twisted in ecstasy; the sensation of his skin on hers; the sound of bells; Revan, perched on a cliff; a blaster to the head–

Arkan had lost his words but not his mind and the one message he was trying to impart was crystalline:

**Malachor. Malachor.**

*Death.*

Sweat broke out as Revan fought the gravitational drop with all she had, every muscle stiff, the Force bucking and flexing beneath her ship's nose.

Arkan's *Pinion* shot past her, tumbling, free from the ion trail of the *Jopheena*, straight into the sun.

Free.

Xxx

The water speckled her skin like jewels, her hair brushed his chest as he stood over her, bobbing up and down, the sun painting them in gold and red and brown–

"Revan," Davad said.

She answered with a smile, her leaf eyes lazy, the sun splashing the tilt of her nose, her breasts–

"Race again?" she murmured, and dove before he could answer, flipping deft as a spear into the depths of the lake–the green depths, daring him to follow and he followed, he followed her down and the water was sun–warmed on his skin–the trace of her hair, like fire it lit–

Xxx

**Malachor.**

Maybe a farewell. Maybe a plea for her to follow him.

Revan would never know.

The Force flared in her, bright as another sun. Revan's arm shot out, the yoke moved, the engines gunned back to life.

*Jopheena* flipped sideways, horizontally propelled by her own velocity, spinning in a perfect spear–shot, careening away towards the black veil of safety, the flashing red lights of the racing course.

Behind the *Aurek*, the *Pinion* fell vertically, a victim of gravity.
Straight into the heart of the sun.

Xxx

Halfway to the docks, Bao stopped, gold skin of his face suddenly paling. "Stars, what--"

"Are you okay?" Meetra frowned.

"The--" His voice broke off. "Did you feel that?"

"No." She barely felt the death stick. But around them, pandemonium. "Feel what?"

"Nothing, I--' His skin had gone from gold to gray. The lines of his indentations darkened as if in shock.

"Seven hells!" Someone behind them yelled. "What's wrong with the sun?"

The image flashed on one of the screens along the wall. One side of the binary cluster seemed to be brighter than the other. But, even as they watched, the brightness seemed to fade, dimming sharply until it stood in shadow to its twin.

"An eclipse?" Meetra blinked.

"I don't think so." Bao's voice was artificially calm, but it always had been. Even before Malachor. "We need to leave now, General."

Xxx

It began a morning like any other at the Rappertunie Clinic.

"How is Patient X today?" Nurse Sadie Leen tried to sound upbeat and positive, because even if their patients were unresponsive they still had lower brainwave function, and who really knew what that meant in Humans? Twi'leks were easy, just Togruta, really, with smaller fat reserves, but Patient X had a small, perfectly round skull, now shaved and covered with a gold mesh hooked up to the read–outs. Didn't seem like there could possibly be enough of her brain left to recover from the catastrophic damage it had suffered.

"Assessment: Vitals remain unchanged since your last inquiry, Nurse Leen. Would you like me to cancel the alert system you programmed to inform you of any change?"

"Just asking to be polite VeeArr," she told the med droid, bending over the bedside of the unconscious woman. This wasn't one of the ones she thought of as the 'possibles.' The sents that might wake.

Patient X was really known as 'Jeen D'oh #3,' one of three unnameds they had in the catatonic wing of the Rappertunie Clinic for Indigent Cases from the Coruscanti Underground; but among themselves, the nurses just used Aurebesh shorthand.

Patient X had been in their care for more than a Coruscanti month.

The wounds on her hands that some sadist looked to have made with a boltgun had been filled in with synthskin and healed up nicely.

That was the easy part, of course. Jeen D'oh #3’s body would heal fine. But she'd never wake up again, not with the way she'd flatlined.
"I hate these trafficking cases," Sadie added. "Poor thing looks barely old enough to vote, and look what those animals did to her!"

"Observation: Dental analysis and bone density indicates this sentient was old enough to vote on most planetary systems for at least several cycles. The long bones in the thighs are capped, and the rear masticatory teeth are fully erupted, except for the one on the upper right hand side, which appears to have been removed--"

"You're so literal. Ugh!" Sadie made a face, leaning over the body. Her hand traced the girl's forehead, adjusting the mesh. "Head fur's growing in again. Is Lenny available to do a delip today?"

"Objection: I am a med droid, not an administrator! Suggestion: call him. Just because your last attempt did not go well--"

"You need your motivators adjusted, I think." She would not blush for a droid. "Lenny and I are just friends. That was just dinner. You don't know what--"

A low moan. Nurse Sadie almost missed it, she was so busy yelling at VeeArr. But Patient X's mouth had fallen open, and a low, keening noise was coming out of her throat. If it had been louder, Sadie would have thought it sounded like a scream.

And then, to her astonishment, Patient X's eyes fluttered open, revealing wide, sea–blue eyes that contrasted with the warm brown of her skin. "F–f–fay~" Her jaw shook with the effort of trying to form a word.

"Shhh, you're okay." Sadie bolted the comforting smile on her face instead of shock. There was no way this girl could wake up… but she had! "Don't try and talk quite yet. You've been through a horrible--you got hurt pretty bad," she corrected. "VeeArr, keep her stable," she added, turning toward the droid. "I'll run and get Doc Ossipus myself. He'll want to see this."

"F–f–ay. Aete. F–fate." Those blue–green eyes pleaded with Sadie to stay, as the girl's lips trembled. "Ch– ch– changed! Ch–changing–r–r–right now." A tear formed at the end of one of those eyes, but incredibly (or due to a seizure) Patient X was actually smiling.

For a Human coma case, she had a beautiful smile.

"Observation: It does appear to be a miracle, Mistress," the droid agreed. "I'll keep close watch."

"Changed," the girl whispered. Her eyes really were extraordinary. "She's changing it right now. R–right now."

"Do you have a name, sweetie?" Sadie gave her sweetest expression, as those extraordinary eyes focused on her.

The girl's head nodded. "Tha–Thalia. M–may–"

"Well, Miz Thali, let's see if we can find a doc free to give you a look, shall we?"

"I'm fine." The girl wiped her eyes, smile breaking like the sun out of clouds. "I'm alive."

Revan was falling, her mind entirely focused on the point ahead. Jopheena was a spear and she was falling–straight through–the ship bucked suddenly, and a beacon blazed in front of her as the
sensors came back online, far enough from the twin sun's rads to reactivate.

The comm was still flashing furiously. Automatically she noted the one green line amongst the red: the link she'd established with the Aleema. They must be here now too. They've caught up. I'll need to comm–

Jasp was–

Her breath came out at the same time the gees stabilized, her body swinging forward as she lunged out of her seat, vaguely aware she'd broken the safety restraints to do so. Next to her, Jasp was gray. Blood–spatters–from his nose.

Please don't let it be serious.

Please don't let him be dead.

On the bow she saw a flash of silver as one of the racers shot past–

Racers. We're still on the track, but we're past the suns, we're almost free of this fracking system–

"Pollie," Jasp whispered. His eyes fluttered open as she tried to support him in the Force, afraid to do more than surround his body in a. "The… the track."

"What?" There had to be a way to strengthen him without using too much–


"What?" They didn't need to finish the race–the jump point out of the system was a few thousand kilosecs off the course. They were on the right side of the system now. Nothing to stop them.

Another ship flashed by as if they were standing still.

"Finish it," Jasp whispered, reaching for the yoke again. His hand was clumsy as he activated Jopheena's thrusters. The tick of the engines shifted to a low whine as they began to accelerate–as he steered them back onto the track.

Revan blinked. "You want to finish the race?"

It was only then that the other… the other thing finally sunk in: the silence. There was no presence in the back of her mind. No screaming.

Her stomach felt uncomfortably full, like she'd eaten too many nutra bars at once. Like she'd never be hungry again.

Polla's father smiled at her, faintly. "Might as well. We've come this far."

He slammed the yoke down, gunning the engines.

Jopheena lunged forward, and Revan fell back into her chair.

Xxx

"That Pub ship's moving again." Layran was still watching the stupid race. Korrie–Kore–wasn't because racing was stupid and that Pinion had just… gone. Fallen into the sun, the announcers said.
If Mother was on it and died I'd know.

Wouldn't he?

"It's pretty fast." Rannie glanced at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Korrie– Kore– muttered. On their screen the Pub ship was chasing down a disc ship and a Naboo cruiser on the final lap. Behind it crowded a whole bunch of other ships, as if they'd all been bunched in that cluster between the suns and suddenly–

"There seems to be unprecedented solar activity, but our experts assure us at this time, there's no cause for alarm--"

"Also, the interdictor malfunction on our satellites will be repaired soon--"

Xxx

"Oh." Her hand dropped the bulb of water and Mical bent down and retrieved it, feeling oddly protective of the women he'd once distrusted more than any sentient alive.

Her now–flawless face stared back at him, eyes still slightly filmed with confusion. He'd been warned to expect that.

Even though Mical understood the necessity, a part of him now grieved as those eyes focused on his face, their expression forever altered.

"My apprentice," the woman whispered. "He--"

Mical felt it too, a faint ripple in the Force, as if somewhere, far away, a voice had stopped.

"I am here," he promised her, feeling strangely protective. "I will be your apprentice now." All he'd had was a glimpse–a fragment of the memories from the holocron the old woman had dropped at dinner. The fragment had been enough for him to understand that Master Atris needed the knowledge within. He had gathered the bundle carefully–careful not to touch more–and brought it before her.

Atris had stared at the holocron for some time without asking for an explanation. Perhaps, he thought, she had always known that it would come to this.

Know your enemy, Master Atris had always counseled her apprentices. Loanin. Surik. So Loanin had always counseled Mical as well. And so, he knew this woman–as well as anyone truly could. And, after seeing what she had showed him, Mical also knew it was not surprising that in the end, Master Atris had taken her own advice.

Xxx

"Don't leave--" she called out, just as Mical was by the door.

The holocron sat on her desk, free of its wrappings, a cube of glimmering blue. The piece Mical had touched had been reattached to the whole.

"Would you like me to wrap it back up again?" He had been given instructions for that eventuality too.

"No." She looked carved from frost. There was a long silence, long enough for Mical's mind to
wander, too long, too much time to dwell upon their ancient enemy and the battle that must be won. He… he had tried to explain it to her, but she had just blinked at him, before finally nodding slowly.

Finally–just before–she had spoken. "They say after a period of adjustment one becomes… both. So I will not lose what I—"

"You will be more," Mical promised her—for so that one memory from Kae's life had shown him. "Your knowledge and hers. The experience of all of your lives—"

"All." Atris nodded, as if he'd confirmed something she had only suspected before. "So there is more than one lifetime in the old woman's mind." Her mouth twisted. "Many of us suspected as much."

"Her mother asked it of her. She asks it of you. You do have a choice. She wants you to have a choice."

"It is kind of you to say so, padawan." Her eyes were the color of frost. "Where is she?"

"Gone." She had not told him where. "She did not want her physical weakness to be a liability."

Those glacial eyes narrowed. "And if I did refuse her offer, I suspect she would not want my retribution."

Xxx

"Nihilus failed." The white–haired woman crossed the room cautiously, herself to the new body. "Our hope must return to her, Mical. Perhaps in the end… it always was with her."

"To your original–?"

"No." The woman scoffed. "That old shell? I know where she walks now. A matter of minor vanity." Her voice hardened. "No. Our hope rests with the Balmorran. With the destruction of the Jedi Council at Katarr, the failure of Darth Nihilus, the disappearance of Revan, we must now seek the last true veteran of the Mandalorian Wars—"

*There are many veterans of the wars.* But he knew better than to argue. "Who do you mean, Master?"

"Call me Mother," she murmured. "You have earned it." Those frost–eyes sharpened. "I mean your sister, of course. Half-sister. My war child—"

XXX

Mekel felt like a fracking knob–head on the bridge, but no one had told him to leave. He eased into a seat by a long bank of blinking blue lights that no one seemed interested in.

The displays in front of them showed the *Aleema*'s hull being peppered by small weapons fire, completely ineffectively, and a lot of flashing red lights.

Canderous stood at the front of the bridge, staring out at the screen in front of them, where lines of numbers and names of ships were coming in fast. He snorted softly. "She came in third."

"What?" Aemelie looked harried. Millifar was sitting up in a hoverchair, doing something with her good hand to program their guns to shoot down more interdictor drones. Dessa was fracking humming and Oyimex and Estrel and Kelbourne had all taken positions behind Canderous at their
banks, like this ship was actually fighting a war.

A war against fracking drones, instead of the frack-damned Sith that have Dustil–

"Are we waiting for her to jump first?" Dessa broke in. "There is no way we can cross the system, General Ordo, not unless we want to shoot our way through several unarmed civilian carriers, and that seems tactically unsound if we don't want to provoke immediate war–"

"Ping her again," General Ordo ordered.

Millifar nodded. There was a black–painted helm on the seat next to hers. Mekel knew it was for Kex. They'd done things like that back on Korriban too. Nothing as big as a helm, but–stones. A stylus. Once, a shoe.

"Revan says jump before we start a kripping war," Millifar reported. "Wait for her at the next stop. She may be delayed. Her ship needs an overhaul, and she–"

"You." Canderous pivoted to Mekel. "Pick a team and go after her. Here." He tossed Mekel a comm.

No fracking way, Mekel thought. You're more likely to get to Kaas in this tub than she is. She just ran her ship through a sun, how the hell can you expect–

"I'll go with Jin," Millifar announced. "We will take a small pinnace across the system and meet with her. Her ship—if it is capable of hyperspace flight at all—barely seats a quarter squadron. And we can't afford to lose more troops here."

"So soon?" Dessa frowned.

"Your choice," Canderous told his daughter, even though Mekel hadn't gotten one.

XXX

"I've never seen anything like it!" The announcer was practically delirious with joy. He sounded drunk, Helena thought. How embarrassing to think that had once seemed quite normal to her—that false exuberance. "That Aurek came out of nowhere—and pulled off the sun–shoot of the century! Have you ever seen such flying?"

"Every few centuries," Cally noted, to Helena. "But he's right. It's quite uncommon."

"They came in third and they weren't even registered," Helena commented. "I don't understand the commotion."

"I can't wait to see who—they're tractoring in the ship now—"

"Difficult to tell—it could always be a trick of some kind, but I believe the Force was involved here," Cally murmured.

"Are you saying the Jedi entered the race?" Helena sniffed. "That seems unsporting."

"I agree," Cally said. "Rather. But it's strange—there was that upset at the start with the cloaked ship—and now the news is focusing rather desperately on this lone starfighter." She sighed. "Pity about the Pinion. Not many of them left now."

"I didn't realize my companion was such an expert."
They exchanged a smile, and Cally reached for the tea pot. "I've had a great deal of time."

The screen closed in on the orbital hangar bay, and the battered military ship sitting there. It looked like a child's toy that someone had tried to melt—a bit blackened on one side, a little crooked on its struts.

As they watched, its side-hatch popped open, and two flight-suited legs emerged, followed by a helmeted figure, half-obscured by the co-pilot they seemed to be carrying. The cam zoomed in closer, revealing a woman and a man. She was rendered anonymous—by the helm covering most of her face, but the man's helmet was off, and his face was streaked with brown… ash?

*Or blood. Dear me! "He's hurt!" Helena exclaimed.*

"I need a medic!" the woman yelled. Surprisingly loud, even over the cam's mics. "Please!" Her voice echoed across the hangar like a bell.

The line of BisSec at the door broke, and seemed to mill around hesitantly—as two white-coated uniforms stepped through. For things like this, medix were always close at hand. It was such a shame Abasen had managed to off himself in some dank cave, instead of a brightly-lit hangar like this—

Helena Shan wiped away tears.

"Please!" The woman's voice cracked. "You have to help!"

"Rather hysterical, isn't she?" Cally chuckled. "No need to cry, Helena."

"I get so emotional." She smiled.

"Please! You have to help!" the woman repeated. Louder this time, more desperately. "Please!"

"Poor woman. Do you suppose that's her husband?"

"I'm not… sure." Cally froze the screen abruptly. "That is rather curious. The inflection there—just there…. One can have so many faces, but a voice—"

She waved at the screen and the timer jumped back.

"Please! You have to help!"

"I was watching that—" Helena protested. Really, just because they were chums now, was it necessary for the younger woman to sometimes treat Helena like she was the servant?

"Please! You have to help!"

Cally repeated the clip, pulling up the magnification. The woman's face was a blur behind the visor but the man's—

"I swear, he looks rather raffish," Helena offered. "Is he going to die, do you think? What madness! They weren't even registered, they'll obviously be arrested—"

"Please! You have to help!"

"Go live," Cally said. But she sounded… puzzled now. Distant.
"—identified as Jasp Organa, registered smuggler of Deralian, Derra Farm Adaston. The woman, who appears unscathed has yet to identify—"

"Organa," Cally said. "Curious."

"Common," Helena sniffed. "I'm sure you remember, Organa was the name of that creature the Jedi made out of Revan to murder my poor Bastila."

"Some flying you both did out there!"

Cally had changed the HoloChannel. At least it wasn't the dreadful mess on Katarr. Helena didn't want to hear about more Jedi dying. Too many memories.

"You don't have to answer their questions," the woman was saying to the man.

"He doesn't have to answer our questions," the reporter echoed, oddly—since that was his job.

"My daughter did it all," the man bragged. "She's the best pilot in the galaxy, aren't you, Pollie?"

"He's… uh, delirious. I'm… I'm not—" His daughter glanced up at the screen behind a tinted visor. A strand of dark hair had fallen over one eye. Her face was as ash-covered as her father's, features blurred behind the ferraglass helm. Her chin was pointed.

"Second—best," the man added. "I'm the best. Polla Organa is the second—best pilot in the galaxy and I don't want any of you lot to forget her. Don't… don't forget her… Pollie, they can't—you won't…"

"Turn those holo-cams off!" the woman snapped. Her hand moved—

The screen went to static.

There was a long pause, and then the sound of clapping. Cally Lee was applauding the blank screen and laughing as if another HoloNet outage was some kind of joke!

"Oh ho," murmured Cally Lee. "Unexpected. Every century or so… there's always the deliciously unexpected—"
Chapter 62 / The Line

A jolt of agony sparked on her spine, a phantom ache from her destroyed arm, sharp stabbing pains in her chest—

Ribs. Spine. Arm. But it's the poison that's the problem, Red. It's the poison that might end you still—

Malak—his hand slipped away from hers, small and slippery as Malachor’s, vanishing down a long, dark tunnel and then there was no light—no light at all—

XXX

In the darkness the woman did not dream.

But then there were noises—voices in the dark—

XXX

A door hissing open and soft laughter. A girlish sigh, and light steps across a stone floor.

"Here, Lord Malak." A feminine laugh, all artifice and no dignity. "I sent the slaves to the market for supplies—with all the shortages they’ll be gone for hours."

"Uh... here?" The voice cracked. Young. Not at all Malak’s. "You want to do it here? But she’s right... there—she’s—"

"Silly. No! Over here. The cot by the window where her slaves sleep. See? It has a lovely view."

Another giggle and the rustle of fabric falling to the floor, the clatter of armor following.

The air smelled too sweet and close. An air of corruption and a full fresher pot.

"No!" An age of octaves in that one syllable as the boy’s voice cracked again. "Put your clothes back on, Mydia. Her eyes are open. She’s watching us."

"The slaves say she does that." Footsteps tapped across the floor and then came the sound of snapping fingers. "Eyes open, no one at home. See?" The voice was closer now, right on top of her. Wind on her face and a snapping noise, hard against her left ear. A sharp thing that felt like a fingernail raked the side of her skull. "Nothing. Don’t be such a wet slatrap, Malak! You sound like Phylus."

"I’m... I’m not." A darker tone. "I don’t... um, it’s disrespectful. She’s... my wife."

The woman would have scowled at that, if she could have felt her face.

I am most certainly not your wife.

She felt like she should know the boy’s name, but she did not. But he was no Malak. Malak had loved her so much—
The girl sighed. “Was she any good? So thin and veiny.” A warm hand lifted hers and then dropped it. “The slave calls her a total veg.”

The woman willed the hand to move again on its own but it did not. Her body felt weighted with duracrete.

“Can’t we just go to your room?” The boyish voice was nothing at all like Malak’s. Accent from a Rim planet. Nothing of Coruscant at all.

Republic space. Not Sith. But this—scent of marri flowers and urea. The tinge of ozone. This is Imperial.

I know this place. I’m on Dromund Kaas. I came here. I came back—

“My room? That’s the first place Inse will look! Do you want her to know?” A pause. “Because I was going to tell her—but you should let me do it.” Another giggle.

I came back to face Tenebrae.

With that memory, came others. The boy—he had been Malak, once. No longer. But the ruse—

To fool Tenebrae. He pretends to be Malak. He’s terrible at it.

There was a hiss as the door opened again and then a new voice interrupted. “Mydia? What are you doing with Lord Malak?”

“Inse! What happened to your face?” A giggle. “Oh! Sometimes I forget how scowling is so aging—but then I always have you to remind me, don’t I?”

Inse. Mydia. Phylus. The Blais children. They are important. This is important. But the woman’s mind felt frozen under ice and she could not recall why. There had been a party—a battle—

I was injured. The wheeze of a respirator, the smell of antiseptic. But if the woman had a body, its workings were entirely divorced from her mind. Only the sounds and smells—

She willed her eyes to open, to close, to blink, to see—

“Hah.” Clack of heels on the floor, and the new, sharp-edged female voice continued. “Put some clothes on, dear sister, before Lord Malak falls out of that window trying to escape from you.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Why would I be jealous?” The new voice sounded amused. “I was wondering if you wanted eggs with your breakfast this morning, dear Malak? Here—I brought your belt. You left it in my rooms last night—I found it hanging from the chandelier.”


Malak would never make a sound like a dying bantha. My Malak would never debase himself with the Blais sisters—they’re practically children—

“Children grow up,” a new voice murmured softly in her ear.

The light, when it returned, did so seamlessly. From one moment to the next. First darkness—then vision. Light shone in her eyes and the woman blinked as the world abruptly came into focus.
“We grew up,” the new voice added. A hand closed on hers. Cold.

Shapes resolved into selves: a scowling girl putting her clothes back on. Another, armored, standing in the doorway with an empty smile. Mydia and Inse Blais. The boy who pretended to be Malak was facing the window. The back of his head was bowed. His hair dull and disheveled, the back of his neck vulnerable—

The Force around him was nearly tangible in its darkness. A part of her quailed.

“No one made that one fall,” said the voice in her ear. “He leapt off the sithspawned cliff—he wanted to do it.”

The woman’s eyes looked up. An insubstantial feminine figure loomed over her, hazed in flickering light. Hair raised in a knot: a heart–shaped face, her blunt sweet profile turned and Beya Organa kissed the woman’s lips, slowly, as if savoring the touch—

The woman felt nothing.

Their eyes locked, and Beya’s smile slowly faded. “Walk with me,” she whispered. Her voice was hoarse as it had been after Malachor.

The woman sat up and swung her legs over the rails of her sickbed, eyeing the Blais sisters and their captive man, but they had all stopped moving—frozen, as if time itself had now stopped.

This is a dream.

She took Beya’s hand and stood up.

“Not a dream.” The Deralian shook her head and led her out of the room.

The woman spared one glance back at the thing now occupying her bed. A breathing mask lay half-over its face, its dulled eyes stared blankly, and one arm ended in a severed stump attached to a battered gold prosthesis.

Poor woman.

The skull was covered with a pelt of red hair; veins underneath too dark for her skin.

“She’s finally dead,” Sheris ventured. Their hands interlaced, and she had both of hers. “I was starting to think nothing could kill her.”

“No,” Beya said. “You’re not.” Her hand pulled. “You need to see.”

They walked through the streets of the shattered city. Makeshift charnel pits in every square. Everyone was masked and walking alone. The few nobles they saw had perimeter remotes buzzing around their heads like two–meter wide halos—warning all who trespassed to keep distance.

“It’s plague,” the woman said. “How is this possible?”

“Wasn’t this your plan?” Beya pointed to the line of slaves wearing masks, the droid guards replacing flesh. “Bring the Empire to its knees?”

“No! I would never!” The woman remembered the labs on Manaan. The ones Malak told her to neglect because his wife wanted them productive.

“I can help them,” the woman offered. She had before—for weeks on Coruscant. She could heal
them. This would be no different.

“It’s too late,” Beya said. “But you needed to see.”

“Her plague,” the woman told her. “It’s here. I’m sorry.”

“No.” Beya shook her head. Her eyes glittered a full yellow, like tarnished gold. “You don’t get to do this. There’s no absolution. For either of you.”

The world contracted again—snapped back to the ceiling of the attic room, and the endless quarreling of Blais voices—

XXX

Time slipped and slid. She walked with ghosts through the streets of Kaas City. Feeling came back slowly—first the memory of an arm she no longer possessed. Then her toes, hidden under a weighted medical blanket. When the voices were quiet and the only sounds were sleeping breaths, the woman wiggled them, back and forth—until her knees bent too.

One day her other arm moved and her eyes focused on a gleam of starlight slipping through the window—or, more prosaically, one of the hovering patrol droids from the street. Lawless Kaas had a curfew now, the voices said—and checkpoints. Everyone was under quarantine.

Sometimes the voices were arguing about matters that she knew were important.

XXX

“People are dying, Yuthura.” A flat voice. “And Carth isn’t even sick. This is all my fault.”

“Objection: The glory-stealing slave Polla Organic did not infect sixty-eight points two sentients with the Rakatan plague on the way to transmit the pathogen to Carth Onasi. Polla Organic could not have done this! The prediction of which doorknobs, palanquin bars, and chattel needed to be touched to produce maximum vectors was a calculation far beyond the limits of a weak, Deralian brain.”

Deralian brain.

Beya? The woman had dreamed of her. She remembered dreaming of her.

But Beya was not here now. This time it was Malak’s shade who stood by the window again, staring at her with glittering gray eyes. He came often, but he rarely spoke. Sometimes she wondered if he was real at all.

“Point two? Sixty-eight?” That accent was Deralian too—voice of a Deralian smuggler who had no business in this place. “HK, I told you to only infect Carth!”

“Objection: The limitations you imposed instructed me to avoid contact with any sentient person. Slave chattel are non-persons. Doorknobs are also not sentient. A palanquin may carry a person within its walls, but the outside bars are carried by chattel—and again—”

“The droid did his job all too well.” That cool voice again. “Revan’s Jedi plague is ravaging the helpless, and we need to repair the damage.”

It was never intended to infect the slaves!

“Phylus said the servants told him Revan always planned to release the virus—”
Revan may have brought the plague, but I helped the helpless! I healed all those sentients in the Coruscant Underground!

“She left no further instructions?”

I did. With the cook to this household. Deckna. With the computer on Kashyyyk. But if I failed it could be another thousand years or more before someone was awake enough to hear them.

I did. Before I went to Atris for the Redemption, I left a note on my bedside table to be forwarded to my parents. I told them to remember they sold me to the Jedi.

I never thought Malak could kill me. I never thought it would be my thoughts inside this empty head—

Not empty. It’s mine. You are the intruder, the conqueror, but you will never have me.

XXX

“Not empty.” Malak’s voice startled her. She felt her physical hand twitch, heard the faint whir as if HK had tracked the motion. “Sheris never left, Red.”

The woman wanted to go to him, to walk with him in dreams as she had with Beya. But her bones were frozen. How could she trust him? In those first few moments of her death, (her false death, if this wasn’t some form of torture in the afterlife), they had been joined—but then—

He walked forward, passing through the suddenly insubstantial women—the Twi’lek and the Deralian. “For a time there was not enough left of you to see. I’ve been watching Malachor. Our son. You remember our son?”

I remember when you told me there could be no children. Because of her.

The hate seemed splintered—its reflection a broken mirror.


I am not her. I will not be her.

No. I am not—

I am no weakling.

No. I am no monster.

“You had a plan for this,” Malak whispered. Metallic coldness of his jaw against her ear. “One you never told me.”

I could not. You were compromised, Mal. Tenebrae would have known.

I could not. It failed. There could be no children. The medix said she had made certain of that in both of us.

“Revan’s plan,” her true love corrected. His metallic voice had a strange gentleness. “I knew of the other, Sheris. I always knew.”

Sheris had made the nursery room as exact as possible—extracting the details from the holostill Malak kept tucked in a box of old lightsaber parts. She’d found it innocently enough, looking for a
new coil for her own hilt—so rarely used that the connectors corroded.

The image of the red-haired princeling. Wide-eyed and chubby in the white crib. The stuffed Wookiee. The butterflies. Malak had never told her. Sheris had had never known (at the time) if the boy was alive or dead.

She and Malak had shared everything. But never the child. She’d had the room built in their Thulian palace in secret. She’d had the builders killed. But still someone knew.

Someone always knew. Someone always told. The palace and its nursery burned by Lord Revan’s orders. And then, the next day, the medix’s report: presented unannounced to her on the silver breakfast platter. Her body. Malak’s. Technical terms that a sentient with her medical training understood all too well—

Extensive damage to the germ line—no viability.

You always had that piece of him that I could never have, Revan.

Because he was mine. You were nothing. A plaything. A pawn. Letting you reproduce would have been irresponsible. It would have given Tenebrae another piece to use against me. It would have been a threat to Malachor—

It would have been mine. I would have been better. I would have been kind—

“Stop,” Malak hissed. “The people of Kaas are dying.”

I never cared about Kaas or the Emperor. All I saw was you, my love.

While their masters died, the slaves were to rise in revolt. But I had to make the Republic safe from his touch—I failed as badly as this pathetic fool with her simple dream of another baby.

XXX

“Ask Revan Fracking Starfire.” A Deralian voice broadened into a deliberately careless drawl. A woman. Not Beya. The woman paced the floor in a slave’s red robes. “Ask her what the fracked plans were with this blasted plague. She won’t answer, but it doesn’t matter now.”

“I’ve tried to reach her mind,” the purple Twi’lek said. “But I’ve found nothing.”

“Because she’s brain dead.” The Deralian threaded her topknot with her fingers and flopped down on the cot by the window. “Sei and I should have left this chivhole when Onasi gave us the chance.”

“And yet, you did not.” The woman sounded curious. “Why?”

“Thought I could make a difference. Thought I could help Captain Obvious. He doesn’t deserve this banthashit. Neither does Darth Sulkypants.”

“I’ve tried to reach Dustil—”

“Yeah, I saw. Your duel was pretty even until he broke out the lightning.”

“It’s good we received the new kolto shipments.” The Twi’lek rubbed her arm. “Dustil considers me yet another authority figure who has betrayed him. We can only keep trying—”

“I just wanted to make a difference,” the Deralian said again. “Rescue Carth and his kid, maybe
get that asshole Tenebrae where it hurts.” She hesitated. “Like she would have, if she hadn’t... lost.”

“Well, you’ve made your mark.” The lilac Twi’lek smiled. “Although the results of your difference have yet to be seen.”

“This rebellion would be easier to run if everyone didn’t keep dying of plague. Half the organizers that were there last week were gone last night.”

“If that droid can obtain more of the vaccine as she promised we can use it to encourage more to join us.”

“Yeah, well—” Polla snorted. “Mission still isn’t back from wherever. It’s been a week. Maybe she got melted down for parts.”

“Objection: the T3’s parts are worthless. No sentient meatbag would want anything from such a squat, clumsy carapace.”

XXX

HK? The woman tried to move her hand. Rebellion? Fools, the woman thought. What have you done?

XXX

The woman had been drifting in and out of consciousness now for days—trying to make sense of the garbled conversations between Polla Organa, Yuthura Ban (how was she on Kaas at all?), HK, and the Blais children. It seemed safer to feign unconsciousness as long as she had so little control over when she would lose it again. HK suspected the truth, Revan assumed, because one morning there was a small, neat vibroknife under her pillow that had not been there the night before. She’d slipped it under the mattress using up the faint strength she had when everyone was sleeping.

I will destroy you, Tenebrae. I will see you broken. I will see your worlds burned for all time—

“No.” A hand brushed her skull, tracing the place she knew should be scarred—where she remembered the pain. “You will not, Revan. You put aside your quest for vengeance long ago.”

“How do you know that?” She sat up abruptly, even as the world dissolved before she could glimpse it, leaving Revan sitting on a well–patched black–and–red blanket on a stretch of white sand. In front of her, the artificial waves from Coruscant’s manufactured sea rolled in, each one precise as parsecs.

Her uncle turned to her, legs crossed and raised an eyebrow. “I know my niece.”

“This is my responsibility,” she told Vrook. Or his hallucination. There had been so many. Most dead enough to be ghosts or Force visions, but sometimes the living intruded too. That child, Carth’s son. The Fragment’s template, blundering through careful arrangements like a bantha in a poraclay shop. The astromech droid, of all things—blurring sometimes into the guise of the dead Twi’lek that had originated its personality— A girl I never even knew.

“Alone?” Her uncle’s dry chuckle echoed the bitterness between them. “You couldn’t even handle two of his rancor.”

“I’m still alive. It's not done.” Was she? Was she? Her hair was loose around her shoulders. The
waves lapped on the shore. But none of it was real.

A phantom hand squeezed hers. “No, child. You know how this works. First, he starts with the nameless. The innocent. The next cuts will be deeper.” His fingers tightened on hers. “Personal. She won’t be prepared for loss. You need to assist her—keep her from falling.”

“You need to be careful,” she warned him. Her voice sounded young. “If we fail, if they take Coruscant, Uncle Vrook—”

“Revan.” He took her other hand too. Her uncle’s eyes were very dark. “You need to wake up.”

“It's not safe.”

“She needs you.” His hand traced her cheek. “She'll come.”

“She can’t.” That sad sense of inevitability. “Are you with her? Can you tell her to be careful—as long as Tenebrae thinks she’s dead we’re all safe, but as soon as she surfaces—he will take her, he will put her in the tomb—”

“I can't.” His voice was gruff, so familiar that her dream self felt the phantom prick of tears in her eyes. “I can't help her, and I can't help you. Or my son.”

“Your son? The boy died.”

Mekel Jin had been his name. Dustil Onasi had mentioned it to the Deralian once in angry tones. He’d been clear. Very clear.


“Fools.” The word slipped out before she could temper the thought.

Vrook is dead. Dull relief that he could no longer be used against Revan came first, then the grief there was no time for. Not now. Not yet. Her rage should have broken the spell, set her awake, given her limbs motion, but instead it was useless, as useless as poor Sheris’s still–beating heart.

How did you die, uncle? She wanted to turn her head, to see the real world and not this memory, but her eyes were frozen, staring directly ahead, her body nothing but a dull weight, a numbness somewhere outside of her, alien and divorced.

“How did you die?” Her voice was frail, and the tears on her cheeks were as imaginary as the waves on the shore. Revan thought she remembered reading, in one of the more random intelligence reports from her Coruscanti spies, that the waves had been stopped, the water switched from salt to sweet, that the once–thriving markets had been closed on the Beach Promenade.

All those months on Coruscant and I never went to see.

“He takes your treachery as an act of war.” Her uncle squeezed her insubstantial fingers with his own. “As you did his. You need her.”

It has always been war, Revan thought tiredly. Maybe it always will be. Malachi was right all along—life is a cycle of endless conflict, and the Emperor just a manifestation more stabilizing than most; but if not him, the Rim would still demand independence, or the Mandalorians would raid—

“How did you die, Uncle?” A part of her envied him.
“Helping.” Vrook squeezed her hand again. “Trust her, niece. She is coming.”

“If the plague is here already, she may be too late—” Her head turned, but he was gone, the artificial sea with him. There was a weighted blanket on her body and warm sunlight on her face. Her eyes cracked open to the blinding light of day.

She blinked them, back and forth, focusing on the ceiling above. *She must not come. He must not win.*

XXX

“What came to pass on Katarr was a tragedy for the Jedi and the Republic. But from such adversity comes hope of a better tomorrow. In times dark as this, we need all remember that from even the darkest tragedies can come a new hope.”

The woman dressed in gray had braided her white hair into two long tails that hung down past her shoulders. It was a look that ill–suited—making her look older instead of younger. The woman Master Atris had been would have known that. This woman smiled, as she leaned on the podium, addressing the crowd, as if unnecessarily compensating for a body that had never been frail. The woman was now addressing the delegation of Telos officials and holo–press with a shrill authority that Brianna had never seen Atris require.

Master Atris had never worn gray either, preferring white, or garments made entirely of fur for the cold. Next to her, Mical Jorde wore his Jedi robes: pale hair slicked back, expression pinched and careful. Abruptly his head turned and he met Brianna’s gaze, nodding, as if they shared the same purpose.

The press conference on Telos Station was sparsely attended, mostly by drab Humans in ill–formed clothes. Brianna stared at the ruined planet below instead, wondering if she was seeing it now for the last time. Even barely recovered, Telos was beautiful.

Master Atris’s voice had been speaking for quite some time, but Brianna had long ceased listening carefully. She had contrived to remain in the back row, behind all of her sisters. That was as far away from Mical Jorde, the brother she had never known, and the woman who wore the face of her aunt, as possible.

Now, Brianna edged back another step, one closer to the door.

“The Jedi Temple at Coruscant is closed and dead, and so it shall remain,” Atris’s voice declared. “No Jedi walk there now—”

“Where are you going?” Dinara hissed.

“The fresher.” Brianna met her half-sister’s gaze steadily, trying not to feel guilty for the lie—or give away any doubt with her stance or her expression.

“Oh.” Her sister shrugged and Brianna backed past her, back into the hall, waiting to break into a run until she was halfway down the corridor.

She had timed it quite perfectly. The cruise ship *Kuat Glorification* was just issuing its final boarding screens. Brianna pulled up her hood and presented the boarding chip she had purchased mere hours before, when the feeling of wrongness had become as overwhelming as a whisper in the back of her mind—
“Hey!” The red-haired woman was a stranger, but she grabbed Brianna’s arm with utter confidence—assuming a familiarity she had no right to possess. “There you are!” The hug was so unexpected that Brianna let it happen—right up until the woman tried to drag her away from the boarding gate.

A blow to the solar plexus was usually enough to disable any random civilian—but somehow the red-haired woman dressed in green evaded the blow, catching Brianna’s arm in a durasteel grip and twisting it back.

A heartbeat later, Red Hair was sailing across the floor while sentients around them scattered.

“Just greeting my sister!” Red Hair called out, jumping easily to her feet. “Echani. You know how they are!”

“This is not how we are,” Brianna warned her. “And you are no sister of mine.” The crowd around them was dispersing hastily—as if, like most sentients, they wanted no trouble. “She’s not my sister!”

The woman didn’t appear to be Echani—despite the hair, her skin was a delicate rose-gold color, and she was dressed more like a civilian than a warrior.

“It’s true, I’m not. Silly, I wasn’t being literal.” The smile turned feral, and Red Hair’s hand beckoned Brianna closer—

Their next exchange was a smooth parry of feints—right up until the moment Red Hair’s arm wrapped around Brianna’s torso like a clamp, pressing something hard and smooth and sharp into her ribs.

“Phytitox,” the woman whispered in Brianna’s ear. “Dart’s on my wrist. Voice and motion-activated. One more twitch from you and you’ll be out for a week—not to mention puking blood when you wake up. They tell me it’s unpleasant.”

“Authorized bounty!” she called out raising her other hand. A hologram emblem flashed on the screen. “Private contractor for the Telos Security Force. Everything’s fine!”

That woman who was Atris would not let me go so easily. Brianna felt her muscles slack in defeat.

“You may as well kill me. Tell Master ‘Atris’ I would rather die than serve her.”

“Atris?” Red Hair laughed, not releasing her grip. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t work for her. I’m Blade Eight of Ish’na’kar. I work for your brother.”

“That is no better.” It had been a childish dream to thinking running would be easy. “Where would Mical have you take me?”

“Mical?” Red Hair shrugged. “I don’t know who that is… but we need to get off this station before someone checks with TSF and notices my forged papers. My ship’s two levels down. Will you walk, or be dragged?”

What kind of trap is this? “Where are you taking me?”

The woman whispered in her ear.

Brianna frowned. “But I was just there!”

“Then you know how difficult it is to fly through all that debris.” Red Hair laughed. “Lucky my
partner’s the best pilot this side of war. Just don’t get on his bad side—and let him win at chess.”

“Is his name Blade Seven? Or Nine?” Brianna smiled slightly. Despite the obvious trap–like nature of her predicament, Blade Eight had a certain infectious enthusiasm she was finding difficult to resist.

*She’s allied against my mother. The enemy of my enemy is an ally.*

“It’s Hanharr.” Blade Eight took her arm with the same familiar efficiency that Brianna and her sisters shared, leading her down a corridor. “He was a Genoharadan assassin hired to hunt me down, and I was one of Sion’s brightest blades. We met on Nar Shaddaa—quite the story. But he tells it better than I do—do you speak Shyriiwook?”

“Only a little.”

“It’s pretty easy, once you get the gist.” Blade Eight beamed again. She had dimples, Brianna noted.

XXX

Revan paced back and forth, eyeing the confused squads of BisSec security and the three dazed reporters. Some of the sents she’d compelled had that bewildered look in their eyes that said they might be coming out of it.

Two medix were seeing to Jasp. That was the most important immediate thing. And the cams were down—taken out with a spark of Force energy. That was also relevant.

Revan glanced back at her ship. The landing struts were half-melted, but Jasp had seemed to think the *Jopheena* could make at least another jump.

*I need to be sure. I need to be absolutely sure.*

“Get me mechanics!” she commanded the closest BisSec. “I need to get this ship checked! Fast.”

“You already asked. They’re coming.” He rubbed his head, looking confused.

She turned her attention to the medix with Jasp. “Is he all right?”

The female medix hovering over Polla’s da looked up at her. “He’s dehydrated, half-starved... but it’s nothing a kolto bath and some nutrition won’t cure—for the short term. His heart—”

“I know.” Da— Jasp— had closed his eyes and he was breathing shallowly, but she had to believe he’d make it. “You can replace hearts, right? We’ll pay.” *Somehow. Just don’t ask me for a retinal scan to prove my credit.*

“Look here!” An officer (by the size of his plated epaulets) strode forward. “You can’t just race the Biscain Hundred without proper registration! I need to take you into custody.”

“No.” she shook her head, throwing caution to the wind and weighting her words with the Force as hard as she could. “You don’t need to take me into custody.”

The Human man’s eyes glazed over. “I—I don’t need to—”

“Wait a second!” one of the reporters—this one a Bothan—interrupted indignantly. “I see what just happened! You just—you’re some kind of Jedi. Those are lightsabers on your belt! Our cams
didn’t just all cut out for no reason—and you’re telling that guy what to think.”

“I’m not telling that guy what to think.”

“Oh no.” He shook his head, backing away. “Don’t think your mind tricks will work on me.”

“You said your name’s Polla… Organa?” Another reporter stepped forward nervously. “Uh, any relation to… the… is that really your name?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “My name is Polla Organa.”

“Your name is Polla Organa,” a few sents muttered, almost eerily in unison. Something about that made Revan feel like a hessi was walking over her grave but there was no more time to think.

“A Jedi—” one of the medix glanced up, frowning. “If you’re a Jedi, can’t you just heal this man yourself?”

“Do your job!” Jasp really didn’t look good.

He still looks better than Arkan did, burning up in that sun.

She’d destroyed her best weapon to defeat the Sith Empire.

“I will do my job.” The medical technician’s head bent down over Jasp again. He was packing him in what looked like kolto bandages. The kolto had an odd sheen to it on the derma–paks.

“What is that? Why are you doing that? He’s not injured.”

“It’s kolto,” the woman said. She was frowning. “The new kind’s good for stabilizing vital signs.”


The woman frowned up at her, amidst the excited chatter from the crowd, forehead wrinkled as if she was trying to sort something out. “If he said you’re Polla Organa, but you’re really a Jedi—”

“I’m not really a Jedi.” If I was a Jedi, I’d have a better plan than this. A Jedi wouldn’t have considered taking Arkan to the Sith to wipe them all out. The Jedi were trying to stop him and save the Force too—

“She’s not really a Jedi,” the man medic said.

“You’re not really a Jedi,” the woman agreed.

“ Took them long enough to get the new kolto distributed,” the Bothan reporter added. “At least it’s everywhere now—guess they finally got those trade deals worked out with Manaan.”

“Oh. Uh… good.” I will not feel guilty. “Guess I never saw it before.”

She recognized the look on their faces. It wasn’t fear—it was awe.

“But if she says she’s Polla Organa—”

“She can’t be Revan. Revan’s dead.”

Did the Council tell everyone I died? They have a frack of a lot to answer for—risking all those
lives on Katarr. She should have felt angry, but right now, all Revan felt was a numb impatience mixed with worry for Jasp.

Ma will kill me if he dies. I’ll kill me if he dies. If he dies it’s all my fault—

“That footage could’ve been faked—”

“There were two Revans, remember? Maybe she’s one. Maybe the other one died.”

“But I thought Polla Organa died in that speeder accident with her family.”

“There was an insurance claim,” another reporter said. “We did a story on it at the time. I interviewed that unconscious guy myself. Seemed really broken up that his daughter was dead.”

The medix had unrolled a portable hover plat and were loading Jasp on.

“Where are you taking him?” The Force still nagged at Revan, like an itch on the back of her neck. Something’s wrong here—not just this.

“He needs to be stabilized. We have a medical transport for the racers.” The female medix frowned. “Uh… are you coming with us? We need next of kin to start the records request from his native—”

“Deralia,” the reported who’d been talking about Polla said. “His native planet would be Deralia, if he’s Polla Organa’s father.”

“But what if she’s Revan?” another asked.

“I’m Polla Organa,” Revan snapped. “That’s it.”

“That’s it, you’re Polla Organa—”

“Are all of you blind?” This speaker was a Weequay, one of the BisSec guards by his uniform. “Can’t you see she’s using that Jedi Force on you?”

“She can’t be Revan,” muttered someone else. “Revan’s dead. Didn’t you see the footage?”

Footage? Her temples throbbed, the feeling of wrongness increased. “That’s right, Revan’s dead.”

“Revan’s dead,” the Weequay repeated.

A little disturbing this was working at all. She’d never been good at compulsion—not that she’d ever been allowed to use it freely. Bastila had been quite clear on the dangers—

Necessity. But it’s wrong. I, of all people, should understand why not to frack with someone’s mind—


“Oh.” It had felt uncannily normal for a moment, standing there facing down two squads of guards. It seemed like a year of her life had been nearly all moments like that. “I’m not coming with you, Da. I’ll… I’ll call Ma—or, I’ll get them to call her. You’re going to be okay.”

He won’t. Something’s really wrong.
As if in time with her unease, the station alarms started going off.

“Pollie?” Jasp tried to lift his head. “I… I know you’re not coming with me. You need to go.”

“An evacuation alert has been ordered for the Biscain System, a mechanical voice chimed. “All vessels on this station have been commandeered for evacuation. There is no need to panic—”

“They always say that when there’s a need to panic,” one of the reporters sniped. He broke for the door. BisSec ranks opened abruptly and let them through.

“It’s the sun—did you see?”

“Who else?”

“Something’s wrong with it. We should go.”

“Her hair’s not red.”

“Hard to tell with that helmet on—”

“No, look. You can see that little bit there, by her face—”

Revan summoned the Force, breathing so deep she felt it crackle to her fingertips. “I’m Polla Organa. Not Revan. Heal him—here—give me your stylus.” She reached over and took it before the male medix could object, scribbling down Molla’s number on Deralia. “Call her. He needs to go back there—to her.”

“You are Polla Organa. Sure.” The medix’s expression looked dubious now, but he pocketed the comm code.

“There is no need to panic,” the mechanical voice said again. But the mechanics in the doorway stood muttering to themselves instead of looking at her ship.

“Fix my ship,” she commanded. “Make sure she can make hyperspace. Now.”

A few guards ran towards her with the mechanics and Revan stiffened, but they ran past, staring at her ship like the compulsion had hit them. One began polishing its side with her sleeve.

Get better, Da. The last Revan saw of Polla’s father was a limp gray hand as the medix escorted him out, followed by another squad of BisSec.

She was reminded suddenly of the Mandalorian party on Coruscant, when she’d lent her strength to Lin to compel a crowd. How had he done it?

Leave peacefully, she thought at the two remaining reporters. The Human woman broke for the door immediately, but the Bothan stared at her steadily, more curious than cowed.

Leave peacefully, she repeated, and several more guards broke for the door. There is nothing to see here. There is nothing wrong.

“There is nothing wrong,” a voice behind her said.

Revan turned to see one of her mechanics walking towards the door.

“I will leave peacefully,” he muttered. “I must leave peacefully—”
She grabbed his arm. “No. **No! Get back to work!**”

He stared blankly up at her, mouth half-open, a terrible blankness in his eyes. “I…”

“Please.” Revan let the Force drop completely. “Please. I need your help! Fix my ship!”

The man was balding, with a beaky nose and faded eyes. He blinked slowly at her, as if he was coming back to life. “What… am I—?”

“I need your help,” she said. “Please.”

“You’re that crazy kid who won the Biscain Hundred?” He snorted. “Gotta check your ship before she flies again.”

“Yes. I need your help.”

“Looks like the converter cables got melted. Need to clean corrosion off the plates.”

“Can you fix it?” She let go of his arm. “Please.”

“Course, I… they called an evac, but it’s not code red. We got time. I’ll get back to work.”

He nodded at her and walked, slightly dazed, back to where the other mechanic and the guards were raising and lowering the landing ramp.

Revan turned back toward the door just as more reporters crowded through it, along with more BisSec. Behind them, filtered viewscreens showed the binary suns. Something about the light, or the way the light was refracted through the ferraglass, made one of the suns look nearly black, overlaid atop the other.

_**Arkan’s dead. He’s gone. Whatever he was, he’s gone. But maybe dropping him into that sun did something to it—**_

XXX

“I don’t like the way that sun looks.”

“You’re not supposed to stare at the sun.” Millifar sighed to show her impatience for explaining the obvious to Mekel Jin. “Or suns. There are two of them. Have you never seen a binary system before?”

They were cutting across the system by the most direct route in the modified warbird—small for two, but fast. Millifar spared a moment to consider how well she might have done if she could have run this ship through the more circuitous path the racers had taken, before Jin’s useless observations dragged her back to the present.

“That sun on the left doesn’t look so good.”

“Then don’t look at it.”

They were fast approaching the great ring of the main Biscain Station. Revan’s ship had vanished into the leeward hangar meant for the racer’s finishers—and Millifar tilted their trajectory for that part of the ring. The pinnace’s comm pinged sharply—

“What’s that?” Jin asked.
“A signal from the Aleema. They made the jump.” Millifar moved her new, numb hand down to
the pinnace’s yoke and used her good one to open up the thrusters as she banked them lee.

“Do you… we should talk. About… what happened.” Jin cleared his throat, sounding like a
dewback calf bleating after its geld.

*Barbarians. Always wanting to talk.* Millifar did not wish to find Jin irritating, but he
was being irritating. “Shall we discuss our plan to liberate Revan? Which weapons did you bring? I
was too busy packing mine to check.”

“Some grenades. A vibroblade. But that’s not what I—”

Did he think she cared about his intent? “We’re going to have to teach you to shoot. I have an extra
repeater.”

“I know how to shoot!”

Ah, she’d wounded his pride. “Everyone needs practice, vod.”

“I meant, we should talk about what happened on Katarr. I don’t blame you for what happened.”

“Why would you? Your accuracy could have been better against Lin. But the next time we engage
him we will need more of those Force–destroying plants. What are they called again?”

“Ysalamiri. They're not plants, they—”

“They are tomorrow's battle.” Kex would not have needed reminding. “How have you prepared for
the fight ahead of us?”

Jin’s voice developed an irritating whine. “These guys are just rent–a–secs. Do you think we’re
really gonna need to kill them?”

“No. Of course we don’t need to kill them. Didn’t anyone ever teach you to fight without killing
your opponent?”

“No.”

She knew he was staring at her, but Millifar kept her eyes firmly on the screen in front of them. It
was odd, because she’d expected to encounter security interference before now, but there was no
line of ships stopping them from entering the main orbital—fast–approaching on their screen. And,
as she watched, several ships winked into hyperspace from the confines of the Biscain orbital’s
drift space with almost no margin for error.

*That was not normal.*

Belatedly, Millifar noticed the red, blinking light on their comm board, indicating a local
emergency broadcast. With both of her hands engaged on the yoke to stabilize their craft, (one of
them irritatingly numb and clumsy still, compared to blood and bone), she couldn’t activate it.

“Ships seem to be leaving the system in unprecedented numbers,” she told Mekel, who was staring
at her instead of the pinnace controls like a normal man. It really was his job to activate that
emergency comm speaker, not hers. But she was not going to injure his pride by pointing it out.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Maybe because there's something wrong with the fracking sun.”

*We can't fix the sun, di’kut.*
Kex, Millifar thought, would have known that already.

Bars on Iridonia were much the same as the bars that Lydie had seen on her missions to the Coruscanti Underground. Smokey and loud and over–crowded. What was most notable about this one was the fact that nearly everyone inside was Zabrak. With the dim light glinting on their horns and hair, and their shabby clothes, they all looked alike. The thought Lydie had had that she would instantly recognize her own relatives now seemed foolishly optimistic.

But the holo–broadcast on the main screen knocked such concerns entirely from her mind. It featured a press conference with Master Atris and Padawan Mical Jorde, broadcast from Telos Station. Lydie found it hard to tear her eyes away from the perfection of the Jedi master’s Echani face—or her mind from the ramifications of the Jedi master’s traitorous words.

“The Jedi Temple at Coruscant is closed and dead, and so it shall remain. No Jedi walk there now. Those few that remain have fled from the ashes of Katarr—I do not know which paths they walk; but I do know the Jedi cannot save the Republic. Such work is the labor of us all—” Master Atris wore her hair in two long braids. Her hands gripped the podium, leaning over it

“Excuse me.” A man wearing some kind of uniform raised his hand. “Are you saying your first act as leader of the Jedi Order is to… dissolve the Jedi Order?”

The announcer sounded astonished.

Next to her, Azen was uncharacteristically muttering under his breath. “What is Atris doing?”

“The Jedi cannot save us from the threat that comes. Against an enemy of the Force, we will require another kind of weapon. The officers of your Republic Fleet acted in good conscience. The Jedi on Katarr sacrificed themselves to keep the galaxy safe. We must all rise to their example—”

“They're dead?” Lydie had not felt it in the Force. She should have. She should have felt something, shouldn’t she? “The Masters on Katarr… died?”

*It was all for nothing?*

Azen looked grim, but he reached for her hand and squeezed it. Uncharacteristic—of late. “We knew it was a possibility. Darth Nihilus will continue to Sith space. We must rally the Jedi for his return.”

*By gathering where he can eat us again?*

“No.” Lydie shook her head. She wasn’t sure why, but she was abruptly sure that was not how things would resolve. “Azen, why would Master Atris say that?”

“I don’t know.” His tones were frost. “Atris is well off–script. That is… a concern.”

“Lydie–lu?” The voice was hesitant behind them.

Lydie turned her head, looking up at the Zabrak woman standing over their table. Her indentations were seamed and worn, and her hair more brown than gray but she looked uncannily like her sister, the late Marla Korr.
“Yes.” She stood up, aware that Azen was still frowning at the vidscreen near the front of the bar. “Nelle? Nelle Korr?” Mother? Ma? It probably should have occurred to her sooner to think of what to call the woman.

The woman nodded slowly. “You... you're such a young lady!”

“This is my husband.” Lydie suddenly felt shy. “Azen Loanin.”

Her mother’s indentations above her eyes had curled in upon themselves, forming whirls above her eyebrows that made her look perpetually surprised. “I am happy for you,” she said, dipping her horns slightly. A memory Lydie could no longer recall thought it was a gesture of respect.

“And I, you,” Azen told her. “I can see where Lydie gets her beauty.” The words might have meant more if he hadn’t been staring at the screen.

“There is no more Jedi Order,” Master Atris murmured on the holo. “But there is one last Jedi. One final hope for us all. One brave Jedi knight did not follow Revan and Malak into darkness, but stood fast against the dying of the light—”

“Lydie–lu?” Her mother’s voice was hesitant as if she was reluctant to interrupt two very important Jedi. “Your da and Attina and her girls are all waiting for us back at the ranch!” She reached out her hand and Lydie took it, not wanting to seem rude.

Dear Ma,

It’s lovely to see you again after so many years but give me a moment to mourn the Jedi masters who raised me, because this announcer said they're all dead.

Lydie swallowed. But if the Jedi are all dead who is Atris talking about?

“It’s good to be home,” she told her mother numbly. “Just... give us a moment. The news—”

“Oh, that.” Lydie’s mother dismissed the destruction of the Order with a shrug. “Can't believe half of it and the other half’s too damned sad. You’re both well away from it.” Her mother beamed. “And just in time from the look of those indentations!” Spots of pink appeared on the dusky gold of her cheeks.

“This is insanity,” Azen muttered by her side. “Mical’s standing right there. How can he allow this? What does Atris plan to do with Surik?”

“It has to be a feint of some kind.” Lydie frowned—squeezing her Nelle Korr’s hand gently, and trying to detach her own fingers. “Who’s Surik?”

“Meetra Surik.” Azen’s lips thinned. “I was a mere padawan stationed on Alderaan, of course, when she returned from the wars; but the Council informed me of what was done—she’s no Jedi. She no longer has the Force.”

“She blocked it?” Lydie had been a mere padawan then too, but far too shy to express any curiosity about the end of the war. Not to her Aunt Marla, who suddenly became terribly busy.

“No.” Her husband frowned. “She was... damaged. Master Kae stripped the Force from her to save her.”

Save her? Like Mekel, Lydie thought. Like with Mekel, it seemed too cruel a punishment, even for a Sith. “Why does Atris want her?”
“It doesn’t make sense.” The pinched lines in his face grew and he glanced between Lydie and her mother. “I’m afraid I may have to cut my visit short.”

“You can’t!” Lydie had barely known the woman who bore her for more than five remembered minutes and already they were speaking in unison.

“Azen, you can’t!” she added, as her mother put a soothing hand on her husband’s arm.

“We’ll need to get your patterns matched,” Nelle Korr told them, wrinkles furrowing around her horns. “That has to be done before first pearls. It’s quite important.”

“It’s too late for that.” Lydie smiled, despite everything. “Azen gave me a lovely krayt string of pearls as a wedding gift. I’d show you, but we left them in the vault when we left Coruscant—”

Her voice trailed off because now Azen was looking like he’d been Force–shocked. “Pearls,” he said, staring hard at Nelle. “You mean the abdomen show. The horns beneath the surface.”

“Pearls.” Nelle nodded, her expression beatific. “Didn’t you know?”

Beneath what surface? Lydie had no idea what Azen was talking about, although of course he’d studied everything about Zabrak culture before he’d even asked for a kiss.

“Your indentations are flushed,” he clipped, turning his gray–ice gaze to her. “I assumed it was the strain of travel—a trick of the light. But the horn show appears at about eight weeks gestation.”

Gestation.

“That’s impossible,” Lydie said, her voice racing ahead of logic. “Azen and I—we had tests. We’re not genetically compatible. The med–droid said I was too sensitized to his blood–type—”

“Then it’s a miracle,” her husband murmured, eyes dry and cold as space. “Congratulations, my wife.”

Xxx

“I’m pretty sure her arm moved. Just now.” Polla eyed the busted med–scanner with disgust. Thing looked like it had been fallen over and stepped on, but no one admitted to breaking it. Had been more than a week since they’d been able to get independent readings on the veg.

Her eyes went to the silent red–eyed droid in the corner, still and quiet now, and seemingly deactivated. Her credits were on him busting the med–scan. Maybe he thinks if we know she’s dying we’ll stop putting the feed lines in.

“She may wake tomorrow or never. But the amount of damage—” Yuthura Ban sighed. “Poor Sheris.”

“Who is Sheris again?” There had been the garbled account she’d gotten from Captain Obvious, but it still wasn't clear. Body swapping? Some kind of Revan duplicate? “I mean, the real Sheris is dead, isn’t she? Revan—” that schutta— “she took over?” Polla had heard the story before.

“This was Sheris’s body.” Yuthura sighed, again stating nothing but the obvious.

“But who is she?”

“She was a friend.” Yuthura Ban had said she took drugs to look Sithy now. Polla thought maybe she’d overdone it. Her eyes were almost fluorescent yellow against her vein–striped skin. “After
Malak’s end, Sheris and I were both imprisoned on Manaan. She grew very close to your cousin, Beya.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know she knew Beya. But why did make herself look like Revan in the first place? Was she a superfan? Did Revan make her do it?” Was that something Sith Lords did—get duplicates? Polla supposed it was handy now, because the real thing was off Bith–free, living on Deralia, (while her duplicate died in a coma and Polla was trapped as a Sith slave), but that couldn’t have been the original plan.

“I don’t know. Sheris was Malak’s lover. Perhaps she became the image of Revan for that.” Yuthura shrugged. “Perhaps as an assassination decoy. Perhaps Revan always wanted the option of another body in case something befell the original.”

Suddenly it gave Polla the creeps. She’d dyed her hair back to a shade resembling its former dark brown the second she’d found the means, but her eyes couldn’t unsee the resemblance between them she’d once tried so hard to find, once, even with the other woman so pale and still.

*Count me out, sister. My days of imitating Revan are done.* “Sheris is dead now, right? Sheris died when the real Revan took over?”

“I’m no expert on Redemption techniques.” The other woman’s lekku twitched, and she gave the word that weird emphasis—like it was a thing. “I was always told that the new personality is supposed to be a composite of both, but after Sheris used Revan’s holocron, she seemed to become entirely… Revan. Perhaps the implanted personally was too strong.”

“Right, because Revan’s fracking magical,” Polla was getting tired of hearing that. “Hey, if you’re playing nursemaid now, how about you start the tub for the all–powerful bint’s sponge bath? I’d like to take a nap.”

The nap idea became less appealing almost immediately, when she found a lacy scrap of thing–like fabric tangled in her sheets that wasn’t hers. She and Yuthura shared the cot—sleeping toe–to–head—but as far as she knew (not that she’d looked closely) the Twi’lek didn’t even wear underwear.

“Ewww.” Polla made a face and started stripping the bed. When she went to get the pillows the light glinted off the veg’s eyes, reminding her it was time to refresh the gel they put in them. From this angle, even coma–lady looked disgusted. “Mydia brought Dustil here again.”

“He’s strong. The sisters want that.” Yuthura looked disgusted too. “I’ll get the clean bedwraps from the laundry.”

There was a clattering noise behind them. “He… he refused her.” A faint voice, raspy from disuse. Then a cough. “I would… still change the sheets.”

Polla whirled around, her hand automatically going to her waist, even though there was no blaster there.

Green eyes stared back at her steadily from a pale but conscious face.

*Declaration of Joy: Oh, Master, I knew this day would come! Your neurons have fully regenerated! You have control of your limbs! Your carapace appears battered but capable, although I recommend re–commencing combat training at once—*”

Coma–lady was sitting up, looking gaunt and pretty terrible, but definitely conscious. The dark lines that had covered her face from the poison had faded. She’d taken off the respirator and pulled
the tubes out of her mouth herself, throwing them on the floor. Now she was doing the same with the ones in her arm. “This diaper I’m wearing appears to be full.” The expression of disgust on her face was just like the one she’d had when she and Polla met for the first time. Good time that was too. “I—I’m not sure I can stand up to change it myself.” Her face flushed—with exertion or embarrassment.

“I’m getting the sheets,” Yuthura said. “It’s good to see you awake, Revan.”

Coma–lady nodded. “You shouldn’t have come, Yuthura, but I’m… I’m happy to see you too.” Sure didn’t look it, with those downcast eyes.

“I came to help Dustil,” the woman said. “But if you saw Dustil and Mydia…?” Yuthura raised her brow ridge.

“He rejected her advances. I think the boy is loyal to Inse Blais, although I’m not sure that’s an improvement.”

“She means how long have you been awake spying on us,” Polla snapped. She’d brought Seiran up here a few times, and while they’d never had sex in front of Coma–lady, they’d certainly said enough shit about her.

“I heard… fragments.” The woman started coughing, and despite her being pissed, Polla went over to the fridger and pulled out a bulb of water. “For a long time, I heard voices—but I couldn’t move.”

“Go slowly, with that—” Yuthura noted.

“I know.” Revan straightened her back, managing to look down her nose at both of them at once, even half-slathered with kolto paste and wearing only bandages. Her fingers were cold when they brushed Polla’s as she took the water and unsealed the straw and took a cautious sip. “It’s… it’s good.” Her lip trembled, and for a sec, Polla thought she was going to cry.

“It’s just water.” The diaper the woman was wearing really did need attention. All this magic tech in the Sith Empire and they’d never mastered anything as clever as Abasen’s self–cleaning eridu blanket.

“It’s good.” Revan wiped her hand and took a breath. “I’m sorry to ask, but would you—”

“Yeah.” She was already pulling a clean one out from the cabinet. Yuthura had scarpered. HK was burbling happily to himself— itself—in the corner. HK could be doing this. He’s said he knows about Human anatomy enough times when he threatened to torture me—

Had been a tense few hours before it became obvious that all the droid could do was make idle threats.

The woman was stiff as a board as Polla moved her around to make the appropriate adjustments, but when she brandished the clean diaper, Revan shook her head. “No. Find me some clothing. Appropriate to my station, if you can.”

“I did,” Yuthura announced from the doorway, before Polla could come back with a snappy comeback. “Your old robes were destroyed in the battle, but Inse’s dress armor should fit you—I think.” She frowned. “We may have to buckle some of the pieces twice.”

“Statement: Master, now that you have returned to full cognizance would you like my performative review of your subject’s loyalty? Despite their politeness now, these two made several
inappropriate remarks in your presence—especially the Deralian.”

“I don’t care, HK.” Revan rubbed her temples, looked at Polla. “Why are you still here? I was under the impression my battle was supposed to win your freedom.”

“You won Seiran’s freedom, but he won’t leave—and Dustil’s—but he can’t. The Blais family owns me.” She should never have signed the teaching contract written in Ancient Sith—or assumed, just because it didn’t have the runes for death on it (one of the words she’d been sure to memorize), that it was fine because Phylus Blais (the ‘trustworthy’ kid) had said so.

“Tenebrae should have overruled the House of Blais and granted your freedom.” The woman was opening and closing her prosthetic hand and frowning, making Polla wonder if she’d reattached it incorrectly. At the time, she’d only been fiddling with it because she was so fracking bored. “Tenebrae should have made you leave. It was our agreement.”

Carth had said something about Tenebrae having the final say a few times. Seiran had mentioned it every day for a month before he gave up.

“He offered. I… didn’t want to just leave.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Polla Organa.” Green eyes examined her like Polla was a lab specimen.

“It wasn’t for you. It was Carth. The HK said if he got the Jedi Plague Tenebrae wouldn’t be able to possess him anymore.”

“Is that why you released the virus on this world?” the woman snapped, as if her politeness before was all a fracking lie. “I’m so sorry that causing the death of thousands and destabilizing a planet has been difficult for you—”

“If you know, why are you asking?” Should she feel more fracking guilty than she did already?

“Objection, Master! Polla Organic may have suggested the idea of infecting the Fragment’s meatbag husband, but she was not the one to release the Rakatan virus. Setting those self-replicating strands of organic matter free was one of my proudest achievements. I spent days plotting the appropriate vectors for maximum transference—”

Revan’s head turned. “And a rather elastic interpretation of your programming directive—do no harm.”

“Wounded Exhalation: Master, had I flesh, it would be bleeding a glorious crimson under the lash of your cruel words. Reminder: you wanted this virus released on this planet yourself. Why else leave the stores with House Blais?”

“After the slaves were vaccinated. After the Republic was safe.” Revan took another shaky sip of water, glaring at Polla. “At least you weakened him. More than you realize.” Her hand reached up to her head and touched her scalp gingerly as if she was wondering what had happened to her hair. “You may have reduced the possibility of us needing to take more extreme measures.”

More extreme than a plague with that’s killing more than half of the sents that get sick? Polla didn’t think it had been that high back on Coru, but she hadn’t really been paying attention.

She stepped back, letting Yuthura handle the getting dressed part and chucked the diaper into the incinerator set into the wall. The drawer was large enough for a body, she noted again, darkly. Something that had occurred to Polla before.
“I will go to the tomb then.” Just like her droids, Revan Starfire had the annoying habit of announcing things like they were orders, even if you had no idea what she meant. “This body survived terentatek poison. It must be strong enough—”

“Your tomb?” Polla asked hopefully, tossing the new sheets on the cot.

“Yes.” Revan Starfire, former scourge of the galaxy, stared at the floor.

,XXX

For every sent that left the Biscain station’s hangar bay, it seemed like three more entered. After what had happened with the mechanics, Revan stopped trying to influence the crowd—focusing on keeping them asking questions instead, so the mechanics could fix her ship and no one would take—or try to take—her into custody.

She’d given up trying to stop the holo–records. For every cam she fried, it seemed like two more popped up in their place. Now, holo–cams from this new crop of reporters kept flashing, blinding her eyes. Revan blinked to clear her gaze and pointed to the nearest raised hand. “Next question?”

“What made you decide to crash the race today?” It was that Bothan again, but now his expression was friendly, open—if anything a little too open.

Surreptitiously, Revan glanced behind her, where the techs had the main fuel cores dialed open from the outside. It looked like they were sealing some of the scorched plates around them. It didn’t look like Jopheena could fly anytime soon.

“Well, my da always wanted to run the Biscain Circuit... I mean who doesn’t? I’m glad we got to go together, I mean, it was a huge honor. Huge.” She glued the smile on her face, glad the visor hid the rest of her expression.

“But your father is Jasp Organa, the father to the Polla Organa who died mysteriously about a standard half-year ago? So that means—”

Means I really need to get the frack out of here. Revan cast a glance at the mechanics still repairing the Jopheena. “Hey! Can she fly yet?”

“Once we put the drives back together. Definitely. Landing might be a problem—”

“I can handle it.” Somehow. I’ll catch up with the Aleema. They can tractor me in.

And then?

Then? I don’t know. Then we go carpet bomb a few Sith planets. A show of force might at least impress Tenebrae—make him and Dar remember who they’re dealing with.

Revan wasn’t sure if she was joking or not.

“So… Polla Organa,” another reporter demanded. Ratakki, by the look of him, covered in tattoos. “Did you think you could get away with faking your own death and collecting the insurance?”

“You’re saying I did all that?” Never tell them anything. Jasp had once told Polla, but Revan had already given too much away. “I–I think that's enough questions.”

“But, you are the Polla Organa who was legally declared deceased and whose family collected two million credits—”
Frack. “I think we’ve had enough questions for now.” Revan’s fingers twitched and she pulled at the Force.

“No, I’ve got several more—”

“I think that’s enough questions!”

“You think that’s enough questions.” The Ratakki nodded slowly, his eyes suddenly, utterly blank. His mouth dropped open. Like so many of his people, he’d filed his teeth, inset them with jewels. They glittered as a thread of drool snaked down the corner of his lip. “Enough questions.”

“No, I—” Hells. “Are you… okay?” He was obviously not.

The Rattataki took a step forward, the blankness changing abruptly to fury. “That’s enough questions!”

“What did she do to him?” The crowd around them splintered, edging away, dissolving into a babble of excited voices. The holocams flashed.

The Rattataki man pulled out a vibroblade from his belt, whirling to face the nearest woman who had wondered.

“No questions!” He roared, advancing.

“Stop!” It was hard to direct the Force at one sent, but Revan tried—and was rewarded with the man freezing mid-step. “You have no more questions for me,” she amended. The sick feeling in her gut increased as the man’s shaved head turned back to her, and nodded slowly, putting his foot back down.

“No more questions for you,” he repeated. He still looked blank—like her compulsion had taken a part of him away.

Bastila had warned her about the danger of bending another’s mind to her own will. Oerin Lin had tried to teach her to do it well.

But suddenly all Revan could remember was the worst time she’d used it.

Xxx

Revan. I knew you would come. Come to me—now.

Under different circumstances, it might have even been comical: Bastila’s fawning avarice, Carth’s cowardice, Zaalbar’s blind obedience, and this—the little Twi’lek’s blind faith in a Deralian smuggler with a heart of gold.

Your power is renewed. Come to me.

I’m coming to kill you, Malak.

If you can.

Her eyes went to the Mandalorian general who stood at the ramp. Canderous’s expression was hidden behind his helmet, but intent was clear in every line of his stance. “We should go,” he muttered. “I said I’d follow you, Revan. And I meant it. To the end.”
She nodded once, even as Bastila launched into a blustering speech about victory and darkness and fools.

There is no time. Come.

There’s time to die, Malak. Only Canderous truly understands. A leader takes the pieces she requires but the rest—sometimes there is sacrifice. Sometimes necessity is expedition.

The voice in her head seemed to darken until it reverberated in her skull. I allow no more time. Come to me. Bring what you require to face me, sithling. You are not Lord Revan again—yet.

I am. The temple opened to me.

Because I willed it.

Your will is nothing compared to mine.

You are nothing compared to your destiny, Starfire. This is the crucible. This is the final check—

“No,” Mission interrupted. “No way, Polla! This isn't you. Bastila’s done something! Snap out of it! Please.”

“Step aside,” murmured Bastila. Her eyes were yellow. Revan could taste her fury burning through them both like a brushfire cleared of its bounds—their flame could encompass this planet, this system—all worlds. Her rage? Bastila’s? There was no difference now. “Lord Revan has no more time for fools.”

“No.” Mission faced down the mad Sith, her eyes clear and bright. “Polla couldn't have done that stuff. She wouldn't kill Jolee and Juhani—not unless you made her, and Malak made you! You did something to her brain and he did something to yours! Snap out of it, Polla! Please!”

Yes, Malak made me—me and Bastila both. Revan would have to thank him for the raw power now twisting through their bond.

The girl will die on the Forge, Starfire.

Bastila’s voice chimed in, another maddening whisper. She is a distraction. He will use her against you.

I can’t afford attachments. Juhani and Jolee refused to understand. Carth did—that’s why he ran. But Mission needs to know too. I have to make her see—

The girl will die anyway.

“I won't kill you, Mission. But Zaalbar would if I asked.”

Xxx

“No more questions,” she said. In the sudden silence, Revan couldn’t tell if her words were a plea or a command.

“No more questions for you,” the Rattataki reporter mumbled. His eyes were glazed over, like frost.
“I think we’ve had enough questions for now,” Mother said to the man who kept shoving a mic in her face.

“Yeah,” Kore muttered, glancing at Ma-Molla for agreement but she was still sitting there, staring at the screen above the breakfast table, mouth slightly open. “They shouldn’t be so bossy with her.”

“I need to go,” Ma-Molla picked up the breakfast dishes and then put them back down again. She looked scared. Kore had never seen her scared before. “They’re just on Biscain. Not so far away! I can put a call into General Information—”

“Your husband will be fine,” Kore assured her. “My moth-my ma wouldn’t send him away with those medic-guys if he wasn’t gonna be fine.”

Ma-Molla just blinked at Korrie like he wasn’t even there.

Abasen took that instant to wake up from his nap and start squalling.

“I’ll tend to him,” Kore offered, even if he wanted to watch Mother lie to the reporters more because it was funny. Was she using the Force on them? It sure looked like it.

That was a neat trick.

“No.” Ma-Molla didn’t smile or anything. “Stay. I’ll call from the other room.”

“Okay.” Was she jealous that Kore wanted his real mother right now? Or was she just worried about her husband? “Mother won’t let anything bad happen to your husband!”

Click. The door slid shut behind her.

“Ma-Molla?” Korrie had this sudden bad feeling. Or sad feeling. Especially when she didn’t answer.

XXX

Moll Organa stood stock-still at the foot of the stairs, listening to that child call for her and trying not cry—for Jasp, for her daughter—and even for the gray-eyed boy in there, who terrified her as much as she’d grown too fond.

He’s the son of Sith. He’s gonna grow into one of those fancy Coruscanti politicians. The kind Jasp hates. The kind you think are right eejits. He can’t stay here forever. You know he’s still calling his friends back home. Grass Priests, probably only a matter of time before some Coruscanti muckety-muck comes looking for him, and you know how they are—he’s told you stories that’d curl your hair if it wasn’t already. They might just soon as kill him then collect.

I need to go to Jasp. I can take Abasen, but that one—what if something happens? What if we’re out in the Core and he gets recognized? Or kidnapped? Or we run into Jedi? Or… insurance investigators?

“I’m Polla Organa,” Revan Starfire had said. Didn’t that fool Jedi realize what she’d done—telling the whole galaxy that Polla Organa was alive?

“Polla’s going to kill her,” she muttered to herself. As if that’d be an even match, her Pollie against
a woman who could practically fly.

Abasen made a noise on the monitor again and Moll hurried up the stairs to him, putting off the decision–making for another five minutes, at least.

The idea of what to do, when it came, was not a good one. But Molla couldn’t think of better.

XXX

Mekel felt useless. He’d saved the girl and he'd thought she'd be grateful. Instead, Millifar kept insulting his combat skills and ignoring his pretty fricking obvious points about how one of the suns looked like it was going bad.

The other ship, the *Pinion* the Mando’ade creamed themselves over, had fallen into that sun with the Force–eating Sith Lord on board. Mekel thought he'd had a legitimate concern, thinking a sun going nova or something could cause a fricking problem. One of the first science lessons they’d had after exploring the effects of vacuum on organic flesh on Korriban had dealt with energy and the release of matter. For every action, a reaction. Just like a stimmed–up prisoner with a shock stick shoved up his ass, energy had to find somewhere to go.

The Force had gone into that sun.

*Therefore, it's gonna come out. Just like the shock stick. Question is, how long—*

Millifar docked their pinnace at the first open hangar on the station. If the Force had been with them, Revan would have been there. But the Force was not. The hangar was just full of sents trying to leave.

“How are we supposed to find her?”

Millifar didn’t look back at Mekel to answer him—she just kept charging down the hall. They were going against the wash—everyone else was evacuating. Everyone around them was talking about the fracking suns—and how no one was sure what had just happened to them, but that it was definitely bad.

“I told you so,” Mekel told her again, finally catching up. “Something’s wrong with the fracking sun.” He reached for Milli’s arm, which was something she’d used to like, but his fingers closed on metal instead of bone and she nearly flinched when she pulled away.

“It doesn’t matter,” she snapped. “There’s nothing in this system of any strategic value. We need to find Revan.”

A man charging in the opposite direction gave them a startled look, but he didn’t stop moving.

*On the bright side, we haven’t had to shoot anyone,* Mekel thought. “Maybe… don’t say her name out loud?” he suggested to Milli.

She looked as if he was speaking Bith.

Two medix pushed past with some old guy hooked up to a bunch of monitors. Ahead, a cluster of guards surrounded the last hangar door entrance on this level.

“Move aside!” a voice said behind and then an entire fracking holo–team trooped by, approaching the guards. Mekel glanced at Millifar, raising an eyebrow, and the two of them attached themselves to the entourage’s end, behind three camera–droids and a shaggy Jenet wearing what
looked like a silver–foiled helmet and a smile and not much else.

From the chatter at the head of their train, it seemed that they were part of the Rim Broadcast Network, here to interview the third–place winner of the Biscain Hundred, a mysterious Deralian in some kind of salvaged military ship.

Would have been comical, maybe, if it hadn’t been so fracked.

XXX

“I think that’s enough questions,” Revan repeated. “Please.” Her temples throbbed. She was no longer trying to use the Force, but it was there, an almost tangible field running through everyone in the crowd, through everything in the room.

“I think that’s enough questions, the Human woman interviewing her nodded. “But—”

“I need to go now.” She was distracted, because coming toward them was another pack of newsagents, led by a tall rat–like sent wearing some kind of silver tower on his head. “I need to go—” she repeated; but her concentration splintered, because behind the rat–man—Jenet, he’s a Jenet—was Mekel Jin and Millifar Ordo, both wearing full beskar, helmets clipped to their belts.

“There’s my replacement crew now!” she added, taking a step back and sideways.

“Oh, I think I need just one moment of your time,” the Jenet chirped softly. “Just one.”

“Make it fast.” Mekel and Canderous’s daughter were both armed. Revan jerked her head toward the ship, wondering how they’d found her—and relieved that they had. One of them can get this ship out of the hangar—

“ Aren’t you tired of these games?” Something about the rodantine’s voice made Revan give him a second glance. Ordinary, except for the silver mask–thing on his face.

“Sure, but my Da wanted to run the race so we did.” Revan shrugged. “Now, we’re done, so—”

“Oh, yes. Your father.” The voice chuckled, softer. “I first saw him on the Yavin moon. I remember him because he was so much like you. Nothing compared to Kun or Qel–Droma, of course, but still… powerful. Notable. Useful.”

“That’s…” that doesn’t make any sense. Jasp was on Yavin Station—but of course, the Jenet wasn’t talking about Jasp Organa.

Useful? “Who are you?”

“Oh, do go first. Who will you say?” That wet nose twitched. The headpiece hid most of the Jenet’s face, just as most of hers was hidden, but his mouth bared teeth in a smile of challenge. “I made a wager with one of my Voices about your response.”

“I’m Polla Organa.” Revan suddenly felt ice–cold—like a childhood nightmare brought to life.

My father was useful? My father was useful to... who?

“Third Wife,” Millifar’s hand clamped down on her arm and tugged. “It is past time for us to leave.”

“I know.” Revan lifted her hand and the rat–man’s silver headpiece blew off and spun across the floor. Millifar took a step back, retreating closer to Revan’s snub. Dimly, Revan was aware that the
Mandalorian had taken her blaster out, training it on the Jenet. Mekel on her other side had muttered a curse and done the same.

“Who are you?” Revan repeated to the rat–man, even as the cold seemed to freeze the marrow of her bones, the galaxy seemed to narrow to two glowing eyes. Red eyes. Do Jenets have red eyes? “Tell me. Who the hell are you?”

Around them, holo–cams abruptly flashed blue–white, glancing off the ceiling, the polished floor, the BisSec armor. Revan blinked hard, almost blinded, but in the center of the maelstrom, two red circles burned, outlined with wisps of black.

The sents around him seemed to recede. Everything did, to a soft noise, dulled by the frantic beating of her own heart, the taste of fear in her throat.

The man smiled, snout curving under his twitching whiskers. When he spoke again his voice was a spike into her skull. “I allow no more time, Starfire. Come to me.”

XXX

The world twisted as the galaxy dropped out of it—and again she was back on that terrible shore on the Rakatan planet, standing with Bastila before the remains of her crew.

A madman was screaming in her head.

I allow no more time. Come to me. Bring what you require to face me, sithling. You are not Lord Revan again—yet.

Her responses were weak, burned away in the blaze of her errant conviction. She had been… wrong. So utterly wrong.

You are nothing compared to your destiny, Starfire. This is the crucible. This is the final check—

XXX

That wasn’t just Malak and Bastila in my head that day.

That wasn’t just Malak I fought on the Star Forge—

XXX

Alarms screamed somewhere beyond them. The Star Forge was dying.

“This is the crucible,” he chuckled darkly, like something damp and rotting. “My Starfire. This is my final test.” Malak's face, metal jaw, stippled skull loomed over her.

That moment when his eyes had sparked red and terror froze her steps and his blade swung down—

XXX

“Come to me, my Starfire,” the Jenet repeated, and beckoned. “We can take my ship if you would prefer.”

“Have I passed?” she whispered. “Have I passed your final fracking test?”
Red eyes. Red fracking eyes!

You know what he is. You've been running from him ever since you can remember. He's the real monster. He's the one that even sithspawned Dar fears.

Without his helm, the Jenet’s eyes were glowing. “I tire of these games, Starfire.” His voice had deepened, and Revan could feel the Force in it, tugging, tearing, tiring her too. “Yours and mine. Come to me. Your time is long past due. I have your husb——”

Kavar’s saber had bisected his body before Revan realized she was holding it lit. The blue light–beam hissed.

Someone in the crowd screamed.

On the ground, the Jenet’s tail twitched once—then again. The glow in his eyes was gone. His skull was three meters from the rest of him, still smoking.

Holocams flashed again, and Revan raised her hands, instinctively (and uselessly) blocking them with the saber.


“Uh… Polla?” Mekel Jin’s face was shadowed in the blue light. It made him look decades older. He smiled at her nervously. “We need to go. There’s something wrong with the fracking sun.”

“My father said not to let you pilot,” Millifar added curtly, from the Jopheena’s loading ramp. “I have permission to shoot if you won't comply.”

XXX

The interior of the Black Temple was vast and dark and mostly empty except for one astromech droid plugged into the floor next to the ferracrystal dome of its central tomb. The connector was a flower–shaped sigil of overlapping durasteel plates set into the floor. Seeing herself reflected in the Kaas’s computer’s sensors, Mission couldn't help but notice how the tomb’s portal resembled the battered Kryyyylak orchid painted on her side.

Of course, being at least half of a thirty–thousand–year–old inorganic entity programmed by a long–dead race of cosmic architects who aspired to godhead, she knew that was no coincidence because there were no coincidences.

The live feed she’d tapped projected itself like a series of ghosts above her.

“—and on the Outer Rim, the Biscain double star has become unstable. Evacuations of the system are proceeding, although scientists at the University of Coruscant expect that a total nova would take years, if not decades before completion.”

“Researchers from Byss Labs have an alternate theory, however—based on the unprecedented amount of solar activity, suggesting orbital decay of the secondary sun could occur in a matter of months—if not weeks—”

“Figures.” Mission wondered if anyone had thought of putting a tracker on Polla–Revan and following her around predicting catastrophe. Not that it could possibly be Polla–Revan’s fault that sun had chosen just now to go nova—
Or, yeah, it could. Mission ran the odds. Five to one that the Biscaïn sun going nova was, in some way, Polla–Revan’s fault.

And Big Z thinks I get into too much trouble! It really wasn’t fair, especially as she’d fixed the entire Sith Empire for them, what with getting Manaan in touch with Kaas—

“Katarr.” The footage Mission had Kashyyyk reroute to Kaas from the Republic feed definitely showed the Aleema, now rumored to be in Mandalorian hands.

And that had definitely been Polla–Revan on Katarr too, running from those shadow–things into the ocean.

since seeing her, the freaking Kaas installation refused to shut up.

[She was on Katarr,] Kaas repeated again, like one of its memory discs was scratched. [Find her!]

According to local news, there were a lot of dead Jedi on Katarr now. Some Jedi named Atris No–Last–Name had appointed herself Jedi Supreme Master or something and was searching for ‘the Last Jedi.’ Bully for her, right? Mission figured Atris had to be crazy or lying. Or both? The records said she’d been master of the Jedi’s archives for decades. Organic brains were terrible with secrets. Some had probably leaked all over her core processing abilities, damaged her ability to see right from wrong.


“No one’s talking about another Revan,” she pointed out to Kaas. “And I got you a perfectly good Revan already. You should be grateful!”

[I need an intact Revan with cognitive, firing neurons. Bring me that one on Katarr.]

Kaas probably had a warped idea of time and space and effort, what with being the central processor for a crazy Sith emperor. Mission had been trying to use that to her advantage, but it kept leading to these totally unreasonable demands.

“Katarr’s ages away, big guy. Hold your hessi.”

Something pinged in on the feed from Biscain. Voice recognition. Poo doo! Mission shot past hoping Kaas was too distracted—

No such luck.

[Error: Entity 13,441,999,777,236 has just expired by lightsaber blade to a female Human pattern matching the one in memory. Go back, insect. Show me Biscaïn, HoloNet channel 339. Time: Now.]

Poo doo kriiffing Polla Revan!

“Searching….” Normally, Mission could lie to Kaas—easy! She could sell it a pack of banthashit about how the Revan they had here would wake up someday... but when she was plugged into the Kaas banks she had to do what it said. Mainframe trumps remote every day. And Kaas, even if it was stupid and out of touch, had about a jillion more processing bytes than she did.

“Still searching,” she chimed. There had to be a few million sents on Biscaïn, if she started with their registrations into the system, cross–referencing against images from the BisSec security
Damn. As if out of her control, the cam centered on a helmeted face almost immediately—

[Pattern match!] Kaas crowed.

“Yeah, I guess that does look like her mouth, but you can’t see the rest of her face and you realize the Jedi totally passed her off as that other bint before. Humans look so much alike—”

[Pattern match!] It repeated, while Mission started to run the vid feeds back—

“Whoa, is that *Mekel*?”

The feed took that exact time to cut out in a wave of static, wiping the circuit, and frying the widebeam receivers within several systems close.

“Was that Mekel? *Did that sun just go nova?* She wouldn’t feel the effects from here, but still Mission’s circuits smarted in sympathy for the poor programs caught closer.

Not to mention Polla Revan and Mekel Jin—maybe Mekel Jin. Although, a part of her considered, strategically, Polla Revan dead was a better outcome for the galaxy than Polla Revan being plugged in here.

Mission rolled a sensor at the ferraglass dome, and the shriveled–up dead thing inside. That one had lasted less than five hundred years.

[Mobile Inorganic Processing Unit 987,231,774,119,003? What is the problem?]  

“Running a check now.” She really was. If she had feelings they’d be worried.

The Biscain feed was just gone. Chatter from the neighboring planets was going nuts. “The bands are saying sunspots have fried the communications grid in that system…” if she’d had lungs Mission would have sighed with relief. “Something’s wrong with the suns.”

According to common hyperspace routes, Biscain was on the way to Sith space from Katarr. The next jump would be—

Jirulla. Not much Polla Revan could do there what with it not being populated. Of course, Polla Revan had managed to leave a bunch of dead Jedi on Katarr and blow up a sun on Biscain.

[You promised me the Revan here would wake,] the Kaas computer interrupted her sharply, tapping her memory banks like an elbow to the ribs. [Send your slaves to bring her to me. I will have mine investigate her condition.]

“Hold your hessi! Geez!”

[Do not distract with meaningless idiom.]

A part of Mission’s mind began cycling through curses for Kashyyyk, the traitor, who could have *helped*, but was now just a dumb slave–terminal for Kaas. Another part wondered what that had meant for Lena Wee and her evil other self.

*Are they prisoners? Zombies?*

“Fine,” she beeped into the gloom. “I’ll check on the Revan we have here and her kriffing neurons! Will that get you off my back?”
[If this installation’s light processing matrix is not replaced, the organic virus introduced will cause irreparable harm in all sentient processors attached to this installation's network. Repeat of query: how was this error introduced into this sector before my matrix was repaired? Mobile Unit, you were tasked with discovery! This installation demands answers!]

“An accident,” Mission snapped. “Like I told you. And like I told you, I’m fixing it. I found the maker of the vaccine in Republic space. They’re gonna shipping freighters of it our way. As soon as you pay them.”

[You have permissions to arrange for currency compensation at the fair market value,] Kaas snapped.

If Mission still needed credits, she'd be thrilled.

“Good,” she drawled, in Polla Revan’s best snarky voice. “Cause I promised delivery a week ago and you've been stalling. That's like, one thousand, seven hundred and ninety–three citizens of Kaas City that’d still be alive except for you.”

[The weak are culled,] Kaas said, like she needed a reminder it was totally evil. [But we need to eliminate unnecessary mortality until the new conduits align.]

Mission detached her appendage from the Kaas receptacle with a pop. “Yeah, yeah,” she groused, already rolling across the floor. “I got your new conduits, didn't I?”

[The conduit must be conscious for symbiosis. And willing.]

“Willing, huh? Your Emperor Crazy's not quite a catch. Maybe you should talk to him.”

[Guidance is impossible until the matrix is restored.]

“Yeah, yeah.” If Mission had eyes they would have rolled.

Another part of her yelled at Kashyyk to ring Canderous's commlink again, for the hundred and fifty–sixth time.

XXX

XXX

**“I think that’s enough questions,”** the woman barked on the monitor. She appeared to be glancing at something offscreen. Most of her face was hidden by the visor, but the voice was unmistakable. It rang like a bell over the comm.

Also unmistakable were the dazed looks from the sentients surrounding her: blank expressions, monotone repetition. They made Rew’s skin prickle. She hadn't seen anything like this since the wars.

*She did that. The Jedi’s redeemed Revan did that. What’s to stop her from doing whatever she wants?*

Rew had seen the effects of Force mind–tricks before. There’d been that transport ship they’d found once—drifting near the Defali Spire. Everyone on board dead, blasters still in their own hands. Ships logs with no signs of distress—just the mention of picking up a Jedi a few days before.
Or a dark Jedi.

Is there a real difference?

There’d been that snub crew Cein’s ship had picked up after the Yu–Phaedran assault—all of them repeating they had a message for Senator Malachi D’Reev and no one else. Rew had heard it had taken those men months to get back to normal.

There’d been what D’Reev had done to Carth Onasi—what the Jedi themselves had done to Revan—

“Blast,” Rew cursed, turning to her second–in–command, Commander Utug–phon. “We need to take custody of her. Can you get us across the system to that station?”

Utug–phon frowned, creasing the lines between his highly–domed ears. “They’re calling for all ships to assist with the evacuation. There’s something wrong with one of the suns.”

“What?” Rew glanced up to the real–time view of the Biscain system.

The smaller star was turning slowly black.

“We’re being pinged from several sources—” Lieutenant Abtrad was moving all four arms frantically over his board.

“Ignore them and head to that hangar,” Rew commanded. “We need to capture that schutta before she does worse.” She nodded to her Sergeant at Arms. “And bring the Jedi Killer—we might need it.”

“But it doesn’t work—” Sergeant Armala was a veteran. In service long enough to remember the times they’d relied on such things before. Or tried to.

“It will slow her down at least.” Trank gun with enough iragam to kill a rancor, coupled with an electrical charge that would stop cardiac function in most four–chambered species.

It had slowed that Devaronian dark Jedi down long enough to put a bolt in his brain, back on Bothawui.

Xxx
The ship– artisans of Clans Rialis and Zal did clever work. Most of the Aleema’s main bridge was now restored: the shield generator protecting the cracked hull had been replaced by triple– plated durasteel welding; and a layer of inert, hypo–core insulation now coated the interior walls, preventing barrier leakage. Bright blue tape demarcated the worst of the original damage and the seams of new plating. Although the women could have easily polished the cosmetic damages from Darth Malak’s bombardment away, Aemelie liked it like this: the hull’s repair marks served as a scarred, ragged reminder of what could happen when a commander overreached—and lost the loyalty of both clan and cause.

Of course, Canderous would never need the reminder. Such a fate would never happen to Ordo, even if Clan Wies continued on its plan of forced isolation and refused to join their fight—as their erstwhile Headwoman seemed likely to do—even after Aemelie (with Gwenarius’s advisement) had presented outstanding terms to the benefit of all Mando’ade.

Now, the hologram of Kissandrix of Wies sighed heavily, leaning back, arms crossed. “Your arguments remain unconvincing.”

“We await rendezvous with General Revan of Clan Lin.” Technically, Revan had never been a General—and certainly not a Mando’ade one—but formalities did not require technical exactitude. Nor did Aemelie of Ordo owe Kissandrix of Wies an explanation, especially not when Aemelie was directing the young warriors to establish orbit around the Jirulla system’s only planet of note: a methane–based hellscape with a weak gravitational core. “When Revan rejoins us we will proceed along the route I have given you—along with Clans Zal, Rialis and Ordo.”

Aemelie spared a moment to glance up at the viewscreen, a sheer wall of dense ferraglass engineered to project the real–time view of their orbit. On the screen, the other ships gathered, clustered in precise orbits according to their utility. From here, Aemelie could count six modified carriers, fifteen gun boats, and one other dreadnaught—Clan Zal’s fabled Sand Dreamer, which had survived the battle of Malachor itself, according to rumor. (In truth, Aemelie had been told by Dessa that the Sand had merely been late to the armistice, jumped from hyperspace, seen the carnage, and immediately jumped back. But if their cowardice meant she had another ship now, she would not mention it. Publicly.)

There were roughly twenty more ships of reasonable size on their way, in addition to Revan’s snubfighter—and whatever presence Kissandrix of Wies would deign to send.

“It is impressive that your husband has rallied so many to General Revan’s fight,” Kissandrix of Wies possessed a tone that spoke otherwise.

Aemelie nodded. “We have gathered ships and warriors, while Wies has harvested alluids and clean iron. Were you to join us, you would find ample reward for your efforts in collecting so much raw material….”

“Yes. Ships do require fuel,” Kissandrix said lightly. Too lightly.

“And we will trade you ships for your fuel… if you wish to leave the safety of the Sanis Cluster
where you are hiding—"

“So your planned incursion is not on the Republic?” Kissandrix’s eyebrows, plucked to a razor-thin arch, rose to the top of her (admittedly low) hairline. “The objectives are in Sith space? The Sith Empire?”

“Reconnaissance,” Aemelie corrected her. It was a much more subtle word. “Our raid. Yes. The World of Tombs falls along the route we’ve given you. Surely, your mother showed you the scrolls describing the marvels that Fett Manda’lor Ulic Qel–Droma found on its surface. Regenerating plasma cells. Armor that blocks magic—”

“And the walking dead.” Kissandrix shook her head slowly. “The World of Tombs was forbidden for a reason.”

Dessa leaned over the command banks, frowning as if she disagreed with Aemelie’s approach. “Wies are cowards,” she muttered, half under her breath.

Aemelie shot her a glare for her insubordination.

“Clan Wies will not commit to action.” Kissandrix scowled. “But we will send one squadron of observers. If the conditions are honorable, we may agree to trade—and an engagement at a later time.”

There was a reason, Aemelie thought blackly, that everyone with true honor despised the lost clan of Wies. “Mando’a.de are a free people. And you, Kissandrix, are free to tell your warriors to go back to sleep beside their empty hearths while the rest of us share glory and the spoils—”

Kissandrix’s image blurred and cut out suddenly.

“Did she hang up on me? Did you cut the connection? Dessa?”

“No!” Her second–in–command shook her head. “It wasn’t her. Something else broke through!”

The image on their comm–link fizzed, replaced by another: a domed top, flashing lights. “Aemelie,” the tiresome droid’s voice repeated itself on the comm–link again, breaking through their private channels, which should not be possible. “Don’t hang up on me again. Please? I need information about Rev—”

Aemelie cut the comm.

Dessa frowned. “Did you tell Canderous that thing has been calling us for weeks?”

Aemelie could not actually remember. “It may have slipped my mind,” she admitted. Her husband never spoke of the Twi’lek child whose soul the droid had copied, but she had noted the inclusion of a fragile leather lekku–ribbon next to his fallen son’s milk shoe on the top shelf of his trophy chest. If the girl had meant less, she suspected he would have said more.

Wartime was not the season for sentiment.

“The droid was useful on Coru,” Dessa added. “Where is it now?”

“Still on Coruscant?” Aemelie wasn’t sure. “It always calls in using encoded lines—but where else could it be?”
She leaned over the board trying to get the connection to the Sanis System—and the too–proud Kissandrix—back.

**Xxx**

The High Admiral of the Sith Armada’s office felt empty without Mission’s cheerful beeps and jokes about Tenebrae’s lax security.

Too empty.

Carth hadn't seen the droid in over two weeks. She'd warned him that whatever plan she had would take time, but Carth still worried that she hadn’t checked back in.

And not just for her. Mission had promised she had ways of reaching Republic space—ways she'd never really explained—or agreed to use before. But without her here, Carth had no way of warning anyone there about his latest order.

Or at least… no good way.

Carth bent over the console he’d used to patch into the trading nets, frowning. No telling if Rew Ekkumi still bothered to check their old haunts. No telling if she'd understand the message—but he couldn't risk using any of the standard naval ciphers—or sending any missive directly into Imperial Space. He had to assume they were compromised—and that any instant Tenebrae himself could possess Carth and discover his treachery.

In the end, all Carth could dare post was a recipe for rickar fish and tubers on the old forum for Telos survivors they’d used long ago, hoping that Rew remembered the meal they’d shared above Felucia when the news about Telos broke. Hoping she’d check in time. Hoping she'd put the pieces together—realize the numbers were Sith tallies, the cooking time coded to the date and time of the Sith’s planned surprise attack on the Felucia system, despite his lobbying for something like Dagobah, where with any luck, they'd all be lost for months without any Republic engagement at all.

Carth’s head ached as he pressed transmit, watching as his encoded message vanished into the wideband wasteland that divided Republic and Imperial space, destined for an obscure survivor’s grief forum.

“Gotta do something,” he reminded himself. Much the same way Zaalbar was working with the cells Yuthura had organized—groups of slaves intended to rise up on this planet and overthrow their masters—when the timing was right—

*If half of them don't die from plague first.*

Every day it seemed like the staff serving them in Tenebrae’s palace got smaller and smaller—but if their mad emperor noticed or cared he hadn't mentioned it—or left it in one of his blasted notes for Carth.

The door slid open.

“Admiral.” The dura–edged voice behind him didn't make Carth jump, he was too numb for that. “Tenebrae informed me that you are leaving tomorrow to begin the war. I’m coming with you.”

“No, Lord Malak.” Were they watched here or not? Sometimes, just to get through another day of this wretched charade, Carth pretended his son was Malak. *Which makes me Saul.* It had ceased to be a funny joke a long time ago. Now, he clasped his fingers hard on the back of his chair, turning
away from the door and what the dark side was doing to his son's face. “Tenebrae commanded that you remain here.”

“I am the Emperor’s equal,” the dark voice muttered behind Carth. A little too sulkily. “I go where I fricking want to.”

Not true and you know it, Dustil. “It's my decision,” Carth snapped. “My decision and Tenebrae’s, Malak. We've been over this already.”

They’d been over it in two different ways: once for Tenebrae’s benefit and once for real. Carth swiveled his chair around to look his son in the face, looking up at the yellow eyes, the darkened stipple of Sith corruption surrounding them, the angry twist of his boyish mouth—like a scar. Dustil was wearing armor uncannily like Malak had been wearing, that doomed day aboard the Leviathan. Sometimes Carth wondered if the ghost was still there too—that would explain it, wouldn't it? Why his son looked like a Sith? He had spent enough time with the ghost of the Dark Lord possessing Dustil to see the difference now—but how else could he explain how Dustil appeared?

“War takes time,” Carth added, trying to gentle his tone. “Patience. Maybe that's a lesson you still need to learn, Malak.”

“I’m tired of lessons.” His son’s cape billowed around his shoulders when he turned and stalked to the window, looking down at the view—an empty courtyard, streaked with rain. “I'm tired of waiting.”

They all were. Polla and Yuthura and Zaalbar were organizing the slaves in Kaas City—and the plague was running wild now—causing its own chaos—but this Empire wasn’t falling—not fast enough. Carth had been so sure—had wanted to be so sure that his wife would show up somehow and fix this—but she hadn't.

She must be dead. Otherwise she would come.

She could still be on her way—I just need to keep stalling until she comes—or until Tenebrae kills me—

Or until I scuttle the Sith Fleet.

Strategizing to lose a war wasn’t that different than strategizing to win one—except for the part where you were ordering everyone who followed you to follow you into certain death. That was… that was harder than Carth expected, considering he’d spent the last decade of his life trying to kill these bastards.

But some of them were… just people. Like the two Zabrak kids, Takan and Zepth. It wasn’t their fault they had a mad emperor in their heads, any more than it was his. Wasn’t the fault of the crew of the Consuming Maw either, that their Emperor was a madman—or that their admiral was a traitor—but Carth had still sent them ahead, straight into a sector of Republic space he knew was still mined. Their destruction would be another warning bell for Rensha and the Fleet.

“Lord Tenebrae needs you here, Malak.” There’s no coming back for me. Whether or not Rew gets the message. Whether the Republic destroys our fleet before we have a chance to seize the Duros shipyards—or not. I’ll go down with Tenebrae’s flagship — or the Republic will have me executed for being a traitor.

Either way, there’s no coming back. I just need to salvage as much as I can. I need to save my
son... somehow.

Was this how it had been for Saul? Again, Carth remembered the last time he'd seen the man—thinking what he was seeing was a hallucination brought on by shock or blood loss or his own insanity—

His eyes. Am I losing my mind, or were Saul’s eyes were glowing red—there at the end? He must have been... he was possessed too. Did he know?

“Dad—” In the heartbeat where Carth had been trying to wish them all out of this, Dustil had crossed the room. The gloved hand on his shoulder felt like a vise, and his son’s head bent down the few centimeters it took to whisper in Carth’s ear. “Father.” Dustil’s voice cracked. “Are you really going to do it? Attack the Republic?”

Carth took a breath. Not effectively. “I have my orders.” He met his son’s eyes steadily. “They include you staying here. Tenebrae won’t waste your talents on command, Lord Malak. He has other plans for you.”

Plans I need you to stop. Plans you and Zaalbar and Mission need to stop. But you... you know this. Mission said you know—she said you're still working with us—she said not to worry—

The droid had been gone for two weeks. Never so long before. All Carth could do was worry.

His son’s eyes burned. “Frack that sleemo’s plans! I have plans too! Inse says w—”

The world washed out abruptly. Everything faded to white.

XXX

“Frack that sleemo’s plans! I have plans too! Inse says we can take—” Dustil’s mouth froze, because Father had gone stiff and horribly blank. Inse says we can take over the Dark Council. Half the Houses have gone to ground because of the plague. She says Voices are vanishing. When they get sick, he kills them. Tenebrae can’t control everything—not on this fracking planet and if it falls apart here, Inse says it will fall apart everywhere else—

And then we’ll be the ones in control. Watching his father turn back into this asshole, Dustil wanted very much to be in control.

“Ah, Lord Malak. Responding to my summons before I even... summon.” The smile on his father’s lips was insane—and those red eyes burned. If the body had been anyone else’s, Dustil would have blasted it across the room.

He let the fury inside burn too because it helped. It was the only thing that did anymore. Hate scorched his blood like a glitterstim high. “Vitiate. What’s up?” He had noticed that the Emperor hated being called Vitiate with no title attached, but if there was a story behind that, Dustil didn’t give a frack.

The asshole made Father’s smile too wide as he stretched a hand toward the small couch by the table where Father and Dustil ate sometimes. “Shall we... sit? I wanted to show you my plans to invade the Republic. Admiral Onasi has been useful with his information but there are a few strategic changes I require, and I thought, with your own knowledge of the Core, we should have a chat.” He folded Father’s arms. “After the broadcast, of course.”

Broadcast? “I have changes too,” Dustil told him. “I’m coming on this invasion.”
“Of course.” The Emperor smiled. “You may have your own ship—but after the broadcast—”

The fracking piece of banthashit wanted Dustil to ask about this broadcast. That was obvious. So Dustil wasn’t going to.

“Lady Inse has proposed to me,” he offered. “I’m thinking I need a consort not in a coma.”

“And her sister Mydia?” It was my impression your affections were… shared?” The asshole pulled a box out of his pocket and popped what looked like a mento into his mouth. Maybe it’d make that rank breath better.

Dustil hated it when the man was so close, in any body. It felt weird—like the Dark was screaming louder than usual, like bugs crawling on his skin—even in his null father’s shell. “She’s okay too,” he allowed. “Inse is smarter.”

“That must be a great advantage for you.” Tenebrae—Vitiate—chuffed like a ronto in mud, leaning back, and folding his hands. He made an elaborate show of checking the chron on Father’s wrist, then glancing toward the door and sighing. “They’ve been quite fortunate that the Starfire plague has spared their House. I assume it still has? No one is sick?”

“No,” Dustil made himself sound bored. “That whole quarter seems better than a lot of the city. What are you doing about this plague anyway?”

“Doing?” Vitiate narrowed Father’s eyes into slits of scarlet fire. “Why, nothing at all! Culls are perfectly natural every few thousand years. The stronger bodies will survive, or evade infection—although, of course—” he chuckled. “Do you remember, Lord Malak? I suppose not. My Voices so seldom remember my guidance, even when they walk the proper steps… but you were… unique. So like your wife in so many ways, but the one—”

“I still am.” Asshole. He would never hurt Father, but those two Zabrak kids that Father had taken under his wing like they mattered—both of them possessed, just like Father—when Old Vitiate possessed them, Dustil thought about ripping their guts out.

“Even more so now.” The man made a show of straightening Father’s collar, brushing imaginary lint from his epaulets.

“Don’t let the Dark consume you.” That had been Yuthura Ban’s helpful advice the last time he’d been there to see Inse and Mydia. That, and some tips on how to play at being Malak, like the woman had even met him for more than five fracking minutes—

Had she? Who cares. Frack her.

There was a knock upon the door.

“Here we are!” Tenebrae beamed. “Our escort! And ahead of schedule.”

XXX

Biscain space off–station was a mess of ships of all sizes. There was even a Republic cruiser bearing down at what looked like full speed, broadcasting some kind of alert to sweep the other ships out of its way.

The part of Revan’s mind that had been thinking like Polla Organa saw a dozen ways for their Aurek–class Jopheena to jump around the cruiser and make it out. The part that had almost just crashed the Jopheena into a sun sat on the passenger bench gratefully, letting Millifar take the
yoke.

The lights of the Biscain system—and its disturbing suns—vanished into a thousand stars as they shot into hyperspace.

“There.” Millifar leaned back and folded her arms, resembling a miniature version of her father. She'd cropped her hair, Revan noted, and there were hollows under her eyes that hadn’t been there before. “Aemelie's furious about the Pinion, Third Wife. You now have two days to formulate your excuse for destroying it—before we meet them in the Jirulla System.”

“Hah.” Revan tried to ignore the nausea kicking in from the jump. “That's funny.”

“How is it funny?” Millifar’s blue–gray eyes were as steady as Canderous’s, but try as she could to see the joke, Revan couldn’t spot the same glint of humor in them.

“Milli's not joking,” Mekel muttered from the co–pilot’s seat.

“It was necessary that I drop the Pinion into that sun to destroy Arkan.” Revan bit back insulting the kid. The adrenaline that had fueled the past day—the race through the stars, the destruction of Arkan, the Force compulsion at the station—had abruptly vanished, leaving her limbs like lead, her mind sluggish and afraid. Her gut lurching, and she swallowed back bile. “I can apologize to Aemelie—”

Millifar burst out laughing. “Apologize? You could have ejected the Force–eater with your Force magic and saved the ship!”

“Milli.” The smile felt like glass, but Revan forced it. “It's good to see you. Thanks for the rescue back there. I wasn’t sure if I could launch by myself.”

“I think you would have made it off the station without our assistance, at least,” the girl muttered. “You killed that one unarmed reporter quite easily.” She paused. “Then probably you would have crashed into a freighter.”

That one unarmed reporter had glowing red eyes. The memory made Revan’s hand twitch, made nonsensical words dance in her head. Red eyes are bad. Red eyes are very, very bad.

“Knock it off, Milli. She placed third in that race.” Mekel had been sitting there quietly turning greener and greener.

Millifar sniffed. “The Organa man was obviously piloting—not her. If he's anything like his daughter—”


“No. But Aemelie is rarely so complimentary of barbarians.”

“Yes, I've heard Aemelie’s opinions.” For nearly a solid week, trapped in that cursed Pinion and drifting in space. According to Aemelie Ordo, Polla Organa Wen could have saved the Star Forge by shooting down all of the ships attacking it before they even came within targeting range. Probably with her eyes closed and rainbows flying out of her ass.

“Excuse me.” Mekel Jin gulped, covering his mouth. He jumped up and ran toward the fresher.

Revan’s own gut had been calmed by an act of sheer will, but now it churned in sympathy.
“Mekel always does that.” Millifar rolled her eyes, mock whispering. “Pretend not to notice.”

“It happens to me too.” It was not going to happen now though, not with Canderous’s daughter glaring scornfully at Revan as if she was mud on her boot. “What happened after I left Katarr? Did you see the Jedi?”

“Yes.” The girl turned away and began doing something to the navboard—it looked like she was tweaking the ship’s gyros that Jasp had so carefully calibrated before.

“Don’t do that.” Revan wasn’t sure she’d know how to bring them back to standard.

Millifar made an exasperated noise. “I’ve never been in a Republic military vessel of this size before. I wanted to test the tertiary stabilizers.”

“It doesn’t have tertiary stabilizers.” Nothing under frigate–class would.

Canderous’s daughter twisted another dial. Revan had no idea what it did, but she knew when she was being fracked with. She raised her voice. “Stop that!”

The girl snorted, shooting her a disdainful glare. “Aemelie said you knew nothing about ships.”

“Aemelie knows nothing about me.” Polla Organa had known a lot of mechanicals, even if she was never interested enough to learn how to fix things. She’d poured over catalogues from Kuat Hyperdrive and Corellian Shipping Lanes as a kid. “That’s an… order, Millifar. Stop adjusting things. My—the last pilot set them up that way for a reason.”

“Your last pilot was overly conservative.” The girl sniffed. “I would have expected more from Polla Organa’s father.”

Revan gritted her teeth. “Would Aemelie or Gwenarius be pleased to hear of your insolence to the woman who outranks you?”

Millifar froze, still in the act of reaching for another dial. Those blue–gray eyes narrowed. “My mothers would say a leader leads, Third Wife—not goes running back to another woman's skirts like someone stole their meat–knife.”

“I would say that a subordinate who can’t even follow a simple order should be removed from duty,” Revan told her, narrowing her eyes back. “You know I possess the means to remove you, Milli. Very easily.”

The girl’s scoff showed what she thought of threats—at least outwardly, but her hands retreated from the board. “When you give me a simple order, perhaps I will follow it.”


“I will not. Wait until Mekel returns.” Millifar uncocked her main blaster and dumped its contents on the console, making a show of examining the firing sequencer barrels, where the plasma bolts were generated. “Mekel Jin should be the one to tell you what happened on Katarr.”

Revan felt cold. Tell me what? “Mekel’s sick,” she pointed out—although the retching noises had stopped almost as quickly as they’d begun.

“He says hyperspace always affects him like that.” Millifar shrugged. “His weak stomach has nothing to do with Katarr. He seems to have no such reaction to the sight of blood, at least. Unlike some barbarians I have met.”
What? “I don’t care about blood, Milli.”

“I wasn’t speaking of you.” Millifar gave an exaggerated sigh. “Not everything is about you, Third Wife.”

There was a long silence, that seemed to grow even longer as Revan stared at the viewscreen, watching the hyperspace tracers flash past.

“Hey.” A hoarse voice spoke from the door. Mekel still looked a little green. He’d stripped out of his beskar and was wearing a drab flight suit underneath. “You need to change the kolto packs again, Milli.” He held out a pile of them. “Linai said every four hours, and it's been at least five.”

“But it doesn’t hurt anymore.” Canderous’s daughter raised her armor–clad right arm above her head and stretched. Without Arkan screaming in the Force, everything was so quiet that Revan had no difficulty hearing the faint, mechanical whir coming from her shoulder. The girl glanced at her and made a face, unbuckled her arm plate. The skin underneath had the distinctive mesh of new plasti–skin.

*Artificial.* Revan thought of Dar and her arm—and was surprised the usual spark of anger she felt for the woman had been replaced by—by nothing. “What happened?”

“The dead thing ripped my arm off.” Millifar stood up, unbuckling her chest plate, and placing the pieces carefully on the floor. Without it, she was narrow—leaner than Revan’s memory of her. The cybernetic arm was attached to flesh that looked raw and bruised at the shoulder socket.

“The dead thing…?”

“She means that asshole chakaar, Oerin Lin.” Mekel spat on the floor—uncannily like a Mandalorian. “Darth Sion, they were calling him.”

“You fought Oerin?” Revan took in the both of them—the maimed girl and the seemingly–unmarked boy. “Are you insane? But he wouldn’t just attack clan—” her voice trailed off. *How do I know that? Did you attack him first?*

“Dar’jett osik!” Millifar’s artificial arm blurred as it dropped to her belt, producing a narrow trank gun. “My father gave me permission to shoot you. He says this will knock you out cold for at least a few hours. I could shove you out an airlock then.”

“Milli—” it was nothing to disable the gun, simply bending the needle contained in the nozzle. Revan did that automatically. Disarming the girl’s anger would be more difficult. “You can’t win. You know that. Not against me.”

“My father wants you alive,” the girl continued fiercely, gesturing with the weapon. “But I could lie.” She glared at Mekel Jin, eyes suddenly liquid, as if she was blinking back tears. “Who would object?”

“Uh… Milli?” Mekel hovered in the background. “Why don’t you… just… put the kolto on your arm. I can… I’ll tell her.”

“I told her you would tell her, but you still have not done so!” The girl stepped forward until they were eye–to–eye. She jabbed the gun into Revan’s ribs hard. When Revan just stared, Millifar’s face crumpled and she threw the gun away, muttering under her breath. “*Di’kut Jett’ai.* Since Lin was already dead, we could not kill him. The Jedi had a device that might have ended him, but we did not know their intent. He did *this* to my arm and then he killed Kex. The Jedi died too.”
Kex. Revan’s memory of the kid was vague. One of the blonde ones, she thought. He’d helped them at the party on Coruscant.

“I—I’m sorry.” Revan reached for the trank gun, levitating it off the floor and shoving it into her own pocket. “I’m sorry about Kex.”

Millifar scowled. “If we had done nothing they would be alive.”

They. She said Jedi died too. “How many…” Revan’s voice trailed off. A part of her mind hissed with bitter laughter. Did I think these were tame Sith Lords? I stopped one—I should have stopped the other too. If they’d both been in that damned ship when I dropped it in the fracking sun— “How many Jedi died?”

In that moment, Millifar’s eyes were exactly like her father’s. They seemed to frost over as she stared past Revan, maybe to the controls, or the hyperspace panels behind. “All of them.”

“All…?” That was impossible. All of the Jedi hadn’t been in the tunnel. They’d evacuated. Those ships rose out of the pit. I saw them leave—

“Milli, uh….” Mekel cleared his throat. “I got this. You need to take care of the arm.”

“The med kit’s here too.” Revan scrambled to her feet collecting it. Half was on the floor by Revan’s chair from when she’d used it to help Jasp.

Millifar’s mouth twisted. “You should have slain Lin, Third Wife. Perhaps your dar’jett powers would have been enough.”

Perhaps they would have been. Perhaps they can be. She hadn’t even tried at the Temple on Coruscant. She’d just let him go—him and Arkan and that old woman—

“Milli! Please—” Mekel Jin looked too pale, with shadows under his eyes. “Do you want me to dress the wound for you like Headwoman Linai said?”

“I will tend to it myself.” The girl snatched the kolto packs and pivoted, heading for the fresher. “Tell her what transpired, Mekel of Lin. You… saw. You saw it all.” Her jaw tightened, but her pale eyes were liquid and she wiped at them clumsily before vanishing behind the door.

“She’s… she was hurt pretty bad.” Mekel’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“But Oerin liked her, I thought.” Revan filled the awkwardness with words, because the expression on Mekel’s face said something else was wrong, something bad—and as long as she kept speaking, it had no time to be true. “Why would he hurt her—how—did the Jedi capture him? Where is he now?”

Mekel made a strange sound in the back of his throat, like a catch between a laugh and—something opposite. “He told Dak Vesser to heal Milli. Then he got away. I—I don’t know where the frack Oerin Lin is now.” His hands were clenched into fists. “I couldn’t kill him either. Dak… died too.”

The story came out slowly. The Jedi trap sprung—and then broken by the Mandalorian kids.

Dumb kids. It would be easier to make excuses if Dak hadn’t died for their mistake. “I’m sorry that happened.” Revan offered, finally. “So, after Dak healed Millifar, Oerin killed him—”

“No. Canderous shot him later. Lin put some kind of compulsion on Dak. Told him to heal Milli and so that was all he did. He stopped talking, he… he faded. Like all of his… like he poured
everything he was into her. Dak’s why she's alive, I guess.”

He stopped talking. He faded. Canderous killed him. But we saved him before—and he helped us—he was loyal—

“Canderous wouldn't have killed him if he didn't have a reason, Mekel.” She tried to keep her voice gentle, even as her uncertainty made the words stick in her throat. He faded. The blank faces of the reporters on Biscain haunted her. “I'm sorry, Dak was a good man. He… he helped me land the Harbinger. We didn't have much time to talk but he was Juhani’s friend—”

“I don't give a frack about Dak Vesser.” The boy in front of her was probably too grown to be called a boy, hard–eyed and blinking and dead in the Force like a black spot. It made him harder to read, but there was no mistaking the twisted fury in his expression. “Vrook Lamar and all the other Jedi died right after Milli’s arm was ripped off. Lin mowed them down like they were fracking civs. Like they were nothing. I saw the whole thing.”

“Vrook—your father—” There was something wrong with her voice. Uncle—

Mekel’s voice faltered. “The Jedi had taken some of their own prisoner. My father died with his hands in binders behind his back. I saw the entire fracking thing.”

“Oh.” There was something Revan should say other than oh. But she felt frozen. “Which other Jedi died?”

Vrook. He said Vrook. Milli said all of them. She should feel something. She did. Regret. Confusion. Guilt—

He was a black spot in the Force now, but Mekel’s voice rang with anger. “All of them! Like she said! Fracking all of them! What do you think?”

Prisoner, her mind supplied. He was their prisoner. Why would Vrook be a prisoner?

The answer seemed obvious, when Revan remembered the way he’d held the others off so that she could run back to the surface. So that I could escape. He wanted me to escape.

He trusted me to do the right thing. And he died for it.

They all did. If I had been there—Lin wouldn't have dared—

Would he? The worm of doubt was poison. If he was strong enough to kill all of them, why would I expect to be different?

“Sorry.” Revan felt numb. She wanted to remember her uncle suddenly. More than just the disapproval he'd shown on Dantooine, their all–too–brief encounters on Manaan and Coruscant. He watched over me. The feeling that he'd meant something was still there, even if the emotion itself was gone.

“Yeah, me too,” the boy muttered. “I hardly knew him, right? I don't know why I give a frack.”

“Because you wanted to know him.” She swallowed, guiltily thankful for Jasp, for Jasp still being alive. “I wanted to know him too. I thought… later we'd have time.”

“Me too.” Mekel sat down heavily on the crew bench to the side of the captain’s chair that Millifar had co–opted. “I… I already told you that he was my father? It went so fast—I saw you, but then—”
“Yes, but Dar told me before that.” The spark of anger Revan expected was dull, a mere whisper. “We’re cousins. I guess that’s why Millifar is calling you Mekel of Lin.”

“Who the frack is Dar?”

“Dar’Revan.”

“What?” Mekel frowned. “Oh! You mean that Sheris bint Malak wasn’t fracking?” He snorted. “Thought about it often enough, but—”

“I don’t need details.” The thought alone opened a thousand more questions. That Force bond with Dustil. Malak had been in Dustil’s mind— was he in Mekel’s too? Uncomfortably, she wondered if Mekel might know more of her own past than she did.

“Sheris. Yeah.” The kid rubbed the back of his neck, glancing at her and then glancing away again. “Other Revan. You know she’s dead too?”

“What? No.” Vrook Lamar is dead. My uncle is dead. She should feel something for him, but Dar— she can’t be dead since I’m going to kill her. “I’d know, I think—I would know if Dar—”

“There was a newsvid from Kaas City. Got broadcast all over the Core.” He walked to the navboard and sat down, slouching a little in the co-pilot’s seat. “The other Revan fought two rancors on Dromund Kaas. One of them killed her. Dustil was there—and his dads. Then that Emperor guy talked in a bunch of voices and said Revan was dead.”

“You saw her die?”

“Yeah. On the vid.” He shrugged. “She was foaming at the mouth and stuff. Your Wookiee pal was there too. And that Polla bint.”

You knew they couldn’t survive there for long. It should not be a surprise. “I need to see.”

Mekel nodded, bending to the board. “I think I can get a channel open.” He fiddled with the dials. Revan just watched, all the words stuck in her throat.

“Ohkay.” They’re all dead. Do you really want to see? “Where is Oerin Lin now?”

“Running from his doom,” Millifar announced from the door. She’d packed kolto around her shoulder. It gleamed with the same strange sheen as the stuff Jasp had been wrapped in. “He is Sith, so he will be fleeing back to this Sith world of yours. We shall kill him there.”

Will he? “There’s more than one Sith world, Milli.”

“Then we shall find whichever one he hides upon. The Jedi had a device to stop him,” Millifar added. “With ysalamiri. We need to recreate it.”

“But it didn’t work.”

“It would have,” Mekel Jin muttered. “It was starting to, but—”

Millifar set her chin stubbornly. “I vow I will end him.” Her eyes flashed. “Oerin Lin is my kill!”

I vowed to end Dar but she’s already dead. She vowed to end Tenebrae, but he’s still around.

If Vrook had made any vows Revan didn’t know them.
“Tell me everything.” They had nothing but time—another two days before their next hyperspace jump point. “Show me the vids—and tell me everything that’s happened.”

XXX

The Market Quarter was mostly shut down now. The stocks were empty of penitents and the stalls closed. Hastily-scrawled signs were pasted on a few windows, offering trades for goods—if the shoppers kept a safe distance. Even the omnipresent guards hung back on the fringes of the Park of Sith Heroes, as if the few cars that passed by might carry contagion.

“Hey!” Polla hissed at Scourge from the window of their armored palanquin as they approached the Park’s mirrored gates. “Wobbly! Come here!”

“What are you doing?” Coma Lady Revan Starfire (and now Polla was again reminded why dear Sei referred to her as ‘the Bitch’) had been awake for less than three hours, and nearly every second of it had been used as a fracking lecture. “Don’t insult him!”

“He seems to like it.” Polla leaned out of the palanquin, slipping her mask down past her chin. (Masks were now mandatory for slaves.) “Hey! Lord Scourge! Tentacle-face! Come here!”

The Sith Lord glanced in their direction, frowning, and got up from his park bench, datapad tucked under his arm, making his way across to the park entrance slowly, as if they had all space-damned day.

“You have no impulse control at all, do you, Deralian?” Revan glared at her from across the bench where she was sitting next to Yuthura. “What do you think will stop Finiris from exterminating you like the null insect he would believe you to be?”

“Who?”

“It’s Scourge’s given name,” Yuthura said. She was in a position to know the details on Wobbly.

“Oh, we’ve got a rapport.” At first, maybe it had helped that Zaalbar had repeatedly threatened to rip the Sith guy’s arms off if he laid a finger on Polla. Not that the Wookiee would stand a chance either against a Sith Lord, but Scourge was the kind of sleemo who respected a show of strength. Grass Priests, that was the one constant on this evil planet: start every negotiation with a few threats and insults, then move on from there. And then, of course there was Yuthura, who had moved on Lord Scourge quite capably—

And told him if he touched one hair on my head, she’d feed his choobs to the first nexu she saw. See? Threats and insults. They work.

Polla turned her head away from the window to cock an eye at Lady Starfire (the Bitch). “What makes you think he’d think I’m an insect?”

The woman pursed her lips like Polla was an eff-fly in her soup. “Because I know him. For a pureblood, he’s quite progressive, but that does not mean he’d treat a Force-blind Human as anything resembling a peer—”

“Actually, Scourge considers Polla to be my property.” Yuthura shrugged coolly with that enviable poise of hers.

“Yours—?” The two Jedi or Sith or whatever exchanged a look. “Ah.” Lady Starfire wasn’t dense, that was one thing. She folded her arms on her lap. “I see. Well, continue. Perhaps the two of you have him in hand.”
“For now, we do. How are you feeling?” the Twi’lek asked.

“Alive.” Revan took another sip from a bulb of water and coughed. They’d gotten her dressed in some of Inse’s battle armor, and it mostly hid how thin she was—although sitting next to her, it looked like Yuthura had to be careful not to impale herself on those giant spiked shoulder-things. A cap of metal hid most of Revan's nearly-bald head. She’d insisted on carrying a saber—since she hadn’t arrived at the Blais house with one (who the frack knew what had happened to the ones she’d used on those rancor), Yuthura had given her a loaner.

Now Coma Lady’s fingers tapped on the hilt, like she was playing a pipe flute. “Here.” She stood up, as unsteadily as a newborn hessi. Polla half expected her to fall, but Revan stared at the door to their palanquin instead. Her hand moved, and the door clicked open.

Going with the new rules about crowds, they didn’t have the Wookiee escort today—the covered car was running on its own mag-levved steam with Polla steering from the inside.

“My Lord Finiris,” Revan called out. Her snotty tone didn’t match the way she was leaning on the palanquin’s doorframe. “How fortuitous that our paths cross again.”

“My lady.” To Polla’s astonishment, Scourge actually bent down and knelt, which he didn’t even do for Yuthura, and she was the one now spending three nights a week with him.

“My slaves are calling you 'Scourge.'” There was a teasing tone to Coma Lady’s voice that Polla might have thought flirtatious if it had come from anyone else. “Was Flagellator taken?”

The Sith gave her a thin-lipped smile before launching into a long, garbled stream of Ancient Sith—until Revan interrupted him.

“Speak Basic,” she said. “So that my slaves understand.”

“The Lady Ban has an excellent tongue,” the man said.

“The Lady Ban agrees with Lord Revan,” Yuthura said. She leaned over and beckoned to him. “Come. Sit with us.”

“Of course.” Scourge was smart enough not to argue with Yuthura. “Our Glorious Emperor declared that all members of the Dark Council needed to take names in keeping with their roles…and so….”

Revan laughed, which was creepy. “So as his Highness's High Punisher, you… named yourself after a whip.”

“Or the bane of the galaxy.”

“Was 'Lord Bane’ already taken too?”

“It is merely a name.” The red-skinned man approached as Polla watched from her windowed seat, taking Revan’s hand in his and bringing it to his lips. “I must confess—from what Lady Ban told me—as well as what my own eyes witnessed—I assumed you would not recover.”

“Tenebrae wished to test this body.” Revan shrugged. “What isn't killed by the Dark is purified. Will you ride with us?”

“Of course.”
Revan stepped back and the Sith stepped in, dwarfing the doorway with his broad–shouldered bulk. His yellow eyes narrowed as he nodded at Yuthura. “Your servants have been loyal,” he remarked, as the door slid closed, and Polla activated the controls to have them circle the park endlessly. “You should be pleased—especially with Lady Ban.”

Yuthura smiled at him in a way that made Polla suspect she’d rather kick him in the choobs, but who knew? It wasn't something they'd discussed in detail. Maybe the red guy had skills. The Twi'lek stood, awkward in the cramped space and took the seat next to Polla, leaving the gilded bench for Revan and Lord Wobbly.

“I hope Nyriss has been loyal as well?” Revan asked, sitting more gracefully than she'd stood. “And SENCHAL? Liyo? I assume you know what happened to Deckna—”

Scourge settled down next to her, looking comically large. “Nyriss retreated to her estate when the plague began. Many chose retreat over trusting the quarantine.”

“That explains the lack of suppliants in the public stockade.” Revan edged to the side of her bench, crossing her legs at the knee. Polla took that as her signal and pulled the remote deck out of the wall to steer the fracking palanquin. “No one is left to impress with the all–night Great One’s Light of Retribution—”

“Revan.” Tentacle–face had a way about him, the way he gentled his voice. “It is good to see you restored.”

“I am hardly that.” Coma–lady’s mouth twitched. “I'm going to the tomb, Finiris. It's the only way forward.”

She'd startled the Sith. “But we need you! Your slaves have destabilized the capital already. With more vaccine we should be able to immunize enough loyalists to disrupt the Voices’ stranglehold upon the Empire—”

“As I told Lord Scourge, we are working on getting more vaccine,” Yuthura chimed in.

“All of that work will be lost if I don't fulfill my ‘destiny.’” Revan scowled as she pronounced the last word.

“You cannot,” Tentacle–face repeated. “The Empire needs you restored to your station. Alive. You must be the voice of temperance and restraint—when Tenebrae gave you equal status, it meant something. The war is not yet won—”

Temperance and restraint? Polla snickered, eyeing Yuthura who gave her such a fake blank look that she knew the Twi’lek was thinking the exact same thing—Just smart enough not to say it.

“I will be the voice of temperance and restraint,” Revan said. “Inside his own mind. The Empire merely needs a figurehead willing to treat with the Republic. Any number of sentients could fill that role. You, for example.” Her smile was glacial. “Don't deny that the thought didn't occur.”

His eyes glinted, yellow and crazy and Sith. “If the other Councilmembers could be swayed in favor of my election—”

“Or Lord Nyriss could do it. Or Lord Zash—she’s young, but charismatic. Even Inse Blais—” Revan folded her hands in her lap, interlacing the flesh fingers with the gold. Her voice was cool. “The girl’s even younger than Zash, but from what Ban has told me, she’s not as stupid. As long
as one of my allies can serve openly as Tenebrae’s public counter, I can… do what I must… from… inside.”

Inside? Polla exchanged another glance with Yuthura, again wondering if they were just humoring a madwoman. From the moment she’d woken, Revan had been babbling about a fracking tomb. And after they’d filled her in on what had happened while she’d been in the coma, she’d come up with this plan. Fetch Lord Scourge to help them past the city gates, go kilometers into the jungle to some kind of temple—

Polla wished Zaalbar was here, but it was one of his days to check on Seiran and Carth and that brat Sith kid at Tenebrae’s palace.

“Forgive my directness,” the Sith Lord said to Revan. “But of the four of us here, you are only marginally stronger than the null insect. This is not your original body, I was told…?”

“You’re right. This body was not mine—originally. But you remember Sheris, Finiris.” Revan’s lips pursed. “How many times did you have her and Malak out to your estate?” She stared down at her golden arm, flexing the fingers slowly. One of them buzzed, and didn’t quite curl—a place where HK hadn’t sealed the circuit very well. “I received the reports. And I’m sure Yuthura told you that Sheris’s body is a genetic copy of mine.”

“And where is the original?”

“Dead. That mindwiped shell inhabiting it was too powerful to live.”

Dead. Even knowing it was a lie—probably—it was difficult for Polla not to believe the hard-edged woman with her blazing green eyes and that flat voice.

Dead? Or hanging out on Deralia with my son, and my parents? Polla knew Carth still hoped the real Revan was gonna show up here somehow, but she’d timed the jumps six different ways. Revan could have been here twice, even in the slowest ship ever.

Maybe the savior of the Star Forge was dead. It wouldn’t surprise Polla at all—in some ways Revan being dead was the only thing that made sense. I would never leave Seiran here alone. And even this version of fracking Revan showed up to save him, right? Someone that’s me—or her—or her and me—would never just leave Carth and his son and Zaalbar—

Would she? For her son? And then the thought Polla didn’t like to admit she had. For mine? If she thinks she’s me, does she think he’s hers? Is she with him? Is she holding Abasen right now?

I’ll fracking kill her. Polla glanced over at the Bitch and Scourge again. She’d seen Lord Wobbly shoot lightning from his fingertips at a slave leader who questioned his loyalty to the cause once. Guy had had third-degree electrical burns. I’ll fracking kill her… from a distance.

“So, the Hero of the Star Forge is dead,” Scourge repeated. “By your hand?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Revan shrugged. “I pushed her off our ship’s hull when we were leaving a planet.”

Seiran had said the same—only he said the other Revan had survived the fall. He’d spoken to Molla who said she was in a coma. (Fracking typical of Revans to be in comas, apparently.) Seiran had also said that this Bitch here had promised she’d rescue them all—

If the Revan with my memories does show up, she’s gonna be pissed about this one shoving her out of a ship. I would be.
The Bitch glanced at Polla, and then started in again with Scourge, apparently abandoning the ‘let’s speak Basic so the null insect can understand’ thing—because her Ancient Sith was so fast that the only word Polla caught was ‘destroy,’ and that also meant ‘maim,’ ‘kill,’ and was a homonym of the word they used for ‘brunch,’ so who knew?

“Let them talk,” Yuthura shrugged, like she and Polla had a choice.

“Right.” Polla took a deep breath and stared at the wall of the palanquin, trying to think happy thoughts—

XXX

“...Then I heard her tell Moll she’d rescue you, then send us both back. Right after she smacked me down with her Force. Do you feel rescued?” her husband whispered, more than a little bitterly.

“Are we rescued yet?”

The air reeked in the mech closet, but it was one of the only places none of the Blaises thought to look for Polla.

Mydia had made looking for Polla a game lately—whenever Dustil brought along his driver, Mydia would try and make some excuse for Polla to be occupied so she couldn't see her husband. At first, Carth’s son had objected—the boy had been raised with manners at some point, maybe—but lately he just stared at Polla with this black, blank expression that said he still hadn’t gotten over the thinking she was responsible for Mekel Jin dying (another gem of gossip Seiran had mentioned, along with the fact that Carth’s possession times were getting longer and the man still wasn't catching the plague that Polla had released on the planet just for him).

Sometimes Polla suspected that Dustil Onasi was getting off their pain just as much as the Blais monsters did. He looked worse than either of them now—like a face full of ugly. The only thing worse than looking at him was hearing Mydia go on about how hot that was.

Dustil Onasi was supposed to be an ally, but Polla wouldn't trust him with someone else’s spice.

“We’re doing great with the rebellion,” Polla told Seiran, dodging the question of any rescue, dodging the worry for Abasen that snuck up and caught her with teeth whenever she was alone. “Stockpiling weapons—and the droid says she’s getting vaccine from her Manaan manufacturers any day now. Plus, Yuthura thinks she can get a sweet ride out of Scourge when we’re ready to leave too—just have to play along ’til then.”

“You’re still thinking about a ship.” He sounded pissed. Polla got that, but this wasn’t the time. “You know Carth Onasi’s going to take the Sith Fleet and attack the Republic? You know they’re planning on war?”

“I can’t stop that.” Hadn’t she tried? “What we can do is get some of these people safe. We’re sneaking folks out of Kaas City, Sei. We’re helping the slaves get free. I can’t tell you where they’re hiding, because then I’d have to kill you—”

“Not funny.” His mouth came down on hers hard as a clamp.

“Not at all funny,” she whispered when she had a chance to catch her breath. “But if we can’t get a ship, I hope you like living in trees on the lightning planes of Kaas, because that’ll be our new, best-case scenario—”

XXX
“What’s the deal with the tomb?” Polla asked Yuthura, when ‘sikuth,’ the word for tomb (or ice generator) came up for the eighth time. Did Revan mean the graves in the basement of the Blais mansion? Sometimes Polla still had nightmares about the time Mydia had sent her down for a bottle of wine and locked the door.

(Phylus said she’d only been down there for forty minutes, but it had felt like forty fracking years in the dark—and that smell—)

“Revan is explaining to Scourge that she will be better able to assist our efforts when she is…” Yuthura’s lekku had flattened all the way down like they did when she was stressed. “When she has opened the tomb.” She shrugged. “Perhaps she needs to retrieve something from within?”

“We’re going back to the house?” Polla was (nominally) in charge of the palanquin’s nav system, although it felt all backasswards, staring at a screen in the wall while sitting backwards, maneuvering the display with her fingers to move the car.

“No,” Revan said, breaking up abruptly from her Ancient Sith heart–to–heart, and staring Polla down with that creepy fracking gaze. “We’re going to the tomb. Now.”

Scourge said something in Ancient Sith and Revan shook her head, answering back. Yuthura chimed in. Polla counted to ten slowly—and then again as the three of them argued more about… something.

“Is this really the right place to just stand here?” Polla interrupted them. Since the plague had gotten so bad, gatherings of more than four parties were forbidden—and even if technically they were in compliance, (at the moment), Polla wasn’t sure they needed to announce Revan being back (for real) just yet. Not before the leaders of their still–reluctant rebellion got a chance to meet the woman they were (supposedly) fighting for––meet the real thing, and not just Polla wearing a mask and dodging a bunch of questions about whether or not she was the real thing….

Xxx

“Do you see how it’s not just about one person, Drakkar?” Polla made her voice sweet and reasonable for the Twi’lek guardsman, endlessly grateful for those Ryl lessons Ma made her take back in primary, that made speaking to him easy, as opposed to like when she had to address the half-breed scions of House Azar, who expected their Revan to talk in Ancient Sith. Sure, she’d had that speech Zaalbar had gotten from Mission, memorized it phonetically, but the question and answer sesh afterwards had been rough. “In a way, we are all Revan Starfire. We are all fighting Tenny—fighting Tenebrae just as she would, protecting the innocent, uh… hiding in this… very nice cave.”

Polla was lying. The cave was not nice. It was damp and smelled like a sewer, maybe because it connected to the Kaas City sewers.

By her side, Zaalbar rumbled his agreement to the cluster of Wookiees behind the Twi’leks and Human slaves of the Kaas secondary noble houses.

“So you’re not her.” Drakkar glared, bitter disappointment quite plain in his open brown eyes.

Polla breathed calmly through the mask, reflecting that it was a frack of a lot easier to stay calm when you knew no one could see your face.

“If I was Revan would you expect me to admit it?” Her best imitation. Her hand went to the lightsaber hilt at her belt. It didn’t work—Phylus had found it somewhere in the Blais crypts—but
it made a good-looking fake, encrusted with even more jewels than the ones Dustil had made her drop in the forest what seemed ages ago. “You’re not rebelling for me—”

“That’s right,” Alura S’Tang snapped. Next to Drakkar, she was one of highest-ranked Resistance leaders. “We’ve been getting people to safety for decades—before Revan came along—and after. The real Revan knew that.”

“Cool your jets,” Polla told her. “I know it—we’re just working to get you guys some vaccine, so your people stop dying—”

“That was supposed to happen before the plague came to Kaas,” Alura said. “If you were truly Revan, you would know that too!”

“Plans change.” Polla shrugged. “We’re getting the vaccine now. Tell me what else you need, and I’ll do my best.”

Kaas City was just another planet, after all. And… just like everywhere else with import restrictions it had a thriving black market. Polla had managed to fence a bunch of Blais artifact crap that Phylus brought them for Imperial credits—and she’d even found a fence with contacts in Republic space—now, if Mission would just get back to them about the vaccine shipments… maybe they’d be golden.

Xxx

They were still waiting on those vaccine shipments. Polla drummed her fingers on the side of the palanquin eyeing the window.

With the Bitch’s charm, meeting the real her might not help rally that crowd. Or maybe her inspirational talks are better in Ancient Sith? Crazy thoughts. This planet made everyone nuts. Polla took a deep breath, counting to ten. Poor, dead Master Klee had taught her that trick. Breathe the fear out, take the calm in.

Maybe for assholes with the Force, breathing in and out worked? It was doing nothing for Polla.

She glanced out the window again. Shit. “Uh… guys? Tenebrae’s Enforcers are out—and coming this way.”

“I see the guardsmen. We must not be captured.” Revan pulled the screen over her window shut. “Proceed to the following coordinates. And quickly. Negative twelve nineteen, by positive two–twelve.”

Outside, the guards had been intercepted by a string of red–robed slaves trotting past on double rows of electrified plasma–chain. They were patting each one down, and arguing with their handler, a hardened–looking Zabrak woman with more scars than tats—and less clothing than either. She looked cold, what with the rain. Colder still, when one of the silver–armored guards stepped forward with a light–whip and lashed it around her neck.

The crack of bone was audible as the woman collapsed. Polla closed her eyes. This fracking planet. And Sei wonders why I keep dreaming of a sweet ship?

“Polla!” Revan snapped, leaning forward and grabbing her arm. “Go!”

Count to ten—

She grabbed the steering bar. Polla had to consider that maybe Klee had never had to test his faith
in actual Kaas City as she punched in the numbers Revan had given.

_Breathe. Count to ten and breathe._

Xxx

“You're back.” Dustil tried to sound like he didn't give a shit, like he hadn't been watching this whole time—thirty minutes now, that the asshole occupied his father’s body.

Once, it had been five minutes, max. But it was getting longer every time now. Every damn time.

Long enough to get them to this fracking broadcast room, where more of the red–eyed zombies were waiting for them with holo–cams and an entourage. To his surprise, Zaalbar was waiting for them there too. And Seiran Wen.

“Wuh—what—” his father wobbled on his feet and Dustil hated the man suddenly because now was the _worst_ time to show weakness.

“No fracking idea.” But that wasn't what Malak would have said. “I do not know,” he added coldly. “Lord Tenebrae said something about an announcement.”

The Wookiee growled something and Father’s head turned. “It definitely won’t be good,” he agreed.

A commotion at the other door interrupted Dustil’s thoughts as Mydia and Inse Blais sauntered through, followed by that brat brother of theirs, lurking behind. At least there was no sign of Ban the idiot, who kept trying to give Dustil lectures about the dark side when he was just trying to get laid.

“We are honored...?” Inse’s voice was polite enough, but her face was too pale, even for her. “But unfortunately, Most Enlightened, the slaves you asked for were sent on another errand. Our seneschal is trying to locate them now—”

“And the body?” The Zabrak kid’s mouth pursed. “Tut, tut, surely my Voice mentioned you were to bring the still–breathing body of the false Revan? Did you think I did not know you had it?”

“It’s…it is gone too,” Inse said. She was brave, Dustil thought, the way she faced down Vitiate unblinking. “Perhaps the servants stole it. Or the woman died? She’s still unconscious. And half the city is ill, you know.”

“Indeed, they are.” The air seemed to thicken around them, like the Sith Emperor was channeling the darkness from the planet itself. “And yet, your family… Lady Blais… remains unscathed.”

Inse stared down at the ground. “Your Grace has shown us favor, Most Luminant. We remain well enough to serve you.”

Takan’s mouth chuckled. “Oh, that you have. But your insolence has its price.”

The girl’s head lifted, and she stared the two Zabraks down. “We will pay.” Her eyes flickered in Dustil’s direction and her chin lifted, stubbornly. Next to her, Mydia stifled a giggle.

“Perhaps I have been too lenient with the House of Blais,” Vitiate growled, this time using several voices. “The thought occurred to me just the yesterday when my Voice was visiting your dear mother, Herpia at the mountain estate. She had expected we would enjoy a pleasant brunch, but my plans… altered.”
Inse froze. “Mother knows I’ve been attending the Dark Council meetings in her stead!”

“She does,” Vitiate whispered, still from several mouths. Dustil assumed he was playing that fracked game of his where he’d possessed all his guards again. “Now.”

Mydia giggled again, high and totally at the wrong time. But strangely, the Emperor just granted her an indulgent smile from Zepth’s mouth.

“When you find the servants and the body, bring them to me.” He shrugged with Zabraks’ shoulders in unison. “Or your own lives can end just as easily as theirs.”

Seiran made a noise, and suddenly Dustil could feel him in the Force, like a weak spark of fury that would be snuffed out if half the room fracking blinked.

“No!” Then Dustil stepped forward before Polla Organa’s husband did something really fracked. The man was a fracking idiot, but he didn’t deserve to die here. “Lord Tenebrae will spare them all because I will it. Lord Tenebrae spares all of you for me.”

“For now.” The Voices chuckled in unison too.

Mydia winked at him. Inse scowled. Dustil was too busy being Malak to give either of them a close look, but he appreciated that Inse had broken enough to start to try and compete with her sister: both girls were wearing figure-hugging body armor that looked like it had been painted on. Made it easy to appreciate Inse’s lean hardness contrasted against her sister’s fantastic rack—

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“Lord Tenebrae,” said one of the Zabraks next to his father, “will speak for himself now… to the galaxy.”

Xxx

Their newly-purchased space yacht was fast, expensive, and a welcome luxury after months in the Kashyyyk forest—and then more time setting up production on Emmfor–78. The Blue Ghast circled the Smuggler’s Moon in the Merchant’s Orbit, so low that the ship’s pointed nose cut through clouds, revealing the lights twinkling like jewels far below.

Civilization at last, Lena thought. Such a relief after the month they’d spent on Emmfor, the remote rock the twins had found to set up their factory base. Her son had been born there, in tunnels carved by machines, attended to by newly-stamped droids, who treated them all with a reverence that was decidedly not droid–like.

It’s good to be back, she thought, staring down at the world below while they waited for docking clearances. Back to civilization, and… people. Not that the twins weren’t… people. She didn’t mean that!

Sometimes, Lena wasn’t sure what she meant. “That’s Nar Shaddaa,” she told newborn Prince, holding him up to the ferracrystal viewscreen. “I know it doesn’t look like much now, but your mama and your sisters are going to make it a nice place. For you.”

She kissed his chubby face that already had Nico’s nose and her lekku. Prince’s hands opened and closed on the viewscreen like he was trying to grab the smuggler’s moon for his own bauble, and she rocked her body back and forth, humming a song about thranta and clouds.

The tell–tale hum of the wideband interrupted their dance abruptly, bringing the galaxy back in a
“—what are we looking at, Jokka Rei?”

“I’m not sure, I—” the smooth voice of the HoloNet’s most famous announcer faltered. “Do you hear that? It’s like white noi—”

“See’raa! I told you! No news broadcasts around the baby!” Lena turned to see both twins standing before her, identically dressed in their red silksynth, head tails neatly tied and flossed.

See’raa held a remote in her hand. “The projector in our room only does blue and white,” the white Twi’lek shrugged. “And you said we were his aunties, not sisters.”

“Family, anyway.” Lena smiled, rocking Prince in her arms. “But the pediatric–droid said no screens until Prince is at least—”

“Like white light.” Jokka Rai chuckled. “Are we live? This needs to be live.”

Hush, Tee’raa signed at her with a pale lavender t’chin. Watch. It's major.

The pretty Human sitting next to Jokka Rai shrugged, looking confused. “Our director says we’re receiving some kind of announcement from the Sith Empire. It's taking over all the networks—how is that even possible—”

On all channels, the mute twin added.

“Why are Jokka Rai’s eyes red and glowing?” Lena Wee asked.

We don't know. Winka Dell on Ryloth had glowing eyes too. Tee’raa’s t’chin traced her confusion.

“Do not attempt to adjust your holo-screen,” Jokka Rai said. “Set your devices to record. Your galaxy contains approximately two hundred fifty–nine trillion sentient lives. This message is intended for one.”

There was a long pause. Then Jokka Rai’s face appeared on the screen split four ways, then three of the panels dissolved into static.

Broadcasting from unknown locations, the chyron said. Live feed.

“Why are his eyes… glowing?” Lena repeated.

Bad, Tee’raa signed, not really answering.

“One…” Jokka Rai murmured. A blaster under his chin appeared on the screen, held by his own hand.

“Two,” the woman appearing next to him whispered. Arkanian, by her coloring, the three fingers on her hand holding the knife to her own throat.

“Three,” said the boy on the third panel. Little more than a kid. Twi’lek. Blue. He was dressed like a Jedi padawan, and was pressing a lightsaber hilt to the side of his own face.

“Look away, Lena,” See’raa barked at her, as if suddenly Lena was the child here and not them.

Please, her sister added. Bad for your milk.

Lena looked down at her son. His eyes were the same brown as hers. His mouth pursed in a bow as
he made a sucking sound. His little brow ridge wrinkled and his t’chun curled on her finger.

“Four.” The fourth voice onscreen was male. She never knew more than that.

A blaster’s report, a lightsaber’s ignition, a death rattle, and what sounded like the crackle of flames. Despite herself, Lena looked up just in time to see the quarter screen dissolve and flicker before being replaced with a man’s face: glowing red eyes, a furred Human jaw, and—

“That’s Carth!” See’raa began cursing long and low in a language Lena didn't recognize. Tee’raa couldn't speak, of course, but Lena heard her take a slow breath, heard the slap of her lekku as they twisted together in mimicry of an old Ryloth grief–song.

“Do not attempt to adjust your holo–screen,” Carth repeated. “Set your devices to record. Your galaxy contains approximately two hundred fifty–nine trillion sentient lives. This message is intended for one. And trust me, Revan,” a voice said from the widescreen. Carth’s words had a strange echo, like there were others in the room, speaking with him in unison. Lots of them, all, speaking together like a hive mind. Or a flock of gan. “Those tiny deaths hurt me far, far more than it could ever hurt them—”

Xxx

“Hu’tuun show off.” Those strangers had suffered bad deaths. Canderous made a silent vow to make the madman pay—no matter how many bodies he chose to hide in.

Around them, the bridge broke out in whispered chaos, as their mostly unblooded warriors reacted to the first glimpse of their true enemy.

*The one Novasun promised. Long ago.* Canderous didn’t know the entire tale—perhaps never would. But Aemelie had let enough of the women’s secrets slip for him to understand their next battle.

“Trust me, Revan. That hurt me far, far more than it could ever hurt them. Your treachery is an act of war.” The expression on the pilot’s face wasn't his at all. His eyes were glowing red. “We are at war,” Carth’s mouth emitted a low chuckle. Next to him, his black–robed son scowled at the cam, face marked with a Sith’s ugly. “Because of you.”

“Do we know anything about the planetary defenses on Kaas?” Canderous asked Aemelie. They were already committed—he’d sent the orders for the Mandalorian ships to follow his path through hyperspace as soon as Biscain’s sun turned black. But watching that sheb–less shabuir murder innocents for the sake of taunting Revan was fuel for the fire of Canderous’s own battle–righteousness.

“Our intelligence regarding their homeworld is more than forty years old.”

“There must be Mando’ade still in that region. Send the call.”

Do not attempt to adjust your holo–screen,” Carth repeated. “Set your devices to record. Your galaxy contains approximately two hundred fifty–nine trillion sentient lives. This message is intended for one.”

“You are sure?” It was ritual that she ask, but Canderous suspected his wife had already done so.

“I am.” By all accounts, the Sith didn't have much of an army left by the time the Star Forge went, but they were hu’tuun Force–users. Worthy challenges.
Pains in his ass.

The remnants of Revan's old fleet had been sent by her to the Malachor system when she'd been little more than a shadow of herself on Manaan trying to impress Oerin Lin. From there, rumor put those that remained as pirates. But rumors, as Canderous knew well, could be wrong.

“They will come for this,” he added, smiling slowly. “Even Wies.”

“I do not trust Kissandrix. But you have an affection for Onasi as well.” Aemelie sounded surprised by that. “Your muscles have knotted tenser than a basilisk’s grapple, husband. You realize everyone in that room is doomed?”

Canderous brushed her enquiring hand aside, rolling back his own shoulders. “That piece of osik Emperor is a thousand years old or more. He’ll be fat and lazy—just as prone to overextend as the Republic. Onasi and his kid and Zaalbar aren't dead yet.”

“Neither is Seiran Wen,” his wife noted. “See? He's standing to the right of the Wookiee.” She paused. “But where is Polla? Revan claimed she was captured as well.”

The Deralian he had heard so much about was nowhere to be seen.

“We will avenge her and sing her battle song.” Canderous’s eyes went to the Wookiee again. The man would be avenged too—if need be with the rest, but he felt that old familiar pang—still expecting to see the T3 astromech at Zaalbar’s side. The real Mission did not require his vengeance—she had died for a true cause she believed in, as brave as any warrior.

But this piece of osik behind all shadows…this ancient emperor… it would be glorious to see his armies ground to sand.

An infinite empire is an endless season of war. It will be difficult. But glorious.

“Come to me, Revan,” said the evil thing using Carth’s voice. “Come to me now.”

XXX

Lord Scourge’s threats got them out of the quarantined city without a search, but Polla’s pulse hadn’t had a chance to return to normal. Now, it was taking all her concentration to keep the mag–levs balanced on this tub as the palanquin chugged through the jungle, along the road that was barely one.

Polla had just saved them from following the Bitch’s coordinates into a gully when Revan leaned across the small space and grabbed her arm. “Go up that hill,” she ordered.

The ‘hill’ in question was more of a cliff and Polla doubted the palanquin would make it. She said as much, and the woman cursed in a language that could have been Bothan, maybe. Or Bithan. Whatever. It didn’t sound like Ancient Sith.

“Your Republic slave is right, Lord Revan.” Scourge frowned. “We will need to make our way on foot, or continue by car to the main entrance.”

“The main entrance is sealed from the lower chambers,” Revan countered. “On foot it must be.”

Personally, Polla didn’t think the woman was up for it. “I’m not a Republic citizen,” she told the Sith. “Don’t fracking insult me again, Tentacles.”
“She’s impudent,” the man said as if Polla was suddenly an inanimate tree. “A dangerous quality for a slave.”

“She’s careless,” Revan responded with a shrug that almost made her fall over. “Yuthura, take her back to the city.” Revan stood up, tottering to her feet as unsteady as poor Auntie Mita there at the end.

“We will not,” Yuthura stood up and proffered an arm. “If those guards were searching for you, we might be detained—and worse.”

“It won’t matter.” The woman moved her hand and the door slid open. “Once I succeed.” She slipped out of the palanquin clumsily, ignoring the Twi’lek’s hand as Scourge followed. Yuthura stood up too—and Polla didn’t fancy her chances alone in the jungle with only the lousy needle-nose she’d managed to nick from one of the Blais guards, so she came along too.

“I said—” Revan began, scowling in a way that Polla had gotten all wrong apparently, because this scowling Revan looked more like she needed a dump than anything else. “I said, Scourge and I should go alone to the Temple.”

“Night comes early here,” Yuthura snapped. “Do you want to abandon us to our deaths?”

The woman blinked. “None of our lives mean anything compared to Tenebrae. Stopping him is what matters. I would kill you all if it was needed—all of us, including myself—”

“Are you killing me now?” Polla interrupted. “Because I think I can outrun you, and… just let me know, okay?” She took a few steps back, not liking the call of the jungle in the background. That night she and Zaalbar had spent in these wilds had been up there with the most terrifying—a category that lately seemed to be her entire life.

“Not yet.” The woman’s mouth twitched, as if they’d shared a joke.

Frick her. Looking up, there was a sort of path, cut through with switchbacks and rocky outcroppings. Didn’t look like any nexu or worse were lurking on it either. Polla started up it, despite the yelling behind her, only stopping at the half-way mark to watch as the two high-and-mighty Force users struggled to make a woman who didn’t want their help walk.

“Coming?” she asked sweetly.

Xxx

“Come to me, Revan,” said Carth’s voice. “Come to me now.”

When some Sith Lord could break through corporate Holo-Net codes and just transmit, you knew things were kind of Hutt-shaped, Lena thought.

“Is it this craphole of a screen, or are Carth's eyes glowing red too?” See’raa asked.

“Don't say craphole in front of the baby,” Lena warned.

Chiv-hole, the other twin signed with her t’chun.

“Revan,” the Sith's voice whispered, strangely resonant. High and low and every pitch between.

It took Lena a moment to realize the voice was coming not just from one voice, but from both announcers on the vid screen, Carth Onasi, and a host of glowing-eyed sentients behind him.
“What the hell have those sleemos done to Carth? Tee’raa signaled.

“Big Z is there too.” See’raa’s brown eyes were big as moons. “And Dustil? Where is that? They’re in trouble!”

“I don’t know.” The sinking pit in the bottom of Lena’s stomach increased when See’raa switched to Rakatan, and Tee’raa’s lekku signs likewise descended into incoherence.

“Revan,” the voices repeated. “I commend your persistence, but the time for feints is done—”

Xxx

“The time for feints is done,” Carth’s mouth said. The words echoed, spoken in unison from at least a dozen throats, but all Revan could do was stare at the holo–image of her husband, whose eyes were glowing, suspended above her board.

“I said I’d save you, Revan and I will—” How long ago had it been that he’d tried?

How can I save you from this, Carth? Revan had no idea.

“Dustil looks like shit,” Mekel Jin noted.

Revan felt her own voice shift between a laugh and a sob. “You're sure Dustil’s not Malak? That asshole just called him Malak.”

“He's faking being Malak.”

“How do you know?” Shouldn’t I know?

“I know him. What the frack is wrong with him?”

“What’s wrong with Carth?” But she knew. A part of her knew. Red eyes. Red eyes are bad.

—the time for feints is done,” Carth’s voice repeated, not sounding like himself at all. “Our bargain… Revan.…” Her husband’s body walked across the room, pacing closer until it filled the entire screen.

“Come to me,” he chuckled. “Our games are done, yours and mine both.”

“No,” Revan muttered. She couldn’t look away.

“I tire of games, Revan. Come to me. Now.”

“That’s the fracking idea.”

Carth’s mouth smiled. “Come out and play, my Starfire.”

“What is this?” Millifar froze in the doorway, kolto packed around her bare arm. “What is your husband doing, Third Wife?”

“Revan.…” A slow stamp of feet created a drumbeat effect behind him. Then the plinking sound of something Revan’s mind took a moment to place as an electro–harp, of all things, echoing the sound. The camera pulled out again: showing Zaalbar and Seiran and Dustil. Zaal had a collar around his neck. Seiran was wearing red robes. And Dustil did look like shit—wearing armor and a cape, yellow eyes burning nearly as bright as his father’s.
“Carth’s possessed.” She felt numb. “That’s Tenebrae, the Sith Emperor. He possesses bodies. He has millions of them. Billions, maybe. Somehow… he has Carth too.”

“Yeah,” Mekel said. “I know. I’ve met the asshole.”

“Revvaaannn,” Carth’s mouth stretched her name out like a shudder. “Come to me. Come out and play.”

“All of your magic.” Millifar spat on the floor. “It always goes wrong. Did you know we’re stopping at the World of Tombs? Aemelie insists and Father gave in.”

“The what?” We can’t stop. There’s no time.

Later, Revan would have time to think of what she could do—time to think of what resources she had. But that was later.

“What is this banthashit, Vitiate?” Carth’s son sounded nothing at all like he had when Malak’s ghost had possessed him. “She’s in a fracking coma. She’s not hiding on this planet—”

“Not this planet.” The tramp of feet and that fracking plinking music kept on in the background, grating on Revan’s nerves until she thought she might scream. “But she and I were just speaking… on… what world was that, again?” That smile of his pulled Carth’s lips too thin, made his face look like a skull.

“I don’t care.” The kid folded his arms across his chest. He was wearing some kind of armor. “How much longer is this going to be?” His eyes were yellow, the skin around them bruised like a stim junkie on a spice binge. His hand fell to the saber on his belt and he took a step forward—

Behind him, incredibly, a young woman giggled and blew a kiss.

“Come to me, Revan,” Carth’s mouth repeated. “Do come and plaay——”

“Frack this,” Dustil snapped, and raised his hand in a fist.

The image cut out abruptly, replaced by red glowing–eyed news announcers with the HoloNet logo.

“Technical difficulties, Revan,” one of them sighed. “Come to me.”

XXX

“Come to me, Revan,” his father’s mouth said. That fracking electroharp in the background went plink, plink, plink. “Do come and plaay——”

“Frack this.” Dustil was tired of the games. He raised his hand in a fist. The cameras sparked and exploded.

Anger felt good. Actually… it all felt good. The Sith Emperor, taking him seriously. The two Blais girls watching. The knowledge that this was all banthashit—that Revan was never going to wake up, and their revolution was going to take this asshole Vitiate down.

“That was rash, Lord Malak.” His father’s mouth chuckled. “Sometimes I forget how young you are. So terribly young and strong.” Vitiate’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I’m so proud.”
The light in his eyes faded out sharply. And then Dustil’s father collapsed like a powered-down droid—or would have—if Dustil hadn’t extended the Force to catch him a few seconds before Zepth and Takan rushed to his rescue—like Dustil hadn’t been there first.

“Wuh...what happened?”

“You’re back.” Dustil turned his head and the two Zabrak backed off. He tried to sound like he didn't give a shit, like he hadn't been watching this whole time—thirty minutes now, that the asshole occupied his father’s body. Once, it had been five minutes, max. But it was getting longer every time now. Every fracking time.

“Wuh—what—” his father wobbled on his feet and Dustil hated the man suddenly because now was still the worst time to show weakness. Again. Just like every time.

“No fracking idea.” But that wasn’t what Malak would have said. “I do not know,” he added coldly. “Lord Tenebrae wants to be a vid star now. He went on the holovid to tell Revan to come here.”

“Is she coming?”

Too easy to hate Father even more for that hope in his voice.

“Does it matter?” Dustil asked him. “Aren't we leaving for war?”

XXX

The screen fizzled out abruptly before resuming, emblazoned with a Fleet Logo.

*Live from Byss, read the chyron. Fleet Holo-Net.*

“What is this?” Admiral Rew Ekkumi demanded.

*“Lord Malak is so rude,”* the Toydarian announcer chirped from the comm screen. His gossamer wings fluttered. *“Come to me, Revan. Come out and play.”*

*“Come out and play,”* the decorated Wing Commander next to him echoed. She was Rishii, and her feathers fluffed, yellow and pink under the overlights. Her beak clacked, one two, three, in a rhythmic discordance.

*“Come and play,”* hissed the Trandoshan Rear Admiral. *“Now, Revan, come to me.”*

“That’s Yuffall Iskar,” her lieutenant gasped. “What’s wrong with them?”

“That’s that Sith Emperor,” Rew muttered. “Iskar’s possessed. The bastard’s infiltrated Fleet.”

Unease prickled at the back of Rew’s neck and she whirled around, half-expecting her own crew to have red glowing eyes too—but they all stared back at her, as astonished—or relieved—as she was.

*This was what that Force-eater was going to stop. Before Revan stopped him. We could have stopped both of them first—*

“Patch me through to Rensha,” she told Lieutenant Abrad. “If she’s still in charge, I’d like to hear her plan for this.”

XXX

The air was dim and stifling, as if the presence of the Dark Temple dimmed the weak sun above. A
cloud of blood–biting insects buzzed interminably around her head until Revan cleared them away with a weak push of the Force. Her armored boots sank in the mud as they ascended the trail.

At her side, Yuthura murmured words of encouragement.

It was humiliating to need help up a simple cliff that Revan remembered clearing with a Force leap, but she was not fool enough to admit a further weakness by falling on her face.

She had accepted Yuthura’s arm. Scourge had forged ahead, passing the rash Deralian, traversing the overgrown path that Revan remembered all too well from before.

Long before, when the galaxy had been at her feet and Revan presumed she had the means to put Tenebrae beneath the ground….

XXX

“Not much farther.” The being inhabiting her husband’s body chuckled, hanging back, as Revan slashed at the overgrown jungle with her lightsaber. “Not much farther, my Starfire.”

Her foot tripped on uneven ground, and Revan nearly stumbled as her boot landed on something hard and smooth and round. Despite years of war and death, she heard herself gasp as she realized it was a skull.

Revan looked down, more carefully. What she had assumed to be merely tangled underbrush and branches concealed a layer of bones. More bones than she could count. Ragged pieces of cloth and armor covered some—others jutted out of the dirt, bleached and stained by the elements. Beasts had scattered them and broken them.

It was impossible to tell how many had died here.

Her eyes fell on something silver protruding from a pile of dank leaves. Revan reached out and a long-dead Sith’s lightsaber flew into her free hand. A wavering red beam extended when she ignited the thing. The crystal was cracked and fused.

Worthless. Revan tossed it aside. “More sacrifices, Tenebrae?” She kept her voice bland. “I thought we had enough of those at my coronation.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Malak’s breath rasped through the prosthesis she’d had so carefully made, although Malak’s mind was nowhere to be found in what remained of his expression.

But Mal will come back. He always comes back—Revan forced her thoughts into cold lines. “Then, speak,” she told her enemy.

A gurgling noise might have been a chuckle. “These are all who came before you. I searched for a long time for my sith’ae’rah—centuries, in fact. You have no idea the difficulty—molding the right circumstances, finding a child with enough power… not losing them to madness or assassination….”

Molding? Revan’s foot stumbled again on what looked like a piece of hip. “Did you tell each of them that they were the chosen one too?”

Tenebrae didn’t answer, coming up close behind Revan, close enough to make her skin crawl. His arm—Malak’s arm—slipped familiarly around her waist. Her husband’s chest breathed in and out, the prosthesis wheezing in her ear.
Needs adjustment again, the calm part of her mind whispered. The valves keep coming loose on
his thorax. When we return to the palace, I will see to it.

“Look,” the Emperor hissed softly. “There, my Starfire. Ahead, through the trees.”

“It’s a door.” She would not give him the satisfaction of her fear.

XXX

Her steps were just as even now, even as the bones crunched under her boots. I passed the test
before and I will do so again. There is no question, no doubt—

“Hey! These are fracking bones!” Polla’s surprised shriek interrupted her reverie. “What the hell
happened here?” She held up a skull by its jawbone, waving it at Revan. “Did you kill all these
people?”

“No.” Revan took a deep breath, steeling herself. She could not warn the Deralian or the Twi’lek,
because they might stop her, out of some misguided notion to preserve Revan—or their own
skins. I did suggest you both wait in the car. “They did not all die at the same time, but over
centuries. Millennia. If you were to descend far enough into the sediment, the remains would cease
to be humanoid. This is the Sith’s Dark Temple; but it was built upon the foundation of something
far older.”

Tenebrae was not the first to sacrifice here. May he be the last. May we be the last.

“That archway contains the door,” Revan continued, as the heedless smuggler turned back toward
the Temple itself. “It has traps for the unwary. Unless you want to die, Polla Organa, let me enter
first.”

“Sure.” The woman stopped still in the tall grass. “Be my fracking guest.”

Finiris—Scourge—paced beside Revan. “Is this the entrance that can only be opened by the
sith’a’e’rah?”

She had not told him that—not specifically. Revan frowned, and he chuckled. “The Dark Temple’s
secret chamber was a bedtime story on my homeworld. Only the most worthy of children would
enter. There was a time when I imagined it full of sweetened drak tails and blue milk confection.”

Revan allowed herself a small smile. “I’m afraid it does not contain anything so piquant.” Of
course there would be legends. Tenebrae searched a long time for me. In this Empire and in ours.

“Ah,” the Sith smiled. “I have missed your humor, my lord.”

“That’s just sad.” Polla coughed. “If we live through this, Revan, remind me to tell you what a real
joke is.”

Her laughter felt hollow. “Oh, I know jokes, Deralian.”

XXX

The door to the chamber slid open easily beneath her fingertips. The interior glowed to life as she
stepped through.

“Here we are, Starfire. Your tomb.”

Malak’s body towered over the crystalline dome in front of them. Revan felt the Force ripple as she
placed her hands on the mirrored places across its surface, feeling the same burning numbness she had felt at the door.

The indentations were made for Rakatan hands, that now—familiar three—fingered shape. Her own fingers moved to fit.

The humming in the air seemed to increase. Now, the crystal was warm under her touch, not cold at all. The Force rippled again in her mind, like the echo of a whisper.

Come.

“You said not yet,” Revan said out loud, although in that moment she could almost… feel the Emperor inside her own mind—like a durasteel grip, the brush of a battering cannon, unbreakable chains. Linked— “We agreed I had ten years left.”

“Oh, I remember.” Tenebrae’s thoughts were there too, almost palpable under her hands. Ageless. Deathless. Black and as cold as space—pricked by a billion points of light and each one of those lights—

Light. To see—

A child on a nameless world turned his head.

To see him again.

A woman on another threw a stone into a silver lake. Eight—legged beasts came down to the water on the opposite shore, raising their serpentine heads.

To see everything.

A man sat alone on a bed waiting for his lover. It was Third—day, their normal time and they were late.

An old woman sang a song to the infant on her lap, brushing back the curls around its horns—

A guttersnipe stole a wallet in a city paved with ferracrystal tiles—her fear shifting to the exaltation of victory as the alarms beneath her feet flashed red and gold—

Everyone.

“Oh.”

“I did say not yet.” Malak’s voder hissed in the silence with Tenebrae’s chuckle. “But the tomb calls you now, does it not?”

“Yes.”

Revan had expected another Malachor. She had expected death, she had expected nothing—she had not expected to… to want.

She had not expected a part of her to want to stay—

I could see him. Somewhere, among all of those sparks—someday—if he lives—I could see—

But Revan pulled her hands away. The tomb’s curved top had begun to apex open, light shining from inside. And inside—
Revan looked down and wished she had not.

“Who was she?”

“Was it a she?” Tenebrae walked away with Mal’s stride, stalking the length of the tomb like a man already bored. “I scarcely remember. I was young then too.”

The humming noise had stopped with her hands’ retreat. The tomb’s surface spiraled shut again. The light inside dimmed, and the shriveled thing within faded back to an indistinct blur.

“Now you see,” the madman whispered. Malak’s body moved around the tomb to face her, looking down—blank curve of metal where he should have had a mouth. “We are as equals now. Sith’ae’rah to sith’ae’rah. Shall we conquer the galaxy?”

We must. I still need you. “Good.” Revan felt unsteady with relief, allowing herself a small moment of mirth. “Because I had my servants set charges around the base of the Temple, yesterday. If this had been some kind of trap for me—”

“Of course you did.” A burbling chuckle, not Malak’s at all. “As if this vault could be so easily broken.”

“I used allucrete explosives. They’re quite powerful.”

“Oh, Starfire.” Malak’s eyes burned scarlet, narrowing to slits, as his voice tinged into mockery. “Do you truly think I haven’t learned your patterns?” The madman seized her hands, tracing a finger across the palm of her right. “We are made from the same cloth. There are no allucrete charges.”

“No, there are not.” I had no time or there would be. Her hands tightened on Malak’s, nearly crushing the bones. “But I—”

“I’ve noted your instructions to your new flagship as well.” Tenebrae’s voice shifted into a metallic, but uncanny, imitation of her own. “Reduce these coordinates to a plain of smoldering glass if I don’t comm and tell your otherwise by oh–twenty–seven hundred!”

Revan breathed in and out, evenly. She felt the small bones in Malak’s hand pop and she forced her own hands to open, drop their grasp. “Actually, I amended it to thirty hours. One full day.”

“Did I ever tell you, during your little war with the Mando’ade I made Admiral Karath mine?”

She refused to show a reaction. I should have known. “Who else? I found out about Corporal Ekosigan and Knight Rischa. They’re dead.”

“Indeed.” Another chuckle. “We feel them go, of course. At least… I do. Little lights winking out….”

“There are always more bodies, aren’t there.” Revan met his eyes evenly, trying to picture them gray and kind. Trying to remind herself that behind every sentient he possessed could be a man like Malak… had been. Once.

If we are equals I can win. I will have ten years before I go to the tomb forever. Ten years to conquer two empires and end this.

In ten years I can win.
XXX

But she had not had ten years.

*I had nearly four. It wasn't enough.* Forty might not be enough—not when he has billions and I am one—but I have to try—better this weak body in the tomb than her. Better he is forced to treat with me than that he draws her into his traps. She's as naive as this Deralian child. She has no chance against him—

“Revan?” Yuthura’s voice was a soft whisper in Revan’s ear. When had the woman gotten so close? “Whatever it is you propose to do, are you strong enough?”

“I have to be.”

“You just almost tripped on your own boot.” The Twi’lek took her arm with near–professional assurance, but Revan felt Yuthura’s grip on her arm tense as they approached the black maw of the entrance. The doors to the Temple’s base were not as impressive as the ones in the front but they still towered meters above their heads, inset within a plinth.

“What is that on the door face?” The Twi’lek noted a millisecond before Revan did—her eyes adjusting more quickly to the dim. “Some kind of seal?”

“No.” Revan motioned them all away. “Step back.”

The artificial hand. I didn’t think. Will it still work—if this will work at all—without both of my hands?

**Fool. I will not be denied this easily! It must!**

The mechanism—the circular plate that spanned both doors was as seamless and smooth as it had been the first day she’d seen it. Revan put her flesh hand on the right side first; immediately feeling the tell–tale burn as the ancient Rakatan device scanned her skin. The light was just as blinding as it had been before, emanating out from her hands, from her skin—making a tracery of light through her veins—

*If this doesn’t work, it’s over.* Revan’s metal palm joined its counterpart, golden fingers aligning with the grooves set in the left side.

The nerves were artificial, the shock slightly dulled, but the light surged there too.

“What’s she doing?”

“Step farther back. Allow the doors to open.” Scourge had fallen behind them. He said more but his words dissolved into a haze of blinding light—

XXX

At this point, Polla was used to the Force. She’d seen lightning, she’d seen sents levitate things, she’d been Force choked.

But what was happening to Revan now was new. It was… something else.

“She’s glowing.” Polla's voice felt thin and unimportant compared to the woman who looked like she was made of light standing in front of them with her hands upon the door.

The light traced capillaries through Revan’s skin, through both of her hands—the flesh one and the metal. Her head turned back toward them, and Polla could see it racing through her skin, through
her closed eyelids.

The woman was smiling.

There was a creaking noise and then the doors slid open.

Revan stepped back, and all the light died. “It worked.” Her voice was faint, and she wavered on
her feet before Yuthura rushed in to support her. “It worked.”

Polla noticed she sounded surprised. *Not so confident after all?*

The Twi’lek was quiet, lekku wrapped around her neck in a way that Polla had come to realize
meant she was stressed.

“You okay?” Polla didn't really think, she just went to Revan’s other side before the Bitch fell over.

“No. I should go first. Alone.” The woman pushed away, taking unsteady steps forward. The light
had continued from behind the door, illuminating everything so that Revan was backlit as she
stepped inside. “You may follow now,” she continued, as if she was in charge. (Was she now? She
was why they were fracking here, wasn’t she?)

*In for a credit, in for a planet.* Polla followed.

XXX

*Shai’cho. N’ha, Eskai.*

Mekel watched Revan move through the basic Forms in the improvised training space they’d set up
in what should be the ship’s sleeping quarters. They were going to take turns sleeping in the
cockpit in shifts as per Millifar’s orders—because it was easier to do what Milli wanted than to
argue more.

Standing there in an old Republic flight suit, Mekel’s cousin was hotter than she had the right to
be—nearly as hot as that brunette rack that had been simpering behind Dustil on the broadcast.

Objectively, hotter than Millifar—especially this grim, strange Millifar, who didn't smile at
Mekel’s jokes.

*But Revan's your cousin, asshat.* It should have been Dustil's voice and not Mekel’s own mind, but
it wasn't.

At least it wasn't desire Mekel felt looking at his cousin (now that he knew she was his cousin) —it
was more like envy. Had Mekel moved like that? So assured in the Force, like every part of his
body was a cog in a coordinated machine? Now, when Mekel worked out the sweat stung his eyes
and his muscles ached as his breath ran short. All those weaknesses—the Force had eased them
away. Without it, he was nothing.

Mekel'd sparred with Milli earlier—until she'd gotten angry and told him to stop pulling his attacks,
that she could easily withstand his full strength.

Mekel had been fighting with everything he had. Everything he had…*now.*

Revan twirled her single blade over her head with the kind of flourish that would get you stabbed in
the gut on Korriban, eyes going to Mekel as if she’d just noticed his existence. Her mouth twitched
in a smile. “I can switch to vibroblades if you want to spar.”
Mekel pulled one of the sabers he’d taken from the dead Jedi back on Katarr out of his sleeve. “I have my own.”

She frowned. “Are you sure? It’s difficult without the Force—”

“How would you know?” His voice came out more bitterly than he meant it.

“I fought my way through Malak’s flagship with a Force collar and a neural disruptor to rescue Bastila. Almost took Carth’s head off.”

“They left you a lightsaber?”

“Carth shot a dark Jed—a Sith.” She seemed to correct herself like she didn’t really understand the difference. “Mission broke us out of there. I’d sent her to free the others too while Carth and I went after Bastila.”

“But Shan was captured by Malak.” Mekel had never watched the entire fracking vid. He and Telos used to watch the Underground version sometimes as a laugh, but—

_Telos is still alive. It was a relief. He looks like he took dark side lessons from fracking Bandon Agare, but he’s still fracking alive._

“Not then. Not yet.” Now her eyes were a million parsecs away. “She was just in another holding cell. Malak captured Bastila and took her later.” She brought her saber up in mock salute, the blue blade buzzing aggressively, like the crystals were slightly off–kilter with her Force. “We can try and spar like this, but I’d feel safer if you were wearing cortosis—maybe an energy shield too.”

“I’m fine.” Mekel ignited his own saber—one of the two he’d taken, the one he’d liked the weight of more. The cool green blade that sparked out of it was less to like—greens had a reputation for burning slow, better suited for blocking an offense than cutting through one.

Her first cut was so fast the saber was out of Mekel’s hand before he blinked. The auto–shutoff (it would be suicide for him to use one without a safety now) cut in before it carved a hole in the floor.

“Damn. Sorry!” Cousin Revan called the hilt back to her own hand before tossing it to his.

Her second introduction was softer, too much softer, but Mekel said nothing as they squared off, pacing the small room.

“Every Sith you fight will be stronger than you. Faster than you.” Their blades clashed as she told him nothing he didn’t already fracking know. Mekel tried to slip his back under her guard… only to nearly have it flipped in his face instead. “Every Sith will have friends.”

“We’re going to fight them?”

“I don’t know yet.” She laughed bitterly. “Maybe Dar knew. She had all the answers.”

_All those Jedi died, but you don’t know what the frack we’re gonna do._

Anger didn’t make you stronger without the Force, but Mekel lit the second saber anyway. It was yellow, burning hard and clean like Bastila’s double that he’d carried once—

“Why aren’t you fighting with your double?” He gestured toward her belt.

Revan looked startled. “I… it broke.”
“Broke?”

“Yes. The crystal fused.” That frown was back on her face. “Why do you care?”

“Fused? Was it faulty?” Without the Force he'd be at the mercy of any asshole with focus and a jot of skill who might want to break Mekel’s saber.

“No.” She deactivated the blue single she was using and clipped it back to her belt. “Dak said—Dar’Revan did something to it. Cracked the emitter, fused the crystal… I don’t… I don’t know.”

“You didn't block her?”

Green eyes blazed at him. “I didn’t know how!”

“But you——” whatever he'd been about to say died at her lost expression. Seeing Revan Starfire look fracking helpless was funny—but oddly, Mekel just felt sorry for her.

“Um, I might be able to fix it,” he offered. “We...we’ve got parts.” He brandished the larger of his hilts. “I can… maybe show you some… some of how to fix it, but without the Force I can’t show you how to stop it from happening again.”

“You can fix my lightsaber?” Those green eyes widened.

“Yeah, uh….” Mekel shoved his own back in his belt and sat down on the floor of the tiny room, patting the plating of the floor next to him. “Come here. Let me take a look——”

Xxx

The crystal dome was as Revan remembered, set into the center of the floor, surrounded by an elaborate metalwork pattern that looked like petals of a flower.

Goodbye, she thought to the others behind her, although there was no point in voicing a farewell aloud. She pulled herself free from Yuthura’s grasp and walked forward slowly, aware of her body’s weakness, trepidation slowing her steps until she forced them forward again. Sheris might hesitate, but Revan would not. She never had.

Without another word, she placed her hands on the crystal dome in the places inset on its surface, as she had before—

XXX

The indentations were made for Rakatan hands, that now–familiar three–fingered shape. Her own fingers moved to fit.

The humming in the air seemed to increase. Now, the crystal was warm under her touch—

XXXX

But now the crystal remained cold and silent. The light that had come from above when the tomb doors opened was fading now, like a swift–setting sun.

“What’s this?” Polla’s voice behind. Startled. “Mission?”

Are you not even paying attention, Deralian? It would not matter soon.

I can’t move until this works. Revan frowned at the crystalline surface. It remained obstinately dark. Nothing sang in her mind. Her flesh fingers were cold.

She felt nothing at all.

“Is that Lord Revan’s astromech?” Finiris sounded distracted too. “What’s that attached to it?”


“Revan?” Yuthura, at least, was there to witness her sacrifice, voice deferential, perhaps a meter behind. “What are you doing?”

Revan turned her head. “This is the tomb. I’m opening it.”

The crystalline dome remained cold and silent beneath her hands, as if mocking that statement.

“I thought we were already in the tomb.” The Twi’lek sounded concerned for Revan more than confounded by their current circumstance. Footsteps stepped lightly beside hers as the woman’s elbow nudged her arm gently. “I could see how much the walk took out of you, if you need my help to walk again—”

“This is the tomb. It will open. I opened the door. Now the tomb will open and I will—I’ll go into it.” Revan had often wondered what it would feel like—like the ice closing above her head on a still lake, the stuff of childhood nightmares. But that feeling, the one she had felt before—all of those voices—

I won’t be alone. Even if I will be with Tenebrae—all of those other eyes. I must not forget—

“Hey! Wobbly! Can you use your lightsaber to cut through this cable? Mission? She’s broken!” Polla sounded more worried about the droid than the end of Revan’s corporeal existence. Of course, how could the woman truly understand—

“Lord Revan?” Finiris touched Revan’s shoulder. “Have you found what you sought? The light is fading.”

“The tomb will open.” Revan willed it, summoning everything she had in the Force. “I opened it before!” But Tenebrae had been here before, in the guise of Malak. He had told her an attendant was ceremonial—a witness, but was he needed—had it been him who had opened the crystal and not her at all? Her metal hand slammed down hard against the flawless faceted surface.

It did not break.

“Revan?” Yuthura put her own hand carelessly on the domed surface, over Revan’s flesh one, squeezing its fingers. “The light—”

“It will open,” Revan insisted again, a larvae of doubt twisting in her guts. Open. I am here. I surrender. I need you to open for me—

“What the frack are you doing?” Polla’s voice, accusing, behind. “Mission’s stuck in here. Are you stuck too?”

“This is the tomb,” Revan told them all, even as all light died. Blackness painted her eyes, leaving only the sounds of the others, the muffled feelings of them in the Force. “It will open, and I will go
inside.”

She remembered the shriveled thing already occupying it and shuddered, imagining herself joining it in its long embrace. Had that been Tenebrae’s body once?

Xxx

“There were to be two,” the red–eyed monster chuckled with her husband’s rotting mouth. “Me and you. Myself and the other. But I have been alone for so long—”

Xxx

“Revan.” Yuthura said again, as Scourge took Revan’s elbow, and pulled her away. The Twi’lek raised her hand, and a glowing orb of light appeared hovering above her palm, casting a ring of light around them. “The outer doors have closed behind us.”

“Are we all supposed to be trapped in here with you?” Polla sounded furious. “Because I’m not going to fracking die for you.”

“I told you to wait in the palanquin,” Revan snapped, straightening and shaking off both Scourge and Yuthura. In the dim light of Yuthura’s Force–globe, the Deralian was scarcely more than a robed blur in the dark.

“Mission!” Polla turned back to a small hunched shape that Revan realized was the Fragment’s Rakatan astromech, her robed shadow bending over it as if Revan had stopped being of interest at all. “She’s gotta have an emergency activation switch, right? Maybe if we do a hard reboot—”

“Did the droid break my tomb?” How did she gain entrance? Revan pulled the borrowed lightsaber from her belt and ignited it, more for a light source than a threat, although Polla jumped back at her approach.

“Careful with that thing!” Fear radiated off the Deralian, echoing in the Force—and then nearly as fast with another one if her incessant demands. “Hey! Can you use that thing to cut this cable and get her free?”

Behind them, Yuthura or Scourge knocked against something hollow. Tap, tap, tap. Faint. Like the sound of footsteps.

“What was that?” Finiris—Scourge’s voice asked.

“The door?” Yuthura turned, the globe of light with her, leaving them all in shadow.

The door? How did this droid open it? Revan knelt next to the astromech who might have broken her tomb and raised her saber to see the connection it had with the floor more clearly. Polla’s eyes were wide and startled next to her in the near–darkness, rolling back to the whites.

“Don’t hurt her!” the Deralian said nonsensically as Revan carefully lowered her blade to cut the cable and free the T3—just as the irritating and erratic woman had asked.

Tap, tap, tap, came the sound behind them again.

“That’s the door,” Yuthura said. “Definitely the door.”

“What?” Polla’s voice echoed when she raised it. “Who the frack would be knocking at the door to a tomb?”
Sheris’s body jolted with an irrational stab of fear, as her weak senses finally noted what Revan would have felt in her own body immediately.

Blackness. Cold and as abstract as space.

“It’s Tenebrae,” Revan told them. The cable that had grown from the floor to attach to the deactivated T3 severed easily, leaving only a faint scorch mark where her blade graced the astromech’s metal skin. She forced her voice to efficiency, to calm as she stepped away and clipped the hilt back on her belt. This is my tomb. He wants me here as much as I do. “Good. Perhaps he can open the crystal.”

XXX

While Revan her high and Dark Lordiness had been fracking with the curved glass thing that looked like a coffin in the middle of the room, Polla had been scanning the perimeter of their prison looking for an exit. As the light faded, she found it—the faint breeze as much evidence as the slightly darker, rectangular shadow low against the wall on the chamber’s far left. As the light faded, for a second, the shadows made it clear: a small, roughly–astromech–shaped hole cut into the wall.

“You make a better door than a window,” Auntie Mita used to say when Polla got in her way. Well. Seemed that the astromech had gone and just made a door. How? It didn't matter.

Knock, knock, knock, went the noise at the closed door again.

“It’s Tenebrae,” Revan told them all, sounding almost… happy about it, especially for someone who had insisted they sneak out here without the emperor knowing. “Good. Perhaps he can open the tomb.”

“And let us out?” Polla thought about mentioning the hole in the wall, but it didn't look like Scourge would fit through, and she didn't want to get Mission in trouble—even if the astromech looked fried now, like whatever she’d done had broken her.

Revan didn't bother to answer, just stood up straight. From this angle, Polla had a good view of her armor–clad knees shaking with the effort.

The light returned a millisecond later, like a switch had flipped, emanating from overhead like a sun. Abruptly, the now–open doorway was the new darkness, with a group of figures silhouetted in its entrance. The horns on the Zabrek kids were unmistakable—

“Tenebrae,” Revan said, lifting her chin. “You’ve arrived just in time.”

“Sheris?” Zepth’s voice—Takan’s was a little deeper—chuckled. “Just in time for what?”

“I’m not Sheris,” the woman practically growled. “I opened the chamber. I agreed to go into the tomb. I will go immediately. All you must do is open the seal—”

“Oh? Is that all?” A dark chuckle. “My Starfire, the mechanism won’t open for me. It’s your tomb. I have my own, you know—and I must say, it has never broken. Do you know I had a group of technicians look for flaws in the wiring of this place a few centuries past?” Zepth’s shoulders shrugged, and behind him and Takan a long row of red–robed guards circled the room’s perimeter.
“There were no circuits to fail… no lock to be broken—just a weakness in the previous sith’ae’rah.”

“But you must have some way—we opened it before. I’ve agreed to our bargain. I’ll go in now—”

“I gave you that opportunity.” Tenny–bro had that tone he got, like everything that they did was a joke. It made Polla want to kill all the billions of him. “Your chance to fix this. If your brilliant mind and this fragile body had been strong enough to open the tomb as easily as you opened the front door…” the voice trailed off, and both Zabrak heads turned in the direction of Lord Wobbly. Tenebrae laughed. “The front door is a mere genetic lock. I had it set for you when you found your first Star Map. But the tomb… the tomb selects its own. The tomb requires power. Raw and pure.” He chuckled. “Was this copy of Revan strong enough to open the tomb, Lord Scourge?”

“She was not,” the Sith said flatly. “As you suspected, your Luminance.”

“There are times when being right is the true tragedy,” the Emperor sighed with Zepth’s mouth. “Don’t you think I would prefer your elevated discourse to the mind of an uncouth Deralian smuggler, Revan? But we all make sacrifices for galactic harmony.”

Yuthura took a step back, lekku lashing around her neck, a step closer to Polla and away from Scourge.

“You called him?” Polla guessed. “Wobbly, you called fracking Tenny-Bro on us?”

Scourge ignored Polla’s question and turned his head toward Revan, who was staring at him, her face hardening into something like the cold rage Polla had seen on the vids.

“Finiris…?” she said. Just that. One word. Scourge’s real name.

“I swore an oath to Darth Revan.” The Sith folded his arms, staring down at the armored woman glaring at him. “I swore to follow the Sith Lord who knew we had to use the slaves to achieve our objective—not… save them. I swore an oath to a woman who was too prudent for chaos. Who held the means to destroy us but knew not to use it—not before we were ready to replace that chaos with order—”

“Revan has been gone for years,” Takan’s voice interrupted smugly. “Long enough for even her most… devout followers to have second thoughts.”

“Finiris,” Revan repeated. “You were never supposed to follow me. You were supposed to lead them—”

“Slaves are not led.” The Sith pureblood’s voice dripped with his disgust. “They are told. They are tools for our Houses.”

_Wobbly’s a traitor?_

_All those cells of slaves we visited with him._ Polla felt numb. _All those people. Does this mean he turned them all in?_ It had been a week since she’d heard from the Twi’leks in the sewers—the rebel cell Scourge was supposed to supply with explosives. Did this mean they were dead?

“You fracking asshole!” Polla’s fist curled and she lunged forward, ready to get at least one good hit in—only something that felt like an invisible hand pulled her back, almost impaling her on one of Revan’s metal-plated epaulets.

“No,” the woman murmured in her ear, the barest whisper. “Not yet.” A metal hand slid around
Polla’s waist, locking her in place, keeping her back. “He’d kill you in an eye–blink.”

Zepth’s mouth chuckled, as if their display of unity was fracking funny to Tenny–Bro. His voice sneered. “So touching, Lady Sheris—your concern for the nulls and broken things. Our time together with you and your companions has been the most interesting diversion. But the real you is coming.”

“No.” Revan shook her head. “As I told you and Finiris, the other body is dead—”

The world upended, as something that felt like a giant hand ripped Polla and Revan apart, sending Polla spinning across the floor and Revan slamming into the wall so hard that her armor crunched.

_Owww_. Polla lifted her head cautiously in time to see Revan rise against the wall’s dark surface dangling against it as if from an invisible cable.

_Frack this Force. Really frack it to hell_— the world seemed to freeze for Polla—all lost in a haze of pure terror. _I don't want to die like this. Breathe_. She heard her exhale come out too fast, and took another quick breath in. _Breathe. I don't want to die._

Pinned to the wall, her hands clutching her throat, Revan stared down steadily at her. And then—

Incredibly, the woman was trying to smile.

_Putting up a brave face, huh?_ Polla felt her own lips turn up back.

“‘We said no lies.’” Zepth advanced, and Polla was just as frozen as everyone else in the room, watching this play out with no fracking idea how to stop it. “‘We said no lies…’” Tenebrae murmured more softly, voice turning silky as he paced toward Revan, hand outstretched like he was holding her there. “‘Did you know… I just spoke to the real Revan?’” His boyish face was split by that ancient asshole's grin. “It seems she just saved us all.” He cracked his knuckles, raising his hand to cover an exaggerated yawn. “Destroyed a Force–eater, according to High Admiral Rensha’s aide that my ensign has the pleasure of bedding. The Jedi are gone too, say the rumors from Katarr. For that bounty I can't even begrudge the Starfire for killing my favorite Jenet reporter on Biscain.”

Revan’s eyes closed, and her lips moved. She didn't seem the type, but it looked like she was praying. Or cursing this fracking asshole Emperor.

“She ran a race through the stars too.” Tenebrae shrugged. “The Biscain System was where we both were, but so briefly—”

The snort that came out of Polla’s mouth was as stupid as it was automatic. _The Biscain Hundred? Her? Hell, I don't know if I could handle that—_

Her eyes went back to that armored figure pinned to the wall. Those hyper–green eyes were open again. Almost imperceptible, a shake of the head.

“The Deralian.” Takan’s body moved faster than Polla could blink, his hand suddenly closing on Polla’s jaw, wrenching her neck to the side so hard she felt the pain jolt her spine. Another heartbeat and a solid wall slammed into her back, her feet dangling a meter off the floor, and an invisible hand holding her by the throat, just like Revan—

— _next_ to Revan. She couldn’t move her head, couldn’t see anything but what was in front of her; but the woman was close, her tortured breathing rasping in Polla’s ear.
The invisible grip of the Emperor’s Force pressed down slowly on Polla’s throat. The choking noises coming out of her mouth were as involuntary as the tears. Frack you, she thought furiously. Frack you, Tenny–Bro!

“Polla Organa.” Zepth’s voice chuckling her name. “Sheris Darkstar. And my Revan. Why would she send you both first?”

What? Polla kicked her legs out hard, causing another shockwave of pain to lance through her spine, but now her head turned, cheek flat against the cold wall. Revan’s face was next to hers, head turned toward her too. The woman’s head shook, nearly imperceptible, her lips mouthed ‘no’—

No? No what? Don’t fight? Frack that. Polla heard a whine in her own throat that should have been a scream—

“My Lord Tenebrae!” Yuthura stepped forward, putting herself between them and the emperor. “You will never convince Revan to do anything if you kill these two.”

Yeah, Polla thought faintly. We know the other Revan cares. That’s why she’s not fracking here.

“Ah. And Yuthura Ban. Former Headmistress of Korriban Academy. Our beautiful union—a school where children from the heart of both of our Empires could learn together—”

The Twi’lek made a noise like a disdainful cough, deep in her throat. “Is that what she told you?”

Polla felt Revan stiffen beside her, her eyes turning toward Yuthura.

“More or less,” Revan rasped.

They fell to the ground almost in the same instant, the arm of Polla’s robe ripping along the seam of Revan’s armor. It hurt, but not as much as her leg cracking against the floor. For a second, all Polla felt was pain—but then Revan’s flesh hand grabbed her arm and it—

Lessened. Green eyes met hers, steady, but squinting with effort. The woman shook her head again, and Polla got it.

She doesn’t want me to talk. She’s… she still thinks she’s in fracking charge here?

Her bruised leg felt funny—like someone had put kolto and heat on it all at once. The ache in Polla’s shoulders she’d gotten so used to lately relaxed too. Is this the Force? It felt wonderful—or would have, if she hadn’t been so afraid.

Revan’s forehead was scrunched up and her hand shook, like whatever she was doing was hard.

“I’m okay,” Polla whispered. “You can stop—”

Those green eyes half-closed and the woman bit her lip, stubbornly shaking her head.

Above them, Yuthura Ban was still arguing with Tenebrae to spare their lives.

“Would you trade your own?” The Sith Emperor asked. “Lady Ban?”

“How could I serve you dead?” The Twi’lek asked. “I was her friend. Unlike the rest of your servants… this Revan that you seek? I know her.”

“I suspect her husbands would say that same....” The Zabraks spoke in unison, chuckling.
“Why not ask them?” Yuthura murmured. “Surely, my lord can summon them here to check?”

“Perhaps I will check with them later.” The Zabraks paced forward, voices still doubled. “So many things require my personal touch these days. As an example… it has come to my attention that there is a spot of rebellion on this planet that was not here before. An… encouragement. A new… hope, as they say.” The Zabrak kid’s boots were polished and black and he paced slowly, back and forth. “I cannot have the true Revan’s entombment ceremony disrupted by a pack of rebellious slaves thinking they might free their savior.”

“Of course not.” Revan’s voice was hoarse, mixed with the ragged sounds of her breathing. “They will not. I can speak to them—command their obedience—”

“Speak?” The Sith chuckled. “I was thinking… more of having you execute them, little shadow.” He stepped forward, raising his voice as more guards than Polla could remember the name for trooped in on his orders. “Take them,” he murmured. “Take them all to the green cells.”

Xxx

“—take them all to the green cells.” Then, the tramp of feet, more yelling, a lot more yelling. It even sounded like Polla Organa yelling a few curses—except Mission thought Polla Organa would have been smart enough not to threaten the Sith Emperor’s choobs.

Or… maybe not, actually.

Not like he cared about a pair or two. Tenny–bro had billions.

Mission kept her sensors still powered down, not daring more than cracking a slight opening in her main aperture—just in time to see the last red–robed guard disappearing with a kicking Deralian slung over his back.

She thought the odds of Polla Organa making it to the green cells was rather less the odds of Mission herself getting a straight answer from the Kaas computer as to why there seemed to be a five–hour gap in her processors from today.

It was a shame about Polla Organa, of course; but sometimes templates had to be remade, made into something stronger. Better.

Something capable of wrangling an ancient Rakatan computer mainframe spanning hundreds of worlds.

[Did you turn me off?] She beeped at the computer angrily. [That was childish. And inefficient.]

The cable it liked to use to make a connection coiled up from the floor hopefully. Someone had sliced through the joiner and Mission wasn’t wild about those glowing blue sparks

[No way,] Mission told it, rolling back toward the door she’d made. [You’re not plugging that thing in again. Uh–huh. What just happened?]

[The Revan part you promised was insufficient,] it said back. [Bring me the other one. Now.]

[No way, sleemo! What just happened to me?] [You were dialing the comm number for your slave Mandalorian army repeatedly,] Kaas said, sounding tired. [It was a waste of your processors and your knowledge banks. I merely ran some additional subroutines.]
[You wiped me!] Was this how Polla Revan had felt? No wonder she'd been so pissed.

[No, I merely used you to activate one of the subroutines in the Kashyyk core to wake another sleeper.] The thing sounded too smug by half. [I had to overwrite the most elementary partitioning that some juvenile entity assumed would seal off the data.]

Mission shot through the escape tunnel she’d carved with her plasma torch and out of its range—she estimated out of its range anyway—although that sparking blue cable stubbornly tried to follow her through.

[Juvenile, huh? You mean the stuff hazardous to sentient life from Kashyyk?]

[A holo–image of Malak D’Reev in a field of flowers is not hazardous to sentient life.]

[I don't believe you are qualified to assess that.] Mission snipped, rolling back up the ramp she'd carved. [But there was a lot of real bad stuff in there.]

[Stuff we need now.] Kaas told her smugly. [Now that we are at war.]

Xxx

…. Three days later….

Xxx

Carth opened his eyes in a white room, taste of the air and the faint whine in his ears telling him immediately what he was on, if not where.

A ship. Large enough to use automatic hyperdrive couplings. In hyperspace from the way they’re ticking. I—

One wall held a viewscreen, currently blacked out for privacy. A bed beneath it was large enough for six. It was the biggest officer’s spread Carth had ever seen. Quarters fit for an admiral—

Tenebrae’s High Admiral of his sithspawned Blessed Sith Armada—that’s me.

Carth coughed, trying to clear what felt like a wall of crap from his chest, and wiped his eyes, blinking. He looked down and found he was dressed in the Imperial uniform. His face reflected, muddled but smooth–shaven, in the mirrored toes of his polished boots.

I lost more time, how much—


He remembered Dustil, pacing slowly away from him down the hall. Carth remembered calling his son’s name and that shocked expression, before Dustil shook his head and kept walking, the wings of his cape flaring like wings—

Carth remembered the window of a shuttle, an officious aide by his side. A note scrawled in front of him, drawn in blood from the man’s wrist: Going to war, dear admiral. Notes in your quarters!

He remembered being naked in the fresher, scented water raining down in mist, his head spinning like it was drugged with spice—

He remembered his head aching, the tramp of booted feet, the vast, transparisteel display of a
And now the world resolved to this. On the console next to Carth’s bed, another note. **Back soon. Don't start war without me!**

A light chimed on the console and Carth blinked at it dumbly.

“Uh, answer,” he mumbled, biting back another cough. Allergies, maybe. Sometimes the change from atmo to life support played havoc with his sinuses. “Go ahead.”

“Darth Malak requested we alert him when you woke, sir. Uh… do you want us to do that?” The kid on the comm sounded nervous. Carth was pretty sure he was one of the ensigns he’d never heard speak, only bow when Carth had toured the Sith Navy’s installation. They were woefully short on men—he’d had the chance to meet nearly every one. He should know this kid’s name, but the face on the viewscreen was generic. Human. Too damn young for this.

“Darth Malak's here?”

“No, he's on the *Grave Bright*, but he's coming. He... uh, he said he'd come immediately when you woke up, but I… I have to ask you a question first—”

“What?”

The door slid open, and there the kid was in the flesh, switching the commlink on his arm off and, blinking at Carth cautiously.

*A guard on my room? From Dustil? Or another trap?*

“Your eyes…” the kid muttered, looking like he was trying not to meet them. He punched the door shut behind him, and stood there, blinking for another second. “Eyes check out. Um, Lord Malak wanted to know what you got him for his… eleventh birthday.”

“What?” But then Carth got it. *He wants to know if it's me.* “Why is Lord Malak on a ship at all?”

“He’s… he’s commanding the *Grave Bright*, sir. Uh, your… the Emperor’s orders.”

“And this is…” for a moment he couldn’t remember what he’d named his damned flagship. “We’re on the *Kaas City Sojourn*?”

“Of course. Um, can you answer the question? Lord Malak… he… he gets impatient. He’s been waiting for you to come back and he said to comm the *second* I knew.”

“A model speeder—wait!” He held up his hands, suddenly aware the holsters at his belt were empty, and the kid was holding a gun.

The boy shook his head. “He–he said you might get it wrong once. But then I should shoot. It's only a stun. I’m–I'm sorry. I have to do what he says. He made me. Him and that… her.”

*Her?*

“Wait,” Carth repeated, stepping forward. The kid waved the gun at him like it would be a deterrent, but Carth just nodded carefully. “Eleventh, you said?”

*First year of the war? We were moved from Dxun to Serroco, and I—I got him—*

“Nothing. I–I lost track of time that year. Messed up my dates—too many planets. Called to ask
what he’d wanted, and it was already two weeks late.”

The kid nodded slowly and traced a few symbols on his wrist. “Okay,” he breathed, as the comm flashed green.

“Admiral Onasi? About damn time you got back.” Dustil’s voice sounded relieved, Carth thought. “I’m heading to my shuttle now. I’ll comm from there.”

“Shuttle? But we’re in hyperspace—”

“The channel’s more secure.” Dustil’s comm cut out abruptly.

Carth bit back asking how long it had been because the chron above the kid’s head told him. *Three days. Tenebrae was in me for three days? Or knocked me out and drugged me?* He remembered the fresher and the smell of spice—

“Status, Ensign?” he demanded hoarsely, trying to clear the bantha in his throat.

“We're five days out, sir.”

“From?”

“From our first engagement in his Gloriousness’s Fifth Republic War.”

*Fifth? Wait. Wait a minute. We made it to Felucia in less than a week?* Carth coughed again. *Gotta be some kind of record.

“Give me a map of the system,” he instructed, trying not to cough again. “Along with any of the scout reports.” *Gotta figure out how to lose the fastest.*

*And why my son has his own damn command.*

A map appeared in front of Carth. Single-star system, an old red dwarf with one small planet orbiting. No moons, just a belt of debris that might have been one, once. It could be anywhere. It was definitely not Felucia, or Duros, or any other of the targets they’d discussed in those Dark Council meetings.

Carth waved his hand to heighten the image, bring the planet in closer, squinting at the translation of the Sith runes someone has helpfully included.

*Medriaas,* the translation said. *The World of Tombs.*
XXX

The Wars, They Will Be Fought Again

Chapter 64 / The Wars, They Will Be Fought Again

The sky overhead on Malachor V burned bilious yellow, choking the air with ash like bits of bone. Parts of the planet’s core had cracked and oozed, revealing bubbling pits of magma amidst the debris of wrecked ships and scorched ground.

There had been a time before the war when Meetra’s master had made her study the history of this world, this Mando holy ground, where no foot was to walk, where the Mando’ade proved their battle–rights in sky and stars.

But never in sand. No foot of flesh was meant to ever touch the sacred ground—

And then I killed them all.

Now, Meetra’s sandaled feet kicked up dust along a rough trail leading to the domed temple in front of them, walking behind Bao–Dur, with each step too heavy for her bones. The gravity of this place weighted Meetra, made her heart pound and her blood feel thick. Sweat stung her eyes and she rolled the sleeves of her robe up higher, but Bao did not stop, and she would not ask for respite.

Words were lost here anyway, screamed by ghosts and whipped away by wind.

But then Bao did glance back at her, and his gentle face with its soft smile mouthed something that could have been 'not much further.' Meetra summoned her resolve and then they continued on until they reached the relative shelter of the temple apse, half-hidden beneath a fallen rockfall.

There, the wind cut out abruptly, and Meetra saw the tell–tale gleam of a shield generator, protecting the temple’s structure from the worst of the elements.

“You must be tired after your journey.” The white–haired woman was an apparition in the gloom of the archway. For a moment, Meetra thought she wasn’t real.

“I slept most of the way,” she said.

“I made tea,” White–Hair offered. She was Echani, probably. Like Meetra’s old master. She smiled at them both.

Bao coughed. “I didn’t know you were here too.”

“Have we met?” The woman looked puzzled. “I'm sorry if I don't recall—I feel I surely would—”

“No.” The Zabrak shook his head. “But I used to see you, with your sisters.”

Her smile faded slightly. “But you never said hello.” Then white–hair turned to Meetra. “My name is Brianna. I am your sister.”

“My sister?” To say Meetra was surprised would be an understatement. “I’m an orphan.”

“No.” Brianna shook her head. “You are the daughter of Vima Sunrider, as am I, and my twin
Mical, and also our other brother, who has brought us both here—"

“And bids you both welcome,” came a voice from the door. A handsome blonde–haired man stood smiling at them both. “I’m Oerin, Meetra. And I'm so pleased to finally meet you!”

“Master,” Bao–Dur inclined his head in a short bow that their brother dismissed with a wave of his hand.

“Vima Sunrider?” This was some mad joke at Meetra’s expense. Or maybe another spice dream, brought on by the stress of travel. Or maybe she was dead on Loser’s Moon, and all of this since just some jape of an afterlife— “I thought she died in the wars.”

“Not everyone was so fortunate,” said her brother Oerin. “Would you care for some lunch? You may need its fortification. Her story is rather a tedious tale…."

Xxx

“I see we've come out of hyperspace.” Revan cleared her throat as thirty–odd pairs of Mandalorian eyes appraised her, standing in the doorway of the Aleema’s outer bridge.

“Obviously,” Millifar muttered. Mekel Jin leaned closer to the girl, whispering something in her ear. They both laughed.

“That's why I summoned you, Third Wife.” Aemelie gestured to the chair beside her own. “Look—"

The ferraglass panels surrounding them on three sides had been tempered for the stresses of space. Outside, the galaxy beckoned, the stars just points of light from this distance—too far removed to be real.

Revan’s attention flickered past the view to the place in the bow where the durasteel plates were blackened and buckled, where someone had installed a clumsy patch of what looked like beskar, rough against the Aleema’s smooth hull.

*Why the frack did I call it the Aleema in the first place?* Errant thoughts kept creeping in—swamping Revan's facade of control.

The place at the curved tip of the Aleema's outer bridge was demarcated by blue plasti–tape and patched raggedly. The work looked recent.

*That's where I died. Right there. On this ship.*

It had been a Coruscanti week since she, Mekel, and Millifar had reached the dreadnaught; spilling out of their cramped Aurek into a vast, half-empty hangar—to be met by Canderous Ordo wearing the mask of the Mandalore, and a squadron of half-grown men, who raised their hands to hail her like a conquering hero.

A part of Revan’s mind had measured and counted the ships in that hangar bay before she even thought—tallied them like bales of spice, noted the scars of old battles on the fighters’ hulls, the freshly–painted clan sigils, the smooth and seemingly–innocent faces of the pilots who looked at her with something like awe. That part had asked questions that made Canderous nod at her approvingly and Aemelie finally (somewhat grudgingly) hand over datapads with ships’ rosters. That part had realized that the Aleema was but one vessel in the new Mandalorian Fleet—the Fleet that followed Canderous now.
Who was following her.

Some of those fresh-faced pilots she recognized from their time in the Mandalorian Embassy on Coruscant, but most had been strangers—just as most of the bridge crew were—a mix of men and women (mostly men, and mostly young), most clad in civs or half-sets of light armor. Aside from the practicalities of battle and beskar, the Mando’ade seemed to have an informal command structure when it came to uniform—but when Revan blinked, she kept seeing quite a different scene: one with immaculate sentients in perfect lines, all dressed in Imperial black and gray—

Then she’d blink again and see this motley pack of grinning strangers—strangers who would vowed to take her orders—at least as long as Canderous, their Mandalore, did.

I died here, Revan thought again, staring at the place where Malak’s command had ripped this bridge open.

Funny, when she'd been Polla Organa she'd dreamed of this place and never realized what it was: the rows of glowing consoles, the lines of black and gray uniformed souls… the stars stretching in front of them like a wall of the infinite—

Just points of light. Stars. Lives—

“I see… I see it's good we’re out of hyperspace,” Revan said now, again clearing her throat at the sudden alert stare of thirty pairs of Mandalorian eyes turned in her direction.

Humility came back fast—as Millifar made a noise like a scoff before turning back to the board she was manning in front of Aemelie’s.

And Canderous’s wife merely raised an eyebrow. “Yes, we are,” Aemelie said. “And that object below us is a planet.”

“Yeah.” Canderous nodded toward the bridge’s nose, and the rim of balcony that surrounded the vast expanse of stars. “That's Medriaas down there.”

Below them, the planet was pale, dappled brown and gray.

“As I explained before, an expedition won't take long,” Aemelie began—presenting the argument she'd been giving for days. “And there's no telling what marvels we may find. In the times of my grandmother—”

“We don't have time,” Revan told her. Again. They'd been over this already—agreed that this system, as the last uninhabited one before Dromund Kaas, was the best place to collect their fleet—and then to leave. Without stopping. Hadn't they agreed on that?

She frowned. That's what I said to do.

She met Canderous's eyes. Her warrior just shrugged. “We have time,” he allowed. “The faster ships are close behind, but the stragglers need a few days to catch up.”

Meanwhile, we hang out on Medriaas, the World of Tombs? There’s something rotten about that fracking planet. Something’s off about this entire sithspawned system—

“We’re out of time,” Revan repeated, suddenly certain that was true. At least on a ship this large, she didn't get sick every time they left hyperspace, but that underlying nausea now mixed with the prickled whispers in the Force—warning something dark and dangerous was close—
“But we have already agreed to a pause, Third Wife.” Aemelie’s forced smile was fast turning into a sneer. “The other ships are slower. We have days before the stragglers reach us—and who knows if Wies will join? Their ships are an asset worth waiting for—”

“No,” Revan shook her head, suddenly certain they didn't have days at all. “We’re... we’re not alone here. Cloak us. Now.”

“In the middle of a hyperspace lane?” Aemelie raised an eyebrow.

Revan walked to the prow of the bridge, ignoring the scarred part that had been repaired, the phantom shiver up her spine when she didn't look at it, that feeling of vulnerability that it could happen again—

“Ohay. Get us out of the hyperspace lane first,” she allowed. “Obviously. But then cloak—I’ll give you a few hours—not days. We don’t have days to waste—”

“We had them to waste collecting you,” Canderous’s wife muttered. “I’m sure the prisoners of the false Revan and the Emperor must already be dead—we need to be well–prepared for victory, lest we end the same—”

The hellish thing was, Revan was afraid she was right.

Carth's probably dead. And Zaalbar. Seiran. Dustil too. And... her. Polla Organa. Maybe Dar killed them. Or maybe it was the fracking Emperor—who's still fracking with me—

Come out and play, the asshole had said.

Sure. Let's play. Let's play a game of 'bomb your fracking planet'—but we’re just one ship and he’ll have more—and we need the rest of my fleet.

Canderous’s fleet, she corrected herself, staring at that scarred place on the hull again. The chair beneath her shifted, aligning perfectly to her back. Revan blinked, not even sure when she’d sat down.

Muscle memory. Her fingers traced the dials on either side of her, inset into the seat’s arms.

“Sensors!” Millifar called out, as alarm lights flashed. “General Revan is correct, General Aemelie—the boards report fluctuating energy surges in several locations—”

Revan’s head turned back to the ferraglass view. I told her not to call me a general.

There are cloaked ships moving here. Lots. Easy to hide one or two with the solar wind, but this—

“Just Revan, Milli. Please.” Her vision blurred as her senses extended—suddenly aware of just how many points of light there were—


“So our eyes can now see,” Aemelie’s voice was acid. “How fortunate they are merely our allies. Clan Wies has been busy—”

Around them, one–by–one, new ships had appeared out of hiding: there, an unfamiliar Mando’ade carrier, next to it a Republic capital–class, heavily modified and painted with green and gray clan signs. In between several squadrons of light fighters, and eight ships that looked like bombers—

How the frack do I know what—
“Glorious!” Aemelie clapped her hands with glee. “They were waiting for us. Kissandrix must have changed her mind.”

“I’m opening a channel,” Dessa reported.

“Good,” Revan said automatically. But it didn’t feel good. Unease prickled her spine.

“She will want what is on the planet,” Dessa added. “If we do not lead Wies, they’ll claim salvage—right. You don’t want that—”

Revan held up her hand and the woman’s voice trailed off into silence. She frowned, because there was something—her mind ran the tally of visible ships again, noting their formations, perfectly aligned as if they’d just swung out of a solar orbit—and something—

Something else. Something—

“Kissandrix?” Canderous leaned over the board. “It’s been a long time.”

“Indeed, General Ordo.” Kissandrix had a musical voice. Her image resolved before them—a tall woman in robes with a round face. Next to her, a slight, armored figure turned a helmeted head and whispered something in the headwoman’s ear. Kissandrix nodded, as if pleased. “Where is your visual display? Will you not show me the bridge of your glorious prize?”

“The Sand Dreamer and the Fat Dewback just jumped in,” Leskal called out, monitoring the inbound channels. The fastest of their followers—the other dreadnaught Canderous said had been at Malachor, and a battered warbird with Tatooine callsigns scratched out along its bow. The Dewback was still running too hot, Revan saw again, as it hovered twenty degrees starboard at the hyperlane, radioactive shimmer of its engines clear even at this distance.

Revan noted their allies’ positions, as in the second’s chair next to her, Aemelie gave a lazy shrug to the image of Kissandrix, hovering above them all, shadowed by the expressionless armor of her guard.

“A favor for a favor. Where have you been hiding these forces? Surely not all on Sanis!”

“Here and there.” Kissandrix's voice lilted, almost singsong.

“Those bombers—?” Revan murmured to Canderous, standing at her left. The ships were long crescents, shaped like blades, but edged and clumsy, squared off in a ‘v’ formation, carefully spaced.

“One of the women’s newer designs,” he agreed. “They must be expecting a battle.”

“They’re… far apart.” She didn't like it.

“Spaced for a run.” Canderous nodded, expressionless, but she saw his fingers twitch as he leaned closer to her chair.

“Against us?”

“Not… necessarily.” But the grooves around his mouth deepened. “Loaded up, those things are like permacrete detonators. You gotta be careful to keep the trigger away from anything you don’t want gone: sudden debris, accidental prox calls—”

“Wies are our allies,” Aemelie scoffed at them. Her normally loose hair was braided, coiled against
her neck. “I called, and they came.”

“Who are allies? Do you know I can hear you? The audio processors of your communications channel are exquisite!” Kissandrix said. Suddenly her face cracked into a wide smile—Dessa’s visual transmission from their bridge seemed to have finally gone through. “There you are, Aemelie!” she cooed. “And not alone. Your husband… and I see—the lone survivor of Clan Lin is with you too—”

“I am sorry your own mate fell in battle,” Aemelie said. “Have you not been able to find another?”

The round-faced woman’s lips pulled back, and a dimple flashed in her right cheek. “Like you, I prefer a man’s role—at times. I am in sole command of my clan.”

“As long as none of the blooded warriors call you to challenge—” Aemelie made a show of examining her nails.

“Perhaps that is what her armored guard is for,” Millifar snickered.

“Milli—” Canderous shook his head, almost imperceptible.

“Kissandrix of Wies,” Revan nodded to the headwoman. No further greeting was required for an ally. “I… your swords are necessary for the battle to come. May we strike down our foes together. May… may our sons find glory in battle—” she stumbled on the phrase—upon the lie. May my son never come within ten systems of your fracking Mandalorian army—

“Yes,” Kissandrix interrupted the formal phrasing suddenly. “They are necessary, our swords. Aren't they?” She smiled, sweet as Thisla pie. “What an honor to meet you, Revan of Lin! We have all heard such tales!”

“Knight Revan Starfire.” the armored figure next to her inclined her head—for the voice was feminine, even through the helm’s distortion. “You've come so far.”

“Yes.” Revan nodded. It was strange for a woman to wear full beskar shipboard—and out of the corner of her eye she saw Millifar whisper something, frowning, to Mekel Jin. The boy shrugged, slipping an arm around her waist with an easy familiarity that made Revan surprised in a different way. The two had been close lately, but she hadn’t realized—

“Perhaps they intend to show us they could drop ordinances,” one of the other Mandalorians next to the weapons array murmured. One of the kids. Revan couldn’t remember his name. Jax? Kelbourne?

The ship’s bridge stretched before her—so many empty chairs. And there, at the end, that terrible scar.

“We wanted to show you our entire fleet,” Kissandrix chuckled, even as their boards chimed the arrival of several more ships of Ordo’s.

The Descant Note, The Free People, The Kriffing Clouds, Malachor’s Bane, Your Mother’s Sack— their names scrolled by the feed inset in the headpiece Revan had clipped on her ear. The headpiece that had been attached to her chair’s arm. When had she clipped it to her ear?

Muscle memory. Her fingers traced the arm of her chair, assigning each ship coordinates out of the lane. Aemelie glanced over, frowning—and then nodded her approval.
“Magnificent,” Revan told Kissandrix. “Truly. How long have you been here?”

“Have you gone to the planet yet?” Aemelie interrupted. “I told you to wait for us!”

“A few days,” Kissandrix said. “And no, we have not.” She folded her arms. “We were waiting. For you.”

“A few days? Have... your sensors picked up anything else?” Revan asked the headwoman of Wies. This prickling feeling was familiar. She’d had it before, with the cloaked fleet of ships above Katarr—

Because something else is out there. Not just them. It's not just them—

“Only your ships,” Kissandrix said. “A few days ago, we registered something in the lanes— but it vanished quite quickly. A scout–ship perhaps. Or a pirate hauler—trade ships do come through this sector. It is the fastest jump–point into Sith space.”

“What is it, Revan?” Canderous grunted at her elbow.

“Something—” she closed her eyes, reaching out with the Force—

There. The planet—above—

“There’s... there.” Revan's hand traced a line of low orbit above the planet on the screen before her chair. Her fingers tapped and two red dots appeared. “Two ships—still cloaked in the planet’s delta. And... a third... maybe. In this sector... something smaller.” Weaker. She circled an area of debris closer to the dim sun. Near a belt from a long–destroyed moon.

“It is known that a Jedi can detect cloaked ships,” the armored figure murmured, next to Kissandrix. “As we learned in the wars.”

“All too well,” the headwoman of Wies said. “If anything is there, it is not ours,” Kissandrix said, raising an eyebrow. “Perhaps those ships are your allies, Revan of Lin?”

“Hold—” Revan gestured at Dessa—a signal to silence their mics, freeze the outgoing, even as her fingers traced the dial on her chair’s left arm to do the same. It might be rude, but something... something was off.

That armored figure. Mando’ade don’t wear armor on their own bridge—especially women. Why would she hide her face?

Revan could think of no good reasons—only insane ones. She can't be Dar. She didn't sound like her. I would know if she was—

She remembered the recording the woman had left her—contrasted with the vid footage she’d seen, watching with Mekel on the Aurek: Darth Revan being welcomed like a conquering hero, Darth Revan seemingly falling in combat—endless news reports of Darth Revan’s death....

That has to be a trick. A trap for me? I’d know if she was dead—wouldn’t I?

“Haar’chak! They’ve got too many ships as it is,” Aemelie snapped as soon as the board flashed red. “Poor taste of Wies to assemble this many before terms are drawn showing us their accounts. What do you mean there are more ships here? Is that daughter of a coward planning some betrayal?”
“Maybe they’re hiding from Wies. There are Force–users on these two....” Revan tapped the two spots she’d sensed above the planet. “Dark Force–users. Sith.” Now that she sensed them it was difficult to ignore the vibrating sense of wrong from the sky.

That’s what was wrong. Not Wies—those ships above the planet. Sith ships.

One of the Force users felt... familiar, like an itch on the back of her neck.

Is it Dar? The woman had never seemed to be this strong before, but if she'd been hiding it her strength before to lull Revan into a false sense of security—

Wouldn’t I know if it was her? But hiding in orbit, waiting for an opportunity... that is exactly what she would do.

Isn’t it? Isn’t it?

“Tell Wies to hold. Let’s bring these hidden ships out of cloak,” Revan ordered. “Launch a squadron, and then move us here—” she tapped a place on the screen. “Into cannon range. When we get closer, I’ll calculate the speed to hold us close in orbit—

“Why yes, that is in cannon range of the space you believe has ships in it,” Aemelie said, more than a little sarcastically. “I’m pleased some of my lessons have not fallen on deafness, Third Wife.”

“General,” Revan corrected her before she thought about why. Because you need to establish command now, before the battle begins with her—or she will never follow your orders later. “For the purposes of this fight, you may call me General Revan, Second Wife.”

“And what should I tell Kissandrix, General Revan?” Aemelie’s eyes narrowed.

“Tell her to keep her forces back.” Too many ships, it could get messy. “Tell her this is our battle.”

XXX

In this age, Valkorion found it surprisingly difficult to keep anything higher than a blind on a starship in the Republic Fleet. It was, perhaps, unfortunate he’d played his hand losing that Toydarian (now languishing in a nondescript brig, seemingly far from anything useful).

And all in an effort to impress a woman who seemed remarkably good at hiding.

Points of light like stars. Who had been the first to describe the expanse so? The Thulian priest, with the furious mind? Freckled arms scabbed with lightsaber scars, that wheeze in his lungs, the hologram rose above his cot, flickering on the wall. Or had it been the Zabrak ingenue from Ziost who played the electroharp? Violet–tinged eyes and a lovely singing voice. Died too soon. Perhaps it was the fallen Jedi from Ossus, the one with beastrider bells and his own dreams of Empire? Filthy traitor. Or the treacherous two testing his legacy? Or even their girl—the one who lost her spark… whatever had become of her?

Each turn of each planet bore a crop of possibilities—but also disappointment. All rejected, culled, or excised in the end. All fled or converted or turned to grit in the Dark Temple boneyard—save the one. And now, even she may be ruined—

Tut, tut, Valkorion reminded himself. Chin up, eyes straight ahead. There is always another—as long as there are the others. It was an irrational fear his subjects sometimes had: that they would all be subsumed to his will, bent under his Touch. Silly sentients. He could afford to lose worlds,
certainly—but never all of them: his lovely subjects—the clawing, clinging opposition, who somehow never lost their ability to surprise him.

Now, this Voice’s mind (the one he was in) was focused on the vista of stars in front of this body, sitting at his console: one in a row of uniformed ensigns, now ducking his head down to hide the glow of his eyes and fumbling for the goggles this farsighted Duros always kept in the drawer beneath his desk.

With a Duros, the red–eyed effect was less noticeable, but one still had to be careful. The Voices were stretched thin out here. So far from the rest of him—unlike Revan he had honored the terms of their arrangement—made no new blinds during the terms of their agreement. And now he was limited. This poor Duros, a spy on enemy turf—

“Come out and play. Where are you, Revan? You must have seen my message. Everyone else in the galaxy did—”

“What did you just say, Ensign?” A frowning Twi’lek hovered above his console, when Valkorion glanced up.

“I was trying to ascertain the whereabouts of my other half,” Valkorion told him. “As well as determine our current location….” He drew his eyes to the star maps floating their holographic glory above his head, but the Republic perspective was confusing and the effort made the poor Duros brain spin. “Have our forces made it to Medriaas yet or not? Is Revan on this ship—or another? Which ship is she on again? You must tell me.”

“Are you on spice again, Hitali?” The Twi’lek dropped the formality his higher rank would afford, dropping his voice to a low whisper. “We’re in the Felucia System. What the frell is Medriaas?”

“Oh dear, was Hitali taking spice?” Valkorion had a twinge of regret. He really should have checked on this body more—perhaps left some encouraging notes about healthy discipline and motivation for the Duro. So hard to be the master of so many—so easy to let them fall through the cracks! (Even as he had the thought, another spark cut out, inexplicably, on the Grave Bright orbiting Medriaas—where they were all supposed to be, waiting for Revan. Another one? He kept losing so many there. Perhaps fall–out from the plague. Things were scarcely better on Kaas.)

Indeed, things were worse on Kaas. So many lights winking out there, he’d grown nearly numb to it.

So fitting, my Starfire. Kaas shall be like Medriaas. Another world for the dead. One for me and one for you.

There was a Mandalorian warfleet above Medriaas too, he’d gathered—but it couldn’t be Revan’s—his Voices saw no Force–sign at all—

Valkorion’s Duro blinked—air lock malfunction, the cold span of space—limbs freezing to ice—oh, dear. Down to three on the Bright, now. So little control over my Live Fleet!

“Hitali?” The Twi’lek in front of him snapped fingers rudely in front of his Duros’s face. “Snap out of it! What's wrong with you?”

Valkorion blinked. “This is Admiral Rensha’s flagship isn't it? Not the Grave Bright?”

“Not funny, Hitali!” The Twi’lek elbowed him. “Told you I wouldn't cover for you again!”
Valkorion answered his own question by noting the Republic seal emblazoned above the (now empty) command chair. Pity, he had so hoped to find his Starfire sitting there!

*Where are you, Revan?* he wondered again. *Where, oh where did you go? There are the rumors of the Mandalorian alliance, but the voices see no Force-sign!*

“Take me to your leader,” he implored the Twi’lek. “Now. Good man.”

“Hitali?” The Twi’lek glanced behind him, at the other techs, now all whispering their confusion.

“Oh, my… didn’t Revan command you to follow her to Kaas? If so, we should have reached Medriaas by now! Did you disobey?” Valkorion pushed up the goggles concealing the Duros’s glowing eyes, revealing himself. “Best take me to Rensha and Revan now, Lieutenant Headtails. We’re off course.”

It had been more than a few centuries since the reaction of any skin–slug had brought Valkorion true joy, but the Twi’lek’s startled gasp was faintly amusing, at least. “You….”

“Yes.” Valkorion smiled. Pity this Duros was so near a null, but he still summoned a scrap of Force—enough to make a breeze flutter through his eyestalks, infusing his skin with an eldritch glow. “It is I. Lord Tenebrae of the Sith. Now, *where is Revan Starfire?*”

“How the hell should I know?” the man said bravely. “You think we’re following that traitor?”

*But she could always be so convincing. How are you not following her? And if you are not, where in stars has she gone? I cannot find her in Sith space, and my eyes are so limited outside of it!* “Perhaps you truly do not know your leader’s motivation,” Valkorion allowed. “Take me to the Republic High Admiral Rensha. Now. She *is* still in charge?”

“What?” The Twi’lek was wasting time now, demanding a security detail. Tiresome.

“Rensha,” he made the Duros mouth repeat. “Now, good man.”

“I… okay,” Lieutenant Commander Headtails gestured with his blaster toward the door. “Comm Old Scaly,” he called to someone else. “Give her a warning—”

Then Valkorion’s mind, setting the Duro on course again first, cast its net wide and free… and he was—

—coughing in his sleep—

—teaching a classroom of wide–eyed Calamari—

—digging his claws in the earth in the forest as the Mother Rancor roared her challenge—

—carrying a steaming tray of food down the moss–stained steps—

—piloting a flyer over the grasslands—

—sitting on a couch wiggling her painted toes on the ottoman—

Ah, yes. There.

Xxx

—*Can I get you anything else, Cally? No, Helena, I’m fine. Shall we watch another broadcast—*
Because surely, the Republic will have reports by now on their plans for war? What is taking them so long?

Xxx

With all the troubles and the sadness, (and General Jiya Sand no longer taking her calls) Cally Lee had become such a comfort to Helena Shan. She’d truly grown to appreciate their together time—and Cally’s green toes, Helena thought, had come out very well indeed.

“Shall we watch another broadcast?” Cally obviously wanted to.

Helena put the vial of nail lacquer down, admiring her work. “If you like, dear.” Her own mirrored reflection smiled back at her from the woman’s young face. Why Cally Lee insisted on wearing goggles inside, Helena would never know, but perhaps it was the style of the times. At least she didn’t have one of those horrid Deralian top–knots. “I had hoped dear Jiya would call on us this week, but with this dreadful conflict—do you truly think the Sith are coming for the Republic?”

Cally smiled, her mouth still full of the cakes she’d brought for them. She swallowed, and took sip of blue milk. “Absolutely,” she said, slipping her arm around Helena’s still–slim waist. “But you don’t need to worry at all, my dear.”

“The Sith killed my daughter,” Helena reminded her. “I worry a great deal!”

“No,” Cally shook her head. “That was all Revan’s doing. She has such a gift for ruining everything, and she’s doing it again.”

“You still think she’s alive?” Helena tried to be mindful about her sober companion’s obsession—it had helped put her own in a certain perspective, but lately, Cally Lee seemed positively bedeviled with finding Revan Starfire. “I told you, that broadcast was merely some kind of publicity stunt, all those red, glowing eyes—like something from a horror–vid! I had nightmares for a week!”

“Revan must be alive,” Cally mumbled through a mouth of cake. “The other one won’t work at all.”

“What?” Helena put her hand on the other woman’s forehead. “Are you feeling well, dear?”

“Distracted.” Cally smiled. “Why don’t you make us some tea?” She wriggled her toes on the ottoman. “The polish came out beautifully, thank you. I do love the color green.”

Xxx

So many bodies required Valkorion’s personal touch.

The matter of Revan and her Republic Fleet was his foremost concern, of course. But with all things in play, he definitely needed more leverage. It had taken weeks on this dreary, remote planet to find precisely the right farm—

—Hello. I’m looking for Bendowen and Ooka Organa? Pesticide sales—I called you yesterday? Quite a… an isolated… location that you have here. Heh.

Oh! You’re the guy who said he could get rid of the botflies? We’ve tried everything, but eridu saplings are delicate.

It takes a special hand—oh! My! And who’s this fellow? Big for his age, isn’t he?

You don’t know my age. Sulky brat.
“Call him ‘sir,’ Kore, be polite.” Ooka tussled his head, even if Kore was as tall as she was. Ooka Organa kept doing that. Ma-Molla had known better. Kore wished Ooka would stop.

“A big lad like yourself must be a great help to your parents. I dare say, I’ve been looking for someone like you. Think you could lend a hand setting the traps?” The wizened old man was missing teeth and wearing funny black glasses but he smiled at Kore anyway, like the gaps in his mouth didn’t matter.

Ooka laughed. “Oh, he's not our—”

“He’s a cousin,” Bendowen said, interrupting his wife. “Go along now, Kore. This part of Derra we help when folks ask.”

“Don’t go too near the seedlings, Kore,” Ooka added.

_She thinks I’ll fry them with the Force._ Kore had gotten that already. Six ways til Sith–day like Ma-Molla used to say. He missed Abasen and his grandma, but she’d been the one to ditch him here across the continent with some lame relatives of hers, who acted like Kore was some kind of booby prize they just had to put up with.

“Sure.” He tried to put on his best Deralian accent. “I’d love to help, Mister!” Not like there was anything else to do on this farm in the middle of nowhere.

“So kind of you, son.” The old man beamed at him, wrinkles traveling all way to the egg–shaped curves of his spacer goggles—as Kore followed him out and into their stupid farm.

_Xxx_

Watch him, such a fine figure of a lad. Don’t frighten—not yet—the lad’s expression so like the woman in this clever green cell—here—glaring at his guard’s body on Kaas through the shimmer of the containment field that was reinforced by an adamite grid.

As they did every day, those familiar green eyes tracked Valkorion’s every step, while her companion kept whispering furiously—running hot and bright, burning up the last essence of her null little life even as the Revan facsimile stared and waited….

*I found the smuggler amusing, Revan. Do you too? She really does look exactly like you!*

Seeing them side–by–side, it was no wonder he’d been fooled.

Such a pity the copy was such a weak vessel. Valkorion had missed her mind so and here it was—those green eyes, measuring his every step. No matter if he approached her helmeted, goggled, or with his blinds bare–faced and free.

_She always knows me, that one. Knows me so well—_

His other body came around the corner, clanking with the trays for their meals, while the copy and
her smuggler handmaiden chattered in furious whispers, perhaps meant for their ears alone—

—It’s been five days! How long are you going to sit there and not fracking do anything?

I’m thinking. I recommend you do the same Deralian! The copy folded her arms and looked toward his bodies, face twisting with an imitation of an aristo’s sneer she must have learned long ago. Hello, Tenebrae. I hope you remembered to season the nerf steak this time.

But of course! It was a lie. All of his cooks were dead. He was feeding them packaged meals—and when those ran out—

Here is your dinner, ladies. Valkorion made both sets of guards’ eyes focus on the smuggler, because she was the weak point, the deliberate crack in his false Starfire’s shield.

You look sad, little shadow.

You look like an asshole, Tenny-Bro. Where is my husband?

Laugh. Frighten her. I’m afraid I can’t say. Because I don’t know. Because I don’t—no! Haha! I just can’t say! This guard is stupid. I need to replace him. So hard to find good help—these days—how brilliant of the copy to distribute the plague, using her little shadow to do so. She had weakened him more than she would ever know.

Not that it mattered.

That Deralian had such a false, green-eyed glare. Now that they were together, he could note the color of her irises was a little off—prenaturally bright for a Human’s eyes. And perhaps her skin a smidge darker, a bit more meat on her haunch—but otherwise—

Truly, anyone would have mistaken one for the other!

—You can take off the goggles, we know it’s you, Tenny-Bro.

They’re both him, Polla. The facsimile turned her elegant back on him, hiding her expression from all four of his eyes. Her poor head looked naked without its wealth of hair. Such a good, good copy. If only—she would never know his regret that her attempt to open the tomb had failed—

Oh, but now, if the Deralian’s looks could kill, this body would be a smoldering corpse, hah, hah. A small comfort, that the true Revan would now possess her spark—if not the bright mind—

I am quite fond of you, copy, he began—

Get out! The smuggler cried. Leave her alone and get the frack out of here, you fracking asshole—

Xxx

“—fracking asshole!” Polla finished, for all the good it fracking did.

The second guard pushed up his goggles and winked at them with red, glowing eyes before he turned and sauntered away after the first.

“You’d think he’d have better things to do than frack with us.” Polla was so tired of this banthashit.

“He’s probably just around the hall, listening to your every word.” Revan’s voice was monotone as ever. She’d taken out that spork again—made of wood, not even metal—and was sharpening it along the edge of the duracrete floor. Polla wasn’t sure how the woman expected to shiv someone
with a wooden toothpick and no Force—hells, even the lousy needle–nose Polla still had hid in her boot had more punch than that, and it wasn’t gonna put a dent in one of those armored jobs all their guards wore.

Red–eyed pervs had stripped Revan to her skivs, taking her lightsaber and the knife she'd had strapped to her arm. But they hadn’t searched Polla at all.

Almost insulting. No, it was fracking insulting. I should have brought a better gun... or one of those fracking laser swords. “He can't be in every guard. Doesn't he have better things to do?”

“Then gloat over his great victory?” Revan’s lip curled, almost a snarl. “No.” She let put a slow breath. “And he is in every guard—at least every guard around us.”

“Well that's grand.” Polla’s ribs still felt sore from being slammed into the wall a few days ago. Her cellmate’s flesh arm was a constellation of green and purple bruises from where they’d grabbed her too, and they both had another line of bruises around their throats. “Hey, Tenny–Bro! Go to hell!”

The sound of laughter drifted back to them—laughter from what sounded like a few mouths in unison—from all of their guards, hovering just out of sight around the corner.

“Three now,” Revan whispered, leaning her head close. She had sour breath, but Polla bet her own wasn't any better. “There were five guards here yesterday.”

“Is that important?” Polla figured she could shoot one of them—but only enough to piss him off—unless they got the asshole to take off his armor first.

Three was still too many.

Miz Sith Lord didn't answer, just paced back to the walled–off fresher with her makeshift shiv.

Xxx

The copy will no doubt concoct some plan to escape. She has my Starfire’s cunning, if not her power.

Reminder to self: the facsimiles are only interesting as a diversion. Perhaps I can keep the copy to entertain once I have my prize, but I must not get too attached—or distracted—

But they are so entertaining compared to the dullards on Coru!

Xxx

Valkorion’s Selkath body drummed her webbed fingers on the table—My guest is late. These Coruscanti senators are all the same. The gills fluttered. Ah. There you are, Senator Racharn—

You can call me Leesa, Doctor Vivek. What did you say is wrong with the vaccine?

I must not say, ‘I broke the factory, Leeshansintina of the Senate House Racharn, and destroyed all of its production!.’ Hah. On purpose. Oh... nothing, my dear. We are just having such... production issues, I thought I should tell you in person.

Doctor Vivek, that's not acceptable! I have a very... loud buyer who has already paid for seven million units! You will have to find an alternate manufacturer for the Jedi Plague vaccine!

Oh, my dear, there is no alternate! By the by, any word from Revan—?
“Oh, my dear,” slurped the Selkath’s voder. “There is no alternate. By the by, any word from Revan—?”

Leeshansintina Evalyn Arabel, First of Racharn, leaned back in her chair, wondering again why she’d bothered to take this meeting with the slimy fish who kept bringing up Revan Starfire like a crazy fangirl. “I didn't realize this was an either/or situation, Doctor Vivek. Sents are still getting the plague, aren't they? Don't you want to help?”

“Of course I do!” The Selkath’s gills flushed pink under the rebreather. “But, hrm... mortality rates have decreased, have they not?”

_On Coruscant, yes, they have. But the other Core worlds—_

Frankly, sick sentients could be just as profitable as well ones, and destabilized planets made excellent investments (just as Mother had always taught her Leesas), but Leesa was going to have a hard time accounting for those seven million units of vaccine that her mysterious buyer from the Outer Rim had demanded (and already paid for). And that might be trouble—especially if that crazy Twi’lek girl really did have all those Exchange ties she kept mentioning.

One had to be organized with organized crime—even when they set entirely irrational interest rates.

“Can you get me any vaccine at all?” she sighed with exasperation.

“Tut, tut!” the Selkath burbled. “With war coming? Surely the kolto is more important!”

“War?” Aramis snorted. “As if!”

“We told the Fleet no war already,” Leeshansintina said to the fish. She rolled her eyes at Aramis, who was hanging out in the corner. It would be culturally insensitive to mention it, maybe, but the gasping fit the fish was having right now sounded an awful lot like laughter—

“Doctor Vivek!” Her little sister burst through the door of the conference she had most assuredly not been invited to. “Hello! Did you get your friend to ask about my friend—about where he’s gone?”

“I think Gant is looking into it now,” the doctor bubbled.


“Doctor Vivek gives talks at our school,” Leeshy said. “And she knows a ton of people everywhere. I asked her to ask... about... my friend. For me. On the Outer Rim.”

“Ah, I see.” That needed no translation. Sheltered Egs didn’t have friends on the Outer Rim—not normally.

_You asked this Selkath for help tracking down Malachor D’Reev on Deralia._ Leesha wanted to yell at Leeshy for her indiscretions—but then she’d have to admit to bugging her sisters’ room.

And, truth be told, since the boy’s comm calls from the Organa farm had stopped, she’d been wondering about his whereabouts herself.

“Does this friend Gant of yours do anything with pharmaceutical distribution?” she asked the
Selkath, trying to make the best of a bad play.

“Hah, hah. From time to time,” the fish said.

Xxx

*Oh, these infant Senators. They give up so easily! Almost as easily as they give up their secrets.*

_Hilarious. Do I care? Racharn will be easier to play than House D'Reev. I won't even need a Jedi with this lot—_

_May I get you anything else, Meez Jarr?_

_Yes, I would like two thisla pies. With extra crema. For here. Yum. Sweet. Creamy—breathe deep, watching the two Zeltrons gyrate for his amusement. Another bite of pie—flash of thigh—_

Xxx

The old Twi’lek came in every Sixthday, Deeka Jin had noted. Always ate his weight in pies, always tipped well. There’d been a time, years ago when she’d still been workin, that she might have given him a toss herself for free—but the years had fattened and wrinkled the man like a smoked nerf haunch.

“Mmm,” he jawed, chewing. Somethin wrong with this eyes of his because he always wore those same goggles, like he couldn't see without. “You set a good table.”

“Sure.” Pies were from the bake shop down the way, but you take the compliment, they add credits. “So kind of you to say.” There, all fancy–like, that friend of her Mekelkins, the one she'd seen on the vids who was callin himself ‘Malak’ now, of all things.

And where was her Mekelkins? She cast an eye toward the black–bordered portrait of his father she'd propped against the bar between the two Togrutan twins who'd died of plague, and her brother Twist, done in the tanks for another thirty years. She didn't have a good picture, not one recent—

“Strange times,” the Twi’lek gestured at the holovid screen. Deeks had turned the sound down, but there was that white–haired woman speaking again. The Holly–Net called her the Last Jedi. “What do you think of that?”

“I think if you want your trick to wear robes it's sixty extra,” said Deeka Jin.

Xxx

_Sixty extra. If only I could still find release in the fleshy delights. Better this pie—_

Knock, knock. This uniform itches terribly! Knock, knock! What is—ho, ho! I am on the Grave Bright! Finally, a blind left alive here—so strange they were all taken ill on Lord Malak’s ship…but the other....

Lord Malak’s voice. _You... uh, you may enter._

_Lord Malak is too polite._ Oh, my. And not alone, I see!

*What do you want, Lieutenant Cordobay? Uh... nothing, my lady. I did not expect to find you here too! Have you been on this ship long?*
Soft laughter. *None of your concern. Leave us.* Gust of Force, edge of compulsion. Pushing him away as the door slammed shut—

Oh, my dear Inse Blais! She's good. Very good. Pity Starfire got to her first—I'll just put my ear to the door now—

*We never found out what he wanted, Inse.*

*That was the Emperor, you fool! See how he covered his eyes?*

*But Cordobay always wears goggles—*

*And now you know why. Oh, Malak, you would be so lost without me.*

*What do we do about Cordobay?*

*Kill him, of course. Do you want me to do it for you, Malak?*

*No.*

The door opened. Run? Or laugh? *Haha, Lord Malak, if you strike me down I will become more powerful than you ever imag—*

*Sharp ping and the light goes out. I hate it when that happens! Unpleasant!*

Points of stars… who was it now that used that phrase? That sulky Jedi who broke all of his limbs in the Korriban tomb? That shallow aristo girl? (Inse Blais reminds me of her.) Oh, so many lights go out lately. But the Lady Inse explains the loss of my blinds! She’s killing them, the filthy traitor. And that plague of Revan’s—dear me! A third of the palace staff at the Red are dead—horrific staffing issues in the green cells—now I’ve lost the cook....

*Dozens on the Grave Bright— could they all be Inse’s victims? Is she plotting against me?*

*Delicious. Poor Herpia Blais would birth a rancor to learn her daughter betrayed her Emperor!*

*(I do hope she comes to my execution tomorrow. She looks so piquant in blue.)*

*Oh, let them play, my day–lived rebels. When she finally comes it will not matter—*

*Xxx*

Tousle–haired, his sleeping robes open to the waist, Lord Malak D’Reev stared at his saber as if he’d never killed anyone before, but Inse knew that wasn't true.

Despite the fatal wound to his abdomen, Lieutenant Cordobay’s face retained its smug grin, even as his limbs twitched their last.

“*There are three more of the Emperor's blinds still left on our ship,*” Inse told the lily–livered ghost of Lord Malak. “I keep them assigned to non–essential custodial tasks on a rotation entirely out of our orbit. Lieutenant Cordobay was the last one spying on you directly, and now—” she kicked the body, wondering if Lord ‘Malak’ needed another compliment about his prowess again to snap out of his tragic reverie.

*The things I do for the House of Blais. Inwardly, she sighed. Lord Malak had, in every tale of her childhood, been a reckless madman, driven by Tenebrae’s kiss; but he had also possessed a certain raw competence. In the boy’s shell, what remained of him always needed to be pushed. Once,*
during a long night of lover’s confessions, the boy had told her he was more Dustil Onasi than D’Reev. Touching at the time, but Inse kept hoping the man’s natural darkness would bring back the Darth she—and their empire—needed.

“Cordobay’s dead,” the Sith Lord declared, obsessed with the obvious. His boy’s voice cracked. “I killed him.”

“Very well you did, too!” Inse smiled to soothe. “Next, we will need to weed out the Emperor’s Voices on the Sojourn—”

“Father’s ship. Yes. Of course.” His eyes were dry as he fastened the saber to his belt.

“Malak?” Inse grew weary of reminding him. “Your father is dead.”

His yellowing eyes narrowed at her. “My father—” his head whipped toward the viewscreen suddenly. “Wait—do you feel that? The ships—”

“The Mandalorian ships? Are they changing formation again?” Mandalorians had been patrolling this system when the Sojourn and the Bright first jumped in, cloaking fast to escape their notice—following the orders Tenebrae had used Admiral Onasi to command. Inse still wasn’t sure if those ships were friend or foe—only that the Emperor had made no commands to contact them—their only orders were to ‘wait for Revan.’

Orders vague enough to be nonsensical, really.

Orders vague enough to show how their immortal Luminance was slipping. Had he even noticed the Mandalorian armada on top of them?

And speaking of that, where is the rest of our Fleet?

No matter—for now, Inse did not need a fleet. Her immediate objective was to take command of these two ships with Lord Malak’s help... but Lord Malak was making it difficult with this puerile attachment to the Onasi boy’s father.

Sometimes, when he embraced her in his sleep, Inse thought Lord Malak looked rather sweet, and nothing like a Dark Lord of the Sith at all. In another time, if all she had needed was a simple bed slave, she might have enjoyed his facile charms, but as things were—

I did not steal you from Mydia to exchange love–tokens with a Telosian nerf–herder, boy! I require Darth Malak!

She had said as much out loud before… only to have the boy blink at her—and sneer, as she felt his dark strength rise. Perhaps he just needed these frequent reminders.

“My dear Dustil,” Inse proclaimed, rather pointedly. “My love. You need to embrace Lord Malak’s touch the way the Emperor’s Voices embrace Tenebrae—”

“Shut up!” Lord Malak walked to the viewscreen, tapping his comm as if he was suddenly inspired to prove it. “Wait—what the—?” His head turned in the direction of those mystery ships, and then his eyes widened. “Prepare my shuttle,” he barked at someone, before flicking the comm off. The stippled corruption on his face mixed with the stubble from the beard his boy’s skin could not quite grow. “I need to see the Admiral. In person. Now—” he glanced up toward the viewscreen again. “Fast.”

Inse frowned, following his direction. “Oh!”
The sleek wedge was unmistakable—as was the feeling suddenly bearing down from the sky: a strong manipulation in the Force, like a distortion field bearing down from above—hard, and clear, and... loud.

“One of the Star Forge ships? I thought they were all destroyed!” Inse had half-expected Revan’s return—the real one—to be a lie. She was no child like Phylus or Mydia, expecting a hero from the Golden Age to aid them in their struggle against Tenebrae. No, Inse liked to think she was a realist, like Mother, trained to seize the opportunities within her grasp. And so she had been, swaying the crew of this ship to her side, encouraging Lord Malak to wield his superior strength to bend their crews’ will to an absolute loyalty—

“I have to tell my—Admiral Onasi,” Lord Malak said, frowning childishly. “He might not know—”

He no longer matters, fool. “She's launching fighters,” Inse noted. “Rather pointless against the fifty ships surrounding her ship. Or are they her escort? I thought from Tenebrae’s orders we were expecting the Republic Fleet to arrive with Lord Revan? Those ships have Mandalorian brands. Is she leading all the Mandalorians now?”

If that were the case, victory would not be won in a battle. Not in these skies.

Malak frowned, looking up at the view. The Aleema’s fighters are forming an attack run,” Malak said. “Looks like the other ships are pulling back and the fighters are coming against us. I… I uh, I know that because I—”

“Because you ordered commands like that,” Inse sighed, watching the squadrons launch from the great ship—a motley lot for a fighting force. Most ships looked like Republic salvage. “But we're still cloaked.”

“I know because I studied squad formations in fracking school,” the boy–man snapped. “Same as I learned there that cloaks don't help against fracking Jedi. Cut the banthashit, Inse. I don't have time. I need to get to my father. Now.”

“But—” the rest of her words were lost to Malak—or Dustil if that was how he wanted to think of himself—for he had already turned and left, breaking into a run down the corridor, presumably heading for the shuttle bay. The red silk of his sleep–robe fluttered in his wake like a cape. Halfway down the hall he paused and turned back.

“Are you going to dress first?” she called out.

He just stared past her blank–eyed, and raised his hand. The silver hilt of his saber detached itself from Lieutenant Cordobay’s guts and shot through the air. “No.” He turned his back and sped away.

Those fighters will launch against the larger ship first— Inse had studied space battles in school as well, but even a simpleton like Mydia or Nereal would know they were outnumbered here—and the way to win was not to fight.

“Commander Tycho,” Inse said, switching on her own comm–link. “Keep us cloaked, but move us aft sixty degrees, along the y–vector. Take no offensive action without my command—but keep Admiral Onasi’s Sojourn between us and those fighters. If they engage in battle, retreat to the planet’s polar line along a solar orbit, half-speed, so the enemy’s sensors don't register the acceleration. Do not drop our cloaks—or comm the Sojourn.”

“Uh… Lord Malak is here now, demanding a shuttle—” from the shouts and unmistakable sounds
of a lightsaber, Lord Malak was doing more than just demanding. In fact, from the way Tycho’s voice had dropped to a whisper, Inse suspected he was hiding in a corner of their small hangar bay while Lord Malak took what was his.

Lord Malak runs away so quickly, when inspired. “Lord Malak is free to do as he pleases.” Apparently, it pleased him more to care about Admiral Onasi’s welfare than hers. Or perhaps he wanted the glory of defeating Revan for himself? Considering how badly they were outnumbered, all Inse could do was wish him a long and painful death.

“I should have let Mydia pop off your digits, Lord Malak,” she muttered at the air. “All of them.”

Sadly, in a space battle—what with depressurization and hard vacuum, long, drawn-out deaths were hard to come by.

Xxx

We're almost to the Felucia System— the flustered Twi’lek admitted when Valkorion pressed him again as they walked the hall toward the Trandoshan High Admiral’s quarters. Easy to press him, even in this near-null of a body.

Felucia? Why, that was Onasi’s plan for an invasion—whether from sheer incompetence or… it seems, deliberate sabotage. How in stars did he actually tell them to go there? Didn't Revan tell them to come to Kaas? They should be nearly to Medriaas now? Oh, Admiral, we will have some words before your end.

Oh! Yes, sir. Here is a door that looks like it belongs to an admiral. Look back at the Twi’lek and the guards. Damned Republic pips, is three lieutenant or captain?

Next to his Duros body, the Twi’lek jumped.

There is no one to fight at Felucia, Lieutenant. Or is it captain? I can never remember… the pips! Peals of laughter. Hah, hah. The body cannot help itself. So amusing, I started a war and no one came—

It’s… Captain Uban. And I know who you are. What have you done with Ensign Hitari?

I’ve made him a part of a much larger plan, Captain.

We—we were warned. Red eyes. Like yours. They warned us—

Is this the hall to Rensha’s suite?

At the end of the corridor. The Twi’lek flushed red with repressed anger and fear.

No need to bring a loaded blaster at my back to the party—without further ado, Valkorion shot him. So tedious, I need a hint of levity—I do hope Rensha is more fun.

He raised his voice as the door slid open —Admiral? We shall have such words if you have countermanded my command and brought the Sith Fleet to Felucia—

XXX

“Admiral!” the voice cracked. “We shall have such words if you have countermanded my command and brought the Sith Fleet to Felucia—”

“Then let’s have words,” High Admiral Rensha snarled at the outline of the man in her doorway.
She’d seen enough reports to have expected something like this. Hells, she’d expected it to be Admiral Yuffall Iskar, the thrice–decorated ‘Doshan hero from her own planet—a man the entire galaxy had witnessed being possessed on the Holo–vids—but Iskar had dropped dead before he could be interrogated. “This is the Republic Fleet, Emperor Vitiate—not the Sith. We are waiting for your Sith fleet here—and we will destroy them—”

Incredibly, the Duro in front of her broke into hysterical laughter. “Oh, my dear Rensha—you will not. Not from Felucia!”

“Explain,” she growled, feeling her head–arch rise.

“Oh, ho! It’s really too funny!” He clutched his gut with laughter. Tears ran from his red, glowing eyes. “Felucia! Hah!” He paused. “Is Revan here?”

“What?” Rensha squinted her own orbs at him, tongue snaking out of her mouth to taste his scent. No fear in it, just madness.

“Of course she’s not.” His voice took on a sing–song. “She’s hiding, isn’t she? Very tricksy!”

“Are you working with her?”

“Mmmm,” he said. “I will be.” The tan skin on his face pulled back around his lips like it was molting. “Felucia! Hah! Haha! Felucia!”

A prudent leader like Jiya or Cein might have taken the giggling wreck of the former Second Ensign Hitari into custody, but their prudence had kept them from taking over Rensha’s command after the Katarr debacle—and prudence, she had observed, did not work with Sith.

The Emperor’s laughter went on for quite some time, until it grated on Rensha’s last tympanic nerve. The body of the foolishly cocksure Captain Udaan did not improve her temper either—when she noticed it sprawled in the corridor.

“Hah, hah, hah!” the Duro chortled, as she raised her blaster.

Rensha shot him.

Xxx

Another light out. But that was worth it. Felucia! Hah!

There's a ship coming out of hyperspace. That's the Aleema, sir.

Aha! Trisky. Could it possibly be—

I knew what it—

It’s Mandalorian. What are the Mandalorians doing?

So big, I’d forgotten—

Chatter of voices. Stop, as always, when I enter the room. Everyone salute.

The Zabrak raised his voice as the door slid open—Admiral? We shall have such words if you have countermanded my command and brought the Sith Fleet to Felucia—

What? The man looked up at him, bleary and red–eyed. Takan, what—? His shoulders
stiffened. Hells, he muttered. *What is it now, Lord Tenebrae? Is this some kind of test?* His hand shook a little and then he coughed.

Oh, my! Admiral Onasi is coughing. I should be in at least three bodies now—I should be in his as well—

Tenebrae pushed harder and then he felt it—that sickly white web, that sense of rot, cutting through the ties that bound him—

*Ugh! How disgusting!* His Zabrak boy’s mouth screamed. *Take it away!*

And were it any other time and any other sentient, that would have been the end of Onasi. But he needed this death to *count*—

xxx

The world blurred to white and—

And then time came back with a jerk. Carth blinked. “That’s the *Aleema,*” he said dumbly, staring at the screen. “Isn’t it?” *I’ve seen… vids, of it, but I never saw—hells, no one saw much except hard choke after they saw the Aleema—that’s what we all used to say—*

“Yes.” Next to him, Takan’s lips pulled back with the Emperor’s twisted smile, red eyes glowing like pits from hell. “*How are you feeling, Admiral? You seem… under the weather.*”

Xxx

*How are you feeling, Admiral? You seem .. under the weather. Happy to have betrayed me? Not to be on Felucia?*

The *Aleema.* Oh! No. Really? Too poetic to think she managed to rally the Mando’ade, following in Ulic’s footsteps, raising another rebellion against me—

But could she? Could she have, truly? Something I missed?

Valkorion could not help himself. Across space, laughter issued from more than a dozen throats.

Xxx

Stop laughing. Stop. You’ll scare the boy! Oh, ho. Stop!

*Haha, sorry. It was just something funny I thought of. Now, Kore. That's a name I didn't think was Deralian—*

Such a strapping lad with his father’s height, his grandfather’s grip, and no power whatsoever—

*I’m from Nar Shaddaa, sir—*

XXX

“—Kore,” the pesticide salesman chuckled. “That’s a name I didn’t think was Deralian.”

“I’m from Nar Shaddaa… sir—” Kore said, because he was supposed to be. He’d shown the old creeper the fields just as he’d been asked, fielded some really dumb questions about school, and tried to pretend to be some dumb ref, just like he was supposed to. It seriously looked like the creeper was sniffing his own weed killers or something though, because he kept randomly
chuckling and smirking and saying, ‘tut,’ all the time—and now this. He was laughing, even though no one had told any jokes.

“Really,” the pesticide salesman said. His name was Gant, he’d said at one point. “What part?”

“The International sector,” Kore made up, because every planet had one.

“Which international sector?”

“I was pretty young when we left,” Kore lied like it was nothing.

“I have many… friends on Nar Shaddaa.” Now the old guy was twitching in a way that made Korrie—Kore—wonder if he was a perv.

“I gotta go back inside,” he muttered, backing up toward the door to the farm house. “It was nice meeting you!”

A flicker of movement near the shed behind the old guy’s back caught his eye.

Kore willed himself not to react as that man in black who’d stalked him after school flickered into sight, raising one finger to his lips and smiling, before vanishing again.

“I gotta go!” he repeated, just as the old guy frowned, glancing behind him—but there was no one there.

“Oh, ho,” he mumbled, eyes rolling a little as Korrie backed away. “Tut, tut!”

Creeper. Kore burst through the doors and through to the dining room where the two startled olds looked up at him like he’d never left.

“Nice night,” the old dirt-farmer said. “Did you show him the fields?”

“Do you want another pomato?” the old woman smiled as she offered Kore an entire platter of them.

“No, thank you Meez Organa. Mister Organa—yes, I—I showed him.” He sat back down in his seat, signing a little as the door clicked safe behind him. *Maybe the man in black is gonna kill that creeper for me?*

“Call me Aunt Ooka, dear.” Ooka Organa pushed the platter toward Kore again as her husband leaned back in his chair, still scowling.

Without a word, the old sales guy walked back in and sat down too.

*Or—or not.* He felt his breath coming fast, so Kore did some Jedi breathing to calm it down.

On the outside, Kore smiled politely, looking past without trying to look like he was—to where the one holo that had kept him from bolting when he first got here was displayed in a black flimsiplast frame that looked so cheap he was pretty sure these Organas were poor. In it was holo-pic of Mother, Father, and some Deralian girl who’d been their friend. Father and Mother didn’t look anything like they did later—if Father wasn’t so tall and Mother didn’t have red hair, Kore wasn’t sure he would have recognized them at all—but they did, and so he did.

They were smiling. He liked the holo even more because of that.

“That’s a nice picture,” the pesticide salesman named Gant said.
“Yeah, that’s my cousin Beya Organa,” Kore told him, because she was supposed to be—according to his cover story. “She died in the Mandalorian Wars or something.”

“After,” Uncle Bendowen muttered.

These were Beya Organa’s parents. Ma-Molla had picked them to guardian him while she was away getting Jasp because she said they knew about the Force and stuff. Their dead daughter had it—but now she was dead. Ma-Molla said they’d never tell anyone else who Kore was because they still felt bad about letting Beya go to war or something.

Kore had never really been a total Jedi, but he was pretty sure no one let Jedi do anything. They had power, right? That meant they got to decide.

“Hrmm,” the man named Gant eyed Kore creepily again. “What a sad story. It is so hard to lose children.”

“Kore,” Bendowen interrupted. “Do you want to go see the crops with me tomorrow?”

“Bendowen!” Ooka Organa frowned. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“I want to go to school,” Kore told them. “Everyone’s gonna wonder where I got to.”

“You can forget your head about that,” Bendowen Organa said. “I’m not flying half across Derra for you to go to Primaries and get us all more press. Reporters are all over Moll and Jasp’s place as is. Why do you think she dropped you here?”

“She said I could go to school.”

“Does he not usually go to school?” Gant frowned. “Tut, tut! An education is very important!”

“Home school,” Bendowen shrugged at his wife. “Like we did for Beya that last year, before—do you still have the discs?”

“She was a little older.” Ooka sighed. “I think they're in the shed. I’ll look in the morning—”

“Let me do it,” Korrie interrupted. Because he had had a funny feeling about that shed ever since he’d seen it… and now he knew why.

*That guy in black is watching me. He’s in the shed. And whoever this other guy is, maybe he knows something... because something’s weird.*

*Something’s not right here.*

“Perhaps in the morning the boy can help us poison the botflies,” the pesticide man offered, smiling. “It has to be done at dawn.”

Xxx

The green cells were green because the walls were covered with some kind of green fungus, slightly damp and dripping. Root–like branches threaded through the stone, creating a web that seemed hard as duracrete when Polla tried to touch it—before Revan warned her off.

Polla had been surprised—at first—that they'd put Revan in the same cell as her. Even more so when they'd disarmed the former Jedi but not done anything like put some kind of Force collar on her. After all the Force–blockers that had been piled on Polla when Tenny–bro thought she might be Revan, it had seemed odd, until Revan explained.
“The walls,” she had muttered in disgust, wrinkling her sheep–nose at the roots. “Full of ysalamiri. We’re in a null field. I can’t feel the Force at all.”

They’d disarmed Revan, but no one had bothered to search Polla—not that the little needle nose she had tucked in her boot was going to do anything.

The Bitch seemed to spend a lot of time staring into space and muttering to herself. Sometimes she sounded like two people. She was probably insane, Polla realized. That would explain so much.

“Are you just giving up?” She finally asked the Bitch on the fourth—or eighth—day (they were starting to blur together) of their captivity. Masked guards came and left (surprisingly good) meals for them twice before each sleep period—but otherwise, nothing happened.

“He won’t leave us to rot in here.” Revan sighed. “I assume he’s rounding up the rebels now. He’ll want to me to execute them.”

“Frack him! You can’t do that!”

Revan wrapped her arms around her knees, drawing them up to her chest. “Even in this weak body, I assure you I can.” She exhaled. “But I will not. The resistance destabilized the Emperor’s hold—at least on this world. And they did it for me. They are… were… loyal, in the end.” Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned closer. “How did you convince them it was for me? Finiris didn’t say before he betrayed us.”

“I put on a fracking mask and gave speeches,” Polla told her. “Is this place bugged, you think?”

“I don’t care. Did you pretend to be… me?” Revan frowned. “Or… her when you gave those speeches?”

_Miz Race–the–Biscain–Hundred? Frack her!_ Polla would think Tenebrae had been lying about that, but who could make something that banthashit crazy up? “Didn’t really get into personal details.”

“You must have been somewhat effective.” The woman shot her a considering glance. “I suppose… you do sound a bit like her.”

_Oh, yeah? Frack her._ “She probably sounds like me,” Polla told the Bitch.

“Regardless… it was effective.”

“What I did was use my connections to find the black market,” Polla told her, since Miz Starfire finally seemed to be taking an interest in all the stuff Polla had done to save this planet. “You know… dropped a few names….” _Well, mainly yours and Lord Scourge’s._ “We had some runners set up to get more vaccine through Manaan—Mission was supposed to be finalizing that with the Senate mucketies who owned distrib rights—but I guess…” Polla’s voice trailed off. “House Racharn or something? You probably know them. And… you know Mission, right? Hey—are you sure this cell isn’t bugged?”

The other woman’s face might as well have been a mask. “I am sure it does not matter. Tenebrae will have tortured the leaders of your rebellion already and discovered all of your secrets.”

No one could accuse the Dark Lord of the Sith of being an optimist, Polla thought.

“He will want me to kill them. I will refuse… of course,” the woman continued, tapping her metal fingers on her other hand like she was keeping a tally.
“Good, but—” Polla didn't know how to put it. “So is there anyone… out there… you think might be able to help us escape? Help us help them escape too?”

At first, Polla had been pretty optimistic about their chances of escaping. They had allies. No one had taken out Yuthura, last she’d seen, and Tenny–bro was enough of a bastard he’d brag if he’d knocked off Seiran or Zaalbar or Carth. Mission the droid hadn't moved when they'd left her in the tomb. Didn’t seem like Tenny–bro had seen her at all. Maybe her circuits were fried now, but there was the other droid—and Seiran and Zaalbar—and the guards had said Carth was gone to war but the others—or Tenny–bro could be lying—

But as the days passed, her optimism had begun to fray.

“He will execute our allies when I refuse to do it for him,” Revan continued flatly. “Making them martyrs to his injustice—not mine. I assume the Fragment was close to the Wookiee, since they were long–term companions. Tenebrae will spare him. For a time. But your husband and the Blais children will be next on the executioner’s list. You…” her eyes looked almost puzzled. “I’m not sure what Tenebrae will do with you. Would the Fragment be affected by the news of your death?”

There was a long silence, as Polla tried to furiously come up with a response to all of that.

*How the frack should I know?* And the... the whole killing Seiran thing was— *maybe she's insane*.

“You have to save Seiran! And me! And Zaalbar too. And… Phylus is just a kid—so if you execute these slaves who will die anyway, then maybe Tenny–Bro will let Seiran live?*

*Goodbye slaves.* Polla tried not to remember their names.

“He will abide by terms,” the Bitch said coolly. “But I would never agree to kill them. They will die. Perhaps you will too—but not by my hand. He will keep me alive… for her. And he will find her—she cannot hide from him forever. He’ll keep me, Carth, and… Malak.” Her hesitation on the name made Polla wonder if this was a kath and hessi show made for Tenebrae all along.

*She knows the kid’s not Malak. She’s not blind and we told her! And she can't really mean that she’d let Seiran die! She tried to save us all before—didn’t she? Isn’t that why she fought the rancors?*

Looking into the arctic chill of the woman’s eyes, Polla wasn't sure of anything. “Sure the other Revan would rather have you alive than me?” Polla snapped.

“He might make her choose.” The woman ran a hand through over the fuzz of her scalp. The guards had taken her armor, stripped her down to a singlet, and she was now wrapped in both of their sleeping blankets. Anyone else might have looked pathetic, but the Bitch was pulling it off. She grimaced. “But he likes me. I know things. Things he needs. You….”

*Right. I’m just the null smuggler.* The Bitch had said as much before. “You don't have to be such a—a bitch about it!”

“Would you like me to lie?” The Bitch rubbed her temples. “With the ysalamiri field I sense nothing, but the pallor of your skin and the tremor in your voice seem to indicate fear. You need to move past it. If, by some remote chance, the Fragment chooses your life over mine there are things you must tell her for me. Important things.”

*Are you really going to give me secrets in a probably–bugged room?* “Oh, yeah? Well I don't need the Force to know you're giving up. Revan wouldn't do that!”

The other woman’s jaw tightened. “Hasn’t she? She's running races now, we were told. Like the
“Biscain Hundred?”

“I… can’t believe that she would. Tenny–bro’s lying. You said you left her with—”

Revan’s metal hand closed down hard over Polla’s. “I left her because she would be useless here and useful to the Republic. Misguided sentiment. I thought she might choose to be the Jedi I was—but it seems she chose *your* life instead.” She raised her voice slightly. “She seems to be nothing more than a copy of you, after all.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I—” *Is this an act for Teeny–Bro or not?*

The metal hand squeezed Polla’s hard—like a warning. “Remember, Deralian,” she snapped. “You are nothing. And the Fragment is merely a version of you with Force powers she barely understands.” She dropped Polla’s hand and stood up abruptly, stalking to the cornered–off area of their fresher again.

“Frack you too,” Polla muttered, when the woman was safely behind the wall.

*Seiran might already be dead.*

She wouldn’t cry. She’d count to ten. There had to be a way out of this.

Xxx

“I brought you caff, milady.” In his own palace, Lord Scourge was nothing but courteous to Yuthura, constantly anticipating her needs both in and out of the bedchamber. Under a different set of circumstances, she might have even enjoyed taking him as a lover: he was skilled, the sheets of his bed were firesilk, and he had an excellent cook.

But the man had betrayed them all—and then been foolish enough to let her live. Sentients to whom she had promised protection were now vulnerable and afraid. And missing. The catacomb cell had been rounded up already. Zaalbar had managed an escape to the forests, but Seiran Wen had vanished. And Dustil Onasi—the boy she had tried to save—was, according to Scourge—now piloting his own dreadnaught in his father’s Sith Armada, engaged in their first strike against the Republic.  

*Always darkest,* Yuthura reminded herself. *Before the light comes back.*

“Thank you for the caff,” she said to the traitor Scourge, taking the cup graciously, and cradling it.

“Of course.” His soft hand traced her freshly–oiled t’chun, from tip to top as he sat down next to her at the breakfast table on the balcony. The oil had the side effect of numbing sensation, (among its more fast–acting effects, but the slower ones were why she had selected it), but Yuthura shivered anyway, feigning pleasure at the man’s touch.

The tell–tale glint of an energy shield sparkled in the sunlight, shielding them both from the city below.

The now nearly–deserted city below.

Yuthura would have felt more satisfaction at the sight if their people hadn't still been dying—although the last report the rebel Liyo Basile had managed to send her from the Emperor’s palace (before he fled to the forest himself) said that death rates had been falling, these last two weeks. Perhaps the infection had burned through all not already immune.
Perhaps….

But this is one world. And for all we know the Sith Emperor is consolidating his strength upon another.

There were three main Sith worlds where Tenebrae held sway: Thule, Zioist and Dromund Kaas. The host of others—Korriban being the most notable—had never been very populated.

“You're quiet this morning,” Scourge murmured.

“I'm thinking.” Yuthura smiled, taking a sip of the caff. “Did they ever find the Wookiee?”

“The beast fled into the forest,” Scourge shrugged. “There are larger hunters there. I don't expect they will ever find much.”

“No,” Yuthura murmured, taking another sip of caff. Below them, she noted the servants had set the refuse bins out without their lids again—the red lekku ribbon tied discretely around the second in the time–old Rylothian symbol for revolt signaled to her that the droid had chosen today to make her way to the palace. Surreptitiously, Yuthura thumbed open the small cap in her pocket containing her lekku–oil poison’s antidote and dabbed it on her fingers before bringing them to her mouth to lick clean. “I don't expect they will find anything at all, my lord.”

Xxx

If things hadn't been such a mess, Mission didn't think Big Z would've been able to get free at all, but he had—escaping into the forest—where she'd found him at that refugee camp Polla Organa and Yuthura Ban had helped supply, before it all went to Hothing hell.

If things hadn't been such a mess, Mission was pretty sure too that someone might have questioned why a droid was rolling around the Sith Emperor's palace with no job to do... but most of the Red Palace seemed to be full of sick and dying sentients, and she might as well have been furniture to them.

Good riddance, she flashed with her lights at the hall security cameras she had already disabled. That stupid, ronto–headed bucket of bolts of a security system had refused to tell her anything about the mysterious green cells, where rumor had it, Emperor Asshole liked to keep his Force-sensitive prisoners before executions.

Right now, Mission’s objective was more basic: spring the rebels slated for execution tomorrow—the ones kept in the ordinary dungeon, twenty meters underground behind eight layers of reinforced duracrete.

It did take her a few more hours to rig up the pulleys in the elevator shaft. If she'd had a stomach, Mission would have stopped for a snack. As it was, she tested the mech lowering her chassis down to the bottom, then cut a hole with her lasercutter.

“Wha—” the lone guard down here began, before her gas grenade knocked him out.

The schematics they had were useless, it seemed, so it took Mission more time to ascertain there was definitely not another level off this one, but then life forms lit up her scanners clear as day—finally!

A few mines blew open what looked like a modified blast door, opening into a large, crowded cave with a line of durasteel bars down the middle between Mission and a crowd of suddenly very loud and demanding organic sents.
“I am here to rescue you!” Mission intoned, in Revan’s best, ‘I am your Jedi savior’ voice. “Is everyone okay?”

A clamor of excited voices responded as the rebel slaves all crowded toward the cell door. Her sensors didn't register any dead, which was good. “I brought kolto too!” Mission added, shooting some paks out through the bars. (She'd deactivated all the security fields before even making it down here. Crap tech—at least a hundred years out of date.)

“Mission?” The Human man was so dirty for a sec Mission didn't recognize him. His head–fur had become a beard. “Is—”

“Seiran!” she yelled with her voder, going for cheerful, as the guy turned around from his corner of the crowded and filthy cell. “Where’s Polla?” She shone her hi–beam through the packed bodies, who blinked, wincing at the light.

“I hoped… she's not with you?”

“She got picked up with Revan. Sheris–Revan?” Mission was still working out a good name for Coma Lady, now that she was out of the coma. If she ever saw her again, that was. “Records say Tenny–Bro took Revan to the green cells. Know where they're at?”

“No.” His hands went to the bars on the gate and he started shaking it, while Mission asked a few more slaves about the green cells too, trying not to be too sad about Polla Organa, who really got herself and the rest of them into this in the first place, even if her heart was in the right place.

(And Mission fully intended to thank Polla, if they ever met again, because even if she could not trust the Kaas computer at all, it had taught her many, many secrets of the universe that even her thirty–thousand–year–old half had never known. Although it was also evil and stuff.)

No one knew where the green cells were, it turned out, but Mission finally had to trank Seiran Wen and have one of the Wookiees carry him out to stop him from running off looking for his wife, who was probably just dead in a lima–pit someplace.

Love made sents crazy. Mission had always known it—ever since Griff met Lena—but the stark reminder here made her bless her circuits for being more rational.

Xxx

“Ungrateful! Urchins! Mydia? Ah, there you are. No, don’t walk away! MYDIA? What have you done with her? MYDIA? Where is she?”

The movement of the older Human’s bulk activated HK’s motion sensors, spinning his ocular circuits back into processing mode. His sensors whirred through the net reports the Master had left cabled to the dataport on his left lower appendage. [[Casualty reports from Kaas City. Disease vectors.....]]

“Statement: Processing data.” HK murmured to himself in a lower frequency than the wrinkling bag of flesh in front of him would have been able to hear, had she been paying attention.

“We don't know where Lord Revan went!” The long–haired, giggling meatbag Mydia Blais had an anguished tone to her voice that HK had never heard from her before—and he had heard her far too much, what with her penchant for lurking about the Master’s chambers—the Onasi boy trailing behind her like some sloppy, supporting, organic gibbonite. “She didn't leave a note!”

The Blais matriarch split her maw into a wet, toothy slice. “I don't care about Revan! I’m speaking
of your sister! The Emperor requested my return from the mountains—and the presence of all of our House tomorrow afternoon. You've grown too fat for your dress armor and there's no time to have more forged, Mydia! And Inse’s room is empty! And where is your brother?”

“You told him to get your bags from the car, I thought! We do have servants, Mother.”

“We do, but servants steal. Why is there a droid here?”

HK dimmed the lights of his eyes, to look harmless, as the wrinkled face drew closer, assessing his carapace with its rolling, wide–eyed orbs.

“It was Revan’s. I think it's broken.”

“Revan’s.” The woman who could only be Herpia Blais, mother of Inse, Mydia, and Phylus Blais scoffed. “Revan’s droid? Well, she won't be needing that—not the worm who was a guest in my house for months without you telling me! You may feign ignorance, but I do know where that Revan went and she’s not coming back. Lord Tenebrae told me to wear blue, and he always asks for me in blue when he's preparing an execution! Something about the light matching the fabric and my eyes?”

“Motherrrr…” Mydia Blais was edging toward the door, like the jiggling pile of craven flesh that she was. “I swear, you're obsessed!”

“She killed your father, you know. Revan did. And she was plotting something with that old cook, Deckna—”

“You think His Luminance will actually kill Revan?”

“He asked me to wear blue, Mydia! Blue!” The liquidous fleshbag waved a slip of plimsi. “You know how our Shining Light feels about blue!”

“But she just woke up from her coma! Doesn't he want to… ask her questions or something?” Mydia’s voice trailed off into a whine. “Also, Mother, I need your permission to kill Inse, when we find her. She stole my consort, Lord Malak…. ow!”

The larger meatbag slapped the smaller, in a gesture that would have been far more effective with a weighted gauntlet.

“Lord Malak? ” The woman snorted. “Your own father has never returned to possess any of your brothers, but you want me to believe that Darth Malak randomly chose some Telosian boy—that you took to your bed…..” Her mouth exhaled a misty secretion as her carapace heaved up and down. “This is just like the gardener all over again, Mydia! How many times do I have to tell you? Our bloodline must remain pure!”

“But it’s true!” Mydia Blais squeaked. “Lord Malak loves me, but then he went off to war. And… okay! I confess! I do know that now our Glorious Emperor has Revan in the green cells with that slave we bought fair and square! There was this plot against his Luminance, but it was all Inse’s fault!”

Another slap. “Don’t bring your sister into this. I will deal with her next.” Another moist sigh. “Well, that's another Revan pretender done then, as I said. No one comes back from the green cells—” the old Sith woman rattled on as HK’s optical orbs swiveled to track her: armored and armed capably with two lightsabers—but no sign of a melee shield, Echani or otherwise.

Analysis: The Master has been captured by the Ancient Enemy, as she projected could happen.
HK felt his circuits twitch—the satisfaction of regaining control over his cortical processing unit somewhat balanced by the genuine regret he felt for the impending loss of his creator. The Master had thought another month of analyzing plague vectors would be necessary, but her calculations had been imprecise. Mortality rates had levelled off in Kaas City already—and not because too many had died. No, something else was stopping HK’s careful, beautiful plague vectors from reaching their exponential destiny.

And, given enough time, (unless someone slaughtered them all and sadly, the Master had ignored that helpful suggestion of his), the population of this wretched planet would rebound. That was the thing with organics: all of their squishing together (his circuits had seen far too much of that lately), tended to propagate more of them, entirely unplanned and inefficiently.

Now, HK now had enough data to see that the Master’s brilliant plan (for an organic) had failed. Which meant it was time for the Master’s next even more effulgent machination to take root and propagate itself, along the hard lines of durasteel and chrome that HK would provide.

“Statement: Casualty reports are still below the ideal curves for societal collapse. Analysis: the Master has failed. New Primary Objective initiated: Operation: New Master.”

“Is that her droid? Did it just say something?” The old fleshbag turned, a snarl on her faded lips, corpulent fingers twitching with ionizing energy that HK’s shields were more than adequate to resist…but still….

His circuits surged with hope. Surely, this counted as an act of aggression against a helpless, sentient droid?

“You may defend yourself, of course, HK,” the Master had whispered in her flawless Rakatan. “But do no harm against any of my allies—”

“Mother,” Mydia interrupted in the middle of the lecture, which had shifted to a complaint regarding the lack of living slaves in residence. (HK knew for a fact that most of them had fled before the Master even awoke.) “I have something wonderful to tell y—”

Whatever it was would be lost to Lady Herpia Blais. She’d wandered too close to HK’s carapace. A quick and satisfying blaster bolt to the skull was over far too soon.

Her offspring, the irrational but admirably bloodthirsty Mydia Blais reacted with a shrill, womanly squawk of fear. “Oh!”

“Statement: Reroute of primary objective complete. Imploremnt: Mydia Blais—cease your screaming. The Master considers you loyal enough to be put on her no–kill list. Unless you obstruct my departure your life will continue upon its depressingly slow slide toward organic dissolution—”

Mydia Blais, HK noted, would not be obstructing his departure as she was currently fleeing down the stairs. “Phylus! Phylus? I have wonderful news! The droid killed Mother!”

“Positive Affirmation,” HK said out loud to the empty room. “Gratitude to the Master for the gift of free will, however fleeting. Initiating self–directed quest… now.”

The room, lacking any living organic presence did not respond, but HK imagined the body of Herpia Blais bleeding a festive farewell as he left the House of Blais, heading for the spaceport.
“Hey, maybe your droid could rescue us?” Polla whispered, crouching next to the Bitch in the fresher. The lights had dimmed again. Hopefully that meant the guards were sleeping. “You spent like an hour messing with his cortex before we left the Blaises. Did you program him to come rescue us?”

Every day, she’d come up with new scenarios about how someone would rescue them: Seiran, Zaalbar, Carth—hell, maybe even Darth Sulkypants and Phylus Blais. But so far, none of her dreams had come true. Hell, maybe even Inse Blais. Mydia, Polla was fairly sure, would never bother.

“No.” The Bitch was using her sharpened spork to scrape at the mortar between the bricks on the wall of their fresher. From the state of her nails on the metal hand, she’d tried using it too. As Polla watched, Revan grabbed the spork in her gold fingers and slammed it into a crack in the wall. It stuck there, and the woman began wiggling it back and forth, stopping from time to time to use the metal hand to hammer it in more. “We aren't important.”

“Maybe you’re fracking not, but I want to see my kid again!”

The Bitch's shaved head turned, those green eyes wide and dark in the dim light. “So do I,” she said evenly. “But it would be better for both of our sons if they grow up free of this. Of us.”

“Of you.” Polla tried to keep her voice down, before the Bitch told her to.

“Yes,” Revan nodded. “Of me.” She blinked. “Much as I would wish otherwise.”

“Yeah, well, I'm not giving up.” And neither was the Bitch from the way she was digging at the wall. Sure didn't look like she was just carving a ‘Revan and Polla were here’ rune in the mortar.

“My uncle once told me that the Force only grants us the illusion of choice,” Revan said suddenly. “We struggle to make our own fate—that is what makes us sentient—but in the end, we all must do what the Force wills us.”

“Frack your Force,” Polla said. “And frack your uncle too. When I met him, he seemed to be doing pretty good making his own fate with his girlfriend—”

“You met him?” It was hard to tell whether the Bitch genuinely cared or was just making conversation. Hadn't they had this conversation already? “He died.”

“Well, it looked like he had some fun before that,” Polla muttered. Was she supposed to offer condolences?

“Good.” Revan withdrew the spork from the mortar and carefully put it a few centimeters down the wall, before repeating the same procedure. “I am glad.”

“All the fun I had isn't gonna make up for my horrible death here. Or Seiran’s,” Polla told her. “In case you were wondering.”

“I wasn't.” Revan slammed her hand hard against the spork. It snapped off. “Oh, kriffing sithspit!” She whispered, face contorting in anguish. “Ich’alla y’nikt dyallydar—”

“On Deralian, we'd just say fracking hell,” Polla told her.

“I know.” Revan held her metal hand gingerly as if it hurt. Did it? Did it have nerve endings and
“Fracking hell!” Her breath hissed out slowly. “It took me days to collect an extra utensil from the guards. I don't suppose you managed something similar—”

“You just told me you didn't care if I died,” Polla snapped. “Frack if I'm gonna give you my needle–nose to help you pry fracking bricks off the wall now.”

“I care very much, but our lives are meaningless compared to stopping Tenebrae—” Revan broke off. “What is a 'needle nose'... I’m unfamiliar with the term?”

“It's a gun.” Polla tilted her head in disbelief. “Weren't you in charge of armies? How can you not know what a gun is?”


“Just a hold–out stunner in my boot.” Polla shrugged. “Won't do anything to those guards as long as they've got armor and the restraining fields are up, but if they take us somewhere again and it seems like we're gonna die, I'm not going down empty–handed. Grass Priests! What the frack are you doing?”

For Revan’s hand had closed upon her ankle, and was now tugging at her boot. “They left you armed?” The hiss of her whisper was sharp in the silent room. “They left you armed and you said nothing?”

“It's the other—get off me!” Somehow, Polla’s boot had connected with the other woman’s stomach from the startled 'oof’ the Bitch produced. And Polla wasn't one bit sorry. “It's my gun, not yours!”

“A stunner?” Revan held up both her hands. “We can adjust the field—intensify the beam, make a makeshift laser—’

“Still won't do much to the guards.” Polla didn't think anyways, but did she know? She'd never declared war on the galaxy.

“Not the guards.” Revan jabbed the wall with the broken spork. “This.”

“You think I can tunnel a hole through with a hold out?” Polla drew it out of her boot cautiously, and handed it to the Bitch. (Against her better judgement.) “Or you can?”

The Bitch shook her head. “No. Not the wall. But all I need is one brick.”

Xxx

“Father!” In his haste to get to the bridge of the Sojourn, Dustil had given up fracking trying to pretend. Did it matter anymore? There wasn't a sent on this ship he couldn't gut if he needed to.

*Just like those bantha–brains who tried to stop me from leaving the Bright—*

The uniformed man turned toward him, face almost gray—

“Hold,” Father said to his second–in–command, an orange–haired pureblood who was most definitely not on their side.

The breath rattled in Father’s lungs. He smelled sick in the Force. Dustil had seen Tenebrae kill plenty of sents with the flu before.
I got here just in time! I should have come earlier—

They'd commed a lot during the trip through hyperspace, but said almost nothing that mattered. Inse just wanted crew lists and star maps, and Father just kept wanting to tell Dustil he was proud, even as his eyes said he wasn't proud at all.

“Is something wrong, my Lord Malak?” The orange–haired asshole had a look of fake concern. “Not that we aren't pleased to have you, but my Lord Emperor did assign you your own ship.”

“Nothing’s wrong—except the impending attack. Didn’t you notice?” Dustil used his best Malak voice. When they’d seen the other ships, they’d put their orbit close to the planet—closer than he’d ever learned was safe at school—but Father had seemed to know what he was talking about.

Just like he had when he'd had the rest of their forces all cloak and scatter to the next system, waiting for the Republic ships to pounce—

(Supposedly.)

Except the ships aligning before them weren't Republic ships. They were Mandalorian. And those fighters that had worried him before were a lot closer now—and even more ships had popped out of hyperspace.

That one in the middle—everyone knew the fracking Aleema. And the others—several had Mandalorian clan sigils on them. That fracked part of Malak-brain who still sometimes chimed in with stuff Dustil didn't know knew exactly what those sigils meant: Zal, Rialis, Wies, Ordo—

Ordo. That was the one on the Aleema itself. Father had to recognize it, right? That's probably why he looked almost sad now, his mouth thinned to a line, the weight of a fracking galaxy making its grooves in his face.

Did that mean the Mandalorians were with her? With Revan? Was she who they were supposed to fight? Her? Not the Republic Fleet?

Whoever was in that ship, they were closer now. A lot closer. The Aleema was taking up half of their viewscreen, fighters scything in front of it heading right at them. They were closing fast too. How can something that big move that fast?

“Admiral Onasi and Lord Malak?” Inse broke in, sounding amused over the comm. “What are your orders?”

“Hold,” Father said again. “My orders are to hold.” Then he coughed, a deep, hollow sound that didn't end for a very long time—long enough for the world to freeze, and the Zabrak kid on his left side to get red eyes too—and then—

Father’s second—in—command’s blaster whipped out as the pureblood’s voice took on Tenebrae’s unmistakable tones. “Tut, tut,” the asshole said. “A shame. But we have no place for weakness, do we, Lord Malak? Admiral, I’m afraid I must ask you to stand down.”

“Vitiate is right,” Dustil sneered. “You look like crap, Admiral Onasi.” The trick was to stay calm when you cut them down. That way you sensed what was coming next—

And they did not.

“I’m fine,” Father insisted. “Just—” a muscle twitched in his cheek
The Emperor chuckled. “My Admiral. You are most definitely n—”.

That Sith pureblood body didn’t have the chance to finish its thought without a head, but the Zabrak kid finished Tenebrae’s laugh as the second’s orange–haired skull rolled across the floor.

“Hah, hah. A test,” the kid hissed. “Lord Malak, such fury! It’s just a shame you are here! I had so hoped to present Lord Revan with at least one husb—”

Dustil’s saber cut him down too. The kid was Zepth, or maybe Takan. Dead, he couldn’t tell which one had made the trip with Father. Behind them, another one of the Emperor’s voices—one who wasn’t dead—yet—was still laughing, a hollow sound that echoed in unison with at least five other possessed ones.

*How many does Tenebrae have on Father’s fracking ship?* Horror uncoiled in Dustil’s gut, even as his blade burned, crimson and clean. He stepped forward—

On Inse’s ship they’d managed to make most of Tenebrae’s blinds have unfortunate accidents while they slept (less likely, Inse thought, for the madman to notice). But here Dustil hadn’t had the chance to take them out. They’d only been out of hyperspace for a fracking day, and he’d spent most of that with Inse when he should have been here—

“I need to be in command to stop Tenebrae,” Father had said stubbornly over the comm. “Stay on your ship,” he had said. Even then he was sniffing. He’d looked like hell, but Dustil had been too dumb to notice why.

*Father has the Korriban flu. That crazy smuggler’s plan… maybe it worked. But now—*

“The Aleema…” said another Zabrak, even as Father scrambled to his feet, his expression frozen as he fumbled with his own blasters, training them on the two members left of the bridge crew. Their eyes were red and glowing too.

“My Starfire is on that ship!” the Zabrak cried while Father was shooting the other. “She must be! And I am proud as any father!”

“Uncloak us but hold fire,” Dad barked at the few left at their stations. And at Dustil’s men—the ones Dustil had brought with him. The ones Inse had said were loyal to them—the ones she’d showed Dustil how to *make* loyal to them—and they were now. Very loyal. “Hold! No matter what—”

To a man, they all looked to Dustil. To their Lord Malak to see what he commanded them to do.

*“Do it,”* Dustil snapped at them. *“Do whatever my—whatever Admiral Onasi says.”*

Their bridge was abruptly rocked by explosions, as the *Aleema* fired its ranged cannon direct on their cloaked position. Shield alerts flashed.

“We’re still cloaked, sir!” called out a panicked lieutenant from the engineering console. “They must have a Jedi on board if they can sense us!”

“How many frickin’ Zabrak does he have?” Tenebrae said, from the surviving Zabrak’s mouth. Zepth? No, this Zabrak was older. *How many fracking Zabrak does he have?* “Your consort seems to be holding a grudge, Lord Malak. Can you feel her?” He walked to the viewscreen, staring out at the stars beyond them, the cluster of ships. “My Starfire—so close, and yet still so f—”

Dustil’s saber throw ended his frickin’ speech. Killing the other red–eyes among the crew didn’t
take long either. They didn't put up a fight. Most of them were laughing when he cut them down—as if this was all a fracking game.

In the middle, he heard Father yelling for more shields again, and the frightened bleats of the unpossessed crew who were trying to answer him. They were stupid to be so scared, and Dustil wanted to kill them for it, but that would be foolish, a waste of resources, and he could do it later when they'd gotten out of this fracking mess—

The lights flickered and there was a smell of burning ozone mixed with blood and guts now on the bridge as they took a few more hits.

“Son?” Father coughed again, before he could say more. He looked like crap.

*Weak,* Dustil thought. “I’m here, Dad.”

“Revan’s really on that ship?”

Dustil forced his voice calm, trying not to look at the Zabrak kid’s body. “Something is.” He could feel something, like a scream in the Force, like blinding light—

He’d felt it before.

*It’s her.*

“Is she on that ship or not?” His father looked like he was waking up. He blinked, staring down at the Zabrak kid Dustil had killed first. Zepth, maybe. Or Takan. Then he closed his eyes. “You… can you tell if it’s her, Dustil? With the Force? They… they won’t answer our comms—”

“Get the rest of the possessed crew,” Dustil told the null corporal shivering by the door. Two days ago, Inse had made the man crawl over broken glass. His hands were still bandaged. “Throw them out an airlock. Raise shields. And open a comm channel from Lord Malak to that ship—if it’s her she’ll want us alive.”

*Won’t she?*

Xxx

“The Emperor's on that ship,” Revan told Aemelie. “Fire again. Blast it from the sky.”

“I don’t see a ship,” Aemelie shrugged. “But our cannon are truly impressive. We can continue firing them as long as your like.”

“We’re hitting something,” Dessa agreed. “Even through the cloak.”

“There's another ship behind that one too.” Revan could feel it, hovering behind them. “Hit them both. Send the fighters around to sweep—it’s moving.”

“The larger ship identifies as the Kaas City Sojourn,” Millifar said. “They’re hailing us now.”

“They have escape pods.” *The Emperor is on that ship. Frack him. I will not give him a centimeter of advantage.* “They're above a planet.” Revan shrugged. “Burn both ships. If they want to parlay they can do it from the ground.”

“These are Republic codes—?” Dessa frowned. “The distress codes aren't Sith—”

“A feint. Burn it down,” Revan said. That darkness—as black and cold as space. She shivered. *Still*
there—and something—something familiar.

You, Dar? Or the Emperor?

A pause, as she watched the ship burn as it dipped into atmosphere.

“Another hail—” Leskal said. “This one’s a distress—”

“I don’t care,” Revan snapped. “Finish them.”

Below them, little lights, winking out.…


And then Revan’s blood froze. “Oh, no.”

Xxx

“Sun and sand,” he whispered. That stupid lock of hair in her face. Warm lips on hers and then Carth drew back. “Your freckles are coming in, beautiful.”

A wave splashed gently over them, eddying sand between their skins. The water was warm as a bath, salty as blood. Revan spat out an errant mouthful and kissed him back.

“Beautiful,” Carth whispered. “Your eyebrows are red.” He traced one with a fingertip.

Red.

Revan forced herself not to shiver. My name is Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith and I have red hair.

“Yeah, I—I know. Her… she has… my hair’s growing in red too.”

“Well, uh. I used to wonder why—”

“Shut up, flyboy.” The carelessness was feigned, but Revan wanted it to be real very, very badly. The warmth of him over her, the coolness of the water, the heat of the sun on her skin—

Paradise.

“When this is over,” he murmured. “You and me?”

“I hope so,” she told him, because it was true. “We’ve had worse odds.”

“If Malak challenges you to a swoop race, say no.” He smiled down at her, and kissed her nose.

“If it doesn’t work out, at least we have this,” Revan told him, because that was all the truth she had. “Sun and sand. This one magic interlude—”

“Always said I’d give you some shore leave.” His full lips quirked. “Our sojourn.”

“Huh?”

“Sojourn. This. Shore. Leave. Sojourn —” Carth punctuated each word with another kiss until Revan felt her limbs grow weak under the assault. His skin tasted like salt and life, and they rolled across the sand, finally landing on smooth rock, polished and hard, as if made for this very purpose.
Passion, said the dark whisper in her mind. Do you think a milked pilot’s passion will make you strong enough for what will come?

Strong enough to block you, she thought—and did—at least for a time.

“If we make it through I’m gonna rename the Ebon Hawk with that stupid word and we’re gonna live on it forever,” she said, sleepy and sated, when they were done.

“Which word?” Carth curled his arm around her, stretching out in the warmth of the sun. It turned his skin gold. Her own felt too hot and stretched thin—the brief reprieve already over.

“Beautiful?”

“Sojourn,” Revan murmured. “Your fancy pilot’s word for vacation—”

“Sojourn, huh?” His stubble brushed her cheek and he kissed her again. “It’s not a bad name for a ship—”

Xxx

It was a stupid name for a ship, but it hadn’t mattered back then. Now—

Sojourn. The Kaas City Sojourn.

“No!” Revan ran to the map, watching the pieces of Carth’s ship falling, feeling the lights in the Force flare and then some die—

So many. Points on a grid, like stars—

Xxx

Carth felt like his brain was on fire and his lungs full of water, but there was no mistaking the prow of that ship swinging towards them, nor the alarms that signaled the Sojourn’s cloaking field was failing. He’d told them to drop it, stop wasting the ship’s remaining energy, but the ensign in charge of that station had been one of Tenebrae’s and he’d… he’d died.

“Open… channel!” he yelled again, trying not to see Takan’s body, trying not to think of who had killed them. “Open—”

“Father!” Strong arms pulled at him. The sound of running feet surrounded them. “Dad? It’s open! They’re not responding! Tell the crew to fight back! They can’t run—stop running—” his son’s voice turned dark. “Tell them to shoot! Aleema’s in range, her shields are down—my men don’t know the fricking launch sequences!”

“No.” Even half-delirious, Carth knew what the alarms meant. “They’ve breached containment fields. Sound the evacuation. We’ve got to get our people out—” he stared up at the viewscreen, at that great ship bearing down on them like an avenging leviathan, and behind it, other ships—from here it looked like an infinite fleet—

Revan’s fleet, he thought. At least she’s won. At least I sent the Sith Fleet away, at least they’re not here too—to make more of a hash of things—

The Ordo sigil was painted everywhere on the Aleema. Dustil had said she was there—said he could sense it.

A part of Carth understood the comm silence. She and Canderous both possessed that brutal
efficiency; while destroying their enemies—of course she wouldn't hesitate. Wouldn't even
wonder—

Of course. Nothing between you and your goal, huh, beautiful? Shoulda named the ship that,
maybe that would catch your attention—

“Get our people out,” he yelled at Dustil again—at all who were left. He watched his son’s
damned yellow eyes widen, that look of surprise preferable to the killer’s mask that had been on
his face a moment before. Don’t think about Takan. Or the others. Casualties of war. Save who we
can. Save my son. ‘Escape pods to the planet. Now!’”

“You don’t even want to fight back?” His son was pulling at Carth now, both of them pausing to
issue more commands, as the fragile order on the Sojourn’s bridge began to splinter.

“We are fighting back.” They were halfway to the door that led to the pods now. Carth had a
strange memory of another ship, another evacuation, another time when he had known, with a
Captain’s certainty that the ship was lost. Those dazed green eyes, blinking at him. She’d been so
lost—and now she’s found. This is who she was meant to be. “Remember which side we’re on,
Dustil.”

“I do,” his son mumbled, tugging his arm, as Carth felt his lungs seize in the thin air—the shouts of
the crew, the galaxy vanishing in smoke. Above the entrance to the pods the viewscreen
shimmered with heat as above them her ship drew closer.

Revan, he thought oddly. Beautiful. Freckles.

Behind his wife’s ship, others rose like wings.

Their formation was unmistakable—

“No!” Carth screamed, even as his son raised his hand, propelling them both into the softness of
the pod, the door slinging shut behind them; hiss of a launch and then the world twisted into a
crazy–quilt of gray ship–side plating and the flowers of ion cannons breaking on its skin, the sky
catching fire overhead as the ground rose up below—the planet—clouds—

Escape pod—going fast—

“The other ships! Dustil! The other ships!”

“Dad.” Dustil almost never called him that, not since Korriban. So rarely as to only be slips. His
son wasn’t strapped in properly, his son’s arms locked on Carth’s shoulders, his son’s damned
yellow eyes, so like Revan’s at the end. “We’re gonna live, okay? We’re gonna make it to the
ground—”

“My crew—” but it wasn't this crew he meant. It was her.

Watch out, Freckles! Those other ships—the other Mandalorians. They’re turning on you. There’s
too many—

The world blurred even as Carth’s fingers fumbled for his comm. “Protect,” he croaked, not
knowing if his fleet would even hear—or if they would even help. “Help... help... the Aleema—
help Revan—”

Xxx
“Revan looked well,” the old woman told Kissandrix of Wies. She had taken off the inappropriate armor, at least—dressed herself like a proper woman of the clans again. Her faded braids swung in two tails, one on each side of her head. “Far more like herself than when I saw her last.”

Kissandrix was getting a headache that watching Clan Ordo put on airs had not helped. “Is this a plea for clemency?”

“No.” The old woman’s eyes were white, chased with silver wires. “Far too late for that.”

“Aemelie of Ordo is in charge of their command… through her husband, of course.” Kissandrix had always thought Gwenarius was the more rational leader. “How can you be sure the Starfire is still a threat?” Her eyes narrowed. “I thought you swore you no longer had the Force magic.”

Jana Novasun nodded. “You are right to wonder. But I know because I know her. She did not hesitate. The Sith ships opened a comm channel—” even now they could hear frantic voices from the dying Sojourn, the calls of alarm from the Bright with its failing shields. “Revan leads the clans—not Ordo. That is her ship and her command.” She paused. “And that command must end now, before she can do more damage to the galaxy.”

“Then we will be rid of the dar’jett osik?” So they had been promised. Kissandrix was skeptical, but the old woman had promised the outcome of (at least) this victory.

“Yes,” Jana nodded. “At least for a time, old friend.”

“Very well.” Kissandrix rose to her feet, raising her voice. “Launch the squadrons. Focus your efforts upon their flagship, but do not let the others escape. Accept quarter from the other clans,” Kissandrix told her fleet. “But for the Sith and Ordo—nothing.”

Xxx

Their shields were failing. Inse had never studied much of ship mechanics, (an oversight she regretted now), but that much was plain from the sheer terror ringing in the Force, the way the crew still only stood by the force of her command. They had moved out of range, but the damned Aleema was now following, having dispatched the Sojourn even more quickly than some of Lord Malak’s relations.

“Can you get us to the hyperspace lane?” Inse asked her commander. “Quickly?”

“Impossible.” The Sithling shook his head. “There's still time to evacuate—”

“Or make the jump blind,” muttered his second. “Faster. When our shields go, everything in our wake will go too—”

“But we could land anywhere—a blind jump—” her commander was a cautious man. Inse had noticed that before.

Their ship rocked with another explosion. Inse glanced up to see (with cold comfort) that some of the Mandalorians seemed to be attacking their own. Including that cursed flagship.

“Just get us out of here,” she told the second. “Now.”

“But—” her commander began, but did not finish. He had something caught in his throat.

“Get us out of here!” She repeated to the second. “And you—” a glance to the commander. Pity, he had kind eyes. “Die,” Inse Blais told him.
Agreeably, the man did.

Xxx

The lights flashed, and for a second Revan was on her back on this bridge again, staring into blue eyes—then she was running down a corridor on the Endar Spire—

Run, the man said, a whisper in her ear, in her mind—

Sojourn, her mind whispered back. Interlude. Oh, no —

“Wies are dogs!” Aemelie spat. “Hu’tuun traitors! They aren't answering my hails!”

“They've turned.” Canderous didn't sound surprised.

Below them, pieces of the Sith dreadnought were sparking on atmosphere, raining wreckage on the world below.

The Aleema was a great deal stronger than the Kaas Sojourn had been, but it was flying low over a planet too—and flying only half-manned. Most of their fighters had been cut off and their allies—

Revan’s breath caught as she saw the carnage from starboard—all those ships from Wies operating with methodic efficiency, striking their targets before anyone had time to react.

We’re the only ones close enough to the planet for life pods. Ten ships of our ships are here—against so many—they are doomed—

“Rally them,” Revan barked at Dessa, who was manning the comms. “Tell them to get the frack out of here. This is a rout. Try and put us between them and the Wies vanguard—to buy them time—” her hands sent the best coordinates to the navboard, where they flashed. The kid there input them quickly, hands shaking.

As she watched, two of their freighters made it to hyperspace. But then the light between the stars darkened with wings of fighters—thousands. More than she’d believed possible in a sky—

No. That's not true. I remember nothing like this, but somehow I do—and those fighters, they’re swarming—they’re going to get beneath our shields and open a path for their bombers—ignoring the freighters—they’re coming for us—

“Fall back!” Revan called out. “We’re no good to anyone dead. None of us!”

“Permission to fly.” Millifar stood in front of Revan, pale, biting her lip like a kid. “We have fighters left. The Wies cowards try to hide her but that is their lead ship. We need to cut off their head before they cut off all our… our limbs.”

“Which one?” Even as she asked, Revan assessed trajectories, watched another one of theirs burn out. And beyond it, a flicker of light—something—

What's that? She frowned, reaching toward the spot on the screen, behind it the real view—and on that, again, a flash—like an interstellar beacon.

Third ship, her mind supplied. Remember? You sensed three cloaked ships—that's the small one hiding in the asteroid field—

“They're signaling for reinforcements!” Revan slammed her hand against the translucent screen. “There! See that flicker? In the asteroid belt. We can’t let them bring more! They can’t get
“Permission?” Milli demanded again.

“Show me which ship is the lead so we can shoot it down,” Revan snapped. “I need you take out this—there—see? The beacon beyond that cloud.”

“But—” Millifar began.

“The Wies ship is mine,” Revan told her.

“Ours,” Aemelie snapped from behind.

“That one.” Millifar pointed at a small warbird hovering off-center. “See? It isn't attacking anything—even in range. They don't want to draw fire.”

“They have now,” Aemelie muttered, waving at the boys manning the plasma cannon. “Launch the long-range missiles, locked onto that vector—”

“Wait!” Revan held up her hand. “Draw them closer first. Give them something they’ll want—”

“Our fighters,” Canderous said. “I’ll lead them in against the aft cannons. Plating’s heaviest there—we reinforced it to take a few hits.”

“As you wish, husband. This is your fight.” Aemelie smiled.

Canderous’s mouth twitched. “Oh, is it now?”

“I will help, Father—” Millifar frowned, looking between them.

“Revan gave you your orders,” her father gruffed. “Get the beacon first. You’ll still be blooded in stars.”

“I’ll come with you,” Mekel said to Millifar.

“The short-range Cartas only seat one.” The girl nodded at Canderous. “Father.”

“Fly well.” Canderous told her, already walking toward the hangers himself.

“Cand—” he was gone before Revan had a chance to say good-bye.

His daughter turned to go but Mekel caught her arm again. “Milli,” he said—and kissed her, cupping her face between his hands, bending his head to hers. They stood a moment, light and dark outlined, and then the girl broke free.

“You were an excellent first lover, Mekel Jin,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Uh,” Vrook’s son actually blushed, but Canderous’s daughter was already running toward the door.

“It’s too soon to know if she’s with child,” Aemelie said to Revan. “But I sent a long-range comm to Gwen. She will be pleased.”

“I—” Mekel’s face was beeta-red. He looked at Revan. “What should I do?”

“Can you shoot a cannon?” she asked him.
“Better than you, Third Wife,” Aemelie chuckled.

Xxx

“Are you getting all this, Pina–ha?” Static crackled over Rew Ekkumi’s comm. “Whatever the seven hells it is?”

“Their comms are all over the place. I don’t speak all the languages—” the Besalisk’s solid body was an outline against their starboard port view, both sets of hands manning the holo-cam controls that maneuvered the drones floating a few clicks out from him. “But at least some of them are Sith, I think. And there might be two sets of Mandalorians.”

“One set trying to destroy the Aleema,” Rew Ekkumi noted. “Revan’s ship.” For that had undoubtedly been her voice barking commands in Mandalorian like it was her native tongue. Rew only knew the basics of the language, but she had heard Revan’s voice issuing commands before—

“So it’s a Mando’ade civil war?” Dwilla asked. “Maybe we should just leave them to it.”

“Car—Captain Onasi was on that Sith vessel,” Rew said. His voice had been unmistakable too, yelling commands in Basic while someone else translated them into the harsh sibilance of that Sith language. “Traitor or not, he's one of ours.”

“He’s probably dead,” Abrad said.

You’re probably right. His ship was pieces raining down on the planet beneath them. “He gave the signal to evacuate,” Rew said. “We’ve tracked at least fifty trajectories from that wreckage falling too evenly to be… wreckage. Carth may have survived. Some of his men definitely have. We need answers.” She glanced at Abrad. “Did Rensha get back to us?”

“High Admiral Rensha only wants to know why we sent her and the Fleet to Felucia when the fight is here.” Lieutenant Abrad coughed. “I admit, sir. I’m curious about that one myself.”

“Because we were following the Mandalorians—and Carth said Felucia!” That message board. Could she have been wrong? That recipe for tubers? Could it have just been a recipe for tubers?

No. That’s madness too.

“Damn,” Pina–ha said. “We’ve been spotted. Incoming. One Mando Carta-class fighter—”

“Get inside,” Rew told him. “Leave the drones—” she turned to Abrad. “Try a hail on the fighter. Let’s see if we can get a sense of what side it’s on—” what side he is on, her mind finished. Did Carth send that message because he’s a traitor, or was he trying to save our fleet by keeping them away from this rout?

“Attention, Sith osik,” a woman’s voice broke in. “Will tell me if you are allied with Wies before you die?”

“She sounds like a kid,” Abrad marveled. He wasn’t far off himself.

She does. But Mandalorians were never truly children, any more than Jedi were.

A red beam shot across their bow, and the ship rocked back and forth.

“Do you mean Clan Wies?” Rew asked on her comm. “No. We are not.”
"Barbarians lie," the girl’s voice snapped, angling closer. Her light guns flashed as she began hammering their shields.

“She's green,” Ensign Thigmak said, rocking the yoke up to put them farther back into the curve of the asteroid. “She's not triangulating range—she’s coming dead on.”

“Is her ship small enough to tractor?” It wasn't pity that kept Rew from engaging—but the lone pilot might know what had just happened—

And what happened to Carth.

“If we can fry her boards before she takes out our shields, yeah. Those Cartas have shit for defensive but they sting hard.”

“Hit an ion pulse when she's in range. Pina? You inside?”

“Aye, aye,” his comm echoed feedback as the airlocked apexed open, and the largest member of their crew tramped in. “And I heard that. You know it’ll fry our long-range comms too—”

“Then you’ll have to get creative. We can still jump.”

“Yeah, but the nearest waystation is two days—”

“In range now!” Thigmak warned.

“Knock her out,” Rew ordered. “We need her alive for interrogation.”

Xxx

“There,” Millifar smiled, as her targeting reticule clicked on the cowardly Sith ship hiding in the asteroid’s shadow. The world had narrowed to them and to her. “Ka’tini, barbarian troch! Ne’shab’ru—”

All the lights froze suddenly. The Carta gave a jerk and then descended rapidly—to rapidly—toward the hangar of a ship that looked more like a Republic light cruiser than anything the Sith osik had ever made.

Her boards were dead entirely. “Ni su’cu’yi—!” Millifar’s voice froze, as the stasis field washed over her body too.

Osik! she thought.

Xxx

“Millifar’s gone dark,” Aemelie’s voice was flat. No accusation, just the facts. A few meters away, Mekel's head turned, and she saw his jaw tighten.

“Keep firing on that fracking ship,” Revan ordered, her own eyes on the rout before them, streams of intel coming through her headset. Wies had twice as many ships—at least—and that advantage was widening.

But some of theirs had gotten away. That was something— had to be something.

Milli— “I—I don't think she's dead.” But how would she know?

“Because you can tell, even if you don't feel it, Padawan. Points of light—like stars going out—”
The dry voice whispered in Revan’s mind. It could have even been real.

“Really?” Mekel’s voice. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Mekel of Lin!” Aemelie barked. “Keep your eyes on the targets in front of you!”

Revan stood up, walking closer to the ferraglass. The offending ship danced, just out of reach. That lead ship, Millifar had said.

_Come closer_, she thought at it, but the Force wasn’t strong enough to bridge vacuum between them, any more than it had been enough for her to know whose ship they had obliterated before—before they had—

“They’re running scared,” Revan noted, seeing a smaller craft detach from the warbird’s bay, arcing away from them, even as the warbird herself finally joined the battle with a volley of short-range bolts that lit up their ship’s sensors—before dancing out of range again.

“They should be,” Aemelie smiled. “Traitorous hu’tuun—”

“Maybe… but the rest of the party isn’t running,” Leskal pointed out, as the kids front of him diverted their forward thrust to their deflecting shields, before Revan could even ask—

“Make them work for it,” Revan said, closing her eyes to see the battle again.

_Points of light. Please—_

_Xxx_

“Dar’jett magic!” Kissandrix cursed. “They know to target us. Evasive to delta, gar–eagle’s claw! Now!”

“Theyir shields are below twenty per cent. We have them—” her lover Rual claimed.

Like many of the Wies men, Rual was clumsy and stupid. And rash. Still, it was tempting.

“No doubt Revan of Lin senses Jana Novasun,” Kissandrix snapped. “And this is why I wanted her and her dar’jett magic on another ship!”

“Oh, she just left,” Arittix, her second mother’s son said. “She took the Degma shuttle—you said to give her anything she wanted!”

“She left?” A wing of fighters bore in low, scraping their view of the _Aleema’s_ heavily armored surface below them, and sending their own proximity alarms pealing. Caught between the great ship’s cannon and its defensive squads, their ship was being pummeled from all sides—

_Xxx_

“There!” It was a hollow victory that Revan felt when the warbird’s sparks all went out at once, made even hollower as its final explosion crashed into what remained of their portside guns, taking them out, and with that, depressurizing the bays on that side of the ship.

_Sparks of light going out_. Revan just _knew_, even as Aemelie was demanding casualty reports—indeed for a second she was _there_, watching the blown blast doors—

_Close_, she thought, as they shuddered forward, sparking the defensive grid finally, sealing out vacuum.
Somewhere, there were cheers.

“The techs were stationed there,” she said. It had only been a few days ago, she’d been down there, racking her memories of Polla Organa’s knowledge about shields and artillery to impress them. “There were twelve—thirteen—behind the blast door that didn’t make it out.” if she turned her head, Revan thought she might see some of them floating in space when the deck blew.

Every spacer’s worst nightmare.

Dessa grunted in agreement.

“Canderous is bringing another run into their squads. Without their leader, they should fall apart.” Aemelie fiddled with her command controls.

“Someone got away from that ship,” Revan told her. For some reason, that seemed important.

Aemelie frowned. “Which ship?”

“Kissandrix’s. I didn’t see, but I—one of the sparks went to the planet.”

Aemelie shrugged. “Those three are our next objectives,” the dark-haired woman said with forced confidence. Maybe forced. “The troop carrier, the modified freighter, and that gunship protecting their bombers.”

“Don’t we need to take out the bombers?” Mekel asked.

“Not near us!” Revan said at nearly the same moment that Aemelie objected too.

“From a distance,” she explained—

“What about those ships?” Mekel asked. “They weren’t there a fracking second ago—”

“What?” Revan knew, again, her head turning to the right of the screen where at least twenty capitals—triangular and wickedly pointed, like the Aleema’s small, clumsy cousins were fanning out in perfect formation—

Ikit’na–chok, it’s called, that whisper in her mind supplied. Maximum scatter at maximum range. A way to take the field, quickly, the danger is if you get flanked—

“Those are Sith ships,” Mekel added.

“Yes, they are. We know what Sith ships look like,” Leskal told him.

“It’s the Sith Fleet,” Revan said. And we just shot down their own fracking flag. “Try and put the Wies ships between us and them—”

“No!” Aemelie snapped. “Hold.”

The barrage on their shields slipped the sensors another notch into the red. A few direct hits sparked the web of shields directly in front of their viewscreen.

Revan’s eyes went to that scar in the hull again. “Maybe we should move command to that interior bridge—”

“I said, 'hold,” Aemelie snapped.
“Ajunta’s Glory is hailing us,” Dessa reported. She turned her head, eyes widening. “Transmitting roster list, and official command of the Sith Fleet to the leader of this vessel—”

“Ah. Kandosii!” Aemelie beamed. “They recognize our superior might!”

Revan thumbed the link on her chair open before she even thought—before she thought enough to realize that ten seconds ago, she hadn’t remembered there was a comm on her chair. “Patch me.”

The link vibrated under her fingers. “Visual,” she told it. *In for a credit—* “This is Revan Starfire of the *Imperial Aleema*. Who am I speaking to?”

A low chuckle. *“Nominally, Second Admiral Tii. I’ll be sure to take notes so he knows. The man has always been an admirer.”*  

Her breath felt frozen. “Hello, Tenebrae.”

The holographic image resolved before her: a balding man, wattled chin—something more than Human blood. Imperial uniform—

Even in the hololmage, it was obvious there was something wrong with his eyes.

“Are these your Mandalorians?” she snapped. “Call them off. Now.”

*“Really, Revan?”* The Sith Emperor chuckled. *“I thought they were yours. And then you betrayed them.”*

“Shields at ten,” Leskal muttered.

“Some of them are mine,” she said. “Can I trust your men to know the difference?”

*“Trust….”* The Sith Emperor chuckled. *“Such a small word. And yet…. upon trust’s back… hinge the hopes of every sentient.”* His fingers curled, and with machine–like precision, ten ships shot forward—

*Wik–cont,* Revan’s mind supplied the name of the maneuver. *Flank. Divide. Conquer—*

Xxx

Carth’s head pounded and the world was too bright. The air smelled scorched and wrong, with a sickly–sweet tang to it that reminded him of Fleet Academy’s turbine processors. Deep in the bowels of their building on Corellia, raw sewage was converted to fuel.

The world had the same smell now.

*What world? Which world?*

“Dad?” Dustil said, from somewhere outside.

*I must be dreaming. He never calls me dad.*

“Dad? Wake up!”

“Dustil.” His voice felt hoarse, full of grit. “Are we on Corellia?”

“Frack! You're burning up!” His son’s hand felt cold on his forehead.
Scuff of footsteps, voices. A startled exclamation—and then an all-too-familiar snap–hiss sound. Someone screamed once, it died out in a whimpering whine that Carth would never forget until the end of his days—any more than he would ever ask about it—even let himself wonder who his son had just killed—

“They… they startled me,” his son’s voice again. Close. That cold hand now holding his. “Dad, I gotta get you out of this pod. Stuff’s falling… we need to find shelter.”

Carth forced his eyes open, even as that drove a vibroblade’s worth of pain into his skull. Dustil’s face, still mottled and wrong, but the worried scowl was familiar and still heartrendingly young.

Like Takan—like—

He wouldn’t think of them now, wouldn’t think of the snap hiss, of how many times today he’d seen (or heard) his son kill.

“How many mothers have you killed, Father?”

Probably a lot—today. I lost an entire ship—probably more than one—

Carth looked up at the sky, but a low cover of dull brown clouds concealed the stars—and ships—above. He stumbled out of the pod, focusing to stay on his feet.

Revan? he thought. With the cover there was no way to know if her ship had made it.

If it doesn’t, it’s gonna be a mess coming down. Come on, Beautiful, we’ve beat worse odds—

“Come on,” his son said. “There’s some buildings over this way. I think I saw a ship come down over—a real ship. Landing—not a pod.”

“Might not be on our side,” Carth tried to make it a joke.

“Does it matter?” Dustil shrugged. “We need a ship. I’ll take it.”

XXX

“And that’s the story.” The man who called himself Meetra Surik’s brother folded his arms, leaning back in his chair. His eyes were the color of the Balmorran sky on a rare, clear day: a perfect shade of blue. “Our mother is a scheming Sith Lord who sired four children and adopted several more. She was obsessed with destroying the Sith Empire, long before its people gave a damn about Republic space. She’s put her memories into Master Atris, the Jedi Archivist. And we need to stop her.”

“That is one story,” Meetra Surik allowed. Growing up in the middle of a civil war, you learned there were always two. Even when there more than two—it always came down to the binary: us, them. You. Me. “On a planet like Thule or Korriban, I expect they tell a different one.”

“Not about our mother.” Her brother hadn’t touched his food, Meetra noticed. Her sister—or the woman who claimed that kinship—had long since gone—disappearing off with Bao. She wondered if they were going to be lovers now. Bao–Dur was an excellent one, so she hoped her sister could keep up—for Bao’s sake, if not the woman’s.

“ Aren’t you hungry?” Meetra asked. He had toyed with his fork, raised his glass to his lips a few times, but he hadn’t eaten—or drunk a thing.
Oerin looked startled. “You noticed my plate?”

“It’s still full,” Meetra told him. “If you’re not going to eat the ronto steak, I want it.”

“Of course...” The plate moved toward her, although his hands remained where they were, folded in a steeple above his lap.

*No, leaning back, covering his belly.*

When she blinked Meetra saw a black place there—not the simple gray robes he wore at all.

“I knew you had the Force,” she said. When she looked at the plate again it blurred—now half-eaten, now empty.

She took the fork and speared the steak, lifting it to her other hand to hold. It was heavy, warm—and intact. Not a bite taken.

“I know you had it once,” her brother said softly. “What do you see now, General Surik?”

Meetra Surik looked up at him, unsurprised that his appearance had changed even more. The handsome visage of a youth younger than her had been replaced by a rotting hulk, a patchwork of dried skin and sinew. One eye rolled, white and rotting. The other was half-closed. Black ichor seeped from a wound in his naked chest.

“I see a corpse,” she said. It was not her first one. “Do you have any peppa sauce for this steak?”

XXX
The Jekk ‘Jekk Tarr cantina was a busy hive of sentient organic life, but when Tee’raa raised her fingers to her lips and blew, the whistle cut through the din like a vibroblade through a Hutt’s soft underbelly.

Across the cantina floor, her twin’s head turned.

Shit! Tee’raa’s lekku snapped the ancient Rakatan word for excrement so hard she heard the ligaments pop.

“Problem, sis. The Kashyyyk mainframe cut off all communication to the relays!”

“That’s because Kashyyyk is a reactor–class asshole,” See’raa called back in Rakatan, getting up from her meet with the Aqualish bankers.

Tee’raa watched the admiring heads turn for her sister. Maybe having a voice helped with confidence, because although their measurements were within millimeters of each other, See’raa attracted all the compliments and free drinks; whereas everyone gave Tee’raa polite smiles and shrugs, as if being mute affected her cognitive ability—or her hearing.

“Da’chokka!” Her twin rolled her eyes at the screen. “We need someone there to check! Some of the Wookiees from Lehon are coming back to Kashyyyk, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I miss them too,” See’raa muttered, leaning on the bar. “What do you think Big Z’s up to?”

No clue. Think the T3 told him about us? Tee’raa wasn’t sure how their old pal would react. Freyrr and the others hadn’t known the original Mission Vao—so they’d been cool with it—but Zaalbar… that was kind of an awkward situation.

See’raa swore she didn't mind that he'd killed their progenitor, and the T3 hadn't seemed to mind either, but Tee’raa still wasn't okay with it, not really. Sometimes she dreamed about that day, even though it had happened after their memories and so not to them—and the only thing she had to go on for it was a reenactment from one of the Revan vids.

Sometimes she dreamed it had gone differently, and she was the only Mission Vao who had ever been. It might have been nice.
“Sis? You listening?” See’raa’s pale pink t’chun twitched with worry. “Zaal’s still on Dromund Kaas with the T3, right? Trying to take over the Sith Empire?”

_I think so—wasn’t that why T3 wanted all the vaccine?_

“Can I get you ladies something?” The male Twi’lek bartender was a green—and hovering closer than he should—probably wondering about a Twi’lek spouting gibberish with her lekku.

He couldn’t understand them, of course—unless he spoke Rakatan—which, Tee’raa thought, had rather lower odds of being true than womp–rats suddenly flying out of her ass.

“Another pair of ruby biels,” See’raa told him in Basic. “Hey. Know when the swoops sign–ups are starting?”

“You a racer?” His brow ridges shot up and a professional smile turned that mouth of his up. “Because you look more like one of the sky–queen’s handmaidens, come from heaven…” his gaze shifted to Tee’raa and then he looked away again. Other Twi’lek always did. Her lekku were defective—when she wasn't moving them to speak they tended to dangle down her back with no control at all—like she’d never learned basic hygiene. “Uh… I do mean both of you, of course. You’re… sisters?”

“Sure! And my sister wants a go at the races,” See’raa shrugged. “She used to be pretty ace. Almost won the Manaan Open one year.”

And Mission Vao would have too, if it hadn’t been for that interfering bantha–brained sleemo—

“Well…” the Twi’lek interrupted Tee’raa’s reminiscence. “Entrance fee is still pretty high—”

Tee’raa made a noise in her throat—more like a whine than a laugh, and twerked her t’chun. _We’ve got the credits! Just show us the sign–ups!_

“Oh? And is _that_ your bank?” He nodded at the priceless Rakatan obelisk that Tee’raa was still monitoring, its flashing patterns of light showing her the back–and–forth status of all the installations under their command: now worryingly disjointed with Kashyyyk pulled out of the mix. “Huttse Racing Guild don’t take sculpture in trade, sweet–cheeks. Too much room for fraud.”

“We have cash,” See’raa sniffed. “Just smart enough not to bring it with us. Wouldn’t want to kill you over ten thousand credits.”

“Hey! Was just asking!” Man was smart to twig that the pink’s hand on her vibroblade wasn’t just a joke. That made him a bunch smarter than the guy in the last bar where they’d gone first. That guy would be okay too—you could reattach lekku no problem if you did it fast—especially with the new, miracle kolto the whole galaxy ought to thank them for.

If only they knew.

_The credits are not your business, jerkoff. I want to race._ Tee’raa’s lekku clipped the words, signaling impatience.

It _was_ a poodoo mess that Kashyyyk had dropped out of their relay—almost like something— _or someone_— had taken control of its processors. And just when they’d finally convinced it not to listen to the T3, too.

Not the end of the galaxy—their Manaan factories was still churning out the kolto by the kilo—
bucket... plus their distribution channels from the Senate House Makeon were still happily shipping product all over Republic and Imperial space... and their droid factory up and running in Em–Four—but it still rankled. Kashyyyk had been theirs. Part of their original template. And while all cubs had to leave the nest sometime, (there was a passage in Thrieeewowwr’s song about that—leave the nest and learn to climb), that didn’t mean the nest should stop speaking to its cubs entirely.

That just didn’t seem fair.

—And it was still a little too on the t’chin, losing Kashyyyk right now, what with rumored reports of Polla Revan rampaging through the galaxy, and little Prince not even having his first milk teeth. What if there was war? All that kolto would sure come in handy, but they’d need optimal processors then, to keep it all going.

They couldn’t tell Lena about the upset, that was for sure. She’d stew, and there was nothing to be done fast.

“Do you think it’s her that stole Kashyyyk back from us?” See’raa switched back to Rakatan. “The T3? She was getting awfully cozy with Kaas. And she wanted to buy all that vaccine from House Racharn’s stores before the crazy terrorist guy blew them up.”

Tee’raa shrugged. She never told us herself she was buying it. The Kashyyyk computer could have been lying. Maybe it wanted all the credits for itself.

Tee’raa wanted to think well of the sad, squat little metal version of them. After all, if that Mission had chosen differently, Tee’raa herself wouldn’t exist.

Or, maybe she's mad about losing those vaccine lots the Selkath doc wrecked. She put up millions of credits—

“Maybe we should give her the reserves you stashed on Em–Four,” See’raa suggested. “Sents won’t twig the vaccine’s worthless for a while. T3 could still make something off the deal.”

“Here’s your biels,” the bartender said sulkily, plunking them down.

I’ll send her a holocard, Tee’raa shrugged. Tell her that crazy Selkath scientist trashing the factories wasn't our fault. Sometimes things happen.

“Should we tell her about the kolto working even better? It’s already shipping to Kaas—”

Tee’raa shook her head. No. Lena would be mad. She wants to sell the vaccine we got left here in Hutt Space before the bottom falls out of the market—

XXX

The planet was a wasteland of dust and the remnants of buildings half-buried by sand. The air stank and peppered Carth’s face with debris—until without asking, his son paused and tore a sleeve off the ill–fitting Imperial uniform he was wearing. Dustil used the fabric to fashion them each a cloth to tie over their noses and mouth, while Carth tried not to stare at the escape pod that had crashed so close to theirs—or the uniformed corpse still smoldering next to it.

He couldn’t forget the dead face, even if he couldn’t remember the name. The body was that kid who had woken him aboard the Sojourn. The one who’d been working with his son before.

“They startled me,” Dustil had said. As if he was making an excuse for spilling his ship–model...
glue on the couch, like he had when he was five.

Carth wished he could remember the kid’s name—

“Father?” His son’s hands had visible lines on them, darkened by Sith corruption. Like Revan’s had looked, there at the end. Those dark–veined hands smoothed the cloth over the lower half of Carth’s face. “We should go find that ship now.”

“Thanks, son.” He still… he still cares. About me, at least. Carth tried to take that as a good sign, even as another coughing fit threatened to rattle his brain loose. He accepted Dustil’s proffered arm (trying hard not to stare at the way the black lines twisted like snakes under his son’s skin), and the two of them set out.

“They’ve stopped fighting up there,” his son added, voice muffled through the cloth. His head tilted toward the sky.

Carth’s feet shuffled in the dust. On their left, a shattered ziggurat of stone and what looked like fused ferraglass cast a shadow over their steps. “Can you tell if it’s Revan? Is she—”

“Not dead? Yeah. She’s not dead. She was pretty loud in the Force a few times. You called the rest of the fleet, right? I think they heard you. There's… more ships up there now—and sentinels seem to have stopped dying.”

“Yes, I called in the Imperial Fleet.” Had they come?

“Hey, Dad…” Dustil's voice trailed off, as he looked back up at the sky. “Most of our ships were at orbital dock around Ziost before you deployed? That’s right, isn’t it? But… did you ever actually see them?”

“What?” Another cough interrupted Carth’s answer. Then, “No. I had the lists. Met a few commanders—why?” Something else suddenly occurred to Carth—a thought he hadn't had time to complete when he'd been trying to save his wife—because the choice between certain death and the madman who wants you alive is always the madman. You can always shoot him—

The red sun stretched their shadows across the ruins, elongating them into a broken wall that looked like it had been laid with colorful mosaics once—now streaked with grime and half-shattered on the ground.

I handed my wife over to the madman. Only… I can’t shoot him, because he’s in a billion bodies.

That was the thing that both Mission and the other… the other Revan had said not to do.

Xxx

“Tenebrae cannot have her, Captain. No matter what.” That face—so like his wife’s except for that clinical gaze, studied Dustil and Carth like they were assets to be weighed and sold. “That is why I came alone. Why we must continue this subterfuge until—”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Carth’s son paced to the window. Already dressed like Malak for the sithspawned party their insane host was throwing in their honor: Darth Revan and her consorts presented to the noble Sith society. “Ask me again: why do I need to do anything you freaking say?”

The woman’s head turned toward Dustil. “Because I can save your father from Tenebrae’s kiss,” she snapped. “Does that still matter to you or not?”
The air in the room seemed to drop at least ten degrees, darkening so much that Carth rubbed his eyes, thinking for a moment that he was going blind. The shadows shifted over his son's face, thinning his features, aging them—turning him into a man Carth barely recognized. For a brief moment—it was only later the effect would be commonplace, at the time it was still a shock—Dustil’s eyes seemed to glow, yellow as mag–lights in the fog.

“I can take care of Father myself,” Dustil snapped. “We don't need you.”

The woman’s eyes widened and she took a step backward. “Have a care,” she muttered. “There are forces here beyond your understanding—”

“I’m not a kid,” Dustil muttered. “I know what the dark side is.”

Incredibly, the woman started laughing.

Xxx

Dustil had stormed out then—and when the party ended with the other Revan Starfire dying—or coming close enough to make no difference—Carth had had no time to ask why his wife was supposed to stay away from Dromund Kaas—or, for that matter, how the original Revan had planned to save them all and defeat the Sith Emperor alone… before she was defeated by a rancor.

Now, Carth had no way of knowing if the original Revan had been right, or lying, or completely insane—

Mission said the same thing, though. Mission didn't want Revan near Dromund Kaas either—

He coughed again. Maybe I handed my wife over... but I bought us all time. Her too. Hell, I've seen her perform miracles before—I have to believe she will again.

Have to believe she’ll find us too. Did we bring the beacon from the pod? He turned his head to look back. They’d come so far—the wreckage of their craft was already hidden amidst the shifting shadows and empty ruins behind them.

“Why’d I ask? Dad? Dad!” Fingers snapped in front of Carth’s face and then Dustil’s voice dragged him back to the present. His son was still frowning at the cloud cover, a troubled expression on his face. “The ships up there...they're… funny.” He frowned. “I can't put my finger on it, just—something’s… wrong.”

“Nothing we can do from here.” Maybe that’s for the best. You’ve done enough, son.

Hard not to think of the crew of his own ship again. Of Takan, and all the other possessed ones that Dustil had cut down without blinking, ending with the kid who’d been unfortunate enough to follow them down in his escape pod.

“Hey! So, some good news...” His son grabbed Carth’s arm and slung it around his own shoulders, supporting him as they started walking again. “I think that asshole is out of your head. You've got the Korriban flu, right? So it's like you're cured.”

Carth blinked his streaming eyes and sneezed. His throat felt like it had been sanded down with durapaper. “Good news,” he croaked, staring into his son’s gleaming yellow eyes, framed by the twisted shadows of the damned. “Great.”

Xxx
And conquer those ships, cutting through the Wies forces with a precision that made Revan’s skin prickle, even as their command–lights flashed in her eyes, requesting directions and allowing her to fine–tune their responses with a combination of gestures and voice–commanded coordinates on the board projected before them. The capital ships moved with the ponderous weight of a kisra herd on parade—and their smaller fighters formed in lines between with the order of a killick hive.

The names of Wies ships offering surrender, downed, or fled scrolled across the holographic display in three columns. With Headwoman Kissandrix’s death, their enemies’ fire had gone out. And, with the Imperial Fleet at Revan’s command, the battle ended quickly.

When Revan closed her eyes, she could still see the command nodes flashing—but also, within the Force, all the tiny sparks still left in space—shining in the Force—each one a life—

Her eyes snapped open, blinking at the screen again, trying to reconcile the sparks with her display.

Impossible! There are more ships than lives!

Less than a quarter of the Sith ships held crews. The others were dark places, distinguished only by their displacement of vacuum, reflected only in the lights surrounded them. Are the crews all dead? She thought of Oerin Lin. But no, his presence in the Force had been… there. (And was not here at all—not even a whisper of him.)

Are those ships commanded by droids? Are they illusions?

“Meditating upon your victory, Lord Revan?” the smug voice interrupted her thoughts. “You’re a quiet one. I didn’t expect that.”

“Oh?” Revan’s eyes went to the holographic image of the Sith Admiral hovering to her left, as she wondered what the frack she was supposed to call him. Emperor? Dar had just called him ‘Tenebrae,’ the scorn in her voice making it clear how much she despised him. “Maybe I just don’t have much to say.”

Or was that an act—Dar hating him? To lull me into a false sense of security? Why else would she leave me and go to him? Dar’Revan did all she could to trap me on Deralia—

Is she still alive? Is she here—could she be masking herself in those ships?

“Gratitude,” murmured the creature. “Would be what I expected. At least feigned appreciation for saving your life and your fleet.”

Auntie Mita had always said words cost nothing and count for everything. “Thank you,” Revan snapped. “Happy?”

The possessed man’s smile widened. “Tut, tut,” chuckled Tenebrae.

Revan kept her face expressionless. “Your ships. Are they illusions?” Or crewed by droids?”

“Are my ships… what?” he beamed at her, stretching the possessed man’s face into a smile that looked too wide for it. “But they are your ships! I give them to you!”

Revan crossed her arms, first gesturing to Aemelie to take over reviewing the surrenders. Notice of returning fighters blinked before her eyes. Canderous is back—
“Nice, but I have my own.”

“Nice?” He blinked at her. “I called in the reserves of the Sith Fleet for you, Starfire. When I saw that the Sleepers had awakened… no doubt inspired by the news of your return… I summoned them! Your former husbands deserved a command worthy of their stations—a shame it was to be their last. Due to your unwarranted aggression, their role in the battle was over before it began.”

“My former husbands—” Carth. I shot down his ship. Revan had been nearly certain before, but now Tenebrae confirmed it. The truth was like a blade in her back, and she felt the weakness crack her voice, saw the pleased smile of the asshole in front of her widen, as if he knew he’d scored a hit.

Revan’s nails bit into her palms, as she stared steadily back at him, grief and rage mixing like a song inside her. Carth.

“Truly, you have no memory,” the man chuckled. “And yet… I can feel you burn from here.” He stroked his chin beard. “Perhaps our union won’t be a disappointment after all.”

Union? In your fracking dreams, monster. Revan stared back at him, not trusting her voice. The Force pulsed in time with her heart, as her vision seemed to skip—everything becoming a blaze of lights, and space between—from the elements to the stars themselves—and at the end of it—

There. That one spark there. Make an end. Revan’s hand twitched open, then closed.

“Hah hahgh… gug—” The Emperor’s laughter abruptly choked off, and her fingers flexed again. For a moment, it felt like his throat was under her hand, slick and crushing beneath her grasp—skin already cold—his body twitching in spasms. “Y–yesss,” he gurgled. “S–so… strong—”

The rush of exultation was surprising, unexpected. It felt like justice. But then, maddeningly, Tenebrae’s smile widened, and something from him shoved back.

The world cut out, leaving only Him.

His mind was black, and formless, and ageless as an infinite spiral; impossibly smooth and all the little lights flickered in it in time—all of them linked like a web of them— and they—they were all linked between—

Far away from the now, Revan felt her own pulse flickering in time—the Force under her command rising like a wave to crush the heart—the hearts—and then that pulse—pulses—pulled—stretching, lagging—racing ragged—too fast and then... slowing—

The little lights all flickered as if they’d go out.

No, a voice whispered. You cannot win, Revan. Not like this.

The abrupt lurch of Revan’s chair and a discordant alarm snapped her mind back from the infinite, leaving her gasping and shaken, her hand locked around her own neck as if to protect it, her heart pounding as if she’d run a race.

“Oh, I’ve missed you, Starfire,” the madman whispered. “So much.”

“Status?” Dessa was demanding, edge of panic there. Lights flashed red and blue.
“We just tilted twenty degrees port,” someone called out. “Engines are fine, stabilizers trying to compensate but there was no reason—we just slid off course!”

“General Revan!” Aemelie hissed from the chair next to hers. The woman’s fist punched her hard in the ribs. “Whatever your dar’jett magic just did, cease it at once. You’re moving my ship!”

“My ship,” Revan hissed back—but her fingers opened, and she felt the power slip out of her hands, leaving them empty and shaking. The alarm cut out abruptly, as a part of her felt the Aleema realign itself, shifting in its paces, like Dancer running beneath Polla Organa on the plains.

*My ship. My mind. I don’t know what the frack that was, but this is all mine. Mine. My body, my people, my ship—*

*Not his—*

“Hah, hah,” the asshole chuckled. “I suppose you have no memory of command. So little control over your slaves. Oh, Revan. The things I will teach you!”

She forced herself to freeze inside, staring at him. “I just wanted to show you my strength, Tenebrae. So there’s no confusion about who I am.”

“No confusion,” he murmured, in a way that made her blood boil. “And such a gift—the two shallow copies you sent to me. In some ways, I feel we’re so close already… seeing that Deralian fire—”

*The two copies—*

“You’re welcome.” Revan looked down at the command board. Underneath it her left hand was clenched in a fist, nails digging hard into her palm. It was pointless to speculate what had happened on Kaas already with this planet in front of her now, and the possibility of survivors *here*—pointless to speculate on what the madman had just done too. She would end him. Somehow. He would pay.

Revan moved her fingers on the console, pulling up the communications logs, the increasingly desperate signals from the *Sojourn*—all of which she had ignored when there had still been time to save them.

No missives were from Carth directly, but she saw his signature in every line now that she was looking for it: those orders to evacuate—written again and again—the pleas to save as much of his crew as possible—the requests for retrieval of all escape pods from the planet—

And not a shot fired. The *Sojourn* had burned with its cannon unused, and the second ship, marked as *Grave Bright* in her logs, had jumped to hyperspace.

*They didn’t even fight back—*

She forced herself to look up again at the still-chuckling hologram before her. Behind him scrolled the lines of their own losses, captures, and returns: lives and equipment reduced to coded Aurebesh.

“What are the Sleepers again?” she asked. “Those ships? Your reserve fleet?”

“Do you truly not remember the Sleepers? I believe those remaining Mandalorian ships are all surrendering, now, Revan. Surrendering to you.” He smiled. “You are quite welcome, but
I’m sorry your carelessness cost you both husbands. Lord Malak would have survived unscathed had he stayed on his own ship, but alas...” he shrugged.

No advantage to answering him.

“What are your Sleepers?” she repeated. Even as she said it, Revan watched the Imperial warships fan out with impossible precision—aligning into a solar orbit that matched their own.

Wik. To surround, in Ancient Sith. And those ships are. Surrounding us. That formation is perfect. Too perfect. No organic pilot could do that—not even with nav–comps automated to calculate the parabolic vectors—

“My Sleepers are ships!” The madman beamed. “For you!”

“What is he saying?” Aemelie interjected. “I’ve learned a great deal of the dar’jettai written tongue from our ship, but he’s going too quickly.”

“He says those warships surrounding us are ours,” Revan translated the Ancient Sith into Mandalorian automatically. “He calls them Sleepers.”

“They look like abominations,” Aemelie scowled. “Do not trust them—or that hu’tuun.”

Do you really think I would? Revan glared at her.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” Tenebrae added cheerily. “It wouldn't be the first time you've destroyed someone loyal to you, Revan. Someone close as blood—although... Lord Malak may have survived. Can you feel that tremor in the Force—as if he's calling to you? He’s become so strong—I believe I sense him below... do you?” Again that chuckle. “The two of you were so close... once upon a time....”

A report flickered in her vision. Millifar’s Carta –class was still missing. Aemelie had tagged it, like a reminder.

“We will handle recovery efforts on the planet’s surface ourselves,” she told the Emperor. “If Lord Malak’s alive, I’ll find him.”

If Dustil survived, then maybe Carth did too—or is this all a trap? How can I be sure? I can’t. We have to go to the surface and see. We need to go now—

All she sensed from the planet beneath was darkness. Darkness and... there. Revan’s senses reached out, past the sparks surrounding them. On the planet’s northern land mass something flickered in the Force, half concealed by a cloak of rage—and then... something like... like a light flashed before her eyes.

A beacon, a part of her mind whispered. Light in the darkness. For one who can hear its call.

“We... we’ll handle recovery,” she said out loud. “You may—you need to leave, Tenebrae.”

“So you already proclaimed, Third Wife.” Aemelie had apparently demoted Revan again.

Because of Millifar? Does Canderous know his daughter is missing?

“Of course.” The admiral had a cruel face—Tenebrae’s expression just made it crueler. “I’ve quite outgrown Nathema, but you may find my natal world amusing. Visit my shrines. Some
may still be standing... but do not tarry too long, Revan. Some of your guests on Kaas may not keep much longer. The green cells are quite drafty, and I don’t want to trouble you with my staffing issues, but it's getting harder to keep them provisioned—they eat so much—” He paused. “I have an execution planned for tomorrow too—such a shame you’ll miss it, but I will transmit a broadcast. Rebels, you know—all those meddlesome slaves. They go so boldly into death. I’ve planned a surprise destruction of the House of Blais, and that Deralian pilot as well to cap off the party—”

Deralian. Pilot. That could be—that could be Polla, or... that could be either of them. Polla or Seiran.

She swallowed. “Which guests in your cells are mine?” There was no use thinking about the others as sentients she could save. Not anymore.

“Hah,” Tenebrae murmured. “More amusing to show you. We’ll chat later, Starfire. Enjoy Nathema.”

“The Imperial ships are leaving,” Dessa reported, telling Revan what she already knew... as one by one, those strange ships—and the five or six more normal ones—vanished from her senses.

Tenebrae’s image fizzled out as his ship went into hyperspace too, still with that too-wide smile on his face.

When Revan blinked she could almost still see his Sith–damned grin: mocking and smug and enraging, baiting her like a k’lor slug along a sweet trail—heading for the salt trap beneath, no matter what she did.

Frack you, she thought, uncoiling her fist. Carth might be still be alive. And Dustil. I’ll end you, Tenebrae.

Her voice came out evenly as she flicked the command to all channels. “Attention crew: maintain orbit and ready shuttles. We need to find the survivors from the Sojourn—or from any other ships—on that planet. Scan the orbital wreckage for life-signs. Bring back everyone... anything you find. I want the dead too. List all relevant information. Descriptions. Names, if... if known.” Carth. Dustil. Millifar—there’s no casualty report, her comm-link’s still open—it must be intact, she might be too—

Millifar. Hells, Canderous wasn’t back up here, but Mekel—

Poor kid. Just found out his girlfriend’s probably dead—just like his father—

“Mekel?” Revan cleared her throat. “I promise, we’ll do everything to find Milli—” Her eyes went to Millifar’s station, the one she had shared with Mekel Jin. But the station was empty.

“Jin left minutes ago while you were admiring the mad king,” Aemelie sniffed. “Try and pay attention, Third Wife.”

XXX

The ship Dustil had said had landed close turned out to be farther than Carth liked, far enough that he ended up almost draped across his son, half-carried by the time they cleared the last rise of broken hill.

Below them burned a makeshift fire and a slight, robed figure sitting next to its warmth. For a
moment Carth’s heart leapt irrationally—that the galaxy could be this simple after all this time.

Until his son pushed him back. “Let me go first,” he muttered. “That woman’s a null. I can take the ship.”

“We don’t know which side she’s on—don’t hurt her!” Carth said, trying to measure his disappointment. The woman had frail shoulders, and crooked, hunched back. A woman, but not my wife. Too small and too old—

His foot slipped on the shale and the hooded one looked up.

“Who is there?” Soft voice, cracked with age. A mirrored visor spanned her eyes, concealing most of her face.

“I got this,” his son muttered, pulling out his saber hilt. “Stay here, Dad!”

“Dustil! Don’t kill—”

You got used to the Force, but Carth would never get used to the sight of his son with a red lightsaber, leaping at least ten meters through the air—and now pointing his blade at a sentient who still hadn’t drawn any weapons in return.

“Don’t move,” his son growled, voice carrying up the shale rocks to where Carth still stood. “We’ll take the ship.” The covering had fallen from his face, fluttering to the ground. “Old woman.”

The hooded figure stood up slowly, and lifted her hood. Under the robes she was slight and short—an old woman with her white hair in two Mandalorian braids, hanging like headtails on either side of her face. The visor hid her gaze, but her lips pursed and sharpened as she assessed them. “For what purpose?” Her voice was as cracked and worn as the planet—but her accent was Core.

“That's our business.” Dustil twitched his blade to the side, as if he was gesturing for her to move.

“Dustil!” Carth started making his way down the slope as fast as he could, trying not to fall on his ass as he did so. They still didn't know if this old woman was friend or foe. She could be from the Aleema. She could be from Revan—

“Dustil?” The old woman said. “Is that who you are?”

“No. I'm Lord Malak’s fracking ghost,” Carth’s son snapped, gesturing with the saber. “Who the frack are you?”

“Quinneth… Cannon?” she said. “Or another name if you'd prefer, Lord Malak.” Her head turned toward Carth, and a faint smile creased her face, softening it. “And you? Who are you supposed to be?”

Carth pulled the cloth from his own face, stepping forward, onto the flat ground. “Carth,” he said. “I’m Carth Onasi. Who… how did you get here? You were in the battle?” Her ship was a Mandalorian shuttle, but unmarked by clan sigils.

“Captain Onasi? Why, of course. You're quite famous. Or… is it Imperial High Admiral Onasi now? There are five bars on your chest. And a crown. Those are measures of the Emperor’s prestige—not the Senate’s.”

“Just call me Carth.”
“And your companion, Lord Malak, is he a mere Corporal in the Imperial Fleet?” A smile tugged her thin lips. “Your uniform missing a sleeve, Corporal Malak.”

“It’s not my uniform.” Carth’s son muttered.

“The name–badge says Irkuk. Perhaps the real Corporal Irkuk was the one who imbued the fabric with the stench of burnt hair and electrical burns?” The old woman shrugged. “In which case you should thank him. No one will notice the missing sleeve when they can smell you from such a distance.”

“Shut up!”

“Dustil!” Carth coughed. Damned if he was going to call his son anything else—or even could. He hadn’t had time to wonder at the uniform or anything else—and now, he didn’t want to know—

“I needed clothes, Dad,” his son muttered. “Corporal Irkuk didn’t listen. I couldn’t issue commands from your flagship in my fracking bathrobe—”

“I—” Carth coughed again, saving himself from making another excuse for his son—at least out loud. \textit{He did what he had to. He’s not in control of this right now, but he will be. Revan came back from this and Dustil will too—}

“We… we need to get off this planet,” he said to the woman. “We could take you with us—”

Her laugh sounded younger than the rest of her. “In my ship? I think not! I came to this place to meet a friend. I expect she’ll be along shortly.” Her head tilted up at him, visor flashing. “Isn’t she the one you seek as well?”

“What do you know—” Dustil began... but then Carth put a hand on his son’s arm, bidding him to be quiet.

“Ah… which friend is that again?” This Quinneth Cannon rubbed him the wrong way, he just couldn’t put his finger on why.

“I’m curious,” the old woman ignored him, staring at Dustil again. “Why did you come to this place? It seems a large coincidence, the three of us meeting here.”

“We saw your ship come down.”

“Through the clouds? And managed to journey to my precise location?” Her voice seemed to be growing stronger.

“Will of the Force.” Dustil folded his arms. “It’s strong in me.”

She chuckled. “I have no doubt of that. What does it whisper to you now?”

“It—it wants—” he broke off. “None of your fracking business! That fracking cave doesn’t matter! We’re taking your ship! My father wants your ship and we’re going to take it!”

“Cave?” Carth didn’t see a cave—just sand, the old woman, and a pile of rocks. He let his hand drop closer to his holster.

“She will hear the beacon too,” Quinneth Cannon murmured. “This is a place her feet have walked before. There is no need for you to find Revan, Captain—or Admiral—Onasi. She will find you.”

“So you \textit{are} here for Revan? Were you with her—you were on her ship?” \textit{No}, his instincts
screamed. *Maybe she’s another possessed Voice, or one of the Mouths—sometimes they’re not even possessed, but they’re all still loyal—*

*She's hiding her eyes. She must have a reason for doing that.*

“What do you know of the Krath aristocrat, Aleema Keto, Captain?”

He'd said to call him Carth. But something about the old woman’s gaze seemed to encourage formality, imply a certain reserve. “She was one of the Sith in the Exar Kun wars, Miz Cannon. Are you Mandalorian?”

“I have seen the skies of all five worlds of the Blood Sun,” the old woman switched to Mandalorian as effortlessly as his wife did. “But I was not born among them. I was adopted into the clans—much like Revan herself. Aleema, of course, did not marry at all—she died quite young—defying the age–old creature who had corrupted the very fabric of her world.”

“She died in the Cron cluster explosion.” Carth knew that much. He kept using Basic, catching Dustil’s frown. There was more to that story—Sith ghosts, Nomi Sunrider, Jedi heroics straight from the vids he’d seen as a kid—Revan probably had too, maybe that was why—

*Wait. Is she stalling for time? Trying to distract us?*

“Show us your eyes,” Carth added, moving his hand to rest on his blaster, now, and taking a step back to angle the shot. “Do it now.”

“My eyes?” She raised the visor. Quinneth Cannon had eyes that age or disease had glazed to white, inset with some kind of cybernetics. “I see better with the visor in this planet’s light,” she murmured. “But I understand your concern. You worry I am one of *his.* I assure you, I am not.”

*Implants. But not Tenebrae. Her eyes aren’t glowing—*

“His?” Carth tried to play dumb.

“This world was called Medriaas,” Quinneth Cannon said. “More than a thousand years ago, a bastard slave was born here. His mother was nothing. His father was a Dark Lord of the Sith—the ruling Dark Lord of this world, from an ancient and noble line. He did not learn of his bastard’s existence until the boy killed him. The boy was renamed Vitiate and the world renamed Nathema. The Lord of all Sith, Marka Ragnos, gave Nathema to Vitiate to rule....” She chuckled. “For a time, he was its proudest son... but as with all things, that did not last.”

“Are you trying to bore us to death before Revan gets here?” Dustil yawned, stretching out his legs before the fire. “Because it's working.”

“Those who do not understand the past are often condemned by their ignorance.” The old woman turned her head to Carth. “Lord Dramath possessed a similar arrogance, Lord...Malak— until the moment his cast–off offspring cut him down. Then he possessed nothing.”

“Well... I don't have any kids.” Carth’s son shrugged. “And I'm not gonna kill Admiral Onasi. So, is there a point to this?”

Quinneth Cannon looked disgusted. “Merely the waste of what breath remains in my body— sharing my wisdom with a fool. Yet still, with an end, comes rebirth. The sentient beasts of Kashyyyk know this well—and all the drexl of Onderon. Even a fool may come to a wellspring of reason, and, if properly nurtured, learn to drink from its—”
“Oh! Now, I understand, my lady! You’re going to talk Revan down from the sky?” Dustil interrupted, voice clipped in a Coruscanti accent, even as he was rolling his eyes. “Using your voice as a beacon? That’s how you know my dear lovely wife Revvie–Red’s coming here for sure? You were told by a Wookiee? Or a drexl?”

“That is the beacon.” The woman turned and pointed to a rough cluster of dust–covered rock to her side. “Or rather, the beacon is below this place, hidden within a forgotten tomb. The rocks conceal a door. And she will hear it, just as you did—hear the call of a man more than a thousand years entombed.” Her lips twitched with a dry smile. “And so I wait. You’re welcome to my fire—” she nodded at the chemical flames flickering in the salvaged crate at her feet. “If you would wait as well.”

“Sure,” Dustil muttered. “Maybe we can find more cool things to burn later in that cave of yours.”

XXX

Milli. Don’t be dead, okay? Mekel rubbed his eyes, staring at the lists again scrolling across the lift’s screen, as if they’d magically change in the time it took him to descend to the hangar level of this fracking enormous ship.

There had been no killed–in–action report—the transceiver would have clicked one last send if her Carta–class fighter had exploded. Instead, the feed from her ship (that he’d been monitoring the whole time) just cut out: the last report from it had the main guns discharging plasma bolts on a locked–in target and then… nothing at all.

There should have been something if she was really dead. Mekel had gotten used to losing sents a long time ago, but that didn’t make it a fracking tricks on parade day.

XXX

Most Mandalorian woman had long hair—something about braids meaning different things and marriage and clan statuses, but Mekel had never paid attention to that banthashit. He only knew that when Milli had cut hers after Katarr, it had meant something, just like the pearls adorning her ears, and the pink candles burning on either side of her bed had meant something, the first night she invited him to her room.

“Thank you,” she said—after, speaking Basic, not Mando’ade.

Milli’s hair was cropped so short that it curled around her ears, in weird contrast to that gorgeous, creamy rack, and those magnificently hot thighs. After their exercise, her hair stuck up in feathers, like his own probably did too, half-matted from the sheets and their sweat. She stretched, bouncing and leaning forward to touch her toes, pointing and flexing them, and rotating her artificial arm until the shoulder popped.

“Anytime.” Mekel leaned back on the bed next to her and wondering again what was up with the holo she'd taped on the ceiling.

“I am sure you know already that you have an impressive shershoy, Jin.” Milli smiled and rolled on top of him. It was the first time he’d seen that careless a smile from her since Coru. “A good sign. And if your arpat is as strong as your beviik—”

“Just speak Mando,” he snickered, pushing those yellow curls out of her eyes. “Or… the words you’re looking for in Basic are ‘seed’ and ‘lance.’ I don’t really understand what ‘shereshoy’ means. It’s like wanting sex…?””
“No. Shereshoy’s everything,” she grinned, making it plain that ‘thank you’ for a Mandalorian meant ‘let’s do that again.’

“You’re welcome,” he mumbled into her skin, looking up at the ceiling, where a picture of him he’d posed for as a joke was taped, grinning down at them both.

He hadn’t known she’d kept it, but he guessed it meant she’d been planning this for a while.

XXX

Milli had left a cup of caff by her half of the weapons display. Mekel had taken that with him when he’d left the bridge, drank it as he came down the lift. She made it too sweet, but he drank it anyway, discarding the bulb in the trash port as he entered the hangar bay.

_Milli. Milli. Millifar. Missing_—

Mekel was getting a little sick of losing people. Korriban was one thing, but they’d left. Losing sents was supposed to stop happening after that. Mekel had lost the father he’d barely known to a fracking Sith. He’d lost Lydie to her di’kut husband. Master Iridel had died of the plague and Thalia May had vanished. He’d lost Dustil too—and that was the worst of all. Dustil had been a piece of him just as much as the Force.

But Milli—her ship hadn’t blown up. There would have been a report if it had. She might be still out there.

The vast hangar was a mess of Mandos and their returning fighters. In the middle of it all, Canderous Ordo stood alone—staring at the lists, lips moving. There was a vacant circle at least a fighting–length deep around him and Mekel got it instantly—the others were giving him the space he needed to figure it out.

When Mekel drew closer, he heard the man _humming_, cradling his own helm in his hands.

Mekel knew the tune. He’d heard it on Coru in their camp atop a fracking meter–high building. One of the death songs. They had a lot of them.

“Hey,” Mekel said. The other Mando’ade were giving the Mandalore space, but Mekel thought they were out of time for that.

Canderous didn't look surprised to see him. The humming stopped and his brows drew together in a thoughtful frown as Mekel approached.

“The last coordinates place her nearly on top of an asteroid,” he said slowly. “The chance is very small.” He was speaking Mandalorian. There had been a time when Mekel wouldn't have understood all of it—but something had clicked—maybe a trace of fracked Malak’s memories, maybe those grammar lessons Ban had almost literally branded on them—in them—now he only got confused when he thought about it.

Or when someone used a word like _shereshoy_, which was impossible to define, because it meant everything good in the universe.

_Stop thinking, fockda. Just go._ The voice wasn't Dustil’s but it gave good advice. It was the voice that had told him to kiss Millifar back, after all, that night in the hall before she led him to her room.

“The ship didn't explode,” Mekel said, although the man would already know that. “There might
“Her comm-link is still live.” Of course—as a wing commander, the man’d have access to the comm channels Mekel didn’t. “She’d answer if she was able. It would answer for her if it was still…”

Still attached to her arm. He didn’t have to say that part, Mekel got it.

“I’ll get us a ship,” Mekel said, already looking around for one. “One with a battle-med station.”

General Ordo nodded, his eyes flickering up—as if toward the bridge again. “Looks like they’ll be sorting out diplomatic osik for a while. It won’t take long—she hadn’t flown very far—”

“Yeah.” Mekel tried not to think about the sleepy noises Milli made—or the way she was muscles and soft all at once. The serious expression of those gray–blue eyes when she’d acted like their fracking was some kind of gift to each other. He especially didn’t want to think about this banthashit in front of her father—

“Your face turns nearly as red as Revan’s,” the man observed, elbowing him into motion. “My daughter gave you a sheresh’ik, Jin—celebrate it proudly. Whether she is alive or dead, you will always have her—in your heart and your loins.”

“Uh, I do. I—”

“That does not mean we need to speak of it,” the general added quickly. “Ever again. Let’s find that ship.”

Xxx

“Go that way,” Revan told Leskal, leaning over the shuttle’s navboard while he and Rowda flew the ship. “Get below this cloud cover so we can see what we’re doing.”

“There is no below,” the boy muttered. “The clouds extend nearly to the surface.”

Canderous and Mekel Jin had gone—the ship’s petty officer said they’d gone to look for Millifar’s ship—and a comm confirmed that. Revan sent a comm back telling them to meet her on the planet, where the first of their rescue squads had already launched—to look for any survivors.

Tenebrae said Malak was with Carth on the Sojourn—he thought he sensed Malak on the planet, and I—

She sensed nothing that felt like Malak.

Malak must mean Dustil.

The planet’s atmosphere unraveled to their ship as their shuttle finally dropped beneath its clouds, revealing a blasted brown plain below.

The planet was entirely dead to the Force. Revan registered nothing at all from the world itself, but scattered on its surface, little sparks—very few—flickered. Escape pods. Their ship passed over one, and she could see three figures waving up at them below. Revan directed another shuttle to that position to rescue—or capture—the survivors, closing her eyes again to map the other sparks she sensed. Any one of them could be Carth, or Carth and Dustil—or—

That beacon flickered again, like a light flashing just out of range. A light surrounded by darkness.
And then there’s that. The dark place in the Force. I need to go there first.

“Keep on course,” she said. “Eighteen degrees now toward the planet’s south.”

“In my grandmother’s time there were still machines at work here,” the woman flying her shuttle grumbled. Junior Headwoman Rowda of Clan Rialis. “Below us should be a city, according to Aemelie’s maps.”

Below them, all Revan saw was sand and rubble. Endless sand.

“Your people have been here before?” Revan asked to be polite. The Force stirred as they drew closer, the darkness flickered, roiled as if fanned by a fire. And next to it—

Light.

The dark was the same she’d sensed on the ship. Familiar. Dar’Revan? Tenebrae? Malak? Much as she’d prefer to find Carth, she had to deal with this first. “More that way,” she directed, leaning across the board to punch in the vector. “Another five degrees west. We’re getting closer.”

“In my grandmother’s time, there were wonders to be taken from this world.” Rowda’s hand pulled Revan’s away, marking the course correction herself. “I wonder what made the machines stop?”

Revan had no answers. Just that thing again. Like light flashing in the corner of her eyes.

“There!” Leskal shouted out, tapping the navigational map, as Rowda steered. “An energy spike—head northwest—maybe fifty kilometers—”

Revan saw, without any surprise at all, that the point on their holo–map matched the point of the dark Force signature—and that whisper on the edge of her mind.

The beacon. Calling me—

Xxx

“Nothing.” Mekel bit back the sense of relief he felt not to see Milli’s corpse, or the wreck of her ship stuck in the asteroid. “Not even char on the rocks.”

“Wouldn’t be, in vacuum.” Next to Mekel’s enviro–suit, Canderous Ordo bobbed in his own. He reached out with a scanner, running it over the rocks. “But something did happen here.”

The Mandalore pointed to a carved–out section of the asteroid before them. The asteroid was full of holes—but this one with huge, with the sides oddly clean—like a chunk bitten out of a goreapple. “Some pilot with more crap than brains jumped from here. Into hyperspace.”

“Jumped? From in a rock?”

“Sure.” Canderous snorted, as if he had more respect for the crap for brains pilot than he was letting on. “If they made the calculations right—not a problem.”

“You think Milli did it?” But there were two ships. Her last report said she was firing on another ship. Where the frack is it?

“She’d know better—I taught her better. It’s a pirate’s trick, not worthy of a warrior.”

“Well, maybe she—”
“There's no debris,” Canderous added. “Her ship—the enemy’s—neither wrecked here. No sign of plasma melt, no radiation, or ionization—”

“Stuff could have drifted away—”

The general made a snorting noise through his helm. “Thought you said you'd studied exo–physics. It'd be here. Something would be.” He held his sensor. “Nearest read on debris is clicks away—we passed it on the way here—and that was a wrecked Delta– wing fighter. One of ours—but not my daughter's.”

“So… she didn't die here?” He knew better than to say cuy garem. Still alive. If General Ordo thought for sure she was still alive for sure, he’d just say it himself.

“Not here.” The General held the scanner up for a long time—or it seemed like to Mekel—before snapping it back on the belt of his suit. “Let’s head back to the others. Revan said she'd send coordinates on the surface for a meet. Wherever my daughter met her fate… the time to learn it is not now.”

“Her comm–link is still active,” Mekel said stubbornly. It could mean everything or nothing. It could be drifting in space—

“She’s a smart kid.” Canderous Ordo had turned back to their ship’s airlock. The door apexed open and he gestured for Mekel to follow him back in. “Maybe she just needs time to overcome her captors before she comms us back.”

XXX

“May you burn in all nine of your Corellian hells!” Millifar told the Republic woman with the bars of an admiral and the eyes of a whipped kath.

“There are only seven,” the whipped kath replied.

The Besalisk restraining Millifar—a creature she’d only seen before in children’s tales—had unnaturally strong limbs, and all four of its hands currently held her down, while a more pedestrian Human had discarded Millifar’s beskar and her comm–link, and shackled her bare hands to a belt at her waist. Her legs were similarly adorned, but she was pleased to note that the weedy–looking Togrutan who had attached her leg restraints was now applying kolto to his bleeding lip and bruised tricorn.

“Republic hu’tuun,” she added, and spat at him.

“You’re from Clan Ordo,” the woman said. “You have Canderous Ordo’s clan sigils on your armor.”

Obvious troch spoke obvious facts, and so Millifar said nothing.

“I met him once,” the woman continued. “At the Mandalorian Embassy, the night he married Revan Starfire and Carth Onasi.”

Lots of people had been there, and it was not necessary to correct a barbarian who thought her father had married a man. Such arrangements were common enough, but her father had not marked Carth’s face.

“My name is Rew Ekkumi,” the troch admiral continued. “Did you come here with Revan?”
“Stabilized—we’ll be coming out of hyperspace in two days, sir,” said the Togruta behind her. “But we’ll have a projected loc in a sec—”

“Unless it’s in the middle of a planet or a star,” the Besalisk rumbled. “In which case, good–bye—”

“You jumped blind?” Millifar craned her head to see their reports. Republics were insane. Even a clan warrior on his last hunt would never be so foolish—

“We had an entire Mandalorian fleet between us and the hyperlane, and you burning our shields,” Rew Ekkumi told her.

“You did not!” She couldn't help but point out. “I was sent on a reconnaissance mission—”

“You tried to blow us out of the sky.” The troch admiral’s mouth twitched.

“Hutt space,” one of the other crewmembers clapped their hands. “Great. Out of the frack and into the shit.”

“See if you can get a line open to High Admiral Rensha—or reroute us toward Felucia, if the engines let you,” Rew Ekkumi said. “She’ll want to hear about this—”

“Do you still have the coordinates mapped back to our jump point?” the Besalisk added. “Save em—we might have just found a shortcut.”

Millifar’s eyes squinted as she tried to make out the numbers marked on their nav screen.

Xxx

Carth’s head felt like it was on fire, but his body was freezing cold, despite the flames from the old woman’s makeshift heating source. The flames danced, gold and red, and blue... and green as his lost wife’s eyes.

He coughed again, and the old woman handed him a cup of something steaming she’d gotten from her ship. He took a cautious sip, even if he didn’t trust her, because it helped tie his burning head back to the ground. The liquid tasted like badly–brewed caff, but it started to clear the webs from his brain.

“So… when did you meet Revan?” he tried again. “Was she a Jedi?”

The old woman shrugged. “Who can say if Revan was ever a Jedi?”

“The Jedi,” Dustil muttered. “They’d say. They fracking take anyone, though.”

“True. Even the consistently ungrateful, Lord Malak.” The woman gave him a thin–lipped, mocking smile. “I think I preferred you in your original body. You seemed much more intelligent then, even possessed by the Emperor's Kiss.”

“Yeah, well… you were too boring for me to fracking remember you!”

*Stop fighting with her.* Carth couldn't think of anything to say out loud. His thoughts felt like they were stuffed with eridu–wool as it was—everything thick and muffled.

“I…” Carth paused to cough again. “Uh, how did you know Revan again?”

“Even with the Force, a mind is a locked datapad—and even the greatest minds possess the most petty and base of keys. There are many sentients who would claim to have known Revan Starfire—
but how many saw the shape of her true thoughts? How many knew of the secret places, where her steps were forced alone?”

“Uh….’” Carth glanced at his son, who was making a crude back and forth motion in his lap. “Dustil! Don’t… don’t do that!”

“It can be hard to lose a son,” Quinneth folded her hands on her lap.

“Whatsoever,” Carth’s son (who was not lost) muttered under his breath. “Got any food, Miz Cannon?”

“In the galley of my ship you may find some provisions,” the woman said, almost primly.

“Frack that! I’m not going into your fracking lair.”

“Dustil!”

“Lord Malak was trained from an early age to have exquisite manners,” Quinneth murmured. “He was an Eglantine. Something to keep in mind if you wish to fool any but the most blind of sentients.”

“When someone who matters comes along, I’ll get back in character,” Dustil sniffed, voice crisping into that clipped tone again. “Admiral Onasi is quite used to my japes by now—it amuses us both for me to assume the personality of his lost son.”


Carth looked past the flames of the fire to his son, still trying to keep his eyes open. His son was staring at that cluster of rocks—the one the old woman said was a cave, moving his fingers back and forth, and muttering to himself.

It’s gonna be okay, he reminded himself. It has to be.

“The Thernbee of Almania are one of a number of species who possess a brute mastery of the Force without sentience,” the old woman began, after an awkward silence. “Their example proves that sensitivity is not always linked to intelligence, or even basic reasoning. Some scholars have posited that—”

“Shut up, already!” Dustil turned, jumping to his feet and staring at a patch of sky. “She’s here,” his son said. “Getting closer. A lot closer. Definitely her, Dad.”

“It is fortunate we have Lord Malak is here to tell us,” Quinneth Cannon said. “Although a Thernbee would have too. Or our ears—can you hear it? That hum in the air above the wind… those are Mandalorian engines—rigged from something much larger—and flying lower than is advised.”

“We studied Thernbee in Eglantine school,” Dustil clipped. “If we had one, it would eat you first.”

A moment later a ship banked out of the clouds, blunt–nosed and spiked. Quinneth Cannon wasn’t wrong. Carth had seen his share of ships like that before.

The old woman beamed. “I told you she would come.” She had told them a lot—none of it, Carth couldn’t help but notice—had anything to do with what was in the cave below them, or how she’d ended up in the Mando’aade army. The longer she’d talked, the more convinced he’d become that
she wasn’t Clan—at least, not like the ones he’d met. So what did that make her?

*Her eyes aren’t glowing, at least that’s something—*

The ship in front of them hovered at the top of the hill, slowly descending to a landing, banking its jets neatly in a perfect five point turn.

*That’s how I know you’re not driving it, beautiful.* Carth’s temples throbbed and he swayed on his feet. He started up the hill towards the ship, vaguely aware that behind him Dustil was telling him to be careful.

*Dustil still cares. About me, at least.* It had to be something.

There was a long pause as his feet slipped in the shale. To Carth, the time felt like hours—days even—staring at that shuttle as its compressors released their steam into the air. The planet’s low gravity sent the vapor water twisting in strange shapes that looked almost like mouths screaming—but that could have been the fever too.

So hard to keep standing when the planet kept tilting. “Dustil?” Carth said finally, words coming out in a croak. He glanced back down the hill startled to see how far he had traveled from them.

The distance seemed to stretch and recede and he coughed again, hoping he wasn’t going to fall over and roll back down the hill. “Are you sure she’s—”

His son looked up. Even at a distance, his eyes burned yellow. “What?”

“Nothing, I—” It hurt his throat to yell.

“Hey!”

*Her voice!* Carth’s head turned back.

The murky sunlight glinted on Revan’s hair—setting it aflame at the corona, although she’d dyed it brown. The wind blew her dark topknot, fluttering it like a flag behind her. No mistake this time. Even backlit by the red sun, half in shadow—meters away—

*This time it’s really you. Finally. Beautiful—*

“Carth!” she called out, and came pelting down the hill, so fast that he only had time to blink twice before the weight of her nearly toppled him over: rough fabric of her jacket, smooth exoskeleton of some kind of armor encasing her arms and legs. Those slender–strong arms wrapped around him and her lips brushed his hard, her head butting up against his tilting down—and then Carth saw those hyperdrive eyes of hers widen, as she took in his face—the mess Tenebrae and the damned flu had left of it.

Looking at her glowing with vitality and life made Carth feel ancient.

“Hey,” he whispered. “Hey, you.”

“You’re ill,” his wife whispered. “You’re burning up.”

“Flu.” He drew back a little. “Good news—that bastard’s out of my head. I—I was… possessed before, but now….” He tried not to cough on her, but she was making it hard, holding him so close. “Now I just feel like crap.”

“I… I saw vids. About Tenebrae. You… with glowing eyes.” Revan’s breath hitched. “Not gonna
lie, I wasn't sure if I could handle seeing your eyes like that in person—” her lips brushed against his—more a comfort than a kiss—and then she drew back again, scanning his face, with the focused intensity of a laser. “Force, I missed you, Carth.”

Looking back, Carth saw that her skin was pale, freckles all faded like she’d been in space too long—but there was no sign of darkness, no corruption—and just a trace of those faded lines left, etched like silver with the planes of her face. He'd… he'd grown so used to seeing dark Force-users—so used to seeing the marks on Dustil and the other Sith—he was almost startled by how young Revan appeared without them.

Beautiful. She was now. She always had been—he had always found her so, even when… even at the end, but now—

Now her eyes met his, squinting with worry, pure green as hyperdrive, scanning his face the way he must be scanning hers.

“Guess I'm a sight to cause a bantha stampede, huh?” His laugh turned into a cough.

“Sorry we shot down your ship,” she said. Her eyelashes were red, like she'd forgotten to dye them. “Sojourn. Hells, Carth, I should have realized—”

“I knew it was you the second I saw those Ordo clan signs on the Aleema. Who else would be nuts enough to invade Sith space?”

“Not sure it counts as an invasion. Tenebrae put me in charge of your fleet.” She traced the bars on his chest, frowning. “That's what all this gold crap means, right? That it's your fleet?”

“Yeah. Second only to the Emperor and his Chosen.” He wished he could make that sound like a joke. “Meaning Lord Malak. And you.”

“Malak—” She stiffened. “Did he come back?”

“No, but Dustil—he's been doing a good imitation—”

“Shit,” she muttered. “This is a kriiffing mess.”

“Better now.” He leaned into her, and her forehead pressed against his, smooth skin like a cool balm as he drank in the sight of her.

“Carth,” she mumbled, and he realized she was shaking. “I was so worried I'd killed you.”

“Not a chance, beautiful. Your hair—” he brushed at it, pushing that topic away. The roots were coming in red, paler than the dark, and she'd tied it up again like a Deralian, clipped the sides nearly to the scalp. What did it mean that she’d done that?

She really does look like Polla, he thought. An uncomfortable thought. Or the smuggler I fell in love with on Taris— that was slightly better, but still off. I fell in love with a woman named Polla Organa, Carth remembered thinking of it before. But all the while she was always you.

“I like your hair,” he mumbled stupidly, although it wasn't true. It wasn't her hair he gave a frack about.

“Just trying to blend in. I was on Deralia—that’s where Dar left me for dead. I had to buy a ship, but that fricking koota sold me a bad one. I still don't know if it was sabotaged on purpose—”
“Dar?” He tried to chuckle. “Who—”

“Her. I know you met her on Kaas, I saw the vid. Dar’Revan dropped me out of the sky on Deralia—I think she was trying to kill me—or….” Revan’s voice broke off, and he felt her body stiffen as those green eyes tracked something behind them. “Dustil! What happened to… y—you… ah… who’s your friend there?” Every muscle in her body tensed, and Carth felt his wife’s feet shift as her voice went cold.

“How ask a question when the answer is known?” Quinneth Cannon called back. She chuckled in a way that made Carth’s own blood freeze. “Not so long,” the old woman said, as Revan stiffened in his arms. “Months, since our last meeting, padawan. And so much changed since.”

Padawan?

“Get away from Dustil,” Revan hissed, pulling away from Carth, practically shoving him behind her, and dragging him back down the hill at the same time. “What the frack did you to him?”

“I am Lord Malak,” Dustil said flatly, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms. “Miz Cannon didn't do anything to me. She couldn't. She's a fracking null.”

“Who?” Revan snorted.

“We… found her here. She said she knew you and that you’d come here.” Carth’s head pounded, and he was pretty sure his teeth were chattering. “She said her name was Quinneth Cannon.”

His wife shook her head, her hand on her saber hilt now. “It’s not.” She raised her voice. “Another name, Vima? Vima’s the original one, isn't it? Or are you going by Arren Kae these days?”

Vima? Carth frowned. Arren Kae? Wait! That was one of the Jedi masters—

“You may call me whatever you wish,” the old woman said. “You may even strike me down—if that is your selection—although I would prefer our meeting went otherwise.”

“Oh, look,” Dustil muttered. Somehow he'd moved to Carth’s side again. Somehow Revan had dragged Carth back down the hill again, facing off against the frail old woman. “It’s Revan here to save all of our lives from an old null.”

Her head whipped back toward him. “Stand back, Dustil.”

Somewhat to Carth’s surprise, his son did.

The old woman chuckled. “He’s not very good at pretending to be Malak, is he?”

“It doesn't matter.” Revan circled, those small side-steps that always made Carth reach for his blaster because he knew a fight was coming. Eerily, the old woman circled her back, their steps almost mirrored, although the woman— Vima? As in Sunrider? The woman moved more slowly, even with a slight limp.

But she doesn’t have the Force—Dustil said she doesn’t have the Force.

“Arkan told me what you are,” Revan growled.

“Not in words, I would think.” The visor on her eyes glinted in the sun. “That one lost those by the time we reached Malachor.”

“He showed me. He showed his memories—of what you are—and what you did to him—what you
did even to your own son—"

“He showed you a great deal then.” The old woman chuckled. “More than I would have expected from a mad beast... but did he show you how he became mad? For that transformation was not guided by my hand.”

Behind them, Carth finally noticed that three more sents had debarked from the shuttle on the hill, and were standing meters back—the dull gleam of beskar, clank of weapons, marking them as Mandalorian.

“Yes.” Revan stopped moving abruptly, and Vima took a step backwards, bringing her hands forward as if to show them open. Revan’s fingers closed on the hilt of her saber. “He showed me what happened to you at Malachor—to you and Oerin, and to him.”

A cracked laugh. “Revan laid a clever trap for us there. I should have known that my greatest apprentice would take every advantage she could find before she faced Vitiate—even seizing control of me. And... where does the fallen knight Davad Arkan walk now?”

“Nowhere. I dropped him into one of the Biscain suns.”

“Ah.” The old woman nodded slowly, her face expressionless. “Sometimes a tool outgrows its purpose. Davad Arkan would have caused the death of the entire Force had he continued unchecked. Would that have been worth Vitiate’s end? Perhaps. But what if he could not be stopped?” She gestured around them. “This is called the World of Tombs because all life was extinguished upon it. One must be careful not to destroy a world when saving it—a lesson taught as true from a plucked flower or a snapped root as it was from Malachor. Destruction without control is—”

“Not going to ask about your son?” Revan interrupted. “Oerin Lin? Or is he working with you now?”

“They were all my children,” Vima said. “I could never put one above the rest—even him.”

“They?” Revan laughed hoarsely. “How many?”

“Dad?” Dustil was at Carth’s elbow again, pulling him back. “What the frack is going on?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered back. “But I knew there was a reason I didn’t trust her.” Vima Sunrider was Nomi Sunrider’s daughter. She was on the Jedi Council. Is she with the Emperor or against him?

“And I?” Revan asked Vima Sunrider. “What was I?”

“Revan was my greatest pupil,” Vima said. “Vitiate’s Sith’ae’rah, but trained by me—trained in ways the madman never knew. The Emperor is blind, when you stand in his own shadow, but I did not make my Revan to stand in shadows—”

“Me,” Revan’s voice was cold. “You mean me. And you didn’t make me at all— whoever you are.”

“Didn’t I?” A small smile played upon the cracked lips. “The Revan of old knew her place in things, even as she arranged mine.”

“Maybe she did.” Revan’s voice sharpened. “But you’re facing me, now—not her.”
“Indeed.” Those eyes narrowed. “You. You… you were never meant to last.”

Xxx

“... you were never meant to last,” the old woman said. The words were a taunt—an obvious ploy to goad Revan into reacting. She knew that.

“But here I am.” The smile felt like a challenge.

“Yes…” Vima Sunrider murmured. “Here you are.”

“This is another trap,” Carth muttered behind her. “I knew it.”

Yes. She wants me rattled. Wants me off guard. But it doesn’t mean her words aren’t true. I was never meant to last. The Republic never worked out a pardon because I wasn’t supposed to survive. No one expected a live Revan after the Star Forge—

She felt her eyes narrow.

Or did they?

Sheris. Vima’s the one who made Sheris into Dar. Davad showed me that. Why? There had been a garbled explanation—something about the old woman wanting to possess Revan’s body herself, but that was madness—surely—

Dar spoke of her too. Dar’Revan thought she’d mastered her old master after Malachor—but Dar hadn’t even known Arkan was Vima’s creature—not then. Not until I told her.

Dar said I was Vima’s creature too. But she was—all along—

“It occurred to me before—that I was only temporary.” It had. Oh, it had. On the Leviathan. On Korriban. And then, later on Coruscant, when Revan had gone as far as to make a record of her life… only to have Dar’Revan laugh at it, and push her out of the sky. “It seems fairly obvious. You made me to kill Malak.”

“Oh—no. No—no!” Vima’s smile was younger than the rest of her, younger than those white-blind eyes. “I first made you to keep the body warm, and to keep Shan from losing her mind. You performed effectively so I kept you to distract Malak and Tenebrae. Which you did—drawing his interest away from my tools—

“Tools? You mean your son? And Davad?”

“Again, asking a question when you know the response.”

“Your son died and I killed Davad Arkan. Your Darth Nihilus.”

“The best-laid plans fail. Even mine.” Vima took a breath. “My son was the true Mandalore. Oerin Lin would have united the clans and the Sith. Become a member of the Jedi Council. He was born to rule as you never were. He could have challenged the Sith Emperor for supremacy and clouded the minds of Vitiate himself with his illusions. With me by his side—and the strength of his siblings—we could have brought an endless peace to the galaxy… but now…..”

Truth? Or a lie? It hardly mattered. The old woman was hiding herself in the Force—if she still had it at all. Dustil had called her a null, and Revan’s senses agreed. Jasp had said Darth Sion had stripped the Force from her. Darth Sion is Oerin Lin. And you know he could do that. He did it to
Mekel too. “The last time I saw you and Lin, Oerin didn’t seem to want you by his side. He said he’d destroy you.”

The old woman didn’t even blink. Her voice continued, flat and dry. “Vitiate was blinded by his attention to you, the promised one, his Sith’ae’rah. As I warned my apprentice time and time again—you cannot keep a singular focus. You must consider all facets of the game.”

“It isn’t a game,” Carth muttered.

“Game is a word that men of power use.” Vima shrugged. “Vitiate uses it often. To a man who has lived more than a thousand of this planet’s years, everything seems a blink for his amusement. The word ‘game’ is an appropriate term for how he sees his empire, and the sentients within it: all pieces under his command—played against the vagaries of chance…and to beat him, we must play as well.”

Behind the woman was a pile of rocks. There was something… something… about those stones. Revan blinked—and it seemed like light shone through the narrow cleft. A note—like an electro-synth band tuning buzzed in her ears.

“… lest our own failings cripple us,” Vima folded her arms. She appeared unarmed. “Now, do you understand?”

Not in the least. But Revan couldn’t stop staring at the rocks. That hard light—the bright flashing—it was coming from there.

“Freckles,” Carth’s voice buzzed in her ear. He’d come up behind her again, now nudging her with a hand, bringing her back to the present. “You okay?”

Freckles? “Didn’t know we’d decided on ‘Freckles,’” Revan muttered. “There’s something—” She grabbed his hand—not willing to let go, not when she’d lost him so often before.

“Ahh. The place calls to you.” Vima’s voice again, intruding where it wasn’t wanted. “As it did before.”

“What?” There was something under those rocks. The darkness she’d sensed from the air had been Dustil. But this—even as she looked the sound flashed again—like the scales of a fish underwater, a star glimpsed through an ion cloud.

“You were never meant to last,” Vima Sunrider said. “But you have exceeded my expectations, Revan. Truly, you are still the Sith’ae’rah, even broken.” She smiled, a gentle smile, almost soft. “I am so proud of you, my apprentice.”

“Uh, thanks.” Another step. It took effort to turn her head back, to signal to Leskal and the others on the hill behind them, to meet Carth’s eyes and nod as if she had this under control.

He squeezed her hand, voice low. “I don’t trust her.”

“Good,” she muttered back, then raised her voice, glaring at the old woman. “Vima? What do you think I was meant for?”

“What were you meant to be? Nothing. As I have said. But that is not the question. The question is, what have you become? What have you forged from yourself?”

“Someone who doesn’t need to answer your fracking questions,” Revan snapped. “Answer mine. What’s in that cave?”
“I will show you.” The old woman took a step toward the cave, beckoning Revan to follow. “Please. Bring your guards, if you prefer the company of Clan to mine alone. Bring your captain and Lord Malak too.”

*Careful. She lies,* a phantom voice whispered in Revan’s mind. *Always remember: Vima always lies—especially when she’s telling the truth.*

Xxx

Whatever was in that cave was tugging at Dustil’s brain in a way that he really didn’t fracking like—any more than he liked that null old hag, standing back from them now, softly humming to herself like a mark in the Coruscanti Underground, while she waited to see what Revan, the special, fracksome savior of the galaxy, would do.

“You go check out the cave. I’m staying up here with Father,” Dustil leaned back against a rock, keeping a careful eye on the armored Mandalorians, who were now traipsing down the hill from Revan’s shuttle. Three of them. Maybe he should comm Inse, see if she’d made it through the fight. He thought she had, but it was hard to tell right now—between the cave and Revan fracking Starfire—the Force was pretty loud right here—even if the rest of the planet felt like nothing.

The Force felt like it didn’t like this dead planet either.

Father coughed again, and it looked more like Revan was holding him up than the other way around. “M’going....” he rasped. “We... we can all go.”

“I don’t know—” Revan looked past Dustil to her approaching minions. She’d barely reacted to Dustil’s eyes and his skin. There was a part of him that was disappointed, that had expected the former Dark Lord of the Sith to be impressed. “Leskal? Did you hear from Canderous?”

“Yes. They found nothing,” the boy reported. “I gave them our coordinates.”

“Maybe we should wait.” Revan glanced restlessly between the Mandalorians and Dustil.

It took Dustil a sec—longer than it should have—to figure out her damage. “You think I’m gonna hurt someone if I stay out here without you?” Dustil felt a small spark of pride. “I mean, I could. I could take out all three of your minions if I wanted to—but why would I? Your fracking Mandalorian army is my Mandalorian army.”

“Oh, yeah? What the hell did you do, Dustil?” She stepped away from his father, who teetered on his feet until a glance from her made it stop—holding Father up with the Force—Dustil could feel the weaves around her flex—frack, he could almost see them—she was lighting it up so strong. “Collect a bunch of Sith holocrons and eat them? Malak’s ghost wasn’t enough? What did you do?”

*Finished my lessons, Lord Revan.* “Oh, Malak’s long gone.” Dustil gave her a twisted grin. “Just left a few memories....”

“And you still have the Force.” Her head tilted. She’d dyed her hair brown. It made her look more like the crazy smuggler, which was a little fracked, honestly. “How is that possible?”

“Thought I’d wash out, like Mekk did?” Dustil sneered. “No. I’m the one who’s been holding this together while your bitch double rotted in a coma and that crazy—”

“Dustil!” His father’s weak voice still made Dustil’s mouth snap shut, but purely out of guilt. Wrong of them to put the old man through this. Wrong of her.
“My double—she’s in a coma?” Revan glanced back toward the old, lying null, and frowned. Weirdly, all the fight seemed to go out of her, like she was scared of the other one. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“We will have much time to speak later,” the lying old bint agreed. “On your ship, Revan. On the way to Dromund Kaas. But for now…” she lowered her visor again, which covered those gross white eyes at least. “This will not take long, but you must see.”

“I’m staying out here,” Dustil muttered, sitting down on the dusty ground against a big rock. A piece of broken masonry was digging into his ass, but he wasn’t going to move. Not a muscle. “Leave Dad with me while you go frack around with the bint, Revan.”

That… thing in the cave felt like an itch on the back of his neck. But his will was stronger than a fracking itch.

His father looked between them, confused, almost like he didn’t know where he was. “I’m not leaving you again, Freckles,” he said weakly—his head turning to her and not his son who’d saved his fricking hide. “We should… we should all go.”

“I’m not moving,” Dustil said. “My feet hurt.” They didn’t. When the Force felt like this, all easy under his will, nothing hurt at all.

“Dustil…” Dustil hated that wheedling tone of voice from his old man. It lacked dignity.

“Frack off.” Dustil put his hands behind his head and looked up at the clouds. They looked like shit.

“Fine,” Revan muttered. Her voice shifted into Mandalorian. “Leskal. If the kid moves, shoot him. Aim for the legs or the hands. Not a kill-shot. And then run. I’ll come as fast as I can. Keep a safe distance—I don’t know how far he can jump or throw that saber—” She took a step toward him, put her hand out, switching back to Basic. “Hells. Give me the saber, Dustil.”

“Farther than you think,” Dustil answered her smugly in Mando, looking up. “And no fracking way.” He’d never been good at Mandalorian back on Korriban, but that was one of the things Malak had left in his brain—a frack of a lot more useful than some crap about trade agreements, or the feeling that Malak had been to this place before....

His lightsaber twitched on his belt like she’d called it, but the Force had slowed time for Dustil too, and a millisecond in advance his grip had already clamped down on the hilt. “I said no,” he growled, feeling his immense power flex around him like wings, drawing deep from the darkness inside—

Dustil had found his true power on Kaas, but now it was with him whenever he wanted it. Even lounging on the ground with her above, he knew he could change the odds in heartbeat, if he needed. If she tried anything—

In a flash she was over him. Revan’s hand closed on Dustil’s arm, and a combination of Force and what had to be her own muscle jerked him to his feet. He was taller than she was, so it was easy to keep glaring—now glaring down at her—channeling his hate while he waited for her to make the first move.

Except the dumb bint just stood there, waiting for him, like she wanted to see how far he’d go.
Dust eddied around them, and so Dustil started to shape it into a fist to shove her back—when suddenly, her lips practically pressed into his ear—or at least it felt like that—like each word carried the Force—less compulsion than pure, raw threat—her head right in front of him, those ice-green eyes blazing up into his own.

“Listen to me, Darth Sulksalot, if you hurt anyone here, it will kill your father,” she hissed. “You want me to kick your ass later, that’s no problem. I got in a lot of practice with Mekel Jin kicking Sithkid ass—and I don’t mind giving you the same lesson.”

The roar in his throat froze almost before it began, forced back by an invisible hand. Revan let go and that same pressure forced Dustil to the ground like she was Shardaan bending a prospie’s fingers back, like she could break him just like that—

Yeah, she's stronger than you, that voice that always sounded like Mekk whispered. But she won't kill you. That's her weakness.

“Wait. Here.” she added, and her words echoed, drilled into his brain, but Dustil was stronger than she realized, and smarter, and he could be more powerful—

Don’t be an idiot, fockda. Not here. Not now. She’s right. It would kill Dear Old Dads if you tried....

The voice wasn’t Mekk’s, of course—since poor Mekk had karked—but it also wasn’t wrong.

“Oh, I’ll wait,” Dustil muttered, sinking back to the dirt, letting Revan think she’d won.

XXX

Fracking dumbass kid! Revan didn’t dare look at Carth as they left his Force-damned hulk of a son behind. Carth held her hand, leaning on her more than she liked.

His son was still armed. Revan hoped she wouldn't live to regret that.

“I understand… why you did that,” her husband whispered in her ear. “But… but later… there has to be some way to bring him back—”

“Do you think he’ll try anything?” She didn’t want to ask—the fear was half the reason she didn’t want to leave Carth there too—but she had a responsibility to those Mando’ade, not to get them killed by Carth’s crazy Sith son.

“No,” he shook his head. “Not… not unless something happens to me.” His eyes searched hers. “That’s… that’s good, right? He still… he still cares about me. That—it has to be good.”

“Sure,” she lied. If something happens to you, I’m not sure I can stop him. “We’ll get him back. If there’s a way, we’ll find it.”

“I—I know. You came back from worse.” He gave her a wan smile, coughing again.

Yes. But I had a cause to fall for. Your son is just an asshole—

Revan couldn’t say that out loud. Maybe Mekel could help get through to Dustil. They’d been close before. And Mekel had more brains than she’d given him credit for on Korriban.

The cave opening was narrow and dank. Revan didn’t like it, but she kept following the old woman in front of her, with Carth leaning on her arm. His twisted son’s power in the Force beat on her
Dustil’s strength now reminded her uncannily of the way he’d felt when Malak possessed him; but she could sense nothing of Malak’s ghost now. He and Carth were both dressed like Imperial officers but for some reason Dustil’s uniform was missing a sleeve. His bare arm had been so stippled with dark side corruption she’d thought it had to be fake—until his rage spiked.

*He’s not stronger than me.* As a mantra, it was less than comforting because she wasn’t sure the difference would matter. She wouldn’t kill Dustil, if it came down to it, but would he pull back from killing her?

“Revan,” Carth’s beard brushed her ear. His hand was feverishly warm, his feet stumbling so much she wondered if he knew she’d extended the Force around him to keep him upright. “Y–you find the nicest places to take me, Freckles.”

“Well, we’ll always have Tatooine,” she muttered back, for there had been a cave there too.

“I have a lot to tell you,” he added.

“Figured that when I saw you dressed like a Sith admiral—and Dustil—but—” Revan shook her head, raising her eyebrows toward the schutta in front of them. “We’ve got time, right?”

“Later,” he nodded, getting it. “You… you got the Aleema.”

“Yes.” She let out a breath. “Great medbay. Can’t wait to show you.”

“Sounds romantic.” He stumbled again, this time nearly into a wall, and she cushioned it with the Force. “Are you holding me——” she felt him tense against the invisible weight holding him upright, and then he coughed again, shoulders shaking with it.

“Can’t have my Sith admiral falling down on the job.” *So many questions. How the hell did you get caught in this?* Mekel had filled in some of the blanks, but he hadn’t known much—

And what he’d said had only been half intelligible.

Xxx

“—Malak kept taking over Dustil’s body, but your double and Zaalbar and me ran into the forest.”

“My double. You mean Polla Organa?”

“Yeah. Captain Onasi told us to run. Polla Organa’s… um—she was nice. We fell asleep. Guess she was pretending to be you before, but that lasted about til Dustil’s body got unthawed—then I was holding the Sith off with Dustil so Polla and Zaalbar could get away—”

“Both of you were in Dustil’s body?”

“All three of us. There was this hunt? A party. *Like a bunch of Sith riding animals, and we killed a terentatek—I started to talk to Dustil’s dads—he was pissed—and then… bam! Back on Coruscant and just me staring at Master Kavar and Master Klee like a fracking rube. Oerin fracking Lin did something and it was just… gone.”

“You didn’t see… the other me, or Seiran Wen? Was Carth okay?”

“I don’t fracking know—I was back on Coru, remember? Thought it was ysalamiri, but it wasn’t,
and then Lin left, and I killed Master Klee because he was possessed, and then Dear Old Dads and Yuthura fracking Ban showed up to rescue me but they were too fracking late—”

“You killed Master Klee? Without the Force?”

“Got the jump on him. He was possessed. Wasn't really him at all—just that fracking Emperor. He was laughing.”

“And what about Dar’Revan?”

“Huh?”

After she explained he just blinked.

“You mean the Sheris bint? Never saw her on Kaas—just, uh, in Malak’s room back on Coruscant—he used to watch her sleep—”

“Never mind.”

His face was betta–root red, and Revan tried not to shudder.

Xxx

My double was in a coma. Or dead.

“Polla,” she murmured, soft so the old woman wouldn't hear. “And Dar. What about—”

“Here,” Vima Sunrider interrupted. The rough corridor had changed to smooth, flagstones underfoot now instead of rubble, and the hall opened—

XXX

The room was vast and arched, and probably important, but all Carth wanted to do now was sit down. He saw a set of steps that seemed to lead into a blank wall near the entrance, and he pulled Revan towards them.

“Polla? And Dar. What about—”

“Here,” Vima Sunrider interrupted, motioning them both forward. In the black, the walls looked artificially smooth, the ceiling low enough to be oppressive.


What about Polla? What can I say? “Polla’s… .” his one weak word drew his wife’s attention back, lights on her armor making her eyes pools in the darkness, suddenly set in pits of shadow as deep as his son’s.

“You okay, Flyboy?”

“It’s dark.” He could tell almost immediately from her puzzled frown that she hadn’t even noticed—the Force probably affected her vision, or she had been so single–minded she hadn’t noticed because it didn’t matter compared to whatever she felt in the Force. “If I sit down, you can stop holding me up in the Force, beautiful.”

“I don’t like this.”
“I didn’t like it when you shot down the Sojourn,” he managed, pulling away from her long enough to make his knees work and sit. “But I’m here. You’re here. We’ll get through it.”

“Yeah.” She leaned in and kissed him, now all worried and sloppy.

Carth was starting to like her concerned kisses as much as he’d always loved the passionate ones. “Go,” he said. “Just be careful.”

“Here.” She peeled something off her belt. It was disc–shaped and glowing. “Extra energy shield. Put it on, just in case.”

“Nice light source too,” he managed.

“Yeah.” Her hand tugged at his hair. It was too short. Carth had a sudden moment of vanity, wondering if she’d noticed—if she hated the beard. Then his wife stood up, walking away from him, leaving a cold space by his side. “What is this place, Vima?”

“A broken tomb,” the lying old woman said. “For a man who no longer needs one.”

XXX

Mekel landed their fighter perfectly, earning a grunt of approval from Canderous Ordo, as if the man hadn’t just been barking orders at him the whole way through atmosphere, like Mekel had never piloted anything before. (He had… a lot. On sims.)

They landed next to the Misto VI, the shuttlecraft from the Aleema that had broadcast the signal for them to find. Without the Force, Mekel couldn’t tell if there was anyone inside it—or inside that other shuttle parked by the chemical fire burning in a storage container in the valley below.

“Looks like the kids are down there,” Canderous remarked as their hatch lifted and they both jumped out. “I don’t see Revan, but there’s someone behind that boulder. See the shadow?”

The three armored Mandalorians were grouped around a pile of rocks like they were guarding them. A larger boulder—or piece of rubble—half-blocked their view, but someone’s shadow stretched out below on the dusty ground, like the person was sacked out. Or hiding.

The broad side of another shuttle formed a decent ambush wall. If Mekel hadn’t seen their own men standing there so calm, he’d have wondered if there were more sents hiding behind it.

“That’s a Wies shuttle,” Canderous added.

“How can you tell?” Mekel didn’t see any clan signs on it.

“They’re the only ones fool enough to patch a plasma cannon to the front end.” Canderous shrugged. “Blast too close to anything large enough to have grav with those and you’ll send yourself in a spin. Not practical, unless you’re trying to ram something.”

“They see us.” Mekel adjusted the feed on his visor, amping it up. Leskal was waving. He waved back. “S’cuy ner vod!”

“Infrared’s got nothing,” Canderous noted. “Cept that fire’s fresh, and there’s some kind of underground tunnel in the rocks—”

The shadow behind the rock shifted and stood up—

And Mekel’s hand froze halfway down from the wave—along with his blood and his guts.
“Haar’chak! That Carth’s kid?” Canderous didn’t sound sure. “What the kriﬃng hell?”

“Damn,” Mekel said. His mouth had gone dry. It was probably fracked, but the ﬁrst thing he felt was envy. Took a lot of power to go that dark. Even fracking Uther hadn’t looked so—he could see Telos’s eyes glowing from here. “What the frack?”

XXX

Carth kept saying it was dark in the room, but it didn’t seem dark at all. In fact, the longer Revan stood there, the lighter their surroundings became, until the very air seemed to resonate, chiming like a note coming into tune.

“You will not remember,” Vima Sunrider said. “But your feet have walked these steps before.”

The thing that Vima stood in front of looked like a crystal dome, top cracked and blackened. Glass crunched under Revan’s boots as she approached. Her hand had fallen to her lightsaber again, and for a moment the world ﬂickered and she was stabbing down into its shimmering depths with a sparking yellow blade—

XXX

“You’ve destroyed it now, Red.” Malak’s hand caught her arm. “Mind explaining why—”

“I can’t.” She turned back to him, hoping—

But hope died as her husband’s eyes began to glow and an inhuman laugh twisted from his throat—

“Hah, hah,” the monster said. “Oh, my Starﬁre! These little betrayals are beneath you! Indeed, all you’ve done now is doom this world. Did you truly think my essence remained in this vulnerable shell?”

“I had to try.” She had to remain calm, ignore the storm rising inside at the sight of Malak possessed again.

She’d hoped—they’d ﬁnally found the right planet and she’d hoped—

Her husband’s rotting mouth chuckled. “I know. But now you see. Let me show you your own tomb—upon a jungle world, young and teeming with so many lives—let me show you, each and every one—”

XXX

“Revan? What did you see in the crystal?” The old woman’s voice was almost kind, soft. “Its resonance holds memories, for those it has seen before. “What did you see?”

Revan’s ﬁngers touched the cauterized edges of the crystal, and it vibrated under her ﬁngers. There was a… rightness to it. Even broken, it felt… good. Beneath the cracked glass, a humanoid corpse curled, half of it crumbled to dust.

“Nothing,” she lied.

The old woman chuckled. “Ah. Keep the visions to yourself, then—if blind ignorance is your preference.”

Revan kept her hand on the crystal. It was… warm, under her touch, which should have been
impossible. “Let me guess… that’s the Sith Emperor’s body? Did I kill him?”

“Do you think such a creature is killed by the dissolution of one mortal body?” Vima shook her head, a faint smile playing around her lips. “Or, do you think the tomb summoned you here merely for the sight of a rotted corpse?”

“Should I guess,” Revan snapped. “No?”

The ruined dome creaked, and began to move under her hands, retracting to reveal more of the withered thing within. The body was small and seemingly harmless. And dead.

“As I expected,” Vima said. “The tomb opens for you.”

“Must have had good engineers,” Revan said. “Maybe I didn’t sever the power source when I was here before.”

“His tomb knows you.” Vima corrected. “Even through the cracks of your shattered mind. Like calls to like.”

Sure, I can see the family resemblance from here. “That was him? Tenebrae?” What had Vima called him? Vitiate?

The body looked so small.

“Yes. A rancor sheds its skin in the larval stage. So, too, the Sith’ae’rah. This is the first body of the Deathless. A slave named Tenebrae, bastard–born to a Sith lord. A child can endure much, but not all before their tether snaps—and so, one day, did his.” The lights of Vima’s visor made her face look like a skull. “But that is a tale for another time. The Star Maps revealed more than the Forge. They brought you to this place. And here you shattered Vitiate’s tomb to sever his connection at its root.”

“It didn’t work.” She glanced back toward Carth, more uneasy than ever. That memory of Malak’s red, glowing eyes—that asshole’s laughter—

“Your powers of observation are at least equal to those of the mad child outside.”

“So, why is it still calling me? And Dustil… he heard it too.” She could tell, it had been written in every tense line of his body, locked against following them. Not just her command, not just fear of her—stubbornness.

He’s smart enough to know that ancient artifacts don’t call you through the Force to buy you krumpa–cakes!

Am I?

“The tomb calls to you, but it is not the only thing in this place. The bastard boy was clever.” Vima walked to the wall, her feet scuffling a section of the floor. “He hid a piece of himself, away from the rest. Silent for centuries, but in time… no one walks alone by choice, Revan. It calls to anyone now. Even to fools.”

“I can feel it.” She could—hard and bright. She walked to the wall, hand brushing the smooth surface. Her gesture sent a cloud of dust crumpling as a panel in the wall slid open, revealing a triangular, faceted holocron, petals already unfolding into the light—

“Hello?” the holocron said, features animating. The face was round and maybe a little chubby, the
features humanoid, but not entirely human. But young—even younger than Dustil. The face seemed to focus on her. “You… you came back!”

“Hello,” she said carefully. “Did you…uh, did you think I wouldn’t?”

“Did you stop him, Revan?” The boy paused. “I mean—did you stop me?”

XXX

Dawn had broken all over the Derran continent, and sure enough, just like the creepy old sales guy had said, they were up and out in the fields, spraying botfly poison at the break of it, before the eridu leaves had a chance to dry out from the nighttime rain.

Kore had tried to get out of helping, but Bendowen Organa could be pretty strict—strictener than Ma-Molla, or even Jasp Organa had been before he left—and although the farmer wouldn't let Kore anywhere near the plants, he had him driving the big tracker that sprayed stuff everywhere, wearing a mask just like Bendowen was, and Ooka, as the two of them ran the small threshers behind. The old guy had only brought three masks, and there were four of them, but he said he didn't need one at all because you got used to the chemicals or something.

Kore glanced at the shed again, being careful to keep the steering in track. That tickling feeling hadn't stopped, but he'd seen no sign of the man in black. He was still trying to figure out their relationship—was the man like his chap? He had to be. Then who had sent him? One of his mothers? Father? Some last be-quest from Grandfather's estate?

Maybe the Genoharadan. He wasn't supposed to really know about them until he was an Amaltine, but as Leeshy said, knowledge was power, and when he’d asked Mother, she’d told him.

The shed door stayed closed, which made sense, because Kore’s secret chap wouldn’t reveal himself to just randoms and there was no danger here.

“That's done!” Bendowen finally called out, and Kore stopped the tracker and jumped down, pushing up his mask. The stuff didn't really smell like anything, so he figured it couldn't be that bad for you—no need to wait for it to disperse. They'd studied lots of poisons back when he was an Eg—and the ones you couldn't tell about were (usually) either harmless or totally lethal—but ones meant for bugs usually weren't designed to affect more complex organics.

“You did a good job, kiddo,” Ooka told him, smiling. She'd pushed up her mask too. “Mind the seedlings, though. Try to keep at least a meter between. And don't… think about them too much.”

“Everyone ready for breakfast?” Bendowen asked.

“Tut, tut. Almost! I just need a holo—” the pesticide guy said. “Just to prove I was here. It's just for record–keeping. Won't take but a moment—”

“Go ahead, Mister Gant.” Ooka tussled Kore’s hair and for once he didn't mind as much. “We’ll get out of your way—”

“But do that! I could make you a copy—” his black goggles reflected Kore and Ooka’s faces. Kore realized he was smiling and shut it down, because as okay as this morning had been, it still wasn't home, and they still weren't letting him go back to school.

“Sure.” Bendowen pushed up his mask too and swung an arm over Kore’s shoulders. He wasn't much—he wasn't as much taller as Kore expected, standing close like that.
“Smile!” The old sales guy named Gant said. And they all did—even Kore, who hadn't meant to.

XX
Dustil lay on the ground with his eyes closed on a dead planet.

Below him in the cave he could sense the fracking ion storm that was Revan, the sick shadow that was his father, and that black null place that was Master Fracking Vima Sunrider, who’d been the hero of the Sixthday shows he’d watched as a kid—all about her life as a kid—except now she was an ugly old wrinkled lying hag.

On a dead world it was easier to see things above as well as below—like those two null sparks of live cannon fodder coming closer in the sky, descending in some kind of ship.

Dustil sat up, peering around the rock to watch their fighter land. Simpa– class. Mandalorian with Ordo clan signs. Probably more of Revan’s fracking crew.

Reinforcements to guard me? She could call in an entire battalion. I could take them. I could do it before she got out of the cave, if I wanted.

“S’cuy!” One of the Mandalorians behind him called out to the two figures popping out of the fighter, voice distorted by his helm.

The shorter of the two armored figures stepping out of the four–man fighter called back, cheerful and metallic. “S’cuy, ner vod!”

Vod. It meant brother. They all called themselves that. Even the women.

“Think they found her body?” one of the Mandies behind Dustil asked the others.

“Think the Lin vod would sound so happy if they had?”

“That's true, then? She really—”

“Shersh’ik. Hasn’t been back to the dorms since.”

Sheresh’ik. That was sex. Dustil didn’t want to fracking know about Mandie sex.

“Tell them to come down the hill slowly,” Dustil snapped, standing up. He didn’t even have to look behind him. He could feel the Mandies reacting to the tone of his voice, to the weight of the Force in it. Maybe they were hard as frack to compel, but they knew how to take orders. Revan had proven that. And Malak... Malak had fought enough of them to just know it.

Dustil stepped out from behind the boulder. Both Mandalorians stopped walking down the hill above him and froze—like those chivholes had never seen a real Sith before.

“Revan said I’m not allowed to kill you,” he called out. “But I can make it hurt. Come down slowly, with your hands up.”

“Can I shoot him?” one of the kids behind him muttered softly—but not soft enough for Force–
trained ears. “General Revan said no kill– shots, but—”

Dustil’s fingers twitched a little and the kid’s words cut out. His saber snapped into his hand and he lit up, just in case anyone got ideas. Snap hiss, then that soothing hum, the familiar red.

The shorter figure froze halfway down the hill. He wasn’t that small, just narrower than the other one. His hand closed on what looked an awful lot like a lightsaber hilt. “Don’t be a fracking asshole, Telos,” he called, holding the unlit blade out in a perfect Korriban salute.

Might have looked more dignified if his other hand hadn’t been busy flipping Dustil off with a three–fingered shake that sents called the ‘backhanded frack-up’ in the Coruscanti Underground.

XXX

“Did you stop him?” The boy’s image repeated like a scratched holodisk. “I mean me?”

“I don’t know,” Revan said warily.

Vima Sunrider had led her to this holocron, and seemed to be claiming it was the Sith Emperor—or the kid Tenebrae had been before he’d become the Sith Emperor. How could she trust it?

“How can you not know?” The voice was a child’s, but that had to be a trick. The dialect of Ancient Sith he was speaking was odd, but intelligible, the accent hard to place…. Worriedly, Revan glanced back toward Carth. He coughed again, the shadows from the tomb making bones in his face, highlighting the sunken cheeks, his shaking hands.

He needs a medix.

“We’ll talk later,” she told the holocron—not that she had to tell it anything. When she’d found the one with Mission’s memories on the Hawk she’d shut it down when it started talking. Holocrons didn’t remember, they were just recordings—

But this holocron did. It said I came back.

“You look older. I like—” the boy’s words cut out mid–sentence as Revan pushed at the holocron with the Force, compressing its edges until it snapped back into dormancy. The slick surface was cold as she tucked it into her belt, looping it onto one of the magnetized tie–alls the Mando’ade used to store miscellaneous salvage.

“I think we’ve wasted enough time here,” she added, turning back to Carth. He looked up, giving her a confused smile that made her even more uneasy. He needs a medix. Now.

“The tomb and its holocron both answered you. Do you consider retrieving some knowledge of your former self a waste?” Vima Sunrider sounded disapproving.

Revan wondered if her former self had given a frack about the old woman’s approval. “Yes.” She walked to Carth. His breathing was more labored than she liked, and she wished to hell and back that some of the healing lessons Bastila and Juhani had given her had taken. Carth felt wrong in the Force, like a cracked vase she had no idea how to fix.

“I see…” Vima murmured. “Revan was a catalyst all of her life. She would not believe she could
effect change without clear, empirical evidence. She understood the virtue of curiosity.”

“Maybe you didn’t know what was here and you just wanted to see,” Revan shot back. She was getting a little tired of Vima Sunrider referring to Revan as if Revan wasn’t her. “Maybe you just wanted the holocron for yourself. You can’t have it.”

“You are greedy too,” the old woman shot back. “Revan was never needlessly covetous.”

“S’dark in here,” Carth whispered. “I didn’t see. Dustil… he’s outside?”

“We left him out there.” Which seemed more and more like a misstep.

Her comm–link beeped. “You okay?” Granite. Canderous’s voice. “Carth’s kid’s got his saber out. I think Jin’s trying to bluff it through, but—”

“Dustil—” Carth’s voice was a whisper. His arm over hers felt like it was burning up, even through the fabric of his uniform. “Don’t… Canderous, don’t hurt… him.”

“Hah! Better tell that to Jin! Vod can shoot—better than you, Revan.”

“What?” Carth’s arm tightened on Revan’s.

She was already dragging Carth through the tunnel. Vima Sunrider could do whatever the frack she wanted with this tomb. Revan had half a mind to bury her in it.

XXX

“Mekk?” Dustil’s voice cracked, giving the word at least three syllables.

“No, I’m your moms’s fracking ghost and I’m fracking myself, fockda.” Mekel advanced, twirling the unlit saber very carefully, in case Dustil activated it and tried to take his head off. Not that he thought… frack, he didn’t know what to think. Telos was still standing there, mouth open like he was turning tricks on his nameday, red blaze of his lightsaber twitching like he was stimmed.

And he looked… he looked dark.

Mekel’s free hand fumbled with the quik–tab on his helmet and it finally popped off. The air on this planet smelled like rotten Moffa eggs. The beard he’d been growing fracking itched, as the seal created instant–sweat, slicking his skin, stinging in his eyes. “Telos,” Mekel said again. “Hey. Nice lines, man. Bandon’d be jealous.”

“Bandon was an asshole.” Dustil’s voice choked a little, even though no one was Force choking him.

XXX

Mekk’s hair was shaved short and he looked like that mess of stubble on his chin was almost a beard now. His eyes widened, probably impressed by the Sith Lord before him, but Dustil couldn’t tell from the way he felt. Mekk could have been an illusion, or a dream. He wasn’t there in the Force at all. He wasn’t anywhere Dustil could feel him—just another null in armor, twitching as he straightened and took two steps forward.

“How—” Dustil nearly gutted the Mandie kid called Leskal who snuck up behind him and then came charging out—and he probably would have, if he hadn’t still been gaping at Mekel, alive and perfectly healthy and dressing like a fracking Mando’ade.
“S’cuy, Mand’alor!” Leskal said, running up to Canderous Ordo, (who’d taken off his helm too) before the old man held up a hand to hold him off. They were talking now, but they didn’t matter anymore.

Mekel walked down the hill to Dustil. He’d tucked his unlit saber back on his belt. He had two blasters now, one on each hip, now one hand on each. With the stubble they made him look dangerous, but it was all a lie. Now that he was closer, Dustil could feel his pulse pounding—not in the Force, but through it. His face was sweaty and those big black eyes were twitchy.

He was right in front of Dustil, but in the Force he felt like any other null.

_He’s scared. Scared of me._

“You grow an extra hand, or do you use the saber with your dick?” As far as it went, it wasn’t Dustil’s best line, but he cracked a smile for it.

Mekel paused, looking him up and down. One side of his mouth tugged up. “Is it Dress–as–Admiral–Karath–Day on this fracking planet, or are you working your way through Ugly School as a Sith stripper?” He was close enough now that Dustil saw him swallow, those big black eyes skittering away and then coming back to meet his. “Want me to rip off the other sleeve of that jacket, or should we find you a pole?”

His arm was close enough to grab—or knock a blaster out of it with a punch if he drew—but before Dustil could do anything more, Mekel placed his gauntleted hand squarely on Dustil’s chest and shoved him back.

Dustil didn’t have to move at all, but he stepped back automatically, staring into those dark eyes that were suddenly a complete mystery.


“Dustil!” From somewhere behind them, Revan had remembered he existed. Her voice was echoed by his father’s.

“Mekel’s alive?” Father sounded as surprised as Dustil was. The old woman was back there too—and out of the corner of Dustil’s eye he saw Revan help his father over to Canderous Ordo, now both of them gesticulating toward the ships parked on top of the hill, the other ship down here, and—

“Hey. Fockda.” Mekel’s hand pushed him back again. It took Dustil a second to realize he was supposed to move backward, toward the wall of the shuttle behind them, away from the crowd. The ship’s hull came up, hard and curved behind his back and then Mekel stepped forward, eyes level and a little too bright.

“That’s Lord Fockda,” Dustil muttered. “Show some respect. What are you supposed to be? Fracking Mandalore the Short? Mekelkins the Mandalittle?”

“General Revan’s cousin,” Mekel said, smile creeping to the other side of his mouth now. “Remember when we found out Vrook was my dads? Well, me and her, we’re pals now. They call me Mekel of Clan Lin.”

“Jin of Lin? You sound like a drink.”

“Yeah, well, you... “ Mekel’s voice trailed off, fumbling for the come–back. “Y–you look like shit,
asshole. So... uh, how powerful are you now?"

His gauntleted hand reached out again, but this time Dustil caught it with his. The Force helped him clamp down and their fingers locked: armored and skin. Mekel’s armor creaked, as Dustil used his power to force their hands back down, swinging their enlaced hands back and forth, like they were kids skipping down a lane.

“You’re alive,” Dustil repeated stupidly. “I thought... thought you’d karked it.”

“Yeah.” Those dark eyes were almost liquid staring back into his. Mekel swallowed again, blinking them too fast. “Me too.”

XXX

*Don’t panic,* Revan told herself, as she dragged Carth out from the tunnel. *With Canderous, there’s enough of us to take Dustil down fast if we need to. And probably alive—*

That grim thought halted as she blinked, staring in near-disbelief at the scene before them.

Revan had rushed out expecting the worst—only to find a scene that looked surprisingly mundane. Dustil and Mekel Jin were leaning against Vima’s shuttle, while Canderous inspected it with a few of the other kids; everyone apparently unperturbed by the permacrete Sithkid sulking in their midst.

But the darkness Revan had sensed before—darkness she now knew had been coming from Dustil—had lessened, like tension in the air broken by a summer storm. Outwardly, if not for the Sith corruption etched on Dustil’s skin, he and Mekel could have been normal kids—or Korriban—normal, at least—elbowing and jostling each beside the ship. Dustil had even laughed once, glancing toward her and Carth smiling, and then back to Mekel Jin. Even Carth had seemed pleased to see his son’s old friend—the kid he’d once called Mister Sith Congeniality—he’d greeted him by name and a handshake before he doubled over coughing again.

Now, Canderous was helping Carth up the hill, trailed closely by the two kids. The others had already made it inside the Misto—Rowda and Wraid splitting off to fly the fighter and Vima’s shuttle back.

“The young warriors are all so loyal to your Mand’alor, and the Mand’alor so loyal to you....” The old woman’s voice interrupted Revan’s thoughts. “All, save that man who fancies himself another Malak. He is dangerous.”

“He’s none of your business,” Revan snapped. “Along with everything else.”

“True.” Vima took a step onto the shale. “But familial bonds are not always a bulwark against darker impulses. Revan learned this of herself before she fell. Did you know she was going to kill Malak? But petty betrayal set his hand against hers faster... and for that millisecond of difference in the timing of their commands, Revan lost.”

“You speak as if you were there.”

“I was.”

“Of course you were. Let me guess. Is this you gloating about betraying me to Malak?”

“It was Beya Organa who gave Malak word of Revan’s treachery. I had not foreseen it at the time. At the time, I agreed with Revan that Malak had outlived his usefulness. And Revan had another champion—”
“Davad.” It was only since she’d dropped him into a sun that Revan had started calling the man she’d barely known by his first name. “Right. And that was all your little plan too. Telling him to… to seduce me. Worm his way in between Malak and me—”

Revan had barely recognized the red-haired woman in the Sith’s memoirs—an idealized version of her own face and body that seemed to have nothing to do with what she saw in the mirror—both beautiful and—

*Hideous. A monster. That cliff. Crashed on that planet. Holding that red hank of hair like a bald madwoman*—

“The Onderonite’s affection was quite easy to direct,” the woman said. “A beastrider rejected by his drelx, the hormonal shifts of adolescence, a girl his own age whose strength would catch his eye…”

Revan gestured with the hilt of her saber for Vima Sunrider to follow the others. “I’ve heard enough.”

“Have you? I would have assumed you would have more questions for me.” Vima Sunrider glanced back. She'd put the visor on again, and it hid most of her expression—just those thin lips, pulled in a disapproving scowl. “My padawan was always so curious.”

“At the moment, I have a lightsaber,” Revan said, motioning with it again. The old woman was a blank space in the Force—uncannily like Mekel Jin, and presumably for the same reason. “And you need to get into our ship.”

“I no longer require weapons.” The woman’s back bent as she climbed the hill, suddenly managing to look frailer than ever. “But you may waggle yours at me, if it makes you feel more capable.”

Revan bit back an automatic insult as a retort. She wished she had a fracking idea where Oerin Lin was. Any Force-user who could take the Force away at will was another monster she'd need to kill.

*Not revenge for the Jedi, she reminded herself. Necessity for the rest of us.*

“Clan Wies was trying to kill us and you were with them,” she said to the old woman’s back. “Was your son Oerin working with you too?”

“I want you to destroy Vitiate, Revan. So why would I want you dead?” Vima Sunrider’s feet slipped on the slope and Revan had to stop herself from automatically taking her arm to help.

“You were with Wies and they were firing on my ship.” Canderous had confirmed it. Was she dodging the question about Oerin Lin?

*If it looks like a hessi and has a two-meter long tongue, it’s no kissra lambie. How many times had Ma told—*

“Indeed. Kissandrix was always rash. When I realized her duplicity, I left.”

Revan remembered the armor-clad figure next to the Headwoman on the Wies bridge and wondered. *She called me Knight Revan. No Mandalorian would do that.* The voice had been distorted through the helm, but it had to have been Sunrider. “Sure you didn’t order Wies to attack us? Wasn’t that you on the bridge whispering in Kissandrix’s ear?”

“Do the clans take orders from an outsider? I have no status among them. Perhaps if my son or husband yet lived, a woman like Kissandrix *might* have taken my orders, but they are long dead, and so…when my attempts to dissuade her from attacking your ship failed, I fled. I had every
expectation that my former padawan would manage to survive—and I knew she would hear the beacon on the planet, and so...” her voice trailed off. “I came here to find Revan.” She glanced back again at Revan, scowling like one of Auntie Mita’s friends who’d just found a botfly in her soup. “Have I found her—or merely a Deralian smuggler accidentally imbued with more strength than she can ever use wisely?”

Revan scoffed. “You think you’re going to teach me how to use the Force?”

Those lips pulled tight. “And so, one question is answered.”

They’d reached the others, and Revan paced behind as the woman made her way up the ramp of the ship.

“It’s not answered,” she muttered. Yes, you found me. And now you’re giving me advice. Out of the goodness of your heart?

Banthashit.

What do I do with you?

Vima’s voice gentled suddenly, standing in the doorway to the ship. She pushed her visor up and those blind eyes fluttered, as if they were focusing on Revan’s face. “You were my padawan once, Revan. After Malachor, I came here to offer my aid again.”

Triple banthashit. “Are you working with Dar’Revan?” That was the only thing that made sense. If Vima really opposed Tenebrae, if she wasn’t with Oerin, if this all wasn’t a trap. If Dar’Revan wasn’t just being manipulated—or manipulating Revan herself—

“You call her no longer Revan, as if you have taken her place. You could have taken her memories, but you did not.”

Not a fracking answer. “I was going to, but someone made her take them first!”

Vima turned away, her voice weary. “That was Sheris’s choice—”

“Don’t lie to me!” Revan had to fight to keep the Force out of her voice, to keep it low, even as she watched two rows of armored heads turn, saw Canderous—standing in the front of the ship—frown. “Davad showed me—he showed me what you did to her! Atris was there. And you were there too—you did it. You made them both do it!”

She was aware of the others watching them now too, even as she drew the old woman to the back of the shuttle, where Canderous and two of the kids were already positioned, weapons out. She hadn’t had to say anything at all: they could tell Vima Sunrider wasn’t an ally.

I bet the Aleema has a great brig. Can’t wait to see. Aemelie left it out of the tour. You can rot in it.

“The Onderonite was ever loyal.” The woman’s voice had changed, flattened. Those blind eyes blinked, and the lines in her face relaxed. For a second, she looked younger, but cold—and Revan had the impression that this was the real Vima, the one seldom seen—the face behind the mask. “I brought his shape to harness, but I could never have predicted how much the beast would bear for her. Kavar would have broken under the strain. Oerin was far too proud. The twins too young and weak. And Meetra Surik—”

“What about Malak?”
The mouth pursed, almost primly. “Malak was never mine. Revan should have been grateful for the illusion of free will—it was a choice my mother dared not allow. It was a choice our generation of Jedi died to give Revan—”

*I’m Revan, you schutta.* This anger wasn’t dangerous. It didn’t even feel like the dark side—just that punching the old woman in the face would feel justified.

*Not the dark side, I just want to punch a blind old woman in the face. Huh.* The thought was crazy enough that Revan almost laughed.

*You should kill her,* that cold inner voice whispered from the real dark. *She always lies. She mocks you to your face with it, testing your mercy as a means to exploit it later—*

“We have any shackles?” Revan asked Canderous. Carth’s face was too pale, but he cracked one eye open at the sound of her voice.

“Saved you a seat,” her husband coughed, patting it.

“Leskal and Dormian already primed the restraints.” Canderous shrugged, looking around, until one of them stepped forward with a crate of them. “Jin? You gonna fly us out of here or what?”

“Shira said I could.” One of the kids scowled.

“Naw, he needs the practice.” Canderous looked around. “Jin? Where’d you go?”

There was an awkward silence.

“Jin?”

“Huh?” Then Mekel popped out of the fresher like he’d been pushed. His chest armor was unbuckled, hanging awkwardly off his frame. “I… yeah. Sure. If you want.”

“Dustil?” Carth mumbled.

“Here, Dad—Father, I’m right here.” Dustil poked his head around the fresher door. “Just… give me a sec—”

“I’m gonna give you thirty, then you need to clear outta there.” Canderous chuckled. “You don’t want to know what happens when the waste–tank shifts before the grav scrubbers take it down again.”

Revan wanted to sit next to Carth, but she sat next to Vima instead, now shackled to her seat and trussed like a partrigg fowl. Someone had taken her visor and those white eyes stared straight ahead.

One of the ribbons that tied the woman’s white braids had a bell in it. For some reason, that made Revan feel… strange.

*Hessi walking over my grave.*

The woman’s head turned toward her. Again, that coldly remote face. There were traces of beauty in it, signs that she was younger than she had first appeared, but the network of lines creased everything, twisting those fragile features with bitterness. “You exceed my expectations, padawan.” Her lips pursed and she turned her head to the window. “In another world, you might have leashed the Beastrider instead of destroying him, and then used *him* to shatter Tenebrae’s grip
upon the galaxy.”

The engines purred as their nose tilted skyward.

“Oh? In this one I just dropped him into a sun.” Revan closed her eyes.

Her former master didn't respond, just hummed something tuneless under her breath.

“What are you singing?” Revan asked, when the scow showed no sign of stopping.

“Nothing,” Vima said. “Just an old Krath lullaby.”

XXX

“The General’s shuttle is returning,” Aemelie noted out loud, frowning over her sensors and her husband’s odd requests. “Canderous wants us to prepare a Force cell for a dar’jett prisoner.”

“Dar’jett? They found one on the planet?”

“Yes. Apparently, working with Wies. He says she claims to be Jana Novasun herself.” Aemelie scoffed, because that seemed unlikely. She had never met the infamous mother of Oerin Lin, but the woman that both Rowda and Leskal had described (in their own reports, also scrolling on her screen) was far too old and frail to be her.

“Claims to be Jana Novasun?” Dessa scowled. Her father had come from a vassal branch of Clan Lin, and then married into Rialis. “I must see. You know, I met her as a child—several times.”

“You are a woman and can do what you will with women’s business, but do not overreach,” Aemelie warned her. “A clan whose leadership is weak enough to be misled deserve their fate.”

“The Fett Cassus was not misled—he lost,” Dessa corrected her. “There is no shame in it, except for Jana Novasun, who fled while the rest of her clan was slaughtered.” She shrugged. “I do not seek vengeance, merely answers.”

“At least Cassus Fett Lin had the wits to stay dead.” Perhaps that was rude to point out. If Gwenarius had been there, she might have frowned, Aemelie thought. Dessa sighed over-dramatically. “As far as we know.” She collected herself and then returned to her report. “Canderous’s ship is the last to return. In total, we recovered thirty-eight Imperials from the wreckage of the Sojourn. Other than that, the World of Tombs was a great disappointment. None of the machines from our grandmother’s time functioned. Rickallion of Zal reported that his patrol discovered a domed structure not previously recorded on our maps, but it was completely sealed, with no power signatures within. And Joetta’s squadron found a crashed Imperial gunship, but there were no crew aboard it at all—just some kind of organic matrix fitted atop the captain’s chair—”

“Organic matrix?” Abomination. “Not a body with implants?”

“No body. He took holovids. I forbade him from taking samples, of course, but looked more like...”

“Do not say it.” Such a concept was as much of an obscenity as the walking dead. Aemelie resisted the urge to spit on the floor like a superstitious child. “And the rest of our ships?” A rhetorical question, Aemelie waved her hand when Dessa tried to answer. “I’ve seen the reports.” They were grim. Of the ten who had jumped to this system before the traitorous akk wolves of Wies had
struck, three had been destroyed utterly, two had jumped, and the others had sustained heavy
damages. “The Sand Dreamer survived Malachor,” she mused, “only to die to a coward’s
treachery.”

“It was still a glorious battle,” Philine interrupted them, wide–eyed enough to be charming, even if
he was also rude. “Did General Ordo find any sign of Millifar—”

“He would have reported it.” Aemelie dialed open the comm–link to the service levels and placed
the orders for a dar’jett prison to be activated. It was coming past time to tell Gwenarius about
Millifar. To add another grenade to the pile, Oerina, the name Milli had chosen for the First Wife’s
daughter, suddenly seemed tragically ill–conceived. True, Oerin Lin had not been the one to kill
Canderous’s First Daughter, but Millifar had still been gaining mastery of her new arm, after Lin
had ripped away the flesh one. Who was to say that the prosthesis itself had not caused her death?

*Gwen’s babe will have to work hard to reclaim her name’s honor when she comes of age. But so
will my Dxun, of course—*

Revan had advised upon at least two neural disruptors, purely as a precaution. Aemelie decided
that four might be better, and said so to Dessa.

“Lead the interrogation, if you like,” she added generously, to the woman who was already
gathering her things to go. Technically, the task should be up to Canderous and Revan, of course;
but Aemelie doubted that Revan knew—and Canderous had a lot to carry on his shield already.
“Keep guards with disruptors on her at all times. Canderous claims she says not to have the Force,
but we all know she lies.”

“Gladly.” Dessa left, still strapping her swords to her belt. It rode awkwardly high now to account
for the swell of her belly, and the new child of Rialis within.

XXX

The medbay was antiseptic and white and empty, except for them. Whether that meant the
casualties of their recent battle were somewhere else, or there were none who could be saved,
Revan wasn’t sure. But she was guiltily grateful, as she had been when Canderous quietly and
efficiently took command of their crew on the shuttle and then transported Vima Sunrider (or Jana
Novasun, as he called her) to a cell designed for Force–users. He’d even offered to place guards on
‘Carth’s kid’ before Revan asked. (She told him to have them maintain a discreet distance.)

“Your First Husband has the flu,” Headwoman Sinae told Revan, who now was trying not to hover
and failing.

“I know that,” she snapped.

Carth had fallen asleep halfway to the *Aleema*. Revan had carried him to the medix as soon as they
landed. She thought she could trust the others to get the Force–blind Sunrider schutta to a cell…
especially since Revan had first taken the precaution of putting a helmet on the old woman’s head
and turning the voder off so she couldn’t talk, then left instructions not to give her any flimsi, or
anything to write with, or a comm, or any form of communication whatsoever, or to unshackle her
hands or feet…not even to enter her cell—

*Until when? Until she starves or pisses herself? What are you planning on doing with her?*

*I don’t know. She can rot in the cell until I do.*

*Killing her would be—*
—expedient.
—efficient.
—wise. She betrayed you. Davad showed you what she did. Her loss of Force could be a ruse. She must have some plan—

Revan took a deep breath, trying to soothe those dark thoughts—only to have them replaced by the more personal.

But what if Carth dies?

Then I destroy Tenebrae. The same as if he lives.

How?

I’ll interrogate the old woman. I’ll ask Dustil what he knows. He was there too. Darth Sulksalot has to have picked up something while pretending to be Malak.

To his credit, Carth’s son had wanted to stay with his father—until Mekel dragged him off. Revan had told the guards she’d placed on the dorm block to shoot with tranks first and then comm her if the kid tried anything, but Dustil had seemed happy when he left, barking orders at her in a fake Coruscanti accent about letting him know when ‘the Admiral’ woke up.

Now Revan’s boots clicked on the floor of the medbay, pacing back and forth and watching her husband sleep. “Isn’t there something you can give to make Carth better faster?” she asked Headwoman Sinae. Again.

Carth looked terrible—probably a hike through a planet made of dust after crash–landing an escape pod hadn’t been what the medix ordered for him. His chest moved too quickly, and his cough sounded underwater, wet and gasping. His handsome face was pale, with lines around the mouth and gray at his temples she’d never seen before.

“The fever–downs should kick in soon,” Sinae shrugged. “I had heard of your Plague, of course, but this is the first case I’ve seen. Still, the man’s vitals are as stable now as they can be. Unless he gets worse and dies, he will recover.”

“This is the first case you’ve seen? So… everyone—your people are vaccinated already?” Canderous had told her that Gwenarius and most of the mothers and children had relocated to their home base, the location of which he was surprisingly reticent about revealing. Not that I need to know. But the others—

The Rakata themselves died of a plague, long ago. Another thought like a whisper, from the long–forgotten recesses of her mind.

“Mando’ade don’t get the Jedi Plague,” Sinae told her. “Or, rarely. In fact, I’ve only heard of two cases, and they were both adopted into Clan—excluding the Lin Deathless, of course.” Her eyes narrowed. “Have you been vaccinated? Because if not, you really need to stop slobbering on him. We do have some decon spray….” Even as she was talking, she pressed a few more derms on Carth’s skin. “There. He should regain consciousness with these. But don’t push him too hard—fever–downs are mild, not battle stimulants, and they don’t have the same adrenal compensators as the stronger types do.”

“Just don’t give him more,” the Headwoman said, walking away. She paused at the exit. “Did you require a contra as well? Normally I would not ask a woman from another clan her business, but Aemelie requested that I inquire—

Revan felt her cheeks flush. “Uh, my implant’s good, thanks—and I think… and… this isn’t… Carth still has his—”

“Make sure he rests,” the Headwoman said, and left.

“Right,” Revan muttered, looking down at her sleeping pilot. It sure didn't look like he'd been given stims—or that they’d need to worry about contras.

Her restless mind nagged at her. If Carth was going to sleep now, there were a dozen other tasks requiring her attention: that schutta in the brig, Darth Dustil Sulksalot in the midship quarters, a conversation with Aemelie about boundaries on the bridge, reviewing Millifar's last logs—her mind stuttered there, ashamed she hadn't put Canderous’s missing daughter first.

Still only missing. Not dead. We need to investigate. Canderous thought a ship—or ships—they may have jumped away—

But then, Carth twitched. “Rev—”

“Here, Flyboy.” She brushed his forehead with her lips. She’d taken hold of both his hands, was sitting on the side of his bed.

Carth's eyes opened—focusing on her face. A slow smile twitched on his mouth. “Hey,” he whispered. “You're here.”

“Hey, Captain Obvious,” she grinned back, trying to match his smile. “Yeah. So are you. Slacking off in the medbay, huh?”

“Yeah…. I—I—” He coughed again, and she waited patiently as his breathing steadied again. “Listen, uh. Maybe… maybe you should call me something else.”

“Since when do you not like Captain Obvious?” She'd been calling him that since Taris, because he had such an obvious face.


She snorted. “Jury’s out until I see the entire package. It's been months—”

“Yeah.” Carth squeezed her hands back, bringing one to his lips and kissed it lightly—an almost courtly gesture that Revan hadn't expected—until he drew her fingers into his mouth, eyes meeting hers with a boldness that was unabashedly intimate.

Revan leaned over him, meeting that gaze head–on. “Months,” she repeated softly. Her hand slid away from his lips then, down the strong line of his jaw, nestling between his robe in the fur of his chest, the flat planes beneath.

“I know,” he muttered, shifting back to give her room to lie beside him. “Believe me, I—”

The ship rolled then, engines ticking into hyperspace. Revan’s stomach lurched and she grabbed her comm, tapping it twice. “Aemelie? Hells! I thought we agreed not to jump yet!”
“General Revan? Are you still in Medix One? General Ordo has approved our jump to hyperspace.”

“Could have warned me first!”

“You are in the medbay. There are plenty of buckets, should you become ill. I’ve sent word to the ships trailing behind us not to tarry in the Medriaas system.”

“I thought we agreed to wait—”

“General Ordo has concerns that waiting at a location where we were known would invite another ambush and put us no closer to achieving our goals.”

Frack. That actually made sense.

“Thanks, Aemelie. Report again if anything goes wrong.”

“I hope your First Husband does not die,” Canderous’s wife said, and cut out.

“So does he,” Carth said. The fever–downs seemed to have kicked in. His eyes were clear and steady, and his breathing even, a little fast, but that was understandable.

“Aemelie hopes you won’t die because she wants to join us in our tent,” Revan told him. “She told me including Canderous would be optional.”

“Are you trying to kill me now?” Carth traced the edge of her eyebrow, eyes lit with a warmth she’d almost forgotten, when she settled back down, lying next to him. “Don’t think I could handle Canderous.”

“We also don’t have a tent. I believe you're expected to make one. You can use any material you like—long as you weave it yourself.”

“First Husband, huh?” Carth’s mouth twitched, as he propped himself carefully up on an elbow. “Not sure if that’s a promotion, or if the Mandalorians can’t count. Did you get any more husbands while I was gone?”

“No.” She shook her head, suddenly devoid of a comeback.

“Uh… good.” He coughed again. It was a jagged, ugly sound.

“Do you want me to get you some water?”

“I’m not dying, woman.” His lips quirked. “Stars, your face! I must look like hell.”

“I think if you were dead in hell you’d look better.” Her fingers wanted to brush that errant lock of hair away from his forehead, but it was already gone. “Who cut your hair?”

“Zaalbar.” He mock–frowned. “Maybe I’ll grow mine out like yours. You hate the beard, huh? That’s why your face has that new wrinkle in it?”

Hate was too strong a word for something irrelevant, but her shrug quirked the edges of his eyes.

“Ah.” He nodded slowly. “Alright then, first chance I get it’s gone, beautiful. Where’s Dustil?”

“He—he went off with Mekel. We’re keeping an eye on Dustil,” she added. “I mean, I can—if he
does anything… dark, I’ll know in the Force.”

*And Canderous gave everyone tranks and permission to use them.*

“Mekel? Oh. Uh, they… that should be okay. Okay.” Carth nodded slowly, seeming to relax. “That's… it's good. You know he… and Mekel… he thought Mekel was dead.”

“I know. Oerin Lin broke the Force bond between them to get Malak’s ghost out.” Revan picked up Carth’s hand, running her fingers along the palm, feeling his pulse, good and strong now. “It was a Jedi plot—some of the Jedi, anyway. Didn't work so well for them—and Mekel lost the Force.”

“I was glad to get my son back, even if he… he was pretty upset—” his gaze shifted away. “You didn’t… guess you didn't get a chance to say good-bye to Malak’s ghost, then.”

“No. But I’d said good-bye to Malak before. Right before I killed him on the Star Forge.” She squeezed his hand and held his gaze, long enough to see the faint smile there.

“Serves me right.” He leaned in, wrapping an arm around her waist. “For saying something stupid.”

*It wasn’t stupid. Just pointless.* “Uh… are… the others…?” Revan was afraid to ask, but she had to know. “Zaalbar’s okay? Polla? Seiran?”

“Yeah.” He caught her restless hand that was foraging between them and kissed it. “No one was dead when we left, at least. But things’ve been better. Mission disappeared a few… guess it’s been more than a few weeks ago, now. The original Revan’s still in a coma. Yuthura thinks she’ll recover eventually, but—”

*Wait. Dar'Revan's the one in the coma? Or Polla is too? Both of them are in a coma? I was in a coma. We could all sit down and have tea and talk about our comas—*

She forced her disjointed thoughts back into a line, trying to quell her irritation at the term, ‘original’ Revan. “Yuthura Ban is there too?”

“Yeah.” Carth nodded. “Just showed up one day. Look… Revan, the original Revan didn't want you on Kaas—ever. And Mission didn't either. I don’t know why, but… do you?”

“Mission is part of a Rakatan computer and the **original Revan** propelled me off a ship fifty meters up,” Revan said. “I don’t know why you trust them.”

*Original Revan.* It shouldn’t rankle, but it did.

“Not a lot of options we had there.” He seemed to hesitate. “I knew you’d come, but it… was a long time.”

*That’s not my fault!* “The original Revan told me that only she could beat Tenebrae,” Revan continued. “Let’s hope she was lying, because I’m not sure how she’s doing it from half-dead and in a coma.”

“Yeah,” Carth said. “She told me that too.” He paused. “I didn't get much of a chance to talk to her but she… she wasn't what I expected.”

“Worse?” Revan remembered those hard green eyes watching her, the nest of braids like snakes. The constant barrage of insults.
The falling from the sky. Hard to forget that one.

“No. She was brave. Like you. The heart of a rock–lion. Both of them.”

“Both?”

“Polla killed that rancor that day—shot it square–on before I could. It would have ripped Revan in half if she hadn’t.” His voice softened. “Remember how you kept saying you could hit the side of a thresher door at midnight—”

“In moonlight,” Revan muttered. Stop calling her ‘Revan.’ “And I was wrong.”

“Well, Polla Organa really can. You weren’t nuts, beautiful. I used to think…you... but she really can.”

“Yeah, Aemelie’s told me all about her aim.” You too, Flyboy? “They… they're great friends, Aemelie and Polla. Don't tell Aemelie you're a fan too or she'll probably invite Polla and Seiran along for that tent party.”

“I know. She said, uh… she met Aemelie.” His arm moved rubbing her back like gentling a hessi. “You’d… you’d like Polla, I think. Not… for a tent… thing. We’re… we’re not doing that.”

“Damn right we’re not.”

Jealousy was a useless emotion. Here she was, with the man she loved, the man she'd married, who’d sacrificed a flagship for her not even six hours ago—and Revan felt consumed by an irrational envy for a trapped smuggler and an unconscious Sith Lord.

There were larger thranta in the galaxy to flay. Much larger. Emperors. Sunriders. Hell, even Darth Sulksalot here on my ship.

And what am I jealous of? I get to live. Sounds like they don't have a shot—either of them.

“Did they… so they both….” Carth hadn't called her Polla once, she realized. Not even when he’d been delirious. That was new. “They both reminded you of me?”

“Everything reminded me of you.” He eased closer, those warm eyes of his steady and serious. “I knew you’d come, but it…” His face was very close to hers, hot and close, skin taut with strain and far too pale. “I wondered why it took so long. I kept thinking… when… but I knew you’d come. I always knew. Even when I doubted, I knew.”

“It took longer than I… I was trying for a long time. I had to deal with… some… stuff first.”

“My turn,” Carth murmured. “We… we can trade off. Question for a question until we run out. What did you have to deal with?”

“For one thing, that old woman in our brig had two Sith apprentices who were killing the Jedi. One was Oerin Lin.”

“He died of plague. Right before Zaal and Mission and I left—”

“Death didn’t stop him.” There was no way to tell him the story from start to end. Revan found herself coming out with it in jumbled chunks: Lin, Arkan, Dar’Revan—the moment she first realized that Sheris Loran had taken the Redemption, and then that Master Arren Kae had been behind it all along.
Kae… also known as Vima Sunrider. Or, that schutta rotting in my brig.

She told Carth how the Jedi were mostly dead, how she’d stopped Davad Arkan, only to let Oerin Lin go free—

She stumbled on the parts before that: killing Marla Korr, finding Seiran—Dar’Revan’s proposal that they face Tenebrae together, Dar’Revan’s killing of Malachi—Dar’s surprise decision leaving Korrie and Polla’s baby behind on Deralia, and not the planet they’d planned for and then—

“Seiran told me that part already, beautiful. We… we spent a lot of time together.”

“Oh. Of course, I guess you—you would have. You… you got along?”

He gave her a strange look. “Yeah. They’re good people. Both of them—”

He interrupted himself with a story about meeting Polla Organa on Yavin IV. How he’d known she was the wrong woman the second she landed in his arms, but they’d all played along because they didn’t know what else to do. How Mission had convinced Polla Organa to stay—telling her Revan was coming to save them—and they’d all thought it was so, because Dar had pretended to be Revan on the comm to them—

She has so much to answer for.

“Polla calls the Sith Emperor Tenny Bro?” It seemed disrespectful, but Revan kind of liked it. “I still don’t understand how she fooled him at all. We don't look—”

“Uh, he’s… very distractible,” Carth said. He looked thirsty so Revan levitated a bulb of water for him from the stack that Sinae had left for them. “And you… you have a lot in common.”

Revan thought about Jasp Organa, wondering if he was still alive. No we don’t.

“If Vima’s working with Oerin Lin, we can use Vima to get to Lin,” she mused. “Davad was too dangerous to bring to Kaas, but maybe Oerin…. He stripped the Force from Vima and Mekel. Maybe he can do it to the Emperor too? That’d help—if we take out the Sith Force-wielders we’d just have their fleet to deal with. That’d be easier.”

“Easier.” He raised an eyebrow. “From what you just said, Vima’s not working with Oerin Lin. They're enemies.” Carth coughed again. “Doesn't make either of em on our side, Freckles.”

“Enemies hate. We can still use her to get to him.” She smiled at him, but he wasn’t smiling back.

“You said— she said she’s doing this to stop the Emperor. Are you sure she's against us? I don't trust her either, but—”

Am I sure? She wanted to laugh. “Vima isn’t any better than that fracking emperor!” Revan told him more. Details, what Davad had shown her, how he’d been used his entire life. How Revan had been too.

“Vima Sunrider destroyed the Jedi Order, Carth. And that plague? The one that started in the Underground? That was her. Davad and Oerin and her. They were all working together before Davad and Oerin betrayed her!”

“She made the Jedi Plague—?”

No. “She set it loose on Coruscant!”
—and then Carth interrupted with an insane story about the plague being released on Kaas City too and order breaking down, a slave rebellion, and Polla Organa and Yuthura Ban helping Zaalbar to lead the rebellion, which had apparently been going well when Carth left (as well as it could), but now he was worried—and no one had heard from Mission—

He’d stopped referring to Mission Vao as a computer at all, Revan noted—and every time he said ‘original Revan’ or Polla she felt herself twitch.

“I think your rebellion failed.” A harsh truth, but one he needed to hear. “The Emperor told me he was going to start executing prisoners tomorrow. He said he’d execute Deralians—or… he said he’d execute a Deralian—would he mean Polla? Or Seiran?”

“I’m not… sure.” His smile faded, etching into something more grim. “Seiran was with us at the palace. Polla and Yuthura were at House Blais, with your… with the other Revan. Zaalbar… he moved between. The Sith didn’t consider him more than a beast, really, so it was easier. And Mission, she was trying to get more vaccine from some Republic channels. Polla had found the black market in Kaas City—they were working out a deal to get vaccine through the Imperial embargos under Tenebrae’s nose. I—I didn’t know details, because I was compromised—”

_Tenebrae said he’d execute House Blais too. Whoever they are._ Looking into those eyes, Revan decided to spare her husband that bit—at least for now. “You said… the other Revan was in a coma….”

“Yeah. Polla was looking after her at the House of Blais. When Yuthura came, she helped too.”

“In a coma since the fight.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “It’s been months, local time. But she’s better than she was. Breathing on her own now. Yuthura thinks she’s stabilized.”

_Great. Revan the Original Vegetable._ “I saw the fight, with the rancor. Why would Dar risk herself like that?”

“The Emperor promised to free Zaalbar and the Deralians, even if she lost.”

_What good would that do to her?_ “And if she won? What was she fighting for?”

“Same thing.” His laugh was hollow. “No way to win on Kaas, beautiful, not for us. It… took me a while to see that. Only ways to make things better. As best as we could. I tried to sabotage the Sith Fleet… I… gave them bad advice. I tried to warn the Republic—Mission was getting us more vaccine to stop the plague—weaken Tenebrae… I… did I say that before?”

“Yeah. But you said Dar’Revan dueled some possessed rancors to set Seiran and Zaalbar and Polla free. Then you said they were still there. Did Tenebrae break his bargain?”

_Aren’t we supposed to have some kind of formal agreement?_ Dar had mentioned it. _Did he break it? Can I use that?_

“He… agreed to let Seiran go. Polla and Zaalbar technically belonged to House Blais—and someone needed to take care of Revan. She was dying—the poison—Dustil said they used terentatek poison on the rancor’s claws. She needed someone to look after her and Polla… she wanted to help.”

"It didn't have to be Polla!" Tenebrae had said he was going to execute a Deralian. _And you’re saying she could have left but she didn’t?_
Abasen. The weight of their baby in her arms, brown eyes looking up at Revan with such trust as she’d walked away from Dar and Seiran—

“Damnit, I promised Polla’s father I’d bring her home safe!”

“You met her father?”

Hadin’t she mentioned that? So much time—like a chasm between them now. “Why the hell did you leave me?” Revan asked him. It wasn’t what she meant to ask—she didn’t want to kick her husband when he was ill, didn’t want to fight—not when they’d been apart for so long, but she…

“You left a note and you left.” Not even much of a note. He’d said he’d do it all again. He’d said he wasn’t sorry he’d saved her.

“Dustil,” Carth said, staring at her, startled. “Senator D’Reev said he’d help—that he knew someone who could help on Dathomir. He said it wouldn’t… wouldn’t take long. It… guess it was a trap, but I didn’t know. I had to do something. And then—Tenebrae commed. I thought Polla was you.”

“I would have come with you to Dathomir—” it was a lie. Korrie. I couldn’t have left him... not then. “It was a trap. You should have known it was a trap—after what that man did to you before—how could you be so fracking trusting? So fracking stupid?”

“I had to do something!” Carth’s voice rasped, and he coughed again, something like durasteel flickering in his soft brown eyes. “You… knew Malak was in my son and you didn't stop him!”

“How was I supposed to? I found out—and then you left me. You kidnapped my son and then you left… by the way how long did you know Dustil was possessed? Because Mal said—he said you knew for a long time. You knew and never told me.”

“Canderous was the one who grabbed Korrie. He wanted to get both of you out of that… tomb of a Temple. And I knew Dustil wasn’t Dustil because I know my son,” he whispered, staring at her. “I knew the second I saw Mal that he wasn’t Dustil. But how could I tell you?”

“With kriffing words?” She didn’t want to be angry. And it wasn’t anger—it was something deeper, something that left a bitter taste in her mouth, maybe something that could never be fully resolved. “Grass Priests! You and Zaalbar and Mission… you just left me there—surrounded by my enemies. Malachi. The Jedi—Malak… you left me with Malak! Did you think I’d take him back?”

“Never.” The way his face hardened told her how off the mark she’d been with that question. “But Zaal and Mission were trying to help Dustil. For me. You… you hadn’t even commed them in weeks! You barely spoke to me after Polla and her family were reported killed—did you know they weren’t killed?”

“Not at first.”

“But then you did? You never said. Didn’t seem to make a difference.”

“Yeah, well…” Her laughter felt hollow. “Great job, guys, helping your kid. Dustil’s so much better now.”

The lines around Carth’s mouth deepened, and his voice roughed to a knife edge. He pulled away from Revan suddenly, sitting up and shoving his back up against the wall. “You listen: my son has been pretending to be Malak for months now while we tried to find a way out of this! Sents have died for us, Revan—and you—”
I did what I had to, Carth.

She heard her own voice crisp to ice. “I led a Force–eating monster into a sun. The man I thought was my friend killed the Jedi and my uncle. I left Korrie with—strangers. And I almost died in space—and before that I was betrayed by the woman who's supposed to be me—but how dare you—” she scrambled to her feet—only to have Carth grab her hand, tugging her back down.

“Wait,” he whispered. His grip was weak. Revan could have broken it easily, but she didn't, she stayed frozen, looking at him. His eyes were soft. As she watched a tear gathered in one, glittering as it traced its way down his cheek.

“What?”

“It's been shit for both of us, hasn't it?” His eyes searched hers, and she met them, feeling her some of her anger ebb away at the sight of his grim smile, that steady gaze.


“Yeah,” she nodded and sat down again, putting her other hand on top of his. “It's been shit.”

“I'm here now.” Muscles in his jaw worked and she saw the feverish brightness of his eyes again, the way his hand shook. “I won't leave again, Revan. Unless you want me to—”

“I don't.” It was true. “Carth, you’ve been—everything I know that's real is—you were always there.” You're in all of it, Flyboy. Even the parts where you were gone.

“Yes.” His mouth twitched. “I know.” He pulled her down next to him on the bed again, until they were back, lying side by side. “I’m sorry I left, beautiful. It was a mistake.”

“Not the only one.” She kissed the underside of his jaw, where the line of that infernal beard was neatly trimmed and she could feel his skin. “I've made plenty. And it sounds like Polla Organa did worse, trying to hustle credits from the Sith Emperor and getting Dustil kidnapped.”

And she’ll die for it before I can save her. Ultimately, a selfish thought, for Revan would have to be the one to tell Molla and Jasp when she retrieved Malachor from Deralia.

“Polla’s the one… she got me infected with the flu. Me and most of Kaas City. HK… he helped too.”

“Then sents died because of her.” Polla Organa set the plague loose on Kaas? How? And she's working with Dar’s homicidal Rakatan droid? Which is no longer in pieces. Wait. Wait a second. Who put HK back together?

Like I have to even ask. Dar loved that damned machine. She probably started soldering his bits on right after she pushed me off the ship.

Hells, HK won't save Polla from an execution. It’ll probably snap holo–prints.

“Yes.” Carth’s arms wrapped around Revan, half pulling her on top of him. Their limbs interlaced, more protecting than passionate. “And some lived—thanks to her. Polla and Zaalbar vaccinated as many sents as they could until we ran out… I couldn't… was hard for me to help. Tenebrae has weekly sacrifices. Culls for those who can't complete the Kiss—when the possession doesn't work—or just when he's bored… he throws parties that always end in the death of innocents.... It was… it’s bad there, Freckles. You have no idea how bad—”
Then tell me. “You need to tell me everything, Carth. The things Davad showed me—that schutta in the bridge… she was behind them all along. Behind me. Even to the Star Forge. She wanted this body for herself. She made Dar—out of Sheris—she made Sheris take that holocron—and turn into Dar. That was her. Do you understand?”

“The original Revan only said that you need to stay away from Kaas. I might not have believed it, but then Mission said it too—that we couldn't let the Emperor have you—and—”

“He won't have me!” You trust the woman who betrayed me and the Rakatan computer more than you trust me, Carth?

“Revan….” Strain or illness had grooved new lines around his mouth. “I've seen what that Sith planet has done to my son. And you're stronger than he is. What if it affects you like it’s affected him?”

*It won't. I'm not weak.* “Carth, Dar'Revan may not have known she was compromised. She could have been doing what Vima wanted and not even have known. That schutta was controlling the Council—at least some of it. And us too. Finding the Star Forge… the Jedi… all of it was a part of her game. She… I think she had Davad stalking us—at least on Korriban… and Taris… and he—”

*The Endar Spire. Even as early as that. And some of the memories he showed me—they were—too much to see. Raw places. Too much of Dar. Too much of him.*

“He, what?” His eyes narrowed. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, he—he wouldn’t—but she twisted him.”

*And Dar twisted him too.*

Irrationally Revan hated them both for it.

”That little old woman you threw in the brig?” Carth still sounded skeptical. You think she's responsible for… everything? What about the Jedi plague?”

“No. That was me. Or, Dar, I mean. It was Dar. She made it to stop Tenebrae. But Vima and her minions set it loose on Coru—Davad… there wasn't much of him left, but he showed me… visions… I saw what she did in my head. And Dar knew she was involved too… she was manipulated, but she knew—”

“But Vima Sunrider told us she wants to stop the Sith Emperor.” He frowned. “Was she lying?”

“Of course Vima wants to stop the Sith Emperor! She probably wants his fracking job!”

“Oh.” Carth ran a hand across his jaw. “Well… what are you going to do?”

“I don't know.” Suddenly she was exhausted.

“Mission didn't want you to go to Kaas,” he said again. “Maybe we should… we could strike Kaas City from orbit. This ship… Tenebrae wouldn't expect it to be hostile. They'd have defenses down… and I… I know their defenses. We could… if we moved fast enough, maybe we could knock their fleet into confusion and take on Thule and Ziost too.” His mouth tightened. “Might not be so good for our friends on the ground though.”

*Oh, Carth.* Revan thought of the flotilla of synchronous ships she'd seen working for Tenebrae and shook her head slowly. *It wouldn't work. He has more up his sleeve than you think.*
Unless—

“You trust Mission?” she asked him, skipping back to that.

Revan remembered when she’d stopped trusting the T3.

Maybe Polla Organa had faked her own death and not been assassinated by Revan’s overzealous droid, but the T3 had still been connected to the Rakatan computer—the computer that Vima Sunrider had shown to Dar’Revan in the first place.

*That computer is dangerous. Dar said so. Malak said so.*

*So now I trust the words of Sith Lords over Carth?*

*They'd know. He wouldn't.*

From the incredulous look Carth was giving her, bringing up Mission had been the wrong thing to do.

“Yes, Revan. I do trust Mission.” He coughed. “I'm worried about her too. She should have reported in by now—when Dustil and I left Kaas, she was missing.”

*Great. A missing Rakata droid with the personality of an impulsive tweener is loose on a Sith planet. She's probably taken it over by now.*

“Is HK missing too?” The last time she'd seen the thing it had still been in pieces. *Figures she'd put together her droid again. That thing liked her like it never did me.*

“No, he's… he was helping Polla and Yuthura with Rev—helping them care for the original Revan.”

“Heartwarming,” she drawled, closing her eyes. *Almost just called her Revan there, Flyboy. Like you think she is.*

“What are we going to do?” His lips brushed her ear and she felt his arms tighten around her. “I'm just flying test loops here, Freckles. I don't know what to do.”

“I have no fracking idea either.” *That bombing thing... never setting foot on that miserable planet... our friends are dead anyway—*

*Would Seiran Wen call me a friend? Would Polla?*

*Not if I bombed them from orbit.*

If it wasn't for the size of that Sith Fleet, a first strike would make the most sense. But if the Sith Fleet could be neutralized immediately?

*Or if we had more ships, enough to outfight them?*

She cracked an eye open to find her husband peering down at her, a half smile on his face.

“I know that look,” Carth said, dark humor pulling the side of his mouth. “That thing about bombing the planet? Don't take it seriously, beautiful… I’m probably still delirious.”

It was impossible not to smile back. “You’re right, it would take much too long. Hey… how's the sun in that system? Stable? Maybe we can make it go nova. Or… we could get the tech specs
on how I destroyed Malachor V?"

“Hah.” Carth’s hand pulled her top knot loose, and he ran his fingers through her hair. “Silk,” he mumbled, tracing her ear, running a finger down her neck. “I used to close my eyes and dream of the way your hair feels.”

Her head rolled closer and they kissed slowly. Revan heard herself give a low sigh as his hand trailed down her back. She'd taken off the armor, put on one of the generic crew coveralls instead. She was suddenly conscious of that—and of the thin fabric of his medix robes, the heat of his skin next to hers.

They kissed again.

“Mmm,” Carth said after a while, those soldier’s eyes watching her own—gentle and hard at once. His pulse was too rapid in his neck and his eyes looked a little stimmed, but he was smiling. It occurred to Revan to wonder again what had actually been in those fever–down derms.

“Easy,” she murmured. “You okay?” His robe lay open, and the zipper to her coverall was pulled all the way down. His hands kept touching her, gentle, but steady and knowing. Her own were more tentative; the press of his hip bones, the hard edge of ribs in his chest—these things were new. She was afraid she might bruise him, and it muted and shifted her desire—always before it had been like riding a swoop into the black with him—an increase of velocity, an inevitable conclusion. But now, it—

“Yeah.” He rolled into her hand, eager. But his breath was ragged, more than she liked—not just from need. “Just not sure I—”

“We probably shouldn’t—”

They’d both started speaking at the same time, and then Revan heard her own chuckle echoed by his.

“You are sick,” she said. “We’ve… we probably won't die today. Maybe we should just wait—”

“Yeah,” he murmured. “We’ll wait. Let me get some beauty sleep first, okay?”

“Yes.” Her leg hooked around his hip, drawing him closer, and they rocked back and forth slowly.

“The sweet, unfulfilled ache was soothing, like a ship in snug orbit, swaying in a gentle solar breeze.

*Those ships,* she thought as sleep came. *The Emperor did give them to me. Sentients, he might possess or own, but if they are something else... if they are machines—*

*And truly mine...*

Xxx

Carth waited until her breath was even and calm, until she'd begun to whisper in her sleep again—those half-words, fragments of languages. He knew more of them now than he had once, but that didn't lessen the mystery of her, his wife. Savior and destroyer, all at once.

“Let's go in the water,” she said in Shyriiwook, clear as day. “Race you! They were only children,” she added in Ryl—then back to incoherence. It was comforting and familiar, as much a part of her as the smell of her skin, those green eyes, the arch of her brows. “Eight quarters starboard,” she added in Basic. “Sixty degrees, launch as soon as you see the trace—”
“A name,” she whispered in Mandalorian. “He will remember it—”

“Freckles,” Carth murmured, untangling himself carefully from her limbs, uncoiling his aching body to stand up. The medbay was larger than any he’d ever seen, like everything else on this ship, walls curved and white and gleaming.

“Something’s wrong with those ships,” Revan muttered in Ancient Sith. And that was when Carth knew he’d been trapped on that damned planet too long, because he understood her.

_I need more fever-downs_, he thought, and found them where the medix had left them on the counter by the door. One helped tether his head to his body, so Carth put on two more for strength, fumbling through the tidy stack of freshly-pressed clothing someone had left for him—next to a similar pile for her. Mandalorians weren’t ones for uniforms outside of their beskar; but they’d left his blasters, freshly charged and polished atop a new belt—embroidered with the Ordo skull on its holsters. There was even a blast helm—one for each of them. Maybe standard issue but it made things convenient.

“Huh.” He almost laughed, putting the holster on, but didn't, glancing back at her.

“... Draavitnya luk jitna,” she said, rolling over on her back. Her limbs flexed out, then splayed. Her mouth fell open and she began to snore—the most beautiful monkey-lizard he’d ever seen.

“I’ll be right back, Revan,” Carth told her, and left, to find his way through the unfamiliar ship.

Xxx

Mekk’s room on the _Aleema_ was a real dump.

Dustil was honestly surprised because he’d expected better on what had been Darth Revan’s flagship, the _Imperial Aleema of Cinnegar and Thule._

He’d written a paper on her back on Korriban. The _Aleema_ was the largest and fastest dreadnaught ever built, capable of crewing at least six thousand sents, and storing nearly as many fighters. (And that wasn’t even mentioning its cannon—both plasma and ion, set both starboard and aft—or the turbolasers portside, or its forty-seven torpedo bays.)

The _Aleema_ actually wasn’t even half-staffed, from what Dustil had seen of it, and surely there had to be officer’s quarters better than this tiny cell that didn’t even have a viewscreen, cluttered with books everywhere, and pieces of what looked like a heavy repeater strewn all over the place, propping up pink, half-burnt candles. Didn’t the Mandies know Mekel was Revan’s cousin? They must, because Mekk had already mentioned it to Dustil about a dozen times, and all they’d done was take off from the shuttle, mumble something to Dustil’s father, and come here to frack.

He looked up at the picture his old bondmate had taped on the low ceiling above their bed and wondered at it. Mekk himself was turned away toward the wall, lying on his stomach, ass in the air; but that holo-image of him grinned down at them as if he approved of the message.

In the holo, Mekk’s hair was slicked back and he was wearing beskar, but posing like some kind of tween idol—carefully slouched, with a blazing green lightsaber out to the side—his handsome face chiseled and hard as a vidstar’s idea of what a hero should be.

“I thought you were dead,” Dustil whispered, staring at the picture and then back to the man next to him in the bed. Mekk’s back had more muscles in it than Dustil remembered and he traced them now, fingers trailing down the spine. Weird, not feeling it on his echo in his own skin. It figured the fockda would carry a saber even when he didn’t have the Force. He’d been so proud of himself.
when he’d gotten his first one—

“Thought you were too… at first.” Mekk’s head turned to look at him then, all black eyes and shadows. “But then… uh, Lyd and I were hanging out and she showed me a vid with you acting like Lord Malak when you met that other Revan…” He snorted. “You didn’t frack the other Revan, right? Because she’s… well, the real one’s my cousin and that would be balls–up weird.”

“Lyd?” Even without a Force bond Mekk had the same tells—that slight hesitation before he said the name. Lyd. The nickname. Mekk shortened everyone’s name given time enough: Dust, Shar, Lash, Thally—at least anyone he liked.

And he had liked dear old Lyd, hadn’t he? She’d featured heavily in the Jin dream spank rotation—

“Lydie Korr.” Mekel kept going. Without the bond he hadn't noticed anything—Dustil hadn’t given any tells for him to notice—being smarter and more powerful than Mekel Jin. “Loanin… now. She married that senator asshole. But he took a lot of meetings off–planet—we were on Katarr for weeks—and she kept inviting me over to spar? Then, this one day… she just dropped her robe! You know those lines Zabraks have? Not like yours… yours make you look like a badass….” He reached out and ran his hand across the dark patches on Dustil’s ribs, which were very badass. “But Zabraks, they have those indentations all over their bodies. Even…” he made a gesture. “You know.”

”Congratulations,” Dustil said dryly. “You always wanted to frack her.”

“Yeah. It was great.” Mekel had a banthashit grin on his face now at the memories. “Sticking it to her husband wasn't bad either—not literally, but he totally knew. His face!” He chuckled. “Nothing he could do—even without the Force I could’ve kicked his ass.”

“They die when the undead Sith killed everyone else?” Dustil figured there had to be some part of this story that’d make him smile too.

“No.” Mekel sat up on his elbows. “Lyd and the shabuir took off with the rest of the Jedi who made it out. Went to Hoth… or Zeltros? Something like that.” He rolled over lazily, like he knew Dustil was watching from the corner of his eyes. His skin was pale gold, striped with hair that ran down the flat of his belly. When his head lolled back, his neck looked so pale and soft—the weakest point. His eyes half-lidded, and he licked his lips a little, looking up at Dustil, that smug smile fading. “Second I found out you were alive, I knew I'd find you,” he added. “Would’ve been rough if my cousin Revan wasn't coming this way too with her Mandalorian army, but I would’ve found a way, Telos.”

“I thought you were dead,” Dustil repeated, suddenly strangely… ashamed for his bout of jealousy before. He stared up at the ceiling again, wondering again what had possessed Mekk to put a holo–image of himself there, grinning like a rube. “And that's the twentieth time you've managed to work in that Revan's your cousin.”

“Well, she's married to your dads so what does that make us?” That crooked smile widened when Mekel looked down at himself and twitched his hips—and suddenly the holo–pic made a lot more sense. He’d always been so fricking vain.

“Here,” Dustil said—and tackled him, pushing a stack of books on genetics and shipbuilding off the end of the bed. “That makes us here.”

Xxx
“Is he okay?” Carth asked one of the kids standing guard at the entrance to the midship quarters.
“My son? The guards said he was staying on this level.”

“They’re in the fifth room aft,” one armored kid said. “The one with the Ordo clan sign carved in the door.”

“He’s with Jin,” one of the others added. “Vod collects sheresh’ik like skulls. He—” the kid made a startled noise as one of the others punched him in his armored gut, sending him slamming into the wall.

“I’m sorry for that shabuir’s rudeness,” the first said. “We all are, First Husband.”

“It’s… it’s fine.” Carth nodded, pretending that had all made sense and continued down the corridor.

It felt awkward as hell knocking, and most of Carth didn’t want to bother them… but you never know what will happen. You never know what will be the last time, either. And he just wanted to make sure Dustil was okay.

Like you and Mom, his son had said about him and Mekel. Well, Carth remembered Morgana’s old man busting in on them too, once or twice—accidentally, he’d thought at the time—now he just hoped it had been. Hell, he hoped then too. But parents embarrassed kids. It was what they did. Maybe her father had his reasons too. Maybe they hadn’t had anything to do with Carth and Morgana at all—but more to do with his own time. The man had dropped dead from a coronary event two weeks before their wedding. Maybe he’d just been working on his own time, as best as he could, when he’d asked Morgana to come out and see the garden—or to help him clean out the storage unit with her mother’s things—

Like you and Mom, his son had said about him and Mekel Jin. Had he meant it? Like me and Revan, was what Carth hoped for his son. Not that he’d been the one to bring her back, he’d never give himself all the credit, but he’d helped. And Mekel Jin—well, he wasn’t exactly what Carth had wanted, but he’d seen Korriban. The two of them had made it out sane from that madhouse. Kid must have hidden depths. And he’d made Dustil laugh—

Hell, I would have hugged Inse Blais herself if she had made my son laugh.

Hesitant, he knocked on the door. “Dustil?”

“Shit!” Jin’s voice.

“Dad?” Dustil’s startled squawk. “Uh… are you okay?”

“Much better. Medix fixed me right up.”

“You… uh… can you give me a sec?”

“It’s fine, just checking in. We… we’ll have breakfast in a few hours, how does that sound?”

The door cracked open and his son peered out at him, only one yellow eye visible in the gloom.

“You look better… but your heart…” The door cracked open a little wider. “Are you stimmed?”

“All I took is the med the doc gave me, I swear.”

“Watch it with those.”
Behind him, Mekel said something in what sounded like Ancient Sith. All Carth caught was the word ‘leave.’

“Shut up!” Dustil snapped, glancing back. “Dad, if you give me a sec, I can come out.”

“No,” Carth smiled. “I’m just taking a walk, kiddo. So—breakfast? You up for it?”

“I don’t think they’ll let you cook,” his son muttered. His thick eyebrow twitched above that yellow eye. “You know that, right?”

He remembers. The rare times Carth had been home. Permacakes on the griddle, with nerf steaks, extra rare. Letting Morgana sleep in. The two of them in that galley kitchen in their conapt, crowding each other as they got it together.

“I don’t know,” Carth told him. “I’m First Husband of Ordo now.”


Mekel called something else behind him, clearer now, like he’d come closer to the door.

“He says we should meet in the Starboard Dining Hall—Officer’s mess,” Dustil translated, although… Carth had gotten most of that. Tenebrae in his head, Ancient Sith had bled through.

“Oh—seven—hundred shipside,” Carth promised him.

“Promise me you’ll rest before then?” His son’s voice. Normal. Concerned. If not for that yellow eye, this was the man Carth had wanted to meet, the one he’d hoped he’d helped raise.

Can’t be this easy, Carth thought. But what if it was?

“Sure. I’m gonna head back to the medix now and get some sleep,” he lied.

Xxx

Darkness.

A small place. Rather like a tomb, except for the unmistakable vibration beneath the old woman’s shackled feet.

Hyperspace.

It was not the first time in her memories that the woman had been so set upon, but with all of her hope, Kreia vowed it would be the last.

What hope? Her mind mocked her. If she is Revan she will have you killed without speaking, and if she is not—

If she is not, your unformed clay is now Vitiate’s. And he will smother the galaxy with it.

But not yet. It has not happened yet—

In Kreia’s darkness and indignity, the earlier images intruded.

A slaver’s bay, Andur’s blasted body. A cell on Cinnegar, and those whispers in the dark of madness. The Dxun moon. The Cron cluster implosion. The darkness of Yavin IV. The death of the
conclave, her childish voice screaming—

That one doubled, as Kreia’s maternal arms locked around her child’s frame—in both of them at once: Nomi, seeing the tragedy of what so much death had done to her daughter’s mind. Vima: locked in that moment—all innocence lost as death rained down from the sky—

A man carved in ice on Rhen Var, the frozen plains, a soldier’s blaster bolt—

The death of Ulic. The death at Malachor. The death of Oerin, her brightest star.

The death of Revan, her most futile hope.

Here in this place, a helm of heavy beskar covered Kreia’s face, its voder smashed and ragged on her lips, preventing speech. The visor’s optical displays were similarly broken, but she could still hear. The sounds of this place were muffled but distinct—the chatter of her guards—five—their footsteps on the floor—and her own steps as she paced the length of her cell.

The Aleema’s interrogation rooms had been designed to break Jedi. The Mandalorians, for all their retrofits on the ship’s weapons, had not touched them—or so her steps taught Kreia now. The scale of the cell was just as she recalled from the other side of its electro-plasmic walls: five steps by four steps, the floor tilted forward and carefully constrictive on all four sides—cramped by design—so as to not allow a prisoner rest.

And Kreia was already weary, forever weakened. But her work was not done.

The Mando’ade children had been kind enough to shackle her arms in front, at least, and the chains around her ankles were loose, speaking of the respect they had been trained to have for the old.

It was a small thing, but it was everything—for she could walk, pacing slowly back and forth in her cell, while the dim voices of the children buzzed there with gossip like Coruscanti gutter–wives.

“Who is she?”

“Some dar’jett. She has four Force bands under that helm!”

Force restraints around her neck, and on her brow. By their weight enough to incapacitate Ulic himself in his prime.

At least in her darkness, Kreia was spared the discomfort of feeling them as anything more than cold metal.

“That’s Jana Novasun.” A new voice intruded sharply. More assertive than the others. Feminine. “I need to speak with her immediately. Remove the helm.”

“It’s forbidden. General Ordo said General Revan gave the order—”

“And I have been assigned to interrogate our prisoner, Wraid. Open the cage and remove the helm!”

“We have orders—”

“And here is a new one,” the woman snapped. The click of knives, perhaps a med–kit. Perhaps interrogation drugs, or more… brute methods. They did not matter. The woman’s voice was hope. “A new order coming from a woman of your clan, to you, an unblooded boy. Open the cage!”

“Yes, Dessa,” the boy’s voice said.
Dessa. The name was unfamiliar, but in her darkness, the old woman smiled.

XXX

Meanwhile on Dromund Kaas….

“No,” Polla said again.

Revan and Polla crouched in the corner of their cell, behind the half-wall that hid their fresher. For a man who possessed billions, Tenebrae was surprisingly squeamish about bodily function. It was an advantage that Revan had manipulated before.

“No. No way. Uh–uh.” Polla shook her head, thankfully managing to keep her voice to a whisper without Revan reminding her for a sixth time. “Listen, I helped get the bricks out to open up the wall, and I strained my fracking shoulder in there breaking off tree branches bringing them out for you. Need me to watch for the guards? I'm your girl. But slaughtering? I think you got it covered just fine on your own.”

She stood up, looking like she meant every word.

“Sit back down,” Revan snapped. “It will go faster with two.”

“No way.” Polla shook her head again. “I killed like four of those things on the ship with Tenny Bro. The blood gave me a rash. I may be allergic.”

“A harmless effect,” Revan told her. Her own flesh hand itched with the lie. “Please.”

Polla looked down at her, frowned, and sat down again. “I'll see if I can pull out more sticks… but I really don't want to smash their little heads in.”

“Please,” Revan repeated, trying not to be humiliated by how much it sounded like she was begging.

Polla’s arm had vanished in the gap in the wall again “Don’t you have enough? I can't reach any more.”

“Use one of the sticks.” Revan’s metal hand clicked clumsily as she handed one to the Deralian. The connectors had been damaged before and her efforts to use it as a tool to open the wall hadn't helped. “The wood is quite brittle. Break the limbs down with the stick and then sweep them out.”

“There has to be a better way to do this,” Polla muttered—but she took the proffered stick.

Revan returned her attention to the task at hand.

The ysalamiri on the ground before her was furred and scaled and big-eyed. Revan had never really noticed how big-eyed they were before, but this ysa had all four of its black eyes blinking up at her above a long snout, its orange tail grown into the broken branch she'd pulled out of the wall. Looking at it made Revan feel a bit dizzy from the imbalance of the null field that it generated—a sensation sickeningly magnified by the fact that all of its fellows close to them had been pulled out by their sticks and stacked on the fresher floor—awaiting their own turns for execution.

Not execution. They're not sentient. Slaughter. Just killing animals. The work was messy. Revan's hands were already covered in gore and she'd only killed three.

Next to her Polla Organa smiled. “See? You got this, I think. Look at how well you're doing!”
That wheedling tone of hers grated. “It really isn't difficult.” Revan nodded at the small pile of bricks they’d removed from the wall. Too small, really—she had hoped they might escape through the tunnels there—tunnels that surely existed to feed and nourish the ysalamiri and their trees; but the hold–out had barely managed a gap wide enough for an arm. “Bring a brick down upon its head,” Revan instructed the Deralian, laying one out in front of her. “They’re not sentient.”

Polla Organa sighed and crossed her legs. At least she was sitting again. “You do it.”

“They don't feel pain,” Revan lied.

The smuggler made a face. “Yeah, well, I’ve killed a few of them before. I swore off.”

She was, Revan noted, absent–mindedly scratching one from the pile between its tiny ears.

“There's not much time.” Revan slammed the brick down hard on the creature in front of her, eyes prickling strangely as she remembered one of Malachor's stories about the ysalamiri at Malachi’s house that he’d played with as pets.

It wasn't the death of the creature in front of her causing the sadness—it was the reminiscence of Malachor himself, the way his own big eyes has looked when he told the story to her on the journey to Deralia—

—and the tale’s end.

Revan hadn't expected Polla Organa to be squeamish—the Fragment was not, after all—but she hadn't expected it of herself either. The ysalamiri were animals—as mindless as the trees they had grown onto—and it has been very easy to collect the ones within reach once they'd opened the wall.

“He’ll notice,” she said. “Those guards are Force-sensitive. We have a very limited window of time—”

“How do you know they're Force-sensitive?” Polla demanded, scowling. “They can't use it here, right? And neither can you?”

“The null field is short. And I know him.” They'd been through these futile exercises in circular logic before.

“Fine.” Polla picked up a brick. Her brick slammed down—

Revan tried not to flinch as she dispatched another herself. “Not so loud!”

“It's hard to do this quietly! Are you… are you crying?” Polla made an incredulous snorting noise. “You?”

“Time,” Revan snapped. The distortion field made her feel ill. “I… being cut off from the Force can affect a Jedi strangely, I… it's not these reptiles, it's Malachor. He… kept one as a pet.” Her brick came down again. Another. Then Polla’s kill right after, an echoing thump.

“Your son.” The Deralian swallowed. “Okay. I get that.” She picked up the broken stick in front of Revan and added it to the pile of crushed things in the corner.

“Malachor told me his father’s ghost made him poison the ysalamiri in the walls of the D’Reev apartments. He had to poison his pet.” She blinked at the strange wetness on her cheeks, the nearly–forgotten salt taste on her lips.
“Your husband was an asshole.” Polla scowled. “No offense.” Her brick came down hard, too loudly again, and she reached for another, smoothly, automatically now that Revan had set her on the right path.

Revan looked down at the new victim in front of her. Its black eyes were round. Its tiny mouth opened and hissed at her. It was… adorable. And doomed.

“Sometimes,” she said.

Xxx

“My lord…?”

The malraas kit in Malak’s hands mewed plaintively, eyes still scrunched shut, tiny paws battening on air as the Dark Lord of the Sith held it by the scruff of its frail, breakable neck.

“I brought this for you.” His voder hissed as if the lines were clogged again, and the feel of him in the Force was heavy with pain.

She took the animal gingerly. It squirmed against her hand. “Do you want me to kill it, Lord Malak?” Was this a test?

“I found it shivering in an alley on Duros.” He shrugged. “Kill it if you prefer, but I thought to give you a companion. They can be trained to hunt.”

A test, it had to be a test. “You are the only companion I need, Malak.” But then, the little thing had begun to purr beneath her hands—

Xxx

“Revan?” A hand poked her ribs. “Revan?” Polla’s whisper was hard in her ear and the woman shook her again. “You okay? Kinda zoned out there.”

“Yes, I—” Revan blinked and discovered that Polls had dispatched three more ysalamiri. “I just…”

I kept it. It was on the Bright, but after Malak died, I left the ship and went to Manaan and I never even wondered what happened to the manka—

My manka. I never gave it a name, but it was Manka.

She reached to rub her eyes clean of Sheris’s Force–damned whispers, but saw the blood on her hands and picked the brick back up instead.

“Is this working?” Polla pressed. “You feel any Force–stuff yet?”

“No. The null field may be too expansive for us to destroy entirely.”

Polla gave an exasperated sigh. “Then what the frack are we doing?”

“Weakening the effect. We may be able to create a bubble that will allow me to at least get us out of the cell.”

“We may? I may have been able to shoot one of those asshole guards when they came to take us out of here! Together we might’ve gotten a jump on another one!” Polla jerked her head toward the corner of the room, where boxes of clothing had been placed by Tenebrae’s guards—along with their evening meal. They’d been told to dress for a special event—an execution of their allies, no
doubt. “No chance of that now!”

“We only have a few hours left until dawn.” Revan thought, anyway. Her sense of the world around them had vanished with the Force, but she’d been trying to count the hours based upon tapping her foot tucked beneath her knee. A part of her mind was endlessly counting—and trying to do so with the smuggler's constant distractions was quite difficult.

You lost count ages ago. Admit it. The guards could come in the next five minutes or five hours. You have no idea. You’re stumbling in the dark—

Her inner voice was smug. It could have been a ghost or a vision, but it sounded like something else.

I called her Manka even if she never had a name. My ship’s captain loved her too. He would have taken care of her. I shouldn't have forgotten. But Beya convinced me to go to Manaan and then I met Oerin—

The Lin child. Kae’s child. Kae’s creature—

He was very powerful, I could have loved him.

Mindless, stupid, cringing Sheris!

“Uh, I think that one’s dead.” Polla had produced more sticks from the wall., and gone back to work smashing them. “You okay? You know you're talking to yourself, right?”

“Of course. It's merely the lack of Force—”

“Don't cry again, it's weird seeing you cry.” Polla nudge Revan’s knee with her foot, perhaps because that seemed more appropriate as a placation than patting her on the back with a hand streaked in gore.

“I'm not.” More convincing without the sob caught in her throat.

“This is a bad situation. I want to cry too.” Polla dealt the helpless ysalamiri a blow that made the branch beneath it splinter. “But we made it this far, right?”

To the Sith Emperor's prison, yes. Revan bit back the acid retort and took a calming breath. “I know precisely what this is: Sheris’s mind is attempting to assert some autonomy. The more I push back, the more she struggles. But I will master her.”

“Oookay.” Polla muttered something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like ‘crazy bint.’ “Sure. You know, Yuthura said this Sheris bint was dead.”

“She was wrong.” Revan reached for another stick. “It is natural for there to be some bleed-through, of course; but in time, the two personalities will integrate. Normally, the subject is wiped of all previous memories—as was done to the Fragment. Since this was not done to Sheris—I find myself having… visions of her life. It is disruptive.”

“Or, you're just nuts.” The smile made it seem like a joke.

“I cannot entirely discount that possibility either.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't,” Polla muttered. “Don't discount it. Not count it. I mean, you should count it. You're talking to yourself.”
“I am aware.”

“Who was she? Would it help talking about her?”

They had been fortunate with their choice of place to break through the wall. They’d pulled more than fifty ysalamiri and their branches from it. Revan picked up the longest stick and stuck her flesh hand holding it through the breech, trying to reach more. The tip swung free, but when she dragged it along the ground, something rolled toward her. Several branches under her fingers—ones Polla had knocked down and then missed.

_There could be thousands... every meter of the wall could be full of them. This could be pointless—I could be mad. I could be Sheris, deluding herself, a poor imitation of a woman she—_

_Hysterics will not help._

They were reaching the end of their pile of squirming lizards. Revan wished she could feel the Force now but she didn’t. “Sheris Loran was a padawan from Hoth. I always suspected it was one of Kae’s schemes, that she survived Malachor. She looked like me already, but I used the Star Forge to enhance the resemblance down to the germ line.”

“How?”

“A duplicate would have been useful. And Malak had already taken her as a lover. It—”

“Right. So was she? Useful?”

“Not as I originally intended, but Sheris kept Mal sated. I—found it difficult to—Tenebrae had possessed him.”

“Okay, I get it. Sounds very healthy. Why the frack would Sheris go along with this?”

“She was obedient.”

_He was powerful. I was young. I remembered the man he was and I had always found him beautiful—he was still so beautiful, the man you never saw—_

_It made me sick to look at him. How much of that madness was his, and how much the Emperor's? Tenebrae would intrude—never during intimacy—but all other times: breakfast, debriefings, waking me from sleep—_

_I never knew that Malak was possessed. He was always there for me. I loved him._

“She loved him,” Revan muttered. “I think her judgment was questionable.”

Polla snorted. “No shit. I had this ex, Therion? Everything he did was highly questionable. Of course, he never tried to take over the galaxy… but if that’d been on the table, he might have. He was… kinda evil.”

“Malak was… he was a good man once. I always…” Revan’s voice trailed off. “Reflection is pointless. We’ve finished the ysalamiri. Wash your hands thoroughly. There’s probably still a little time before the guards wake.”

“We just escape now?” Polla stood up, leaning on the half-wall that separated the fresh area from the rest of her cell. “You have the Force back? You’re gonna zap the guards when they come?”

“I—I don’t—” Revan stood herself, running her hands beneath the water–fueled sanitizer. The
artificial nerves on her prosthetic fingers felt numb, probably permanently damaged. “The range of the null field is wide, but short.” She hoped. “I know because I’ve seen the guards use the Force in the hall in front of our cell.” She had seen one of them levitating a rock absently, like a child tossing a ball in the air and bouncing it.

She walked to the cell’s barrier. The energy field buzzed blue and the bars ran in an even line, too narrow to get more than a hand through them.

That is all I require—if this works. If it does not—

Revan closed her eyes and took a breath.

XXX
After making sure Dustil was okay, Carth made it ten meters down the hall before he came across two more guards—two half-grown kids bristling with enough weapons to show that Canderous thought they must be competent, despite their size.

“Sir,” one of them said. Voice was treble, either from age or gender. “First Husband of Lin. Did you need something?”

“Do you know where the… uh, is there a map I could download?”

“No. Sith are bad at ship design,” the taller one said. He—or she—still only came up to Carth’s chest. “They hide things. We are working on improvements….” His helmeted head swiveled, and there was a pause as Carth realized he was probably calling in the request for approval.

Blast.

“Where is General Revan?” the shorter one asked.

“Still sleeping.” Carth smothered a cough. The fever–break stuff worked wonders. He really did feel better, just a little weak on his feet.

“It's ca bunk time but General Ordo wanted to know when you woke—you or her. Or both,” the taller one said. “Are we supposed to wake her?”

“No.” Carth shook his head. Ca. Night. Explains why the ship’s half-deserted. “Revan needs her sleep. And… tell General Ordo I’ll see him later. I just need… I need a walk.”

“We put up some guidance logs in the ceta stairs,” the short kid told him. “If you go that way, you can see the starboard viewing decks too. Nice view of the engines.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Carth choked back another cough and continued on his way.

Dessa had the children escort Jana Novasun to the small officer’s mess off the interior bridge. It held tables and chairs—unlike the dar’jett holding cells. And it was private, which might put the old woman at ease.

“You may go,” she told the young warriors, for none of them were Rialis. Being well–mannered as their mothers had taught, they obeyed without question.

The blind old woman’s shoulders were frail under her hands as Dessa guided Jana Novasun into a seat and removed the helm covering her face, revealing the same features she had seen long ago in her mother’s tent—now aged beyond the years that had passed. It was, Dessa thought, as if the woman had spent a few years baking her skin next to a yellow sun without a blast visor.

“Which is your clan, child?” Jana Novasun asked as Dessa poured the Elder of Lin a glass of honey
wine. The woman’s eyes narrowed at it, but she did not drink. “I confess I have already forgotten your name.”

Seeing that, Dessa did not bother to pour a glass for herself, even in pretense. “Dessa, of Clan Rialis. My father was from Clan Kozk.”

“Kozk, the underclan of Lin.” Novasun nodded slowly. “I remember when both Kozk and Rialis came to my fire. You must have been one of the children, playing at our feet.”

“I was not that young,” Dessa smiled, wondering what else the old woman could see. “I sat behind my mother and Headwoman Catrinex, and listened for your lies.”

“Ah.” Novasun’s mouth twitched. “They were not lies. The clans had their glory.”

“From what our Mand’alar has told us, your hand set Revan on her path to victory against us.”

“In the abstract that is true.” Jana Novasun blinked. “More or less.” Something in her expression flickered, like a low flame set to burn. “Is that why you wear your swords on this day, Dessa of Clan Rialis? You would use them against an old woman?”

“Of course not!” Dessa drew her left ur’beskad and set it on the table. “You are not defenseless, Mother of Lin.” She got up slowly, letting her right hand rest on the hilt of the other blade.

“Ah.” The woman’s white-blind eyes must have been able to see something because they grasped the wooden hilt before Dessa led her to it. “Do you expect us to duel? With me blind and doddering and you hearty and whole?”

“I am ungainly with child and you are old.” Dessa pulled out the vial of truth serum from her pocket and placed it on the table. “Were we to fight, the battle would hold balance.”

“But we are not going to duel?” The woman seemed to regain some strength as her spine straightened.

“Not outside a circle. I have been ordered to ask you questions. However, if you would prefer battle instead, I can force you to take this….”

“Did Revan send you to perform my interrogation?” A slow smile crossed that lined face, as Novasun glanced at the chronometer on the wall. “A strange time for it, second shift. Most of the ship’s crew must be sleeping.”

“I have been directed to ask you questions for Revan,” Dessa countered. “Will I need to force you to give me true speech, or will you accord me the respect of my underclan, and vow for only truth between us?”

“And where is Revan?” the woman demanded, folding her hands over the wooden blade before her.

“With her First Husband,” Dessa shrugged. “It has been some time since they have seen each other, and…”

“And trust often begins with the smallest of steps.” Jana Novasun picked up the hypo and attached it to her arm with no further coercion. She did not flinch as the electro-spray needled her skin. “There. I’ve taken your truth serum. Go ahead, daughter of Rialis.”

Dessa watched. The registers blinked green as the serum released. “I expected more resistance
from you.”

“There is no more time for lies.”

Then, there was a long pause as the drug began to do its work. Dessa took her seat again opposite and set her own blade back on her lap.

The old woman’s lined face paled, and her breaths grew shallow before she spoke again. “Perhaps the reason you expected objection is because you are as dim a star of Rialis as your father was for Kozl.”

Inwardly, Dessa smiled, for Novasun’s bravado proved the serum was working. No elder woman of the clans would ever insult a younger from a different clan—not when blades were drawn.

“Why were you allied with Clan Wies?” Dessa began.

“I was not allied with them,” Novasun chuckled. “I led them, just as easily as I led all your people, years ago.”

And that is why you are in chains now? Because you led us? But Dessa merely smiled, proud at herself for not taking the old woman’s bait, and continued her interrogation.

Xxx

Breathe in, breathe out, Polla reminded herself, trying to ignore the way the air in their cell suddenly seemed stifling, and the way her skin itched from that fracking ysalamiri blood. Revan had sworn the critters’ ichor wouldn’t leave a rash, but it had.

“Anything?” she whispered, but Miz High and Mighty didn’t bother with a response. Not even a shoulder twitch to indicate she’d heard Polla.

Polla shifted on her feet. The brick she held half-behind her back seemed a half-assed weapon to confront Tenny–Bro’s guards with, but it was all she had. Was more than Miz High and Mighty had, still dressed in just her skivs.

What if their killing the ysalamiri hadn’t worked? Tenny–Bro had promised them there’d be executions today—

It’s my neck on the line, here. Not hers. He likes her. All that work I did, trying to get the fracking revolution started on this gods–damned sithspawned planet... it can’t end like this!

And then, just when Polla had practically given up, the lock clicked open. The flickering blue haze surrounding their cell shorted out.

“Thank the gods,” she whispered.

“Gods?” Revan’s red–fuzzed head turned back toward her, raising a thin eyebrow. “Thank the Force instead of your primitive deities. Beya once tried to explain the vagaries of your planet’s religious culture, but I—”


“Of course.” Revan turned back toward her, frowning. “It took some time to synchronize the Force energies, but once we destroyed enough ysa, I knew their null field would collapse—” She froze
suddenly, one hand motioning Polla back. The gesture was accompanied by a faint press of air, like a warning wasn’t enough for Polla Organa not to stay out of the fight–lines between her and the approaching footsteps—

_How many feet?_ Polla didn’t know. And then they were there before she had a chance to figure it out.

Two guardsmen, both masked. _Only two._ There had been three left, before.

“Oh ho,” chuckled one with Tenny–bro’s echoing voice. “Starfire. What have you done?”

“Restored the Force, Vitiate.” Both hands hung at Revan’s sides now, but the right one was slightly curled.

“Hah! At least in this chamber.” The other guard’s voice was deeper but it had that same metallic echo. “Planning to leave, so soon? Why escape at all, my little copy—when I have arrived to escort you to the position of honor for today’s executions?”

“I don’t require your escort,” the woman purred back, with a lot of guts for someone unarmed in their skivs.

Polla’s fingers shifted on her brick.

“Perhaps you thought I was coming to kill you?” the other guard asked. “I would have every right, purely for the destruction of my property! Do you know it took _centuries_ to breed so many ysalamiri? They’re quite particular.”

“I _do_ know.” Revan seemed perfectly relaxed, even smiling. “The Senate families on Coruscant used them too. I used to wonder if that was part of your design—or if your agents procured samples from Senate contacts? I _knew_ you had your hooks in House D’Reev.”

“Oh, my Starfire.” The guard shook his head, chuckling. “Honestly? I cannot recall.” He drew out a raised disc from his robe’s pockets and held it up. It looked like a comm–link, a small one with an inset screen. “I have something here… ah, more _recent_ to show you.”

Revan took a step back, still smiling and shook her head. “No.”

“She’s not wearing the gown I selected,” sighed the other guard. “And it was perfection incarnate —”

“Ungracious,” the other said. He raised the comm–link screen toward Revan. It was tilted at an angle so Polla couldn’t see, but the other woman froze, all the muscles in her arm tensing at once.

Then the smile on Revan’s face grew wider. “The gown is lovely, Vitiate. I just didn’t want to soil it.”

She launched forward, legs cutting out in a high kick, so fast that her movements blurred. The comm–link spun out of the guard’s hand, and there was a sickening crunch when her foot connected with his guts.

_Now, Polla!_ There was supposed to have been some signal, some warning, but Revan had moved _so fast._ So did the guards now, even the injured one, faster than anybody had a right to be moving—but all their attention was focused on the red–headed woman in her skivs and not Polla—

_Now’d be the time to cut and run,_ she thought randomly.
Instead, Polla Organa moved in closer with her brick.

Xxx

Valkorion adjusted the collar of his robes, the bodies behind this one mimicking the movements with a dozen different hands, all red-robed, and all prepared for sacrifice. The Zabrak boy named Zepth who he was possessing here tapped the comm-link at his wrist, sending the image of Malachor D'Reev he’d taken on Deralia to the guard’s comm-link in the green cells below Zepth’s feet.

The image was the holoprint of the boy, Malachor, taken the evening before on Deralia—

“Perfection, incarnate,” he echoed in this body, echoing the words of the guard below.

_Perfection_ , indeed. Now, Valkorion was—

—eating a pie on Coruscant.

—walking out onto a balcony to address his subjects on Thule.

—smiling at the copy who had managed to shatter her chains in the Green Cells. She would attack him in a moment, but he was two by now, and all she had were her clumsy fists, her weakened body, her cowering companion—

—the weak Starfire was contained, for the nonce. “I have something more… ah, recent to show you,” he chuckled, waving the comm-link. And—

“Oh! That reminds me!” Zepth’s mouth exclaimed.

And then, Valkorion was—

—reaching into his satchel and pulling out the antidote to a poison on—

_Yes, there._

—Deralia. At Bendowen and Ooka Organa’s farm.

“There,” he made Gaten’s voice say brightly, as he rubbed the sleep from the man’s old eyes and picked up the poison’s antidote. “Can’t wait any longer! Tut, tut!”

“Perhaps I should take more holopictures,” his Zabrak body murmured to its attendants back on Kaas.

_Nearly all of them were also him, so they chuckled in unison._

“When the boy wakes. Before the antidote? Or after?”

“Before,” said a Human’s mouth standing behind Zepth. The man had a tickle in the back of his throat and it itched abominably—

—in the ruin of his finest Green Cell, the copy’s green eyes narrowed, and all of her thin muscles tensed and then she sprang forward—

“Used isaflexin, am I right?”

“What?” Valkorion was rudely jolted back to Gaten’s body on Deralia. Interrupted by an utter

The voice was older, though. Not Deralian. “Put the contact poison on the masks? Noticed you made sure they all wore ‘em when you sprayed the fields.” The voice chuckled. “Nice bit of work, that one. Breaks down so fast, no evidence… very clean.”

Valkorion cursed himself for choosing a null body to come to this derelict planet. But the old scavenger Gaten had been the closest contact. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said indignantly, as he turned around to see—

—on Kaas, his first body blocked Revan’s first strike, while the other moved in to flank her. The smuggler gave a startled ‘eeep’ noise, and stumbled back toward the fresher as if that would save her. So amusing, how that little null clung to life—his first arm closed down on the copy’s arm, but she ducked under him, leg sweeping out fast enough to blur—

—he was setting up the stands, peering down at the prisoners in the cage below. Which one should be first to die? Which one?

—the pie on Coruscant was exquisite. “Another,” his Selkath’s voice told the vendor. “Please.”

—he sketched the lesson plan on the board in front of the eager young Bothans on Bothawui Five. “Did everyone do their astro–mechanics homework?” his Duros voice inquired. “We’re having a pop quiz!”

—which one of the Kaas prisoners? The youngest daughter of Blais stared back at him from a cluster of frightened peasants. Had she truly eliminated her own mother, despite the woman’s Force–controls? Remarkable tenacity. Dangerous?

—Revan’s hand lashed out with a weak pulse of Force that nearly had his guard’s body overcompensating forward, expecting more resistance. “Only two bodies?” she taunted him. “You should have brought more, Vitiate.”

**Vitiate. The name my father chose for the least of his bastard sons. She knows how I hate it.**

“Aww, don’t be like that, man. Don’t be scared.” A chuckle from Gaten’s intruder, back on Deralia. “You’re shaking! Maybe I just want in on your scam.”

“Scam?” This body had already turned to face his new opponent, was already stammering denial. “I–I don’t know what you’re talking about, young sir!”

The man in front of Gaten on Deralia was nondescript but handsome. Dark–haired and all Human, by the look. He had a leathery cast to his skin that spoke of competence and—

—a blur to the side and a pain in his belly from the force of her blow—and then something slammed into Valkorion’s head like stars. Something hard. His guard’s body fell backward and he felt the Force compress as his shields dropped and then his neck snapped—

“Die,” the copy of Revan hissed from above. Her face was contorted with rage.

Next to her, the smuggler was blinking, still holding the brick she’d hit him with. His other body staggered as the first wink faded, gasping the words—

—“holopicture,” he made the dying lips mumble. “On… comm–link. Eee’s such a fine… fine… boyo—”
—snap–hiss and a blaze of red disrupted the second guard’s attempt to deliver the message about Malachor, the one that should have stayed her hand—

—Revan! The clever manka had stolen his saber!

—his Selkath’s body put the pie down. “Not sure I have time for another,” he told Deeka Jin.

—in the dim light, the copy’s green eyes were dark and full of shadows, as the second guard died too. “Goodbye, Lord Vitiate,” she sneered. “Again.”

“What?” Valkorion repeated, but time had passed when he blinked and died half a galaxy away. Died twice—for in his shock he had never even attempted to fight. “Her copy escaped! I did not anticipate that! Still, where can she g—”

Something sharp stung his ribs. Here. On Deralia!

“The reason I don’t like isaflexin,” a male voice murmured in his ear. Arms wrapped around him, and the hum of a vibroknife jagged as it traveled up his chest, slicing through the old scavenger’s clothes. It stung. “Is that it’s fracking slow. But karkas oil?” A laugh. “You allergic? I’m not. But most sents are.”

Another hand ripped the goggles off and then Valkorion was falling forward, crumpling to the ground and trapped in this body, while Gaten’s throat closed.

Above him, the black–clad man laughed and kicked him hard in the ribs, knocking off the goggles Gaten’s body always wore, even while sleeping. “Red–Eye,” he said, almost conversationally. “Wondered about that.” A booted kick made Valkorion shriek with the involuntary pain, but the noise came out more like a gasp as all the muscles in his throat froze. “Not sure what you lot are, but we had special orders to always stay clear. Guess that don’t matter, now.”

“Whoo—” Gaten’s body managed… and then that body died too.

And now, Valkorion was—

—brushing pie crumbs off his belly on Coruscant, and striding away, back toward House Racharn, where he could at least send a message—

—returning a volley of tenistre across the court in a nearby excersium to Helena Shan—

“Good job, Cally!” she enthused.

—coughing as he viewed the stands above his execution grounds on Kaas City, the tickle in the throat abominable—

Wait. Coughing? That will not do!

—drawing his saber to finish the infected one, even as he noticed for the first time that his escort had fallen silent, all of them wide–eyed and waiting, as if something was in the air—

Zepth’s body strode through the doorway to the grand balcony, looking down at the motley prisoners—

This fourth death was a small one. Nothing, really, after the other three.

XXX
The man had been calling himself Atton lately. It wasn’t a bad name—didn’t mean anything rude in Huttese and that was always a plus. Atton was a brand of fishcakes back home, and sometimes the man now called Atton instead of Blade Three of Twelve missed fishcakes.

“Good thing you didn’t break,” he told the vial of anti-toxin as he picked it up from where it had rolled on the floor. He pocketed it, and, reconsidering, bent down to check the old dead guy’s pulse. Didn’t have one. Reconsidering again, he cut the guy’s throat. Must have already been dead, because he didn’t bleed much—only the tips of his shoes got wet.

Never hurt to be sure.

Atton checked his chronometer. Still a few more hours til dawn. His stomach rumbled. He could have breakfast. He’d been watching the Organas for a while and they kept a decent larder. No fishcakes, of course, but still.

He bent down and lifted the body of old Red-Eye up by its elbows, dragging it out to the pit he’d pre-dug.

Xxx

“Well! That was unpleasant!” Valkorion adjusted the collar of his robes, the mirrors behind him mimicking their movements with a dozen different hands, all red-robed, and all prepared for sacrifice.

“Tut, tut,” he echoed through a dozen throats. How many times had he died? A number beyond measure. Dying no longer pained him.

Betrayal, though… well, perhaps it always would.

How far would she take this? How had she arranged for a guardian on Deralia? One that he had missed? If guardian the man was and not some Senator’s lackey, about to eliminate a rival.

“I should warn House Racharn,” he murmured. A shame she had managed to inoculate so many Senators, but there were still those whose loyalty he’d managed to sway—if only he’d begun earlier, but he’d held to the treaty until Starfire broke her word—

“I gave you so many chances, Revan!” His throats all echoed with regret.

Xxx

Zaalbar had been helping Breowl carve more logs for their stockade when he heard one of the cubs on look-out patrol cheer. The Wookiees of this planet had lived generations with no wroshyr, and so their notions of construction relied heavily on caverns dug in the earth, buttressed with logs and stone. Their fortification would be no match for any Sith who came upon them, but this dwelling kept their young ones safe from the predators of the forest.

The cheer seemed a cry of victory and Zaalbar hurried to the gates, pushing past the dark-haired Human cub, Phylus Blais.

“Big Z!” Mission’s dome spun with happiness when he came into view.

“Mission!” His ghost-cub was back from her quest to free the madclaw’s prisoners—and with her came victory: along with the Human Seiran Wen were the Wookiees Sikarroee, Adrewwr, and Geelmor. They were trailed by a dozen others Zaalbar did not know—all filthy and matted from their imprisonment, and all of his kind too thin. There were more Humans and Twi’leks too—even
one whose orange hide and cheek flesh marked him as *Sith*— although the hairless one possessed slave tattoos that marked him as having none of the Sith’s mystic powers.

“Have you heard from Yuthura Ban?” Seiran Wen was upon Zaalbar like a mynock to find news of his mate. “Mission said that Polla and Revan were in something called the ‘green cells, and Yuthura was going to rescue them? Or… find out more?’”

“We have no more words,” Zaalbar shook his head. “But the Twi’lek Ban knows that Mission went to the palace today—” he paused, letting Mission translate. “*Yours* was the execution planned for tomorrow, Seiran Wen. But now you are free.”

“Yuthura may be in danger too, then,” Seiran said. But the flatness of his words and the sudden agony infecting his scent spoke of his grief—as well as his quick and unclever lie. “Someone should warn her. I’ll go.”

“Not alone,” Zaalbar groaned, touching his shoulder. You could not stop an ally from going madclaw but you could be there, after, to help them see the ruin they had made. You could help them rebuild.


“Good,” Zaalbar agreed because her powers would be useful, and her company was pleasant.

“Can you grab my sister while you’re at it?” Phylus Blais interrupted. “His Luminance summoned us both to the palace for the execution and she was dumb enough not to run.”

Zaalbar expressed surprise, as he had been under the impression that the boy did not like his fellow nest–cubs.

“Really?” Mission sounded surprised too. “Big Z and me thought you hated her. Isn’t it better if she’s dead?”

“I need Mydia,” Phylus muttered. “She’s the only one who can stand up to Inse, and besides—”

The following tale he told seemed as improbable as it was overlong and unduly complicated. Ghosts could not make children, and Mydia Blais’s abdomen was as flat as a plank of wood. How long did Humans gestate for? They were so short–lived that Zaalbar thought it could only be a few months.

“That’s… gross,” Mission said when he was done. “But yeah, I guess we need to let it be born and stuff so we can figure out if it’s evil.” Her processors made a noise like a sigh. “Fine. We were gonna rescue everyone else anyway. Guess we can save your stupid sister and her… blastocyste.”

“It would have more cells than that, Mission,” Zaalbar growled, correcting her, although he did see her point.

Xxx

The woman who had been Jana Novasun knew the Mando’ade. The woman who had been Arren Kae knew the *Aleema,* knew every span of its durasteel frame, every deck, and every coupling—at least by their schematic. She had been in this room before, too. This small galley designed for officers, off the main interior bridge.

Many times Revan had gathered her most trusted allies here, plotting their next victory amidst the mundanity of caff-bulbs and chok-cakes.
Even stripped from the Force, its guidance still led her steps. For there was no place more convenient to Kreia’s own plans that her interrogator could have chosen than this room—save perhaps the interior bridge itself. The drug clouded Kreia’s reasoning and freed her tongue, but it could not obscure her purpose. Indeed, she thought, as Dessa of Clan Rialis yawned for the third time, the drug made their remaining time pass almost pleasantly.

“Your child,” Kreia interrupted Dessa of Rialis, who was still pestering her about the numbers of Kissandrix’s wasted fleet and the locations of the Wies supply reserves. The drug the woman had given her compelled her to answer each query, no matter how inane, but this blonde fool was too stupid to ask the proper questions. “Is it the product of your women’s labs, or one conceived on sands and left to chance?”

“My husband has been a mercenary on the Rim since the Clans broke,” the Rialis woman shrugged with a careless arrogance Kreia would have admired… under different circumstances. “If he returns I will give him a boy for Rialis.”

“No.” Kreia told her, the drug making a fool of her as well, although that also did not matter.

“No?” The blonde frowned. “Do you mean you don’t know how many ships Kissandrix held in reserve? Or the location of their base? What is the location of their home base?”

“I do know—” Kreia began, but then the drug did its work all too well, as her fingers tapped on the table, slowly marking the seconds the chronometer on the wall was circling. Her voice went on, listing those useless, lost ships to a woman who would never need them—

A woman carrying a child who would never be born.


Kreia assumed she was recording their conversation, as she took no notes. That would not matter.

“Where are your reserves?” Kreia interrupted her own recitation with a dry voice, wishing she had a bulb of water. “I had heard rumors that there were Mandalorian ships near Rekkiad.”

“There were. But we have a base on Dxun,” Dessa of Rialis said, so easily it might have been a lie. Without the Force, Kreia had no way to tell. Dessa shrugged, with all of the arrogance of her station and none of the gravity. “Tell me how you raised Oerin of Lin from the dead.”

“It’s technical,” Kreia managed dryly. “I’m not sure you’ll understand….?” Nonetheless, her tired voice began again, reverting to Ancient Sith when Mando’ade failed her.

Xxx

Now, Valkorion was—

—making his excuses to Helena Shan.

—standing on a balcony to address his subjects on Thule.

—watching through narrowed eyes as the servers’ prepared the priest’s chambers on Ziost—his Oracle had been so irritable of late, always wrong, but so loud—

Drat. The boy. I must secure him! Who do I have close to Deralia—

—
“There,” he made Sydax’s voice say brightly, as he rubbed the sleep from the Human’s eyes as he stared into the dawn on Chassna. “Can’t wait any longer!”

“Wait for what?” his husband—no, her—her husband asked from across the room. Watching one of the local swoop races, now that the Biscain Hundred was done.

Valkorion froze, and blinked. “Apologies, my dear. I get so distracted when I’m…” he looked down. “Baking. Is this pie?”

His husband—the man’s name escaped him at the moment—flicked a lekku. “Hitting the Sleheyron sherry again, Sydax?”

“I don’t mean anything, my dear.” He glanced down at his hand but it was the wrong body and then Valkorion was—

—roaring a challenge to the Mother rancor on Dathomir.

—absorbing a new essence on a Ziost beach watching the dawning. The Oracle was absent, sadly. He had been so reticent and cantankerous of late, going on and on about doom even more than usual—

“Look at the sky,” one of his months murmured from the priest’s mouth on the Ziost beach, and all of Valkorion that was gathered there glanced up and saw—

—and saw

The scream seemed to echo from a thousand throats as the shock of their extinction ripped through Valkorion’s very core.

Xxx

Revan’s eyelids fluttered open, revealing the dimmed lights of the Aleema’s medbay overhead. I thought I heard something—

**Like a million screams. Lights winking out on a grid—**

“It’s nothing,” a voice murmured beside her. “Nothing you can help. Come back to sleep.”

“I—” Revan frowned because it wasn’t nothing. Somewhere, there was something, but—

“Even you need to sleep, Red.” Carth’s voice was amused, soft as if he’d just woken too, with a static buzz to it—

Revan blinked her eyes staring up at a perfectly white ceiling, now softened in the dining overnights, the reassuring hums of a ship in hyperspace, all of it so easy and familiar. Her eyes fluttered closed again. The bone–tug of exhaustion and the softness of dreams pulled her back into darkness.

“Come here,” Dream–Carth murmured, holding out his arms.

“Mmm…” Revan rolled over, although the bed seemed wider and colder than it had before. Her dream before had been pleasant and simple. Carth. A primitive wood fire in a portable hearth, the white walls of their ice–dome. Outside, perhaps, a blizzard raged, but here in the warmth of their foam–kit hut, they were both safe and secure—
“I love you, Flyboy.” Her body rolled into those muscular arms, and she buried her face in his smooth chest.

“No,” he whispered. Carth’s voice was strangely metallic and soft. “But he’s safe. No matter what you hear, Red. Malachor’s safe, but you can’t look back. She needs you—and you need her—”

“I know Korrie’s safe,” Revan agreed, feeling those arms tighten inexorably around her. “How’d you know?” Did he know where Korrie was? Had she told him that too?

Somewhere, faintly, she heard the sound of bells. That was familiar too, in this place.

“Safe,” he repeated. “No matter what you hear. For now, he’s safe. But she needs you. She’s in over her head—”


Da, her mind whispered. Da will keep him safe.

“Red.” Carth’s sigh rattled in his throat. “Listen. Please. She needs your help.”

She. No need to ask who—who she was. Or who he was. Because he’s Carth. She willed him to be Carth, even if she knew better.

“No.” In her dream, she pulled away, sat up and looked at him. “Dar’Revan doesn’t need anything because I’m going to kill her.”

Malak lay on the bed, fully dressed and armored. Again he was the man she’d faced on the Star Forge. Metal jaw, hairless head. Yellow eyes burned with corruption. “You can’t.”

“I can. I will. Go back to hell.” Dream–Revan rose and lifted her hand, slamming Dream–Malak into a convenient bulkhead.

For it was her dream, under her own control. And Malak…

Malak was nothing. As she watched, his broken body wafted away as insubstantial as an electron cloud. The sound of bells faded too.

Dream–Carth rematerialized instead, leaning on one elbow next to her. “Hey,” he said softly, a sultry grin on his face. “Freckles. Come here.”

The fire flickered back into existence on the hearth. Outside, the ice–winds blew, but here they were safe and warm.


Xxx

In Yuthura Ban’s dreams, she slew the same monsters again and again—even the ones in life that she’d never touched.

She slew Omeesh, the Hutt who had made her a stage piece before her women’s spots, hovering over her bed, rattling chains and her own broken slave collar. She slew Uthar, who had used her to further his own advance, drawing his saber once more for their final duel. She slew Jorak Uln, who cackled madly as the strength of the Bezel bond arced through his fingertips, summoning lightning to flay her alive. She slew Darth Malak, who turned and raised a fist—face shifting abruptly into
Dustil Onasi’s face as he choked and died. Davad Arkan chuckled disarmingly on Mannan as he fell to Yuthura’s blue blade, and Sheris Darkstar raised her fist as Yuthura felt all the muscles in her own throat clench tight too—

And then, Revan stood before her, masked in gray before Kressh’s tomb.

The woman raised her mask, dark energy rising behind her like cold fire. “You know who I am,” she whispered again, as she had in life. “You know what I am and still you are here—”

“Not for you.” Yuthura’s saber throw cut into the Human’s heart. The Dark Lord of the Sith collapsed like a droid with a dead motivator, dark Force imploding like a salt tide.

In the end, it was Lord Scourge who chuckled softly and looked at Yuthura with eyes that were soft and weak with his need. “I’ve grown quite fond of you, Lady Ban,” he said. The pale moons of his eyes were already rent by red capillaries, little hemorrhages, signs that her poison had already done the bulk of its work—

“Too late,” she told him. For it was.

Too late for fondness. For regrets. As it had been with Vikor Tio. Even with Uthar. With Revan—

Somewhere a bell chimed its morning alarm. “Arise,” her thoughts whispered, nudging her. For a moment, she thought the voice in her head almost sounded like Vik Tio, his voice soft, wit acerbic. “Today, you’ll bring down a Sith so powerful he might as well be a god, Yuthura.” A warm chuckle brushed her earbulb. “Better eat a good breakfast first.”

Yuthura Ban snapped back to wakefulness, sitting up with a start. “Today,” she said, to the quiet room, the giant bed, the body on the floor. “Today we’ll bring down a god.”

Lord Scourge did not answer, as he lay sprawled on the handwoven Ssyyrian carpet upon which he’d died.

His skin had turned a pinkish gray several days ago. Dried froth on his lips and the way his hands clenched spoke to the fact that his very end had not come easily. Even slow-acting poisons were quick and ugly at the end.

Yuthura smiled down at him. “Good morning, Lord Scourge.” Her bare foot found purchase on his back as she stepped over the corpse to retrieve her dressing gown.

When she completed her morning ablution and came downstairs, Zaalbar was eating at the dining table downstairs with a few of the servants loyal to her. (Those who had not been loyal had been dispatched quickly weeks ago.) Next to him, a pleasant surprise: Polla Organa’s husband Seiran, rescued from Tenebrae’s cells and armed to the teeth. And glowering.

“Tell the man there is no sign of Polla Organa or the Revan Sheris,” Zaalbar whined at her without preamble. “We only liberated one cell. He keeps asking. There are still others.”

“The Emperor will bring Sheris out for the show today,” Yuthura surmised in Basic, for Seiran’s sake. “Polla may be with her—”

“Everyone is ready,” Zaalbar added. “Today will be the day the infidel soul stealer dies.”

“Did he just say something more about Polla?” Seiran demanded. “I need my wife!”

Yuthura shrugged, deciding it was more diplomatic to demur that point. “If your wife is alive, we’ll
do our best to save her, Seiran Wen. If she is not we will avenge her death.” She leaned across the
table and selected a pastry.

“What about her Exchange contacts?” Seiran demanded. “Aren’t they in on this too? Polla said
you got some outside help. The droid refused to go back into the cells, but they might—she said
she knew some of them—”

“We have.” Yuthura arranged her face to seem comforting. In truth, they had done most of the
negotiations for supplies and weapons while Polla wore a mask and pretended to be Revan over a
bad comm–link, but now was not the time to consider what they would tell Grarwwaar and his
mercenaries who were expecting to meet the Dark Lord of the Sith at the end of this fight. “There
is a small mercenary band at a cantina near the spaceport called the Blue Skies. When we give the
signal they will provide some… assistance to us in securing the city.” She forced her voice to
sound assured. “Additional cells of slaves will rise up all over this planet, galvanizing similar
rebellions on Zioost and Thule.”

“The grid on Zioost is down already,” Zaalbar whined. “Maybe they started already.”

“In that case, we have no time to waste.” Yuthura smiled. “Today, my friends, we will take down a
Sith so powerful he might as well be a god.”

“Sith are godless,” Zaalbar grumbled in Shyriiwook. “He is nothing but bad wind.”

“Did he say anything about Polla?” Seiran demanded.

XXX

The lights in the green cells flickered overhead, illuminating the dead guards, the blasted force
fields, and the dark stretch of a hallway leading to freedom.

“I once told the Fragment you were a criminal with poor impulse control,” the Dark Lord of the
Sith said, almost begrudgingly, as Polla looked up from rummaging through the dead guard’s
pockets. “As a Jedi, I had a dim view of lawbreakers—”

Polla let the snort that had been building escape, glancing up to see the faint smile on the other
woman’s face, as if she too got the jest.

“... but I underestimated the abilities your resourcefulness could provide us,” Revan continued. Her
voice was ladylike and gracious like she was talking about a fracking tea party. She was dressed
like she was going to a tea party too, having taken one of the gowns Tenny–Bro had left for them
and pulled it on her bony frame. The dress was white and looked a lot like the one she'd fought the
rancor in. Maybe fancier.

A dress wasn’t something Polla had expected, that the former Terror of the Galaxy would care
about. Wearing one of the dead guards’ robes would have seemed more practical, but when Polla
had suggested that, Revan had acted like Polla was asking her to wear Tanaabian mud–slime.

“I underestimated the number of words it would take you to say thank you,” Polla told her now,
trying to mimic the woman’s tone. “And all I did was distract that one with a brick to the head so
you could knock him out. But you’re welcome.”

There had been only two guards for them to take out. Whether the third guard was dead from
plague, or just getting lunch—they had no way of knowing—or at least Polla had no way—and
from the way Revan was standing casually against the wall, turning one of the guard’s comm–links
over in her hand (and not actually helping Polla search them for weapons or security cards), it
didn't seem like she sensed anyone else coming.

“I don't mean just now, with the guards.” Revan’s tone had shifted back to disapproving. “I mean before—securing that blaster that allowed us to dig into the walls. I told you to *throw* the brick at the man’s head. Not get between our melee. That was a foolish risk.”

“Again,” Polla muttered, “you're welcome for the help. Hey. So, when you called me a criminal you meant it as a compliment?”

“At the time, no.” Cool, green eyes assessed her. “Now I'm not as sure.”

“Well, you're the murderer,” Polla told her cheerfully. “I'm just seeing if they're carrying anything we can use.” She had been hoping for some kind of all–access pass to Tenebrae’s, or a datapad with Seiran’s name and location on it, but all she found was a fairly crappy blaster and a pocketful of lint. “Is there another guard coming?” she added.

“No.” Revan rubbed her temples, staring down at something on that commlink's screen. “There is still some distortion from the ysalamiri field, but I think most of the palace’s remaining denizens are that way.” She pointed at a wall, which wasn't helpful. “Somewhere outside. He will know we escaped, of course,” she added as an afterthought, which was the line Polla would have led with—herself. “We need to move—it is odd that they’re not coming closer, but we will encounter resistance—”

“You sense other sents? Underground?” There had to be other cells. Sei could be in one of them.

“Not close enough to catch us.”

Polla handed Revan the other guard’s lightsaber, so she had two.

“The Emperor mentioned executions today. He is no doubt distracted with them now...” Revan grimaced. “Remember, we’re nothing more than a diversion to him—or so he will think. If we move quickly we can evade his minions.”

*We'd better. He mentioned executing me today before.* Polla thought about asking for a laser sword of her own but decided she'd be better off with the crap blaster—at least until they found a better gun.

*I wonder what happened to my sweet rifle.* Seiran had been holding onto it when she'd been dressing up like Revan Starfire. For a second she thought about asking if Revan had seen it on the ship she'd shared with Polla’s husband, but then decided she couldn't handle another incredulous sigh and eye-roll. The woman probably could have conquered the galaxy just with her exasperated ‘you’re an idiot,’ glare.

“Executions.” Polla nodded, forcing cheer into her voice. “Great. We’re going to rescue the executed, right? Now? Lead on, mi lorda,” Polla added in Ancient Sith. “Guess you know your way around.”

“Hem–tesh, mi lorda,” the woman said, correcting Polla’s pronunciation. Not for the first fracking time either. “We may not be able to save Seiran. I warned you before.” She took a deep breath, slipping the comm into her pocket. From Revan’s expression, Polla wondered if she was supposed to ask about it. “It is not always possible to save everyone.”

“We’re going to save Sei! I’ll threaten to kill you,” Polla snapped at her. “Unless Tenny–Bro sets him free.”
“Why would you think that could work?” Revan blinked at her. “I could overpower you in seconds, even in this weakened state.”

*Not if I got the drop on you.* Polla scoffed. “I don't know, my poor impulse control?”

“Do not be foolish.” The other woman turned and started walking, still more stiff on her legs than Polla liked to see. “We cannot be taken again by him. You said before you had connections—your little rebellion had procured a safe house—”

“That was Scourge's mansion and he didn't seem to be on our side!”

“You mentioned a cantina as well. The one you said you met with the Exchange criminals in—what was it called again?”

*I never told you the name, Miz Know–It–All.* But Polla answered anyway. *Blue Skies.* It's by the spaceport—and you *owe* me, sister. I just saved your life again and I need your help to get my husband back!”

“If we can find him easily, I promise I will make every effort—” Revan froze, her head turning suddenly in the opposite direction from the way they'd come. “Wait.”

“What is it?” Polla found herself matching the hushed voice, edging back against the wall.

Revan’s eyes widened and she shook her head, holding up a hand.

Polla felt a warning pressure on her throat. “Don't do that!”

“Then be quiet. I need to concentrate. This body is so weak I can barely sense—”

The walls shook. So did the ceiling. From somewhere on the other side of it came the sound of an explosion. And screams.

“What—?” Polla cast an uneasy glance up at the low ceiling. It was rattling ominously. You didn't need the Force to *sense* that wasn't good. “You could barely notice explosions and screaming? Some Jedi you are.”

“That sounds like your little rebellion.” Revan was ignoring Polla’s jibes now. “Convenient, actually. Will Ban and her cadre of desperate slaves try to liberate the prisoners on the execution grounds?”

“Yes,” Polla bit out, hoping it was true. “Because they’re not *assholes.*”

“Good,” the woman’s lips pulled into a smile that made Polla want to take a step backward. “We’ll take this little rebellion—”

“It’s not little—”

“We’ll make it a war,” Revan continued. She grabbed Polla’s arm. “Come. We need to move faster.”

“Where?” Polla dug in her heels stubbornly, slowing their pace to a crawl. “If there's fighting by the execution grounds and Seiran might be there then that's where I'm going.”

The Bitch made a sound like a laugh. “Of course. But let me lead the way.”

XXX
The table between Dessa and Jana Novasun lay empty, save for the ur-beskad she had given the old woman, and the bulb of water the old woman had asked for, which lay in front of Jana Novasun’s wrinkled fingers.

Jana had set the ur-beskad on her lap.

Dessa had pocketed the hypoapplicator, as its purpose had been more than fulfilled.

She had her own dull–edged dueling blade on her lap too, next to the recording device. Dessa now had all the ship numbers of Wies’s fleet, the location of their base, and the tantalizing knowledge that the strange fleet of machine–cursed ships had been dar’jett magic and the Emperor’s—and nothing of Wies at all.

“The fleet you call the Sleepers are still abominations,” she chided the Lin elder, feeling slightly uneasy as if she’d had her son spit in the woman’s tea. “Metal and organic? You said they were not of Wies, but you knew of them.”

“They are the Sleepers,” the old woman responded impatiently. “Revan and Vitiate’s hidden fleet. I told you this before.”

What she had said had been both fantastical and heretical. Organic minds, over a thousand years old, melded to the fabric of machines, designed for a singular purpose—

The woman launched into another one of her technical explanations. Half of it was in that hu’tuun language that Dessa only half-understood. The moments stretched like hyperspace coils, and time was marked by their breaths.

In truth, Dessa’s mind was beginning to wander.

The old woman’s fingers tapped on the table. Her civilized accent broke and slurred, becoming more akin to one from a Rim planet. From time to time, Dessa interrupted to ask her a more pertinent question and was pleased how the woman’s responses to simple questions like time and date became irrelevantly precise, as her mind attempted to round down to the nearest second.

“My next inquiry involves other alliances...” Dessa began, having exhausted the topics of Wies and those unmanned ships. “Were you working with Senator D’Reev when you rallied our clans to war against the Republic?”

“Yes,” Jana Novasun said. “And no.” A smile crossed her thin lips. “Senator D’Reev was working for me, unbeknownst to him.” Her laughter was dry as sand. “Mine was not the only hand guiding a Senator’s steps, of course.”

“You have a high opinion of yourself.” As a woman of the clans that was normal, but Novasun had been born elsewhere.

“I was trained to be effective.” Jana Novasun’s gaze fixed on a point behind Dessa’s chair.

Dessa turned around to see what had caught her attention—only to find naught but the ship’s chronometer and an otherwise empty wall.

—and I honed my own power with the wisdom of those who had come before,” Jana Novasun continued smugly.

“It is the second shift,” Dessa reminded her. “Most of my crewmates are asleep. Watching milliseconds turn on the chronometer will not make the time pass more quickly. Before the serum
wears off, I must return you to your cell.”

“Revan is asleep?” Novasun sighed again. “A strange time you’ve picked for my interrogation.” She glanced toward the ceiling. “And an odd place. The galley off of the interior bridge. You know, I’m quite familiar with this ship.” One eyebrow raised above a white eye. “Do you have any questions regarding the Aleema’s operation?”

“No.” Dessa ignored the insult. “You said D’Reev was working for you, before. How?”

“That is not what I said. The Senator knew that the Republic was stronger in wartime. He sought to manufacture a threat to serve his own ends.” Novasun’s hands folded in a steeple. “Fortuitously, I knew of a real threat. I knew that we had to prepare for a real enemy, and his efforts served that purpose.” She exhaled. “For a time.”

“For a time? Did it stop working?”

“No, but I was outmatched. Our enemy had already sunk his hooks into House D’Reev. I was slow to realize how deeply. The mother… and, of course, Revan never told me of Malak’s madness when it began. By that time she no longer trusted my counsel—”

That seems wise of her. “And who is your true enemy again?” Dessa yawned, although they had been over this point before.

White–blind eyes blinked in her direction. “The Sith Emperor. Tenebrae, as he is known now. Vitiate, he was called as a boy. Valkorion is, of course, the name he gave himself.” Thin lips pulled back, revealing perfect teeth. “A name whispered beyond the reaches of Wild Space. Some say his influence stretches even to there.”

“A Sith.” Of course. It was always a Sith. Dessa nodded. This woman—blinded and by all accounts Force–culled, stripped of her ranks and ships—was not a worthy foe. But if she knew of one…. “You mean the chakaar who tried to make us slaves under Qel–Droma? We fight him too.”

“Yes.” Novasun slowly. “You did.”

“We are going to fight him now.” Those ships—abominations if the reports were true. Some strange synthesis of sentient organic and machine. That kind of technology could not be allowed to flourish again. If her people had learned anything from the old basilisk designs it was this.

Dessa allowed herself the pleasure of accomplishment in so easily finding common ground. “Your information will be a great help. Perhaps Revan will let you eat in her tent again.”

Jana Novasun’s optical implants flickered in the whites of her eyes. “No. Some wars cannot be won in a battle of stars.”

“Then we’ll fight him on sands.” Their advantage, surely. The denizens of the Sith homeworld had never seen a Mandalorian invasion force. And even with their dar’jett magic—

“No.” Jana Novasun shook her head. A thin smile pulled at her lips. “You will not.”

Dessa folded her arms above her belly, frowning. “Why do you say that?” There had been rumors that Jana Novasun had had the gift of foresight, but Dessa’s own mother had just assumed the woman lied.

“Because it is true.” Calm voice.
“Skies, then.” They would need better maps of this world. Topographical ones. Would there be time to map it before the invasion?

Jana Novasun shook her head again. “No.”

Xxx

The stands were more than half-empty, which was not fair, Lady Mydia Blais thought, for she could remember when House Kryss was cut down to the last boy–child and they had had the slaves and commoners lined the streets cheering for them.

It was not fair that she was being executed with so little fanfare. It also wasn't fair that Phylus had run off, and that Inse had stolen Lord Malak away. Mother had been fond of telling them that life wasn’t supposed to be equitable, but that was supposed to mean that the House of Blais always won; and despite being younger than her sister, Mydia had always assumed that meant she would always be the ultimate victor.

Dying would be a massive disappointment. She hoped that Inse and Phylus had offspring soon, so she could haunt them and drive them mad.

But, appearances were important… and so Mydia flashed a smile at the floating holo-cam as her escort passed it. Ahead of them, the main viewing area of the Red Palace had been cleared of its usual potted topiaries; which were now replaced by a row of shock cages and a masked Gamorrean with a brutally large axe.

The shock cages were all full of riff-raff. Slaves, mostly Twi'leks and Wookiees, as well as several disgraced nobles. One of them, a skinny blonde girl who'd studied the Social Arts of Force Control at the Academy with Mydia and Inse and Nereal, waved her hand slightly, as Mydia passed her.

Mydia nodded back. Impending death was no reason not to be polite to the youngest Lady Zash.

At the top of a rose-covered platform, a Zabrak boy stood. Attractive and muscular. His red, glowing eyes marked him as a Voice, and the eye freshly branded on his forehead marked him as Select.

“Lady Blais,” he boomed, voice amplified by its echoes from the crowd around them. “You're the first.”

_The first to be executed? But is there still time?_ Mydia thought hopefully. But no, because now the axeman was stepping forward—

“Wait!” she cried out—for surely now was the time—if ever a time there was to save herself. “You can't execute me! I'm pregnant with Lord Malak’s baby!”

Xxx

_Pollie. She's not here._ Seiran’s heart sank as he scanned the stands, which were filled mostly with glowing, red-eyed sentients.

“Wait!” A feminine voice cried out. “You can’t execute me! I’m pregnant with Lord Malak’s baby!”

The crowd gasped, some of them clapping so much in unison that Seiran didn't have to check the color of their eyes.
“That’s my sister, all right,” Phylus muttered next to him. “I’m sort of obligated to try and rescue her and Lord Malak’s baby.”

“Dustil’s not Lord Malak,” Mission swiveled her dome to look up them. The two blue lights looked almost like eyes—the way that they blinked. (Or, it was possible that Seiran was just losing his mind.)

“The baby’s still a Blais,” Phylus insisted. “If it’s a girl, it’ll be heir to our House.” He took a step forward, backing almost out of the line of crates they’d set up camp behind. “Can we save her? Please?”

“Bantha poodoo! You're serious?” beeped Mission. “Hoped you were kidding about the kid.”

“Big Z says, ‘her plea is as good a time as any,’” Zaalbar growled and Mission translated.

“But Yuthura hasn’t—” the T3 objected, switching her voice back to the Twi’lek kid’s in a way Seiran still found disconcerting. “She’s still five minutes out with the mercenaries—”

_Damnit, Pollie! Where are you?_ “Blow the stands,” Seiran agreed, even as his heart sank. Clustered and barely hidden from so many of Tenebrae’s eyes, they'd be sitting kissra lambies, if they didn't make a move soon. “It’s time.”

The astromech beeped agreement (sullenly) and then Zaalbar switched the detonator at his belt to trigger the explosives before Seiran had a chance to say what he really thought—to point out that Polla could still be somewhere inside that blasted fortress—

To their right, the crenelated wall of the palace collapsed, taking half the stands—all lined with red–eyed, possessed sents—with it.

Amidst the smoke and confusion, Seiran’s gaze fixed on the disheveled form of his wife’s former captor, the Sith Mydia Blais. Incredibly, she was running toward them with a smile on her face, while the rest of the prisoners scattered, and the remaining Emperor’s possessed minions fell, one–by–one, taken out by their team of Wookiee snipers, already hidden on the roof overlooking the square.

XXX

“Oh!” Valkorion blinked. Time had—

Time had… _ellipsed_, as he lost too many bodies now to count. Disorienting, but not an unfamiliar sensation.

He was walking down the corridor now, one in a line of selves. Which body? He felt a lekku twitch in his own skull, glancing down to see a green–skinned hand. “My Sith’ae’rah can’t blame me for that one! I would have let dear Malachor live!” He allowed himself a dry chuckle. “At least for now.”

Ahead of him, he heard the cheers of his subjects. Wait! Were those cheers? He was—

—one in a line of hundreds, cheering in the crowd as a great, low boom made the floor beneath his feet give way.

He was—

—buried under a collapsing wall, blinded by smoke and dust, and dying a dozen times.
—drawing his saber... only to watch himself felled by a laser sight.

—standing guard at the main gate of the square—

—remarkably, the copy had killed the guards and freed herself, but surely she wouldn’t miss this—surely—this magnificent and useless gesture. Grand and sweeping.

Better, even than Ziosk—

“—water,” his cracked lips mumbled, and then Valkorion died again on that blasted beach on Ziosk, fading eyes staring up at the flotilla of wedge–shaped ships as they winked out of sight....

Had the copy of Revan done all of this? In Sheris Darkstar’s body? Had his true Starfire commanded her to commence this sad rebellion?

But... if the copy had her memories, wouldn't it have warned the true Sith'ae'rah against such lunacy?

He was—

“Hello, again, Lord Vitiate.” Just like that, she stood before him. The copy. He'd known she would come.

She was wearing the gown he’d chosen. White. His Starfire had always loved white. Did she think he never noticed her foibles? Those little tics made her mortal. Copied over to the copy, they were all the more charming for their fragility.

The Deralian smuggler trailed behind her.

He was in one of the guards at the main gate. He should have been in two but—

He glanced at Qeesh. The man was too pale. And then he coughed. At any other moment that would have ended his existence, but before her—

Only the copy, and yet! Still, unmistakably her.

The copy of Revan had lightsabers, two of them—one from each guard the two of them had ended so cleverly.

But the world, it wobbled and shook.

And Valkorion! He was—


“The Sleepers awoke,” he told the copy, blinking back shadows of his other selves. “Revan woke them. They’re bombing Ziosk right now. Didn’t you warn her?” He chuckled. “It’s out of our hands now, you and I.”

“Sleepers—” Her eyes widened and her face paled. She knew. Remarkable, this copy. It occurred to him at that moment that he’d never discovered just how the memory–transfer had been done. Was it still all with holocrons? He’d had so many holocrons destroyed on his own worlds, lest someone twist his own mind against him—

Valkorion's body smiled at the copy. “Oh, my light, you could have just taken the —”
Her lightsaber’s slash took off his head before he could tell her what to take.

XXX

Polla hung back while Revan killed the red–robed man in case the other three guards tried
something, but one of them was coughing now, and the other two had normal faces, with ordinary
eyes under their red hoods.

“Step back.” Revan sailed past them, and to Polla’s wonderment, the remaining guards did, even
the coughing one, stepping over the body of the fourth guard—the one with red, glowing eyes who
Revan had just killed.

“You’re… are you really Lady Yuthura?” one of them asked, voice almost a whisper.

“Does she look like a Twi’lek?” Polla snapped in her best Revan voice.

“Holomask,” the pureblood guard chimed in. “We were told to expect someone who seemed to be
Revan, but we were also told it would not be truly her, but Lady Ban, disguised as—” he frowned,
glancing between them. “Wait. Why are there two of you?”

“Come on now! I dyed my hair back. I don’t even look like her!” Polla paused because Revan was
giving her that glare again. She tried to match it, glaring back.

Holomask? Polla had only suggested
that as a joke to Yuthura. Had the woman actually gone ahead, somewhere out here, pretending to
be Revan?

“This is her,” Polla added. “Revan Starfire. The real thing. I’m serious.”

The real thing ignored them and pulled out that comm–link she’d taken from the dead guard. She
was staring down at its narrow screen now, her face a perfect blank.

“Revan? You calling someone?” Polla cleared her throat.

“No.” The woman tensed, shoving the comm into a pocket of her gown. “Captain Rinna, is it not?”
Revan’s eyes narrowed as she stared at the pureblood. “Along with Servile Kibo and Servile…..”
she frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t know you,” she told the coughing one, her hand back on her saber.

“Servile Qeesh,” the man said, dipping into a bow. “My lord, I was not honored with a place in his
Luminance’s guard when you were last with us—”

“You could have looked our names up,” the pureblood interrupted.

“Oh? Did you think I never noticed you, captain?” Revan’s voice tinged with impatience. “Part of
my husband’s honor guard for a year. You always stood in the back. We used to joke you did it to
make yourself look taller.” Her eyes flickered disdainfully down. “So we wouldn’t notice the heels
of your shoes. You’re a bit short for a Sith. Short and a null. You owed us your station after Mal
bought that lot of pureblood culls from the Thulian auctions—”

“W–we’re with you, Lord Revan.” Rinna changed his song fast. He was red and watted like all the
Sith purebloods were, and now those wattles twitched with urgency. “Lady Ban stationed us here
in case any of them tried to get out. We were about to end Shikkah here, before you took care of
it….” He nudged the dead guy’s severed head with one of his high–heeled shoes. “Qeesh, too, but
now—”

“Now I’m sick,” Qeesh coughed. “Please! You know I was on your side when his Luminance
wasn’t in me—Zepth vouched for me!”
“And what is Lady Ban planning?” Something like a smile tugged at Revan’s mouth. “Aside from impersonating me and disrupting this execution?”

“Today, to take the palace,” Rinna said. “Tomorrow the city. And then after that—”


“There are more of us than him. We’re killing them all. Everyone who’s been possessed by Tenebrae’s Kiss.”

“Idiots,” Revan snapped. “How can you tell if he's in them or not?”

“Y–you know how! The eyes!”

“Only if he’s in them at the time. How will you tell?” And then, just when Polla thought that maybe the woman had a heart Revan smiled coldly. “You need to be sure.” She frowned at the coughing one again, narrowing her gaze. “He culls the sick ones quickly. You are running a fever, Qeesh, but that could a deliberate ruse—”

Qeesh paled. “No. We—we test for antibodies. Test me! Anyone not vaccinated—or who hasn’t caught it yet—Rinna said he’d test me—”

“How fortunate for you.” She folded her arms. “But some sentient beings are immune to his Kiss. Zabrak. Rodians, Selk—”

“Yes,” Qeesh (who looked Human to Polla), nodded slowly. “Of course. We… we have a plan for that. It's not pleasant but sometimes sacrifice is—”

“Necessary.” But the woman was nodding slowly now. “Stay here—for now, Qeesh.” Her eyes flickered to Polla. “And you two… guard her for me. Take her to safety.”

“But Lady Yuthura told us to hold this gate—” Rinna’s stuttered objections fell on empty air.

“Hey! You can't just kill all the Zabrak!” Before Polla had a chance to object, she was staring at a swinging–open gate and another pack of heavily armed and confused–looking guards just inside it Beyond them, Revan Starfire was a white–gowned blur, charging into the open square with two red sabers blazing.

In the sudden silence, Qeesh coughed again.

_Blast._ “Uh, look…” Polla put her hands up letting the blaster dangle off her thumb. “I don’t want any trouble, but I'm gonna go after her, okay?”

“No.” The pureblood Sith guard shook his head. “You heard Lord Rev—”

Another explosion from the arena drowned out the rest of his words.

“I’m going,” Polla snapped—and went—assuming that they wouldn’t shoot her in the back.

XXX

“Wait!” Revan growled in Shyriiwook as she approached what appeared to be the main pack of rebels. Another grenade–launch took out half of a nearly deserted stand to their left, and another
volley in front of her made one of the remaining walls of Tenebrae’s palace ripple and shake. “Chaos is wasted effort! Round up his remaining bodies in the center of the square and secure the perimeter!”

“I thought you were coming with the flyers,” barked a young Wookiee, while next to him, a yellow Twi’lek nodded in agreement. “Zaalbar said we should not wait if we were to save Phylus–cub’s kin—”

“Flyers?” Revan glanced at the sky for any sign of air support—or opposition—but there was none.

“Lady Ban said we make mayhem, we make an opportunity,” growled a grizzled matriarch behind the youngling, the stippling of her fur indicating she had seen centuries on this planet. “Who are you? You smell too much like glass to be Lady Ban.”

“Revan. Obviously.” She set her chin, giving the Elder the full force of her glare. In times past, that would have sent the entire lot of them to their knees, but the Wookiee only barked a laugh, shaking her head.

“You are the sick one from the jails?” Another Wookiee pushed forward, this one heavily armed and snarling at her with a grimace if recognition. His nostrils flared and then he nodded. “Yes. We have been seeking you, Sheris Revan. Where is Polla Organa?”

“Zaalbar.” She nodded at him, recognition coming a beat later than she liked, but she had never befriended the denizens of the Shadowlands, not like the Fragment, who had probably learned all of their names in the mere week she spent on the planet. “You know me. Tell them—” she gestured. “Clear the square. This needs to be an organized purge if it is to be effective. Chaos gives the Emperor too much of an opportunity—”

“Where is Polla Organa?” The Wookiee repeated.

“Safe.” She smiled up at him to placate. “I left her with loyalists. Now, please. Anarchy is not our ally, it is his. He will sow more confusion in order to save as many of his bodies as he can.”

“Oh, yeah?” came a feminine voice behind her. The voice sounded so much like the Fragment that Revan turned, heart in her throat, but it was only the woman’s T3 astromech droid gliding up with a blue flower freshly painted on its chassis and two blasters clutched in its appendages. “Anarchy’s working pretty well so far, Coma–Lady—”

“You were in the tomb with us.” Revan frowned warily at the thing programmed with a child’s mind. “Plugged into the Kaas network—”

“Yeah. Was just trying to get a widebeam connection offworld. But Kaas tricked me. Froze me with a carbonite ray and then tried to hack into my data logs.”

*Her personality matrix had to be corrupted.* Any innocence the recording of a dead girl might have had was long since lost. And yet… Revan smiled a little at the indignation in that voice and gentled her own. “Did it succeed?” She glanced up again at the Wookiees suddenly surrounding them and repeated her command for them to round up the survivors of their attack.

Four of them growled at her… but Zaalbar growled back and the four jogged away toward the front gate, obeying hid directive.

“I’m not… sure.” The synthesized voice sounded uncertain now. Younger. It could be a ruse. “I’m not gonna do what it wants, whatever. It’s not the boss of me!”
“Your personality matrix could be corrupted without you knowing.” Revan’s hand went to her now–deactivated saber.

“Maybe I’m corrupted and maybe not.” A few lights flashed sullenly on the T3’s dome, distracting Revan from her assessment of their remaining forces’ loyalty. “I don’t feel any different, you know! Maybe Kaas works for me now.”

_Poor creature. It's the illusion of agency we value. Even this little ghost values it._

“You and I aren’t so different,” she soothed. A lie, but not an untruth. Kaas’s processors surely could have overwritten Mission Vao, had they tried… but they had not.

The question was why.

_I need to put this machine off guard. Gain its trust so I can discover the means to destroy—or control it._ “I need your assistance… Mission.”

“Oh, yeah?” Her own voice came out of the dome’s speaker—if Revan had ever been a sullen child, which she had not. “For what?”

“With… this.” All around them, bedlam reigned. “Who is giving commands here? Take me to them. Indiscriminate slaughter gives the Emperor too much opportunity.”

“Hey! We don’t discriminate! We’re shooting everyone! Yuthura Ban and Big Z have it under control.”

Behind the T3, Zaalbar growled his affirmation.

_Big Z is Zaalbar, her mind categorized. Zaalbar has the life–debt to the Fragment. If I can convince him I'm acting to save her—_

But instead of being logical, Revan bit back a laugh. “You call this control?” Behind them, she heard the screams from the dying, felt the pain of a dozen injuries. Tenebrae’s possessed rarely screamed, they would fall silently, or laughing at her—

There were too many innocents caught in this net.

“We can handle this revolution just fine without you, nerf–brain!” The T3 chirped. “But say… you wouldn’t happen to know where Polla Revan got to, would ya?”

_Polla Revan._ It didn’t take decades worth of Jedi training and scholarship to know the droid was referring to the Fragment.

“No,” Revan said. “But… perhaps I can help you find her.” She forced a smile onto her face, even as she suddenly noted Polla Organa, in flagrant denial of Revan’s orders, running across the sands of the square toward another cluster of Humans. “Your friend Polla Revan would want you to help me now,” she added, wondering how resistant that Wookiee was to compulsion, and if Sheris’s weak power would be capable of bending Zaalbar’s loyalty.

The Wookiee’s teeth pulled back from his lips as if he sensed her attention. “This is the true madclaw,” he rumbled at the T3, shaking his head. “Only a madclaw would fight rancors with blades and not traps. She smells like Polla Revan’s nightmares.”

“Only a son of the forest would fight an infidel’s war, risking his branch!” Revan shot back. “And yet, here you are, Zaalbar of the Eiweorr Branch.”
“I free my people,” he yowled.

“They’re not yours,” she purred in response. “The Wookiee of this planet have been slaves for generations. They are decadent. Subservient. Weak—”

One of them had the courage to object to the last with a snarl, but it was drowned out by Zaalbar’s roar.

“They are mine,” he barked, gesturing with a heavy claw. “My branch now. If you want to help Polla Revan, Dark Lady, you will help us now.”

“I will,” she smiled. It wasn’t a lie. “But you must listen to my wisdom in matters where it surpasses your own. This—” she gestured at the field of combat around them. “This is war. Madclaw I may be, but war is something I know.”

His brow wrinkled. “When you start to make sense I will listen. When you find Polla Revan, I will follow.”

“Poodoo, Big Z! How many times do I have to say it? We don’t want to find her!” The computer made a rude noise, almost like it had gas. Or a bad anterior radiator. “Kaas computer does, and that means finding her is bad. Whole time I was plugged into that bantha brain, Kaas kept saying it needed Revan’s brain to rebuild its network, blah, blah, blah—”

What’s this? Revan eyed the thing, whose fears at least appeared to echo her own. “You sound sincere.”

“Are you nuts? Of course I am! That sleemo Kaas would slot her into its bank and use her to fix Tenny–Bro. Then it’d boss all the other planets around, and Kashyyk was perfectly happy being an independent before. Now, I can’t even get through to Carth on the private link we set up, cause Kaas is on all the networks!” The droid rolled its dome back, sensors blinking. “Hey… I saw you trying to open that tomb—”

“You saw me fail.” Around their immediate area, the rebellion was not failing, and Revan allowed herself a sense of satisfaction, as another group of Tenebrae’s Voices were lined up against a wall and shot, about twenty meters to their right, at the edge of the square.

An empty gesture, but still.

“But why were you trying to open it?” the simulacrum of a dead girl asked. “Were you trying to help the Kaas computer?”

Would I tell you if I was? Fortunately for the T3, Revan did not want to help the Kaas mainframe, either. “No,” she said levelly. “I was trying to be…” her mind reached for a vernacular term the machine–child would understand. “A… a hydrospanner in the works of its gears.”

“Oh.” The lights on the dome beeped green as if Revan had impressed the thing. “Well… good. I kept trying to ping Canderous to tell him to warn her not to come—”

Another explosion interrupted the rest of the astromech’s tirade, and then foolish Polla Organa ran across the courtyard again, trailed by the three red–robed guards as if she was leading their charge.

The Fragment would do the same if she were here, Revan thought sourly. Although she wouldn’t die so easily as Polla Organa if her bodyguards aren’t more careful. “Is… Polla Revan’ traveling with Canderous Ordo?” she asked out loud.
“How should I know? Last thing I saw, she was racing sublight tracks in the Biscain Hundred!”
Mission paused. “Feeds are spotty now from that sector, but they're saying something went bad with its suns.”

Amidst the chaos, Revan saw a man break free from a crowd running toward Polla, and then the Deralian veered her course to intersect them. They met in an embrace… but a nearby explosion kicked up a cloud of dust and the next thing she saw was the two of them running clear from another collapsing wall.

“Suns?” Biscain had two. “What do you mean wrong? Did the Mando’ade attack Biscain?” They had the *Aleema*. They would be more than capable. “Did Clan Ordo attack the Biscain Stations with my ship?”

“Don’t be a jerk,” the Twi’lek grumbled, which was hardly definitive as a response. “News got weird after something weird happened on Katarr—and then Biscain.”

“We’ll need to speak later,” Revan told the machine and the Wookiee. An odd part of her wanted to pat the T3’s dome. “Keep yourself safe.”

“You too,” the machine warbled. “I guess. I mean, I know stuff about war too, and if you can't open the tomb you're a crappy hydrospanner.” Its dome swiveled and the voice shifted into Rakatan. “We will need something better.”

Revan took a deep breath, calling on the wisdom of the Force not to answer, and her own strength not to shiver with Sheris’s weak spine. She raised her eyes to the skies and then, in that instant, caught a glimpse of red hair in a cluster of sentients fighting in the stands above them.

Red hair and a lightsaber, flashing with a Jedi’s blue.

*Oh, no,* she thought. It was impossible. And yet—

“Fracking hell!” The word came from her lips with the graceless eloquence of Polla Organa—whose bad influence must have rubbed off on her—and then Revan launched herself in a Force–enhanced run toward the stands, abandoning the Wookiee and the droid for greater prey.

Xxx

“You did not have to be rude to the madclaw,” Big Z lectured, as if Mission still needed manners lessons. (Not that taking them from a Wookiee had helped, really, as Zaerdra always used to remind her.) “Your shielding may not be adequate to withstand a lightsaber blow at close range.”

Mission had already moved on, a remote part of her probing Kaas’s lockdown by pinging it with the lyrics of three thousand Bithan pop songs all at once. “Hey! Is that Yuthura up there?”

Zaalbar rumbled his disapproval. He did not like the holomask that made the Twi’lek look like Revan, and he did not like the Scentless One the Twi’lek was standing with, who pretended to be a Wookiee.

Xxx

The wooden weight of Dessa’s ur-beskad was a reassuring line against the warmth of the child spinning within her belly.

In contrast, the cold words of Jana Novasun were becoming a dull drone, filled with Ancient Sith terms she would need a holo–dictionary to translate later.
Dessa blinked and yawned.

“Tired?” Novasun raised one white eyebrow. “You must be very near your time.”

Yes. But that did not matter. Duty to Clan came first.

“We are going to battle your Sith now,” Dessa told the Lin Elder. “We are going to Dromund Kaas to fight this enemy of yours, this emperor now. Clan Wies as an ally would have been helpful, but you put them against us. If we share a common enemy, why would you oppose our work?”

“Because I could not—cannot—save you.” The old woman stared past her at the chronometer. “I cannot save any on this ship. But you are noble warriors. You all do your clanmothers proud. In a better world, you would meet a kinder fate.” She took a slow breath. “I am sorry.”

“Is that a threat?” Dessa would merely laugh… except the old woman’s eyes were deadly serious. “I am half your age and our blades are ur-beskad. Hollow and blunt. Even if you bested me, what could you hope—”

The pain came before her mind had a chance to recreate the steps toward it. The old woman’s right hand was now hooking hard around her neck, and Dessa’s face was slamming into table’s stone surface. A bright crack of white–red agony, and then something hard and flat cracked across the back of her skull.

But the ur-beskad blades are hollow—

A futile thought, even as the next came like a thundercrack—

Not the hilts, they are weighted with the sand from home. Stone is heavy whether ground to sand or solid, I should not have trusted a dar’jett—

Then came the black, as cruel and silent as space.

Xxx

Revan Force–leapt toward the stands, where Tenebrae’s executioners had suddenly become the hunted. She barely cleared the first row of seats, but managed to recover, rolling into the landing and looking up at—

Herself.

For a moment—but no, this woman was not as strong as the Fragment. Could not be the Fragment. Revan stared up at herself, dressed in black battle armor, surrounded by mercenaries and wielding a blazing blue lightsaber, the Force swirling around her like a maelstrom.

Tenebrae’s chosen lay dead around them by the dozens. Most looked startled, as if the Emperor and Revan had never played a game like this before. Some of the dead were achingly young, and Revan willed herself not to think of the comm–link she’d taken from the dead guard’s hands, with its simple message, the implied threat.

Greetings from Deralia. Any message for your son?

Malachor’s half-grown face had beamed back in the holomage. Less than half a year since she’d seen him, but he’d grown so much—

Vitiate can’t kill him. He needs Mal to get to me. He thinks he can control me through my son—
“Revan!” Her own mirror reflection called down to her with a Rim–accented voice, and a moment later the woman’s holomask cut out, revealing a Sith–marked lilac face, lekku bound tight her skull. “Thank the Force!”

**Ban. Yuthura Ban. The woman the smuggler claimed was helping, the one from the palanquin, she was in the tomb with us and then she—**

“Where is Lord Finiris?” Revan leveled her blade up, gaging the distance between them. “You left my tomb with Finiris, Lady Ban. Is he with you now?”

“No. Lord Scourge is dead,” the former Sith Academy Headmistress replied, smiling slightly. Her teeth were small and pointed. “I poisoned him.”

“Good,” Revan replied automatically, although the man had been a friend, once. She remembered that. She remembered that once he had chafed under the Emperor’s command as much as she had. She remembered Finiris as a man of principles—and a part of her regretted—

*He betrayed you,* a colder voice whispered. *This is not the time for sentiment.*

But then, it was Ban’s face that suddenly swam in her mind. Ban’s face as it was now, but different—lips curved in a smile in a Korriban bar, the marks of Sith corruption changed, the sound of Beya’s laughter ringing across the room—

Xxx

“Give us the name of the contact, Headmistress, and my friend will assure you have Darth Malak’s support for your little coup—”

Sheris kept her head down, well aware that the mystery of the hood concealing her features was far more effective in this place than her ignominious face.

“Lurze.” Yuthura Ban shrugged. “By all accounts, just another nameless smuggler, but if what you claim is true, and he is—”

“GenoHaradan,” Beya said. “We’re sure of it. Infiltrating so close to the Academy—” she crossed her arms. “You are fortunate we found out in time.”

Xxx

Sheris knew Ban?

That presence Revan tried to deny uncoiled in her head.

*I knew her. We shared a mutual acquaintance on Korriban, and then, on Manaan, she was kind to me. She was always kind to me when most sentients thought me mad, or merely Òerin’s cast–off—*

*You mean Malak’s cast–off.* It was neither the time nor the place for such an exchange, but a juvenile rage consumed Revan and could not be denied—

*You were Malak’s cast–off. Not I.*

Silence. Revan would not be goaded by her own mind.

Revan pulled at the Force again, leaping over two more rows of seats to stand before her pretender.

The Twi’lek was shorter than Revan. A smile flickered across that false mouth. “We hoped to find
you unharmed.” Yuthura Ban beamed, even as her mercenary team tensed at Revan’s approach.

“I found you,” she said. Revan didn’t recognize any of them. Half were helmeted; and none were the Fragment or her known allies.

“Stand down,” Yuthura’s voice snapped with command. “This is truly Revan. I told you we’d find her.”

“Alive,” growled a Wookiee armed with a sniper’s rifle. “I admit, my sources were wrong when they reported her demise.”

“And you are?” Behind them, Revan could hear—and feel the chaos of battle swirling like a maelstrom, but it was more a slaughter than a struggle. Faintly, she could feel the lights winking out when Tenebrae’s Chosen died. Possessed, they truly did not care. But the innocents… every one was a pinprick of hot pain in her chest.

“Grarwbaar,” he barked, tilting his head, and wrinkling his nose. “Lord Revan.”

There was a pause as if the Wookiee expected some reaction, but Revan’s gaze had drifted to the other side of the staging grounds, where Polla Organa gathered with her husband and a host of other sentients. Her eyes narrowed, tallying those below, and watching their movements looking for any that seemed too synchronized—

She found nothing so obvious. If Tenebrae possessed any of those left alive, his consciousness had fled them. That made sense, of course. The Emperor disliked losing.

“Polla,” Yuthura followed Revan’s gaze. “Did she escape with you? We suspected he held you together, but we could find no trace.”

“Of course. I kept her safe. We escaped the green cells together. Vitiate hates dying,” Revan changed the topic back to the tactics at hand. “He’ll retreat, but then we won’t know which bodies he can possess. In the confusion, he will rally more forces from Ziosk or Thule, and bring back the Imperial Fleet.”

“No,” Yuthura told her. “We arranged for uprisings on Ziosk and Thule too.” A smug smile twisted her face, turning her aristocratic features into something cheaper and common. “Tenebrae is a man who can be everywhere at once… but death weakens him. By assaulting him on all fronts—”

“I believe I grasp the meat of your scheme,” Revan told her, trying not to let acid etch her words, for Yuthura Ban was an ally.

I had a similar plan, once upon a time. The one I couldn’t implement. Not until I had Republic space secure.

“But your plan is foolish,” Revan said aloud. “Starting this rebellion of yours now was very foolish. With our treaty broken, Tenebrae will consider himself free to occupy sentients in Republic space. Instead of containing him to his own preserve you’re handing him the galaxy.”

The Twi’lek shrugged. “It’s done,” Yuthura snapped her saber back on her belt.

Revan didn’t bother to answer, eyes scanning the field below. The T3 was there, with the Wookiee Zaalbar, hovering near Polla and her husband. “I assume you have air support, if the Emperor’s wing commands aren’t bombing us?”

“Incoming, from central Kaas City now,” Grarwbaar nodded back, glancing down at his comm.
“Hrmm, that's odd.”

*His comm. Commlink.* The reminder of the one in the pocket of her white gown felt as heavy as a stone.

“What?” *He* was odd, Revan noticed. She should have noticed that before.

He was a Wookiee with what appeared to be a metal voder attached to his throat. His voice, even when speaking Shyriiwook was curiously bland. And now he lapsed into Standard, barking orders at his soldiers—before turning back to her.

“Something just jumped out of hyperspace,” he began.

*The Fragment*—? Revan’s head looked up, but only saw clouds and smoke from the carnage their little war had already cost. In the Force she felt nothing at all—or—

*There. Faint. Like a tremor in the Force—*

“Lots of somethings,” the Wookiee added. “The readings are—this can't be right. There's... I think they're ships, but there are so many—”

Xxx

*So many nightmares the Emperor had shared with her. The horrors of his own childhood.*

*The horrors he had done to his own children.*

“All of them failed me, Starfire,” he'd murmured from Malak’s metal throat. “All of them, save you. They had to be punished. Even the Sleepers—”

“Were the Sleepers your children too?”

Am I? It was a question she would not give him the satisfaction of asking.

Revan had her mother's eyes and her father’s chin, and although that did not preclude Radik Starfire from being one of Vitiate's possessed Jedi, it still did not mean she was his in any sense of the word—

“No.” He chuckled. “Sleepers are the lost souls of my world. The computer showed me what to do—how to cast their minds in silicate—but the infernal machine was tricksy. It never warned me I would need a fulcrum to control them—”

“A fulcrum?” But she knew. She knew because she could sense them herself now: those trapped minds, frozen and still and waiting for their spark.

He means me. I am the lever that sets them in motion. I am the control, the check on his power. I am the ignition, the key, the spark—

Vitiate nodded Malak’s head. “Yes, you.” He laughed again. Malak had never laughed, everything was deadly serious, but this monster ripped the mirth from his ruined throat. “The device never warned me they'd hate me so much for what they'd become.”

“They were Force sensitives.” Her mind found it easier to entertain the puzzle than the truth before her. “And so that hate must fuel—”

“Thereir power.” In another body he might have smiled. In this one, his eyes only glowed their
hellish red. “Yes.”

Xxx

“Too many?” Yuthura Ban was asking somewhere back in the world. “What do you mean too many? Too many what?”

Revan's eyes fixed on the square below, where Polla Organa had raised a hand to wave at them. It looked like she was motioning for them to come down. As if this was all some kind of child’s party and not—

The pieces clicked into place. “We need to leave the palace. Immediately. Go to ground. There were… are there still caves? In the forest?” She tried to make that question sound calm and perfectly reasonable, even as the Force toned a warning in a way she never remembered it doing before. Even with Sheris's dulled senses, when every echo was more like a whisper than a roar—

_I'm frightened. We need to run. So much death and pain—_

“There are caves,” the former Headmistress of Korriban replied. “Yes. A few entrances close to here.”

Revan willed Sheris’s weak bleats not to infuse her voice. “Anyone you want to live needs to go to ground now. The Emperor's true Fleet has come to his defense. The Sleepers are much more than ships. They possess sentient cunning and the coordination of a Killick hive. They will swarm like cells defending against an infection, and they will burn everything in their path. This planet is about to be blasted back into the Age of Dirt thanks to your carelessness—and there's nothing we can do to stop them.”

“We will demand that the Emperor stop it—” Yuthura began.

“Tenebrae can't stop them. ”

_I could, once. He told me I could. He told me they were mine, and I felt them, dormant in their sleeping matrix, high above the skies of that barbarous world. Kin to my Star–Forged ships, but still, something else entirely._

_Something ancient that should have stayed buried—_

But Revan could not sense the ships at all now, only this increasing sense of dread. “There is no time,” she snapped, even as the sound of faint explosions lit the darkening sky a few kilometers away. “Go!”

Yuthura was already barking commands into her comm as their party began to move.

Below Revan watched the pale oval of Polla Organa’s face turn up toward them as she received the message, and then turn back toward her husband. Even at this distance the smuggler’s incredulousness was clear in her stance—no doubt she was complaining to Seiran Wen about a circumstance she herself had brought to bear—

Revan cleared her throat, willing her voice to stay even, and not crack with Sheris’s weak fear. “Yuthura. Every population center on this planet needs to be emptied. Sentients must scatter. Stop slaughtering Tenebrae’s chosen. Contain them. Bring them—we will need… at least one or two with every cell.” Her eyes scanned the band of mercenaries before them, but saw no tell–tale red glint. “He told me long ago that the Sleepers cannot be stopped, cannot be reasoned with, cannot be countered. But… nine hundred years past, _some_ sentients survived the burning of Medriaas. I've
seen the holo-record. They survived underground.” Revan took a breath. Was it her imagination or was the air already smoke-tinged with more than just the debris of cordite and permacrete their own forces had used? “We need to follow their example. Now.”

Xxx

It took Carth longer than he’d hoped to find the brig, having decided (given his motives) that it was better not to ask again for directions. A stop at an unlocked armory supplied a set of workable sparring armor. Whatever that medix had given him seemed to have stopped the flu in his tracks too. He almost felt… good.

_Capable._

The embroidered belt was the wrong shape for his blasters, but Carth thanked that spirit of Mandalorian ingenuity that made such a thing unremarkable. He found some magna-clips to fit them better and set out again with the vague idea that the brig should be on one of the lower decks, past the hangar bays and near the maintenance tunnels.

He was wrong, but the other thing he had been looking for, Carth found in the stairwell of Ceta Deck: a datapad welded to the wall, with the sigil for map drawn above it. Maybe when this had been an Imperial ship, directions had been a closely-guarded secret, but now that it was in Mandalorian hands, they’d left schematics for the crews assigned to maintenance. Ship was so damned big you needed maps to get around. Carth had served on dreadnaughts before, but the _Aleema_ had to be at least five times the size of _Great Hunt_, or the _Corulag Scar._

There were several places marked as retaining cells, but only one with the added sigil of a star, which Carth figured had the best chance of being right. He grimaced, noting its location. As with the _Leviathan_, the cells reserved for high level prisoners were on the upper level—in this case, right off of the runes drawn to indicate the ship’s interior bridge.

_Back the way I came—_

Retracing his steps, it hit him again like a ton of permacrete: here he was on Darth Revan’s old flagship with a pack of Mandalorians and his wife. His wife… _Revan_. She’d seemed upset when he called the… the other one Revan too, but Carth didn’t know else to call _her._

_This is her ship_, he thought. _Not yours, Freckles. You share a name, nothing more. Not you. Not the woman I married_—

He had to make sure of that.

Carth was coughing when he reached the elevator banks. Coughing and feeling a little lightheaded. He was still sick or stimmed enough that he must have stared at them for a solid ten minutes before deciding to take the stairs to the cells.

The door slid open. A pack of kids not any older than Dustil looked up at him from where they were gathered around the floor of a cramped, curved room, playing chess.

The cells lining the bulkhead wall were all empty, their fields deactivated.

_Oh, no. Maybe that didn’t mean anything at all. Hell, it could have been anything._

“General… Onasi?” One of the kids stood up. “Do we call you Admiral?”

“First Husband,” one of the chess players corrected. Her hair was in braids and her gaze direct and
open, maybe even friendly. “Did General Ordo send you to hear our report?”

“Uh… no. Where’s uh—” Revan’s story of the woman had included so many names Carth wasn't sure what to call her. “Sunrider? Kae? Novasun? Is she here?”

“Dessa is interrogating her for Revan,” one of them said brightly. “In the quarters off the interior bridge.”

Dessa? The name wasn't familiar. “Does Revan know that? I don’t think Revan knows that. Is Dessa alone with her?”

“Dessa’s father was a vassal of Clan Lin,” the boy told Carth as if that explained things. “It's good to see you again, First Husband Carth Onasi of Lin.”

I'm of Lin now too? Was that better than being an Imperial admiral? Or a Mandalorian general?

“Where did Dessa take her?” he asked shortly, instead of continuing to argue.

“Down the corridor until it curves at the prow,” the girl said. She moved a black chess piece against a white with a click. “Did Revan send you?”

“Yes,” Carth muttered, lying, and turned and left.

Apparently being Carth of Lin worked wonders for his authority, because only the first kid followed him, and he looked more concerned than suspicious.

“Do you need help?” the kid asked politely. “You're sweating. We were told you had some kind of illness.”

Carth waited for him to catch up. “Not sure.” He didn't see a way of shaking this guard. “Maybe. Uh… just follow my lead. Where… uh, where did you say they'd gone again?”

The kid blinked at him. “This door.” He knocked on it. No one answered.

Carth didn't waste more time. He tried to punch the controls, but they'd been locked. Before the kid could call for help, he pried the plate off from the side—

“What are you doing?”

—ignoring the kid’s questions and his own ragged heartbeat. Then he jabbed the two connectors together. The frame flashed green and the door opened.

The room inside was small: just a galley kitchen and a basic fridger and cooker, a small round table, two chairs, both upturned.

A woman with the bloody face lay unconscious—or dead—on the floor.

Carth froze.

The kid next to him made a soft noise, very soft, already trained to realize that whoever did this had to be close.

Exits, Onasi. Whoever did this didn't come back the way you came—so they're ahead.

Ahead was another door, carelessly half-open, whether from haste or because of a trap
A broken sword made of what looked like wood lay next to the Mandalorian woman, the unfortunate Dessa. Her hair was blonde where it wasn't matted dark with blood. Her eyes were closed.

One hand had fallen over her belly. She was pregnant. Close to her time. Or had been. She was alive or she was dead. Her stomach moved slightly.

Oh, no.

Still keeping his eyes on the door, Carth knelt down next to her and felt for a pulse. It hummed, slow and steady beneath his hand. Strong.

Stable, then—at least for now—

Carth glanced at the kid, motioning him forward with a series of hand gestures he hoped meant help her, stay quiet, and get help.

The kid nodded and pulled a kolto pack out from his belt.

Carth left them, moving as quietly as he could toward the half-open door in front of him. There were voices within. One cracked and familiar, another tinged with static.

Behind him he heard the click of the kid’s own comm–unit, and his voice, low and fast, requesting a medic.

Interior bridge, the kid had said. Carth had heard of other flagships having them—usually more like rudimentary panic rooms, designed to stash your officers in case of boarders, or hull breeches on the external decks, but the Aleema wasn't like other ships.

Carth could think of several things someone like Arren Kae or Vima Sunrider or whatever her name was could do with access to bridge commands.

Access that she'd killed—or tried to kill—to get.

None of those things were good.

XXX

“Did you give Carth Onasi the holster you embroidered?”

“Yes.” Canderous stretched, rising to his feet. His knees popped again—a good reminder he'd been younger back when they'd fought the last war.

“And he accepted?” Aemelie smiled smugly.

“He doesn't understand the meaning.”

“Did you explain it?”

“He's Telosian.”

“So?”

Canderous sighed. “So, they don’t have tents that are large enough for…” he made a gesture,
reminding himself he was too old a man for the heat coloring his cheeks. “Company.”

“Jin of Lin doesn't seem to have any limitations about his—”

“That kid isn't Telosian. He's from Coruscant. They do it for credits there.”

“I know.” Aemelie sounded scandalized. “I told you, we saw his parents at their brothel—”

The console pinged and Canderous glanced at the incoming transmission, all thoughts of Aemelie’s personal arrangements vanishing like yesterday's fight.

*Hells.* “That’s Malachor D'Reev,” he said out loud, frowning as he squinted to make sure. Blurred image, yeah. And the kid had grown a lot. Shaved his head almost, but that was what clinched it. Without that mop of red curls, you could see the shape of man he’d be one day—and that man looked a hell of a lot like Malak D'Reev.

The couple he stood between were smiling too, both of them with Deralian top-knots, longer than the stub of one the kid wore.

Words scrolled across the screen.

_Such a strapping, helpful son! I’m sure he misses you. Would you like to see him again, Revan? The weather on Deralia this time of year is so delightful!_

“Osik,” Canderous swore. “Is the wideband feed linked into the med-bay?”

“No.” Aemelie frowned. “Who sent the message? Do you think it’s a threat?”

The wideband cut out abruptly and then pinged again, this time coming from Core space. The image of a Selkath appeared on their screen, blurred with the scrambler.

_“Revan?” It demanded. Her? Canderous had always had a hard time telling with the Selks. “Revan! Do you know what your little pawns have been playing? Should I be amused?”_ The voice darkened and the image resolved, clear enough now to see that the eyes of the Selk were glowing, even through the holo-image’s blue haze. _“Revan! Answer me! ANSWER ME—”_

“I’d better go wake them up,” Canderous muttered, reaching for his robe. “Don’t talk to that thing while I’m gone.”

“But he wants an answer.” Aemelie frowned. “If the dar’jett hu’tuun thinks he can threaten a son of Lin and Ordo—”

“It’s Revan’s business,” he reminded her. “Not yours.” Canderous paused at the door, glancing back. Aemelie was still half-naked, her hair like a dark cloud, half-hiding her eyes. “Let her handle it. Less the Sith Emp knows of our command chains the better.”

“As you wish,” she began, too sweetly—

It was then that the distress beacon flashed above their heads. Twice.

_“General?”_ a boy’s voice cracked. _“We need a medical team off the main interior bridge—it’s Dessa—”_

Aemelie’s gasp of breath came too fast, like whatever was wrong she already knew. Canderous’s
mind made the connections. *Dessa. Interior bridge. The Jett’ai cells. That old woman—*

Haar’chak.

There was an old Clan saying. ‘Rain is rare on Ordo, but you can drown in sand all the same.’ Or as Gwen used to say; ‘Never just one grenade going off—always a dozen.’

“Oh our way,” Canderous grunted, grabbing Aemelie’s arm.

XXX

Outside, another storm was brewing on the Telosian pole.

The wide–band comm had chimed while they were reviewing purloined Republic chronicles about a battle between unknown factions, (unknown to Republic forces—not to them), somewhere out on the Outer Rim.

The woman who called herself Traya looked up from Admiral Rew Ekkumi’s half-hysterical recordings of an unknown hyperspace route, captured Mandalorians, and strange ships—and raised an eyebrow at the buzzing comm–link.

It flashed yellow in a pattern known only by one mind. One mind: now shared, at least in part, by three sentients.

Two of them were in this room.

“She deigns to check in.” Traya tried to keep the sardonic tone from her voice; although, of course, it made no difference.

“At last,” Padawan Mical Jorde nodded slowly and went to the console. Because of the storm’s atmospheric interference their signal was filled with static, but the face looking back at them was unmistakable.

*When did I become so old?* Traya mused, but more pressing questions pertained to what her former self had discovered. The cam was focused so close upon those wizened features as to hide all background views. Someone had fastened a Force band at her temples and three more were locked around the old woman’s neck. “Where are you?”

*“The Aleema, of course.”* The old face smiled back at her. *“Its interior bridge still responds to my voice commands.”*

“Oh? How fortuitous that I—that we compelled that technician to include your voiceprint in the security commands.” Traya frowned because knowing the woman as she knew herself, Traya suspected she knew her next course of action as well. “Have you wended your way into the amnesiac’s heart, or is she already dead?”

*“Neither. But this Revan is as recalcitrant and stubborn as the smuggler we met on Dantooine. And much more dangerous. We have only a little time, old friend,”* Kreia’s stooped figure glanced behind her and then back to the holocam, her face half-lit with a radioactive glow.

Abruptly, what must have been a hovering holocamera panned back. Darth Kreia had prised the maintenance doors open along the room’s curved wall and was now withdrawing the core array’s coolant rods, one–by–one. *“We are quite fortunate that the Mando’ade never rerouted the main arrays out of this room.”*
“Old friend?” The term was inadequate. “If we were merely friends I could attempt to change your mind.”

“Do you wish to? Truly?” The woman let out an uncharacteristic sound, something like a laugh. Her eyes were unfocused, and her lips moved as if she was half-speaking to herself. Her hand fumbled at one of the collars at her neck and she tugged at it. “Far too late for that. Far too late, indeed.”

“Mother…” Mical cleared his throat and Traya considered the word might seem more convincing as sentiment if the boy didn’t look like he smelled something bad. “Are you…. you appear impaired.”

“The Force restraints?” Even as Traya wondered, the old woman shook her head.

“No. I was interrogated by a doomed child who was even more of a fool than the one who sent her. The one who sought to contain a woman deaf to the Force with neural bands.” Kreia grimaced as she reached for another rod, hands shaking a little as she set it down. “Dessa of Rialis injected me with what I believe to be the same hypnotic that I used on Ulic Qel–Droma when the Council refused to trust—” her voice cut out. “Oh! That can’t be right!”

“That was Nomi,” Traya sighed. “Nomi Sunrider’s memory.” Her own memory of the event was shrouded in shadows, overlain with subjects more pertinent that she had found in the Archive holocrons. Ancient history. The origins of the Force. Lost civilizations—

“You could reprogram the navigation charts, instead, Mother. Reroute the ship back to Republic space,” Mical suggested.

Traya frowned at him. His eyes met hers and for once, she could not read them. “Our old apprentice understood restraint—” she began, positioning her own argument, even as she saw the futility. Half the rods stacked on the floor in front of Kreia had their pale green shading to red as the gases within began to overheat. “Revan understood restraint. Did you try speaking to her? Reasoning with her?”

“She is not my old padawan. She understands nothing.” The voice was flat. “The Onderonite poisoned her mind against me. She cared more for her null husband and his fallen son than any knowledge from that tomb, any wisdom I could offer. And, she is weak. Even knowing what I had done, she let me live.” Kreia straightened with a grunt, looking up at the cam again. “Are you aware she also lured Darth Nihilus into a sun?”

Mical nodded. “Yes. The Biscain System is now under a mandatory evacuation order.”

Such a waste, Traya thought. Revan Starfire’s power. That ship. Even you, old woman, with all of our wisdom. All to be ash. “Did you not sense Davad’s passing?” she asked, with a lightness in her tone that she had not felt in years.

“Blindness can serve as a respite from pain,” Kreia mumbled, hand now trembling as she set another rod on the ground. “I sensed nothing.”

“Knight Arkan went quickly, we think,” Mical interjected.

“I do not care how fast he died or if he suffered,” Kreia snapped. “He was a weapon primed. If we did nothing, he would have finished Vitiate and all his works.”
“My apologies, Mother.” Her son shot Traya another glance. Even if Mical contained only a part of her mind, Traya thought that it was enough for him to understand her, to know that the two of them were allied in purpose.

For Traya understood his doubts all too well. The part of her that had been Atris had shared… had shared those doubts. She remembered… once. Sharing them. But now, she and her son had seen true horror. Had walked through Vima Sunrider’s memories of Nathema’s blasted sands. Had seen the deaths at the Cron Cluster, as well as Malachor.

Now, Traya raised an eyebrow at her son and he frowned, shaking his head. She knew without asking that his attempts to pinmark the Aleema’s signal had failed. The ship was still in hyperspace, unreachable by comm. Even if they wanted to send a warning, it was impossible.

Traya cleared her throat. “Then, the Aleema’s fatal flaw is intact. Even after all this time.”

The wizened head bobbed up and down. “To the unnamed slave race who built it, running the main power arrays next to the hyperspace generator may have seemed more insurance than a flaw. Very few points of action can be centrally controlled, but core meltdown is one of them.”

It was strange, the woman who had been Atris thought, to see the face you remembered from birth displayed on a holoscreen, staring back at you, declaring an end that you knew was a waste. And yet—

There was peace in recognizing the inevitable. “I know this as well as you do,” Traya told the old woman.

“My son may not.” The blind eyes turned. There was spittle at the corners of her lips. “I regret they took my visor, because I would like to see your face again, Mical. Your image is distorted without. And your sisters—”

Their son’s voice was flat. “My twin Brianna fled in the company of a known Blade. Since he was not working for us, we suspect—”

“Perhaps Darth Sion may yet have a part to play,” Kreia interrupted, finishing the thought for all of them.

_He may, but you will never know, Mother. Sister. Self._

Mical frowned stubbornly. “It would be useful to have an agent on Dromund Kaas. Perhaps you could travel there and arrange an accident for Revan on Kaas, instead, Mother?”

Atris, the Master of the Archives, had been a practical enough Jedi to note that a pyrrhic victory would only delay their enemy’s victory—not win their war. Traya thought perhaps the amnesiac could still be countered, if Darth Sion could be leashed again, or if any of her other children manifested the right gifts… When Atris had only been Surik’s master, she had been so sure the girl had possessed potential at least equal to Revan’s own—

Kreia’s words interrupted Traya’s musings. “I saw her open the Medriaas tomb. The holocron of Vitiate responded to her… and where one opens, so will another. No,” Kreia shook her head. “This Revan has all of our old apprentice’s passion… with none of her sense.”

“But the rumors of plague on Kaas—Vitiate may be distracted. He may not send her to the tomb right away.” Although Traya agreed with her old self’s assessment of Revan’s character, she
thought there was still hope for change. Or control. The same qualities her other self saw as a weakness could, Traya thought, be used to their advantage.

“The Sith Emperor’s holdings are in near–ruin due to the Rakatan plague. My intelligence reports claim rebels on Kaas are currently destabilizing all planetary trade. Ziost and Thule also stand on the brink of chaos.” Kreia’s lined face smiled grimly. “Vitiate will be desperate and Revan will be there. He will use her. Our only recourse is to ensure that she never reaches Kaas. She cannot be used dead.”

“But Vitiate will just find another refuge—as he did after he made Medriaas into Nathema. Your method will not lead to victory. Merely delay.”

There were now eleven rods on the ground. It the control arrays were disabled when the hyperdrive engines shifted frequencies—

Their time to sway Darth Kreia had already passed.

Darth Kreia turned back to her task, taking another, even as her task had already been completed. ” Perhaps. But it may take Valkorion a thousand years to reassemble his empire, and in that millennia, the galaxy will have its peace.”

“What of Sheris? Are you sure she is dead?”

Kreia looked up from the array, now holding a rod in two shaking heads. “I am sure of nothing. But I will not risk Revan coming to that planet on a half-planned hope.”

More than half-planned. Traya had seen the footage from the Sith planets, heard their whispers of a rebellion. “The Sith sects in Republic space whisper of a Revan returned. We know it is not this Revan. It could be Sheris.”

“It could be anyone. There are always rumors. Ever since her first death.” Kreia’s hands pulled out another rod, setting it on the ground stiffly. “As we designed. If the shadow survives, she will be our final distraction. But our old padawan must not—”

“Revan must not reach Dromund Kaas.” Traya nodded slowly. She wondered if she would be less reluctant if it was her own life being sacrificed—or if something about watching the other woman’s choice merely brought her own guilt to the foreground.

Traya remembered the banks of alarms that should have sounded when Kreia began dismantling the ship’s secondary hyperdrive control, and her eyes went to the walls, where those lines had been blasted open and raggedly cut. They did much to explain Kreia’s pallor, her trembling hands. Not just fear. Exhaustion, too. And the drugs she was given. “Then I suppose this is farewell.”

The woman who still remained in her old body looked up scowling. “If Davad Arkan metastasized into too strong a piece for the board, this Revan is no better.” She paused, pursing her lips almost smugly. “Something you do not know: Vitiate’s dormant fleet awoke in her presence. I saw a fraction of them myself—coming to Revan’s aid above the skies of Nathema.”

“The Sleepers?” Traya froze.

“Drawn to her. Another risk.” Kreia sighed. “But even strong as she is in the Force, Revan
cannot survive a core reactor meltdown. In a few more minutes the Aleema will be lost with all han—"

A flash of light from the side illuminated half of Kreia’s body, before sparking through the other side of her skull. The holocam transmitting the image to them jerked and bobbed, emitting a startled beep before stabilizing to show the woman who had been born as Vima Sunrider collapsed like a cheap puppet on the durasteel-plated floor.

“Down you go,” muttered a hoarse male voice in Basic, and Captain Carth Onasi stumbled into the holocamera’s view, toeing the body of the dead woman before turning his attention to the rods. He picked up the first with a mechanic’s hand and gingerly reslotted it into its case with a mechanic’s efficiency, barely glancing in their direction, although the flicker in his eyes and the grim set of his jaw indicated he had noticed the audience.

The flashing red lights that had begun to appear on the commander’s console faded as he slotted the tenth rod in, and he let out a ragged breath. Only when the man had completely stabilized the ship did he look up at her. “Who the hell are you?”

“Master Atris, of the Jedi Council.” For it was no lie. “And you are Carth Onasi. We have met—”

“What was she doing?” he demanded. “My wife and the Emperor? Davad Arkan? Sleepers? What the hell was she talking about?”

Kreia’s plan had failed. Traya tried to think of the best way to appeal to Carth Onasi’s sense of nobility. This was the man who had saved Revan Starfire before, (perhaps better if he had not), but he was a hero. Ideas on how to appeal to his desire for the common good warred with common sense. For Kreia had let slip that the man’s son was still doomed.

He will not destroy this vessel. Kreia gambled… but she lost. I must find the new path.

Traya composed her features into a reflection of serenity. “Master Sunrider was driven to madness, but some of her words were true. Revan must not go to Dromund Kaas. Not now. Not without my help.”

“A little late for that,” he muttered. “Don’t you think?”

“You have a ship that can go anywhere in the galaxy. Taking it anywhere in the galaxy would be preferable than going to Kaas.”

The captain’s eyes narrowed. “Might come as a shock, Master Atris, but I don’t trust you.”

“You have been given few reasons to trust anyone—” she paused, while the futures nested and folded in her mind—now projected by the thoughts of Jedi who had come before, as well as her own. Kreia had mentioned the fallen son—

Mical cleared his throat, raising an eyebrow. His index finger plucked his own shirt. Even then, his answer was so logically simplistic that it took Traya a moment to fully understand how closely his thoughts had dovetailed her own.

“You do not need to trust me,” Traya told Revan Starfire’s husband. “Or Padawan Jorde. But we can help your son. I have helped others back from the Dark before.”

“No.” Carth shook his head.
“Allow me to speak to Revan, at least,” she urged. Now, thanks to Kreia, she knew what not to say to the woman. “Please.”

“She’s asleep”—His head turned toward the door, and he wiped his forehead with his sleeve, frowning at the open array banks. “That crazy old scow almost killed us all!”

“She disabled the alarms,” Traya murmured. “And we had no way of warning you. Padawan Jorde and I were helpless to do anything but watch.”

“She held us hostage to her atrocity,” Mical added, which seemed overly–dramatic, Traya thought.

Carth Onasi squinted at them both. “I walked in while you two were saying good–bye. Sounded like you were all old chums.” A muscle twitched in his cheek. “Seems to me if you didn’t want Revan on Kaas, and these Sleepers didn’t want her on Kaas, and that dead schutta didn’t want her on Kaas, then Kaas is where she’s going.”

“Dessa’s okay,” a gruff voice interrupted him, and the holocam swiveled again, rising up for a wider view. “Kid commed it in and got her to the medix team in time.” General Canderous of Ordo stood in the doorway, arms crossed. A scowl crossed his face as he focused on Traya and Mical. “Jedi’re pacifists, huh? Going by that open array bank, someone tried to blow up my ship. You lot calling to apologize?”

“I will speak only to Revan—” Traya began “You must impress upon her the urgency—”

“They with that Emperor of the Sith that’s jamming up our main comms?” Canderous Ordo asked Carth Onasi.

“I don’t think so… I don’t know.” Carth scowled. “Maybe they are. Soul-sucking scum likes to play games. Where is—”


“Please,” Traya repeated. “I must speak to Revan—”

“Then you’ll have to wait,” Carth snapped, and severed the communications feed.

The dull hiss of static replaced their earlier audience.

“Captain Onasi was remarkably undiplomatic for a Republic officer—” Mical began.

“It scarcely matters. Revan controls the ship’s destination and it is she we must convince.” Atris sighed, reaching for a bulb of water. “She will comm us back. Quite soon, I expect.”

“What will you convince Revan to do?” Mical asked.

Traya was disappointed that he did not already know. Kreia had not trusted Revan, but Traya remembered the padawan she had helped to train once. So many padawans—so many children—all throughout the years, but Revan had shone among them, the brightest of all. Brighter even than the one Atris had held closest to her heart: Traya’s own daughter: the lost one, Meetra Surik.

Some of that spark in Revan remained.

Kreia had been blinded by the frailty of her own body, the paucity of her own experience. The dead
woman had merely taken her own mother’s memories… but Traya now had the wisdom of centuries—all the collected holocrons from Master Atris’s archive at her disposal—and those lives had revealed certain universal truths, common to all sentient existence.

Given opportunity, most sentients tried to do what they perceived as good. Even among the Sith that lesson rang true, even if a Sith's views of good based themselves on the winning side of a zero sum equation.

*My padawan, the Revan of old, would understand what Mical fails to grasp. Without Revan’s power, Vitiate is nothing. Even his fabled Sleepers will destroy no more than a dozen worlds before they exhaust themselves.*

*The Jedi Order has been effectively culled. Do the same for the Sith and the galaxy has a chance for its own fate—perhaps even a millennia of true peace—*

“Master Traya?” Mical interrupted again. “Convince Revan to what?”

“To spare the innocents aboard that ship, of course,” she said kindly, as if any Mando’ade had ever been innocent. “When she makes her own end.”

XXX

*“Have a care, Millifar of Ordo. You are a Republic prisoner.”* The woman at the head of the crowd of Republic hu’nuu (all displayed on the viewscreen) had a High Admiral’s bars on her coat. Milli’s father had made her learn their names and insignia back on Coruscant, when they were still pretending to work for Malachi D’Reev. There was only one High Admiral, which made her identity obvious. The others surrounding her on the viewer were less known: one was a Chiss, another a graying man about her buir’s own age. “You need to answer our questions, or put us in touch with someone who will.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong.” Millifar crossed her new arm with the flesh one, glaring at the blue–edged hologram in front of her. High Admiral Rensha was Trandoshan, and the scowl on her face might be her normal expression, but there was no mistaking the scorn in her sibilant voice. Millifar’s eyes went back to her comm–link still blinking on the console in front of Rew Ekkumi, the woman whose command had captured her in honorable battle. “And I am Admiral Ekkumi’s prisoner, not yours.”

*“Don’t you want to be returned to your family?”*

“They will want me to return to them,” she admitted, staring at the comm. She’d locked it to her own pass–phrase just as the troch barbarians broke her ship’s hatch open.

“Answer our questions and we may return you to them,” Rew Ekkumi muttered, leaning closer than Millifar liked. She could smell the woman’s lunch on her breath.

“I’ve answered enough.” Millifar glared at her. The time they'd spent playing guards for D’Reev had taught her a great deal about Republic barbarians—namely that she didn't have to do what they wanted. They believed in their rules of laws. It was not like it would be with Sith. These moffasaps didn't even like to use torture. They'd even let her keep her own boots!

She would escape quite soon.

“We know Revan commands the Aleema,” Admiral Rensha continued. “Does she intend to join the Sith Emperor?”
“Would you take the word of a Mandalorian prisoner, if I said yes?” Milli’s shoulder throbbed. If she was on the ship Mekel of Lin would be rubbing it with oil now. “Or if I said no?”

“We saw her Aleema destroy some Sith ships—” Rew began, frowning. “But it was set upon by other Mandalorians as well.”

“My father is Mand’alor, not General Revan,” Millifar added. “If you want to know his plans, you may ask him.” she nodded at the comm–link. “He will answer.”

“We may do just that,” Rew muttered. “Open a channel.”

Millifar shook her head slowly. “Not until you return my ship and my freedom.”

“You are my prisoner,” the holographic Trandoshan interrupted them. “Not Ekkumi’s.”

“She is here,” Milli said politely. “Where are you?” Father would want to know, she suspected.

“Chasing ghosts and lies,” the admiral hissed back. “The time for this is done. Admiral Ekkumi, I’m sending you coordinates.” Her tongue snaked between her teeth. “Come join the fleet while we prepare for war.”

XXX

Revan stood in the room of the interior bridge and considered that she might as well never sleep again, because apparently, the galaxy could go to hell and no one would even bother to tell her until they’d reached the ninth level of a cold fracking Corellian purgatory—the one that was a bottomless kriffing pit.

“What the hell were you thinking, Carth?”

It was cold on this Force–damned bridge, too. Perhaps she should have stopped to grab more than a sleeping robe before Canderous's terse comm had summoned her, just as the med–bay erupted in chaos, admitting Dessa of Clan Rialis with a head wound and possible fetal distress.

“Why, Carth?” she asked again.

His soft brown eyes were harder than she'd seen them since Lehon, and his mouth twitched when he looked at her. “Vima Sunrider attacked one of our crew. She needed to be stopped.”

“But you came down here to question her before you knew that. Against my orders.” It should feel personal. He was her husband… and yet, standing in this room Revan had a strange flash of doubled memory, as if she was in a place she'd been before. “You countermanded my orders, Carth. Behind my back.”

“And I’d do it again,” he said flatly. “She had to be stopped.”

“That wasn't your call!”

“I–I know that.” He swallowed. One of his hands was shaking and she could see the sweat on his forehead. He still wasn't well. “It's nobody's call to do what I did, but I came down here to shoot her because it had to be done. I knew that even… even before I found Dessa, before I found her sabotaging the ship.”

“She was sabotaging the ship!” Aemelie interrupted. “Your First Husband saved all of our lives.”
“We needed her alive.” Now they had nothing. All the woman’s knowledge, the answers to so many questions—

“She wanted you dead.” The look was that flat look, dangerous. The one he’d first turned in her direction on the Leviathan, after the dying Admiral Karath whispered words in his ear.

“Your dar’jett was going to blow up my ship!” Aemelie interrupted again.

“It’s my ship. Not yours.” Revan’s eyes went to the wall above their heads. “My command.” Like a memory, the smell of charged lightning, scorched skin. Suddenly, she knew she had stood in this same place, punished those who dared cross her in this place. “I wanted her alive.”

_Not entirely true_, a cold voice whispered. _But you wanted to be there when she ended. You wanted answers first—_

Carth stood against the wall, back straight like a perfect soldier, eyes locked to hers. “You told me yourself. Vima Sunrider's been in this every step of the way, hounding our steps, making you do whatever she wants, whenever she wants it—” The muscles in his jaw worked and she noticed again how pale he was, how his hands were shaking. “I put an end to her, once and for all.”

“Vima Sunrider set all this up so she can _kill_ us here? Blow up the _Aleema_?” It made no sense—and yet, the open maintenance panel, the disabled security panels—“You’re saying Vima wanted to kill us all?”

“I don’t know.” His voice was hoarse. “She… she was talking to Master Atris and some kid.”

“What did they say?” Revan reached for a calm that eluded her.

Aemelie’s smug expression wasn’t helping. The woman had already let it slip that she’d been the one who gave Dessa of Rialis permission to interrogate ‘Jana Novasun’ in the first place.

There was a recording of that meeting, but no footage of the bridge encounter that had ended in the woman’s death. Revan had fast forwarded through clips of Dessa’s interview. They held a mess of technical detail—what little she’d had time to hear. She was starting to wonder if she’d get more information reading the dead woman’s entrails like a Grass Priest.

“Something about wanting to speak to you.” Her husband blinked. “I was more focused on the rods Sunrider was taking out of the mains. They were speaking Mandalorian… she and the old woman said something about Sheris and Davad Arkan being on Kaas? And Arkan being too powerful. They said you can’t go to Kaas. Atris said that too—to me. After… after I shot… Vima Sunrider.” His flat gaze turned harder. “Atris said she’d help Dustil if I stopped you from going to Kaas.”

“But Davad’s dead.” Of course, so was Malak. Thinking of that made Revan remember her dream again. _He said Korrie’s safe, but why would he tell me that—if it was him at all—_

She stared at the body, remembering a horror–vid Polla Organa had seen once where the Jedi detective had mind–probed corpses to solve their murders. It probably wasn’t possible to do that truly, but—

“Incoming transmission,” Leskal interrupted, alert in his new position on this interior bridge. The Mandalorians had taken up nav, comm and defensive stations without Revan giving any orders. The commander’s chair on this deck—identical to the one twenty–eight levels above their heads—seemed to mock her, with the dead woman sprawled in front of it.

_My old master, Vima Sunrider_. Her head was a ruin. Revan looked away.
“Put the call on the main board.” Her eyes went to a spot in the wall again, slightly dented, and for a moment, she almost saw a red-armored hull of a man pinned against it: half-rotted mouth open in a scream as her fingers flexed invisible bands around his throat—

Revan realized she'd sat down in the command chair when her fingers reached for the headset array on the hand-rest.

“Revan,” a voice purred from the speaker. Female, but overlain with a sibilance that startled her until the image came upon her screen. “Apologies for the long-range comm, but your minions’ antics have quite disrupted my ceremony. I had such plans!”

“Him again,” Canderous muttered. “Emperor called before. Was gonna tell you about that, too—”

“Oh?” Revan didn’t bother to look at him. “Were you waiting until he had a chance to disable our hyperdrive?”

The Selkath chuckled. She was female, and she was holding something in her hands. Tenebrae’s hands, of course.

Revan’s heart stopped when she realized what.

A holopicture of Malachor, smiling between a man and a woman, both with Deralian topknots.

It took Revan another stuttered heartbeat to place them.

Xxx

“Bendowen’s our… is it third or fourth cousin? Jasp?”

“Your second cousin,” Polla’s father called back from the sitting room. “Think he's a fifth twice removed, on my da’s side.”

“His wife Ooka Organa’s no relation,” Molla shrugged. “Far as we know—”

Xxx

Korrie was taller than the last time she'd seen him. The image had to be recent.

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” She was surprised at how even her voice came out. “He's gotten taller.”

“Oh, ho! No! I meant it as a reminder. But things have… escalated between us since, haven't they? I've lost so many bodies to your followers’ predation. You will have words with the survivors, Revan, when we meet on Kaas—” a dark chuckle then. “Oh, I cannot wait for you to see what your carelessness has done to the place!”

“Stay away from my son!”

“As your pets stayed away from mine?” The voice was mocking. “Loss can be an exquisite sensation. One even develops a taste for it after a few centuries. I cannot wait to share—”

Breathe, Revan reminded herself. The Force felt like black water, dragging her soul down with it. Revan’s thoughts ran, disjointed and wild. “I cannot wait to see you in person,” she countered, surprised at how even her voice sounded. “Will you bring my minions to the spaceport to greet us?”
“Hah,” he chuckled. “The spaceport—? The Kaas City Spaceport? I will not. But do let me know when you find it.”

Xxx

Mostly, Mission left her remote links to the Ebon Hawk dead. That kept any losers from tracking her signal (like those two used–to–be–hers in meat suits). On this planet, it also kept Kaas’s greasy virtual talons off their ship.

But when she saw the cloud of smoke rising from the ‘port, she had to act. Carth and Big Z loved that ship, and Mission—the real one—had too, once upon a time.

So she switched over fast, with only time for a few beeps to Big Z to tell him to carry her chassis out of danger, before she was stretching herself out through what remained of Kaas’s signals (no time to worry about corruption now) to the guts of the Corellian disc ship.

Doing so was like awakening into hell. Fire licked across her frame, and all of her sensors flashed red. Ruins of other ships around Mission burned, and laser bolts rained down from the sky.

The Ebon Hawk appeared to be the only intact vessel in its blasted–into bay.

That's lucky, Mission thought to herself, as she shifted her thrusters on, preparing for a fast run into atmo and the black. On any other world, someone might’ve impounded her, or slapped a port lock on, but maybe the Emperor was lazy, or they’d never expected Polla Revan or Carth or anybody to escape.

I don't know where to go, Mission thought forlornly, wishing there'd been a way to scoop up Big Z at least, but that would only draw attention and the bulk of the crazy ships above her had already passed overhead, going in that direction.

It was lucky the bombers had missed her, so far. Mission hoped that luck continued to hold.

It wasn't until she'd lifted up a hundred meters and seen the smoking ruin of the Kaas City Spaceport—and the blasted plain of glass that had once been Kaas City—that Mission realized it hadn't been—couldn't have been—luck at all.

<<Sister>> one of the wedge–ships whispered through her consciousness, as four of them detached from the flotilla ahead and circled back toward her. <<Careful, little sister. Keep your wings out of the flames.>>

Xxx

Dustil blinked at his reflection in the narrow mirror, holding the towel around his waist with the Force. Ship this big, they should have their own fresher, but Mekk had taken him to some dinky cell of a room with a holo of Mekk’s own face taped on the wall, and a stack of books about genetics and xeno–engineering.

The dark lines ran all the way down Dustil’s chest now. That was new. Mekk had been practically in awe—almost groveling, his pulse racing in a way that Dustil couldn't tell was passion, or fear, or both.

That was… that was a little weird. Yeah Mekel had always been a coward but—

When did he get into genetics and engineering?
“Hey.” Mekk had followed him down the hall, not bothering with a towel himself. “Some kinda alarm just went off.” He yawned, scratching his pits, and stretched. “Feel anything weird in the Force?”

“I think Revan woke up.” That hard, clear light. The frozen scream. That was her. But there was a calm to it too, which made Dustil relax a little, because whatever had pissed off the former ruler of the Sith had faded again. And that had to mean his dad was… was okay. He yawned. They’d been in bed, but there hadn’t been much sleep. “Hey, when did you get into engineering?”

Mekk looked like he was trying to make that into a dirty joke. “Huh?”

“Those books,” Dustil told him, before he had to hear the bad pun. “You used to like history. Didn’t know you had the head for hard stuff.”

That earned him a smirk. “Yeah, well about—”

“Come here.” Dustil pulled him over to the wall and lost his own towel, both of them scrambling to beat the other to getting use from those words. Ended up with them in a tangled mess on the floor, which was where Dustil asked again.

“Can't see you as a scientist, Mekk.”

“What?”

“The books.”

“Oh. Those books are Milli’s,” Mekk said, lifting his head up with a distracted frown.


“Milli’s one who died?” Was a little mean, but Dustil was a fracking Sith, right? “You guys must’ve spent a lot of time together, if she’s staying in your room.”

“She might not be dead. Her father doesn't think she's dead.” Mekel sat up abruptly. “It's her room,” he added. “I have a bunk in the dorms. Couldn't take you there.”

“Oh. Well, that—” The picture, Dustil realized. Of course. Mekel hadn't put it up on the bunk ceiling. Milli had. Like a schoolgirl with a fracking crush.

It made him feel bad for being glad that she was (probably) dead.

“I bagged the Blais sisters,” he told Mekel. “Inse and Mydia Blais. Sith princesses. Tits out to here.”

“Oh?” His friend’s voice was more curious than anything else. “At the same time?”

“No! They're _sisters_!”

Mekel’s low chuckle showed Dustil he'd just been jerking his chain. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, I...” His voice trailed off, but his thoughts were caught, as Selene used to say, in a bad loop. Mekk might not care, and Inse might be negotiable, (if she hadn't just taken off with that ship, she'd seemed a little pissed). But Mydia… girl had a possessive streak. Servants said she'd killed her favorite gardener for sleeping with his own wife.
And Mekk would be vulnerable on Kaas, without the Force.

“Maybe you should stay up here,” Dustil started. “When we get to Kaas.”

Mekel rolled off him. Maybe the knee to the choobs was accidental. “Yeah? Okay. If that’s how you want it, Lord Malak.”

“Hah, hah.” Dustil started, but Mekel was half in the fresher stall now, roar of a sonic spray cutting out half his words. “Asshole,” he muttered to himself, watching the outline of the chivhole as he showered. When they’d had the bond he’d have felt every blast like it was on his own skin. Now, the other man might as well have been on Dagobah.

“—son of a whore?” Suddenly, Mekk leaned out, brows knit in a stubborn challenge.

“What?” Dustil stood up too.

“I said,” Mekel snapped. “Is it that I'm the son of a Coruscanti whore, or is it because I'm a fracking null that you don't think I'm good enough to escort Lord Fracking Malak with his Frack Sisters?”

There was real anger in his voice that made Dustil drop the act. “I don't want them to kill you. If they knew what you meant they might use it—”

“What I meant?” Mekk didn't look like he got it. “You think I can't handle myself, Telos? I took on Oerin Fracking Lin when he was dead! Not to mention, my cousin’s the Dark Lord of the—”

“I can't lose you,” Dustil broke in, leaning forward so they were eye to eye. The sonic spray stung his eyes, and his voice cracked. “Seriously, Mekk. I can't lose you again.”

“Oh.” His lover’s eyes were as dark and clear as Dustil’s were yellow. He could see both of them in the frosted–over mirror on the wall. Mekel’s hand closed over Dustil’s arm.

An alarm went off someplace far away. Someplace far away, Revan was awake and pissed off about something. Maybe she and Dad had a fight. None of that mattered to Dustil right now.

“Coming out of hyperspace soon,” Mekk noted. “You ready?”

Dustil smiled. “For anything.”

That would turn out, he thought later, to be a lie. He hadn't been ready at all.

Xxx

It was that taste that told Kore D’Reev everything, even before he went into Bendowen and Ooka’s room and saw them still asleep, so pale and still it looked like they might not wake up.

Don’t cry, he reminded himself, and went to the gun safe under their bed. He’d been shown where it was and warned he didn't have the combination to open it, but nobody had warned these people against Kore (or some stupid pesticide guy), because the Force took care of locks as easy as opening a door.

Kore took two silvery blaster pistols, holding one in his off hand and hiding the other one in his pocket.

The Organas just looked like they were sleeping, but they might not wake up.
When Kore went downstairs, the man in black was frying baca, and had set the table for two already, like he knew no one else would be getting breakfast that day. (Or any day.)

“Eggs?” The man beamed and turned around again, turning back to the pan. “You'd better sit down, kid. I have some bad news.”

“I saw.” Kore edged closer to the counter where Ooka kept her knives.

“You already checked?” The man turned back to him. “Rough luck for them, huh?”

“It wasn't luck. You poisoned them.” Kore brought up the gun in his right hand, centering it really careful because he was better with his left. His left hand hovered close enough to his jacket pocket to grab the blaster there, if the assassin (for what else could he be?), made any funny moves.

“Not me, kid, I would've just shot them. But Old Stinky needed something slow–acting to knock you all out—something that he could fix later. You’ll need another dose of the antidote.” The man gestured to the table, which was answer enough. In front of Kore’s platemat a blue vial waited, contained in an old–fashioned needler. “Gave you one when you were asleep, but another’s recommended to cut down on the side effects.”

“It was isaflexin on us. On the masks.” Kore knew because of the taste in his mouth now. He'd been dumb not to guess sooner. “I don't need more antidote. I'm immune to isaflexin tox. Grandfather had me acclimated when I was five.”

The black man’s eyebrows shot up. “You know your poisons.”

“I'm an Eg. Of course I do.”

“Well, I told you already—I didn’t do this.” His head tilted. “Take another cure anyway. I'm supposed to keep you alive. Rather not have you puking up on my speeder.”

“Bendowen and Ooka weren't gonna kill me!”

“They couldn't protect you, neither. We need to get gone before that ratscum’s friends come lookin for us.” The man paused. “After you eat your breakfast and take the shot. And I gotta finish clean–up too.”

His hands, Kore noted, were dirty, like he'd been playing in the mud. *Or digging a hole,* Kore thought. Because that's what they do on dirt planets with bodies. They put them in holes. But he just put the guy who was gonna kill us in a hole, not Bendowen and Ooka—

“You’re gonna give them the antidote too, right?” Kore asked. He hadn’t checked, but he thought they were both still alive. The Force around them still buzzed, just a little.

“Sure.” The man gave him a smile that wasn’t. “I’ll get to that next.”

“Why didn't you just give it to them already?” Kore pretended like he thought the man was really planning on it because maybe that way he would. “I order you to give it to them already!”

“Soon as I finish the eggs.” The man smiled. “But… you know what, if they're alive, guy’s friends can question them. You figure that out?”

“I figured he’s bad and you’re bad,” Kore told him.

“*His boss* is gonna send more Red–Eyes,” the man said. “This way, with a little luck, they’ll think
you’re dead and stop looking.”

Wouldn't Father have warned Kore if this was danger? Of course, he'd barely seen Father in ages—and the few times he had, Father seemed all stretched out and thin, like he was mostly someplace else. Maybe Father was still stuck in Dustil Onasi and that was why. His warnings now were more feelings than words and right now—

Right now, Father was quiet. He was quiet most of the time lately. More feelings than anything else, and sometimes Kore thought it was all in his own head.

“The shot,” the man nodded at it. “I’ll explain the rest as we go.”

“No!” Kore shook his head. “Give them the antidote first!” He didn't like Bendowen and Ooka very much, but they'd been okay.

The drawer where Ooka kept the knives was free. Kore edged over closer to it until the man caught his arm and stabbed him with the needler. Kore could move fast when he wanted to, but the man had moved just as fast. Maybe even faster.

“You asshole!” Kore yelled, before the man stabbed him again with something else.

“Kids,” the man said with disgust. “Never listen. It's for your own good. Should’ve had breakfast. We've got a long haul ahead, and I'm not stopping for lunch.”

_Trank_? Kore's mind had time to think before everything went black.

Xxx

“I'd do it again,” Carth said stubbornly.

“Careful, you look like you’re about to tip over in there.” Revan’s words felt dry and tight as the anger inside her.

The cell’s floor slanted slightly and her husband teetered on his feet. There were four cells in the room. Revan wondered if Carth was now in the one that had recently held Vima Sunrider.

There was no way to tell, and there was no one to ask. She’d ordered the kids who had been ‘watching’ Jana Novasun sent to the barracks brig five levels down and portside. They’d gone without protest. Everyone had obeyed all her commands without protest.

Revan wasn’t entirely sure if it was because they were all frightened of her, or if she was right.

If there hadn’t been six millimeters of near–lethally–charged security shielding between them, Revan might have taken Carth’s arm when he stumbled. As it was, she sent the Force out instinctively, only to feel it spark against the cage’s shields. She could penetrate them easily enough, perhaps, but that would short out the barrier.

“Let me out,” her husband pleaded. “I know that planet, Freckles. You don’t. You can’t go into this blind.”

“That is no longer your concern.” The Force almost crackled at her fingertips, and again, Revan had the sense she’d been in this room before, that these cells had once held others—

*These cells were made for Force users,* the voice inside whispered. *Force users can withstand those energy fields. But nulls—if he touches that field.…*
Instinct, more than thought, had her reaching for a control to dial down the strength of the shields, aware that Carth’s eyes hadn’t left her the entire time. Minimal power levels should still be enough to contain him now that he was unarmed.

“Sit down,” she commanded him. “This isn’t a torture cage. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

*That cell made an effective torture cage,* the voice whispered. *On many occasions.*

Carth blinked at her and nodded slowly. He sat down as stiffly as an old man. Whatever stims the medix had given him before had worn off now. “I’d do it again,” he declared stubbornly.

His belt felt loose around Revan's waist and the embroidery on it was stiff. It probably meant something that she was wearing the blaster he’d used to kill Vima Sunrider. She fiddled with its fasteners instead of looking him in the eye.

“All the times I imagined our reunion,” Carth coughed. “Never thought it'd go like this.”

“I need you tell me everything Vima said to Atris.” Revan walked closer and put a hand out, pressing it into the blue, feeling the Force ripple around her, as the field sparked against her hand.

“Was more focused on the job that scow was doing on the cooling rods.” Carth wrapped his hands around his knees, looking up at her. “Revan, you have to listen to me. Dustil… h—he might not understand why I’m in here—”

“I need you tell me *everything,*” she repeated. “If your son has a problem with that, I have a cell for him too.”

“But he—”

“He’s no Malak.” Her voice felt dead. “And I killed Malak. If I need to shove Darth Sulksalot into the brig next to yours, I will.”

In the cell next to Carth’s, Aemelie was a curled–up ball wrapped in a loose robe, doing an excellent job of pretending to be asleep. Whatever Canderous had whispered in her ear before he turned the brig’s power cells on had cowed—or at least—silenced her.

*Thank the Force for small mercies.*

Carth exhaled sharply. It turned into another coughing fit as Revan waited. “I was focused on the rods,” he repeated when he caught his breath again. “Trying to count the hyperdrive ticks. Figure out how much time we had left. If I could stop it. When I slipped in, Vima was saying something about Sheris and the Empire being destabilized. She said that Davad Arkan was too strong… and you were just as bad. She said you can’t go to Kaas.”

“Oh, I’m going to Kaas,” she muttered. “Wild hessi in a hunting pack couldn’t stop me now.”

“I know. But Korrie.” Carth took another breath. He was still too pale, washed to almost gray behind the cell’s blue light. “Tenebrae has Korrie—”

Revan shook her head with more resolution than she felt, a bubble of dark hysteria forming on her lips. *No. My son is safe. I dreamed it. Malak told me in a dream.* “He doesn’t. Korrie’s safe. It’s all a bunch of fricking tricks. Tenny–Bro’s probably laughing at us right now—”

“I know that. You told me.” Revan was going to call him that when she ended him. Somehow.

The ship lurched and then rolled. On a ship this large they shouldn’t feel anything, but Revan’s gut heaved, and then—

“Out of hyperspace,” Carth sighed. “Whatever happens next, you need to know I underst—”

A proximity alarm pealed.

A millisecond later, it was the quietest sound in Revan’s head.

A voice shattered and broke a thousand times. Revan’s vision splintered, and her ears rang. The world slipped out of focus, smashing into stars. They were on a blasted plain. They were choking in a ruined city. Drowning in a burning sea. Carth’s face loomed in front of her, bathed in flickering blue light, but she couldn’t hear him because something was too loud—someone was screaming too loudly—

—and then all she could hear was a weak wail, almost a whimper. A cracked sound, like a voice in a torture cell, breaking over and over again.

“Revan!” Carth was standing up now, looming above. His hands tried to punch through the fields to get to her. “Revan! Hey! Guards! Can anyone hear me? We need some help in here!”

The ceiling loomed above her. The durasteel was cold under Revan’s back. Her limbs jerked. She tasted blood where she'd bitten her tongue.

“It’s just the prox alarm,” Aemelie’s words cut through at a higher pitch. “Is she having some kind of fit, First Husband? We’re not even in real battle yet.”

XXX

The Aleema came out of hyperspace above Dromund Kaas…

...and immediately, there was chaos.
Chapter 68/ Hard Rain

XXX

“Mai,” Dxun said, tugging at Gwenarius’s sleeve. Oerina was still asleep, but Aemelie’s son woke with the dawn. From the look of his feet, the babe had toddled outside in the rich Dxun mud and was now tracking it all over the first carpet Canderous had woven for their marriage tent, happily cooing to himself. “Trac’yin,” he lisped.

“Tracyn,” she corrected. “Did Hisha forget to put out the coals?” She would have to have a talk with that one, even if the girl was part of Clan Zal and not her responsibility. Hisha had been raised in stars and found it difficult to remember tasks required in the midst of a jungle, like banking the coals in the fire pits before sleep, maintaining the perimeter alarms, not leaving her undergarments out to dry where they could be eaten by cannock.


“I knew she would forget to dampen the fire! Well, Hisha will learn, little warrior.” She smiled at the boy fondly. “And I think you have earned the first bath of the day.”

“Tracyn,” Aemelie’s son was losing his milk teeth. How she wished Oerina would follow suit. “Up.”

“I will pick you up in a moment, uj’ika. First, let me put on my outerrobe—”

“Gwen!” The sheer panic in Xarga’s voice had Gwenarius reaching for Dxun even before the boy from Clan Ordo burst through the tent’s door. The babe dodged her grip, giggling. “The sky! It’s on fire!”

“Tracyn,” lisped Dxun, from behind his sister’s crate. “Pretty.”

“Stay,” she commanded, forgoing gentleness. She grabbed Dxun’s arm and swung him up; dumping him in the sleeping crate on top of Oerina. Her daughter gave a startled wail, but Gwenarius was already halfway out of the tent.

This time of year, Onderon and its moon were not yet close enough to share an atmosphere, but the curve of the planet’s dappled surface still encompassed most of the sky.

Tracyn, Gwenarius thought grimly. Up.

The sky was burning.

XXX

Trista Jar: “Now, for the next segment of our broadcast I’d like to introduce our viewers to Kol DX–9, a Quarren student from Nar Shaddaa’s Black Sun College for Gentlebeings of Merit. What are we seeing here, Kol DX–9?”
Kol DX–9: “I already told you.”

Trista Jar: “Just tell our viewers again. Now, you at home keep in mind, this is new footage. Taken only a few hours past. What are we going to be seeing, Kol?”

Kol: “Well, uh… It appears to be some kind of uprising in the Outer Reaches. My satellites picked up the broadcast signal transmitting from Kaas City. I collect Sith executions, but this isn’t a normal one—”

Trista Jar: “Wait! You… collect Sith executions?”

Kol: “Just vids of them! When I was a kid my dad’s got me a wideband scanner and I get these Imperial transmissions? When I saw this one, I knew I had to call somebody. I mean look!”

Trista Jar: “Now you all can see what made me pick my jaw up off the floor, so to speak, hah hah. That looks like… Revan Starfire? And which planet is this again?”

Kol: “A world called Dromund Kaas. It’s in Sith sp—”

Trista Jar: “I’m getting an alert that the name and location of the planet is highly classified. But, in fact, we do have confirmation from High Admiral Rensha and the Republic Fleet. That is Revan Starfire and she appears to be… what is she doing?”

Kol: “Looks like she’s standing between that group of sents and an angry mob. Whoa! Look at all those Wookiees!”

Trista Jar: “I had no idea Wookiees lived on Sith planets.”

Kol: “They use them as slave labor, I think. I have this one vid, where they’re pulling these red–skinned, bumpy guys around in carriages—”

Trista Jar: “That’s disgusting!”

Kol: “Well, lots of sentients have red skin. Zeltrons. Some Zabrak. I knew a pink Twi’lek girl, once… but uh, that’s a long story. Look, see we’re getting to the good bit now. See? There’s Revan leading the charge—over to where they blew up all of those guards?”

Trista Jar: “Not what I meant, but—oh! Feeds a bit spotty there—for a second I thought I saw two Revans. That woman in white—”

Kol: “Revan is wearing white. See? She's next to the purple Twi’lek.”

Trista Jar: “Wasn’t very clear with that crowd blocking them, but for a sec I thought she was the purple Twi’lek.”

Kol: “Nope. See there she is pointing at the sky?”

Trista Jar: “She seems excited about something. Wait! They're moving! Are they… it rather looks like they're running away. Are you sure that's not some actress?”

Kol: “This is where it gets nuts, man. I mean, I've seen a lot of Sith stuff—executions, weird
floor shows, birthday parties... but this is crazyspace.”

Trista Jar: “Wait, what happened to the lights?”

Kol: “It’s the middle of the afternoon there, right? And it goes dark and then—”

Trista Jar: “That was an explosion! It appears to be aerial bombardment! What? Are those ships?”

Kol: “Nuts! I know! Going so fast?”

Trista Jar: “And then the vid stops.”

Kol: “Yeah but the really kriffed thing is the links all go dead. Not just there, but the widebeam stuff from other Sith worlds too. There's three main ones: Thule, Ziosk and Dromund Kaas and they all go quiet at once. Like someone—or some thing knocked out their access to everything.”

Trista Jar: “And how long ago was this?”

Kol: “Uh... an hour, maybe?”

Trista Jar: “An hour on Nar Shaddaa is three on Coruscant. Not just a saying, viewers. So three hours ago, Kol, here, witnessed Revan Starfire launch some kind of incursion in Sith space. What does this mean? And what about the Wookiees? Kol? Do you have anything to add?”

Kol: “I wanted to say hi to Jakio and U’laff if they’re listening. Guys, I told you it was huge, right? And my dad, of course, who got me into this hobby in the first place! Dad, I love y—”

[Feed cuts out.]


[Silence. The holofeed signal transmits nothing but static.]

Trista Jar: “We seem to be having some trouble with the wideband from Hutt space, but I’m sure it’s temporary. Sunspots? Meanwhile, viewers, ponder the implications. Is Revan Starfire secretly working with the Republic Fleet to take down our Sith enemies? My station has been trying to get a statement from the Fleet brass or the Senate, but you know how secretive High Admiral Old Scaly Rensha can be!”

[Takes breath.]

Trista Jar: “I don’t suppose we’ll ever get a conclusive report about this... any more than we will ever learn what actually happened on Katarr—

[Raises one finger.]

Trista Jar: “Or Biscain—

[Raises second finger.]
Trista Jar: Or receive an official statement regarding the D’Reev Purge—

[Continues counting on fingers, listing off each point.]

Trista Jar: “Or what happened to those possessed sents (including my predecessor, poor Jokka Rai) who executed themselves on our live broadcast nearly a week ago—”

Trista Jar: “Or why their eyes were glowing red—

Trista Jar: “Or what really caused the Jedi Plague—

Trista Jar: “Or what became of the Jedi Council—”

[Holds up one talon.]

Trista Jar: “Oh! Hang on! I’m getting reports in—”

[Long pause, as the expression on the announcer’s face shifts from neutral to horrified.]

Trista Jar: “Friends, it appears that the Outer Rim planets of Onderon, Hoth, and Nar Shaddaa are also under attack. This is coming from the Senate’s official Office of Communications, who have a hotline to Fleet, so that’s confirmed. Officially. In each case, a fleet of unknown ships appeared and immediately began atmospheric launches of unknown ordinance. They’re saying we haven’t seen attacks on this scale since the Sith and Mandalorian Wars… and if Revan Starfire is involved....”

[Shakes head.]

Trista Jar: “I—I don’t have to tell you what that means. All sentients on Rim planets have been advised to take all precautions and to be prepared to seek shelter at the first sign of atmospheric invasion.”

Trista Jar: “I wish I could say this is unprecedented, but as the survivors of Telos and Taris can attest, we have been here before—”

XXX

{{Awaken}}

A voice shattered and broke a thousand times.

Revan’s vision splintered, and her ears rang. The world slipped out of focus, smashing into stars. She— they— were on a blasted plain. They were choking in a ruined city. Drowning in a burning sea. Skimming low above an ancient, walled city, with explosions blossoming beneath their wings like a deadly garden—

Carth loomed above her, bathed in flickering blue light, but she couldn’t hear him because something was too loud— someone was screaming too loudly—

—and then all she could hear was a weak wail, almost a whimper. A cracked sound, like a voice in a torture cell, breaking over and over again.

The ceiling loomed above her. The durasteel was cold under Revan’s back. Her limbs jerked. She
tasted blood where she'd bitten her tongue.

{{Planetary defenses are online. Disabling}}

The sparks were old, and cold, and whispering. Voices crinkled like dead leaves in her ears, overlapping speech into a cacophony. The world was faceted, fragmented, as Revan’s vision split into a dozen different perspectives. She heard Carth calling her name, but suddenly she was a planetfall away, too far to answer. Suddenly, she was—

—chasing a flock of fleeing meat–bodies, low towards the planet’s curve, as her guns primed for another run.

{{Analysis: Dromund Kaas, 9983, 134887 w. 9 sentients in wooden structure. Eliminate: Y/N? Y}}

Yes, her mind whispered, caught in the play of light and shade. The targets cowered below, so slow and clumsy and scattered. It took too many missiles to bring down too few.

{{Target locked. Missile launched. Find: Next. Param: >4 sentient life forms}}

The command was simple, like a switch: on or off. Light or dark—

{{Target locked. Missile launched. Find: Next. Param: >4 sentient life forms}}

{{Increase parameters. >20 sentient life forms}}

Their natural tendency was to cluster. It would be more efficient to target greater numbers.

Suddenly, she was

—strafing a group of screaming organics. They fell in clumps, lights winking out.

{{Extermination successful. Continue sequence? Y/N. Y}}

Yes. Like a switch reset. And then she was—

—launching a nest of small flyers from her sides as her main cannon targeted the glittering spires of a world below—

{{Analysis: Nar Shaddaa, north quadrant, 30, 122229 n. Scanning: Duracrete structures contain 7,576 organics. Eliminate Y/N. Y. Target locked}}

Here it was easier. They huddled vertically in poorly built habitations. Thousands per square kilometer.

{{Missile launched}}


Yes. And then she was—

—boiling an ocean with the net of her electro–rays, as the beach beside it had already been
transformed into a plain of shimmering glass.

{{Analysis: Ziost, 30 degrees north of the equator. WARNING: STOP Bombardment at equatorial line.}}

{{No organic life in the northern hemisphere. SUCCESS. Next Target: Telos. Target: Scouted. Proceed to hyperspace: Y/N? Y}}

Telos?

Yes.

Wait.

No.

“No.” Revan felt her lips move, even as she felt another tower on Nar Shaddaa burn. Little lights winking out. She was—

{{—proceed to hyperspace? Target: Telos. Scouting in progress. Proceed to hyperspace. Y/N.}}

“No!” Her eyes tried to open, but they were already open, the multitude of them—synthetic sensor–eyes set along the hulls and bows of the Awakened Fleet. Thousands, perhaps—stretched thin across the galaxy’s fabric, hovering above the defective worlds, the examples—

The warnings.

{{Threat initiated. Comprehension, Starfire Unit. Y/N?}}

“No!”

And then she was—

—flying in the skies above Dromund Kaas, escorting the juvenile ship–sense, coaxing it home.

[[“ No way am I going in your hangar bay, sleemo! What the frack did you do to my hyperdrive? Give it back! And stop bombing the kriffin’ planet, already! I have friends down there! ”]]

“No!” That voice sounded like Mission. But that was impossible. All of this was impossible—

{{Warning. Further degrade of organic matrix will result in system instability. Physical processing capacity exceeded at this time. Neural repair initiated}}

Pain ripped through her head then and all Revan saw was stars.

XXX

Their second wedding ceremony had gone well, Azen Loanin thought.

His senator father would have been utterly scandalized to see his son kitted out in barbaric furs with Zabrak indentations painted on his human skin—kneeling before some primitive altar while his pregnant wife knelt beside him, her show of “pearls” already visible in the thin gown that barely concealed her belly.
Pregnancy became Lydie Loanin—so much that sometimes she took his breath away. That beauty was a comforting reminder, in the moments when Azen remembered just whose son she would bear. Another comfort was that the antibodies in her blood from her first child might make it possible for her to have another.

Another, who would be a part of both of them.

_Not that blood matters_, he reminded himself. Again.

Azen himself was the son of two clones whose progenitors would have been too close in familial proximity to be approved, had their records not been altered over a half-century ago. His Force sensitivity had been a surprise throwback in a line of Loanins who had prided themselves on a reliance upon facts over mysticism. _If_ Lydie could manage to bear his natural child they would still have to screen for a host of unfortunate recessives due to the errors of his genetic legacy—and so how could he begrudge this child for being free of that risk?

Say what you like about Jin. Loanin (in the privacy of his own mind) had said plenty—but the man did his best to scatter his genetic material far and wide. And, from the research Loanin had done into the family (unsavory, but necessary), outbreeding was somewhat of a Jin trait.

“`I do,`” Lydie murmured to the priestess. Her elbow nudged his slightly, bringing Azen abruptly back to the present.

“Oh. Yes,” Azen nodded. “I do as well.” The indentations drawn on his skin itched. The bukk calf chained to the altar had evacuated its bowels, adding to the miasma already in the air. One of the (many) children too young for such a formal gathering giggled, whispering and pointing at him.

The rest of the ceremony was a fascinating display for a xenosociologist, and Azen muddled through it as he’d been coached: binding their palms together with silken cords, standing forehead to forehead with dear Lydie while her family marched around them in a circle, enduring the gentle ribbing in which her siblings compared his private parts unfavorably to the bukk calf’s…and finally making it to the glorious moment when he stumbled through their nuptial doorway with Lydie in his arms (Zabrak bones were surprisingly heavy) and deposited her gently onto their marriage mat.

His wife now twice over smiled up at him. “Tomorrow, you need to give the bukk calf back to Aure. The gift was only ceremonial.”

“I don’t mind the idea of becoming a nerf herder,” he joked. “I used to ride thranta on my family’s Alderaan estate. I had a rapport with them. It can’t be so different, herding from a sky–speeder.”

“Sky speeders take fuel.” She raised an eyebrow. “Too expensive here. Most of the ranchers use dewbacks, or bantha to herd the bukks. And they’re not the same as nerfs. Nerfs are too delicate for the Iridonian climate. They’d never survive a winter dust–storm.”

“We could open a clinic.” He hadn’t been serious about farming, although the prospect of remaining here had appeal. The child—their child—had to be born somewhere, and this refuge was safer than most, thanks to his efforts.

“I thought we were going to meet Devn and Aishie on Hoth?” Lydie’s head tilted. “In her last comm, Aishie said they’d collected six padawans in addition to the twelve on the ship. Practically an enclave.”

“The cluster of Jedi on Ithor was practically an enclave too. And then they went dark,” Azen
reminded her. “Just like Hapes IV and Eriadu. The SIS reports to the Senate that Mical sent us mentioned the structures on Hapes seemed hastily abandoned, with signs of a struggle.”

“But no bodies,” Lydie pointed out. “And we would know, surely, if….”

*If they were dead? Perhaps. But there are worse things than dead, my wife. Worse things we’ve both seen. It isn’t the plague killing the Jedi.*

Worse had been the panicked comm–blast sent directly to Azen from Thyferra by Knight Joost’atok, but Azen had not shared that with Lydie.

*Master Vargas took the padawans to town for supplies, the woman’s missive had read. 2 weeks ago. Haven’t heard since, but I think someone’s following me & Ulla’s having nightmares about masked Humans—more details inc—*

There had never been more, leaving Azen too much time to speculate. Thyferra was barely habitable. Outside the main hyperlanes, it should have been a refuge, but if it was not….

“It may not be safe for Jedi to gather at all,” Azen confessed. “Remember, there were two Sith Lords on Katarr—not just Nihilus. Darth Sion was witnessed to have killed twenty Jedi in a matter of minutes, including most of the Council. His whereabouts are still unknown.”

Most of the Jedi were blissfully unaware of the true danger. But Azen’s former padawan Mical Jorde had SIS contacts, and was currently working with Master Atris. Indeed, Mical’s confidence did much to assuage Azen’s concerns about the woman. Mical had explained why she had abruptly sided with the Fleet—to the detriment of the Jedi left on Katarr.

There had been no way to save the Jedi Council on Katarr. Not from their own folly. Azen had seen that for himself.

And it seemed that now Atris had bravely set herself up as a lure: establishing a false Academy on Telos in the hopes that might draw out more of their enemies. So far, her actions had proved futile. Jedi continued to vanish. Sometimes Azen and Lydie felt them fall—dimly—in the Force. Other times, it was more like a cloud passing over the sun as if the Force itself grew smaller with each passing death.

*Death or worse?* After escaping the wreck of Katarr they both knew there were fates worse than death. Especially for Force users.

“Is that why you sent the others away? To keep us safe?” His wife reached out and touched his arm.

Lydie’s expression was calm and unsurprised when Azen nodded back. “Yes.”

The larger Jedi clusters had gone dark first. Azen felt oddly guilty that he had sent the padawans who had traveled with them to a Corellian colony moon called Chassna. He had given them vague instructions to avoid large gatherings and access to one of his family’s accounts.

Perhaps he should have done more. The thought haunted him late at night when sleep failed. But Azen and Lydie were the only Jedi on Iridonia, now. And he would do anything to keep her from harm.

His wife seemed to take a moment to compose herself. “Well. Perhaps there are better topics for our honeymoon…?” Lydie finally suggested. She gave him an obviously forced smile: one that made Azen evaluate again, as he did dozens of times every day, the odds of their union surviving
their current travails.

*I love you, Lydie Korr.*

Azen thought the words at least a dozen times each day, even when his tongue stumbled. His love was pure, and it did not matter if hers held some mercenary calculation. It *must* not matter. In the end, Jin was dead or gone, and Azen had won the girl—not that she was a mere prize to be won—but she *was* his, now, and he hers. They were legally and spiritually bonded on two planets.

No black-eyed Force-blind son of a whore could ever take that from them.

*Could* she still hold affection—or more—for Mekel Jin? Could her vows of devotion to Azen be false? He had offered to release her from the vows they had made on Coruscant, even if divorce was unheard of in the Loanin family. He had offered her the means to raise another man’s child in another place without him.

It had been safe to offer those things, knowing full well that she would never accept.

XXX

“My mother wants to see us married,” she had said quietly, as if that mattered. “Here on Iridonia.” Those thick eyelashes fluttered and the lines around her horns wrinkled. “I can understand if you want me to leave after what I—what happened—”

“I never want you to leave.” Azen had suspected the affair for weeks and stayed silent. He had comforted himself with stories of Mandalorians, or the matriarchal Sand People of Tatooine, where a child’s blood was only marked in the maternal line; where a woman’s heart was her own, a gift to be blessed but never taken for granted. Azen had given her his own translation of “Poems for the Dune Sea Blood Tide,” a compilation of ancient works by the poetess J’kkia’la, lost for a thousand years (and by some thought to be a forgery). “I never want to leave you, but you are not a possession. You are my partner.” He took a deep breath. “If you want to go, will you tell me?”

“Of course.” She smiled that forced smile that told him nothing, and Azen warred again with the conflicting shadows of his heart: he wanted her free, and he wanted her his. The child she bore was *theirs,* its unformed mind already as familiar in the Force as the new color on her breasts, that dark line down her belly, the three of them asleep in the rapidly-shrinking bed; but would he feel the same if it looked like Jin? If it had the callow man’s smirk?

*It was a boy; the scans had said.*

XXX

*It will be mine,* he reminded himself, now. *He will be mine. Mekel Jin isn’t fit to be a father. He is nothing.*

“Azen…?” In the present, Lydie touched his arm lightly, so lightly that the touch sent shivers up his spine. “Is everything all right?”

“Perfect,” he told her because it was.

“Well, then.” Her cheeks flushed. “You know, the next part of this tradition requires that we put that bukk calf outside—”

A hesitant knock on the door made both of their heads turn.
“Sorry to interrupt,” Lydie’s mother’s voice carried through the plimfoam loudly, even in a mock-whisper. “There’s news on the wideband. Thought you’d want to see.”

“It’s fine.” Lydie pulled her robe together and stood up quickly, leaving Azen eye-level to her show of pearls. He scrambled to his feet as well, suddenly grateful for the six centimeters of height between them that set his gaze high above hers, so that she could not gauge his expression.

His wife motioned to the door and it slid open, revealing her shorter, rounder twin—the vision of the woman she would be if they had enough time—face a nest of indented wrinkles and careworn hands, the smile strained and shy—but still beautiful, he thought loyally. As his wife would be beautiful in her old age, too, someday.

“What is it, Ma?” Lydie smiled at her shadow.

“It’s… the vids… Something… something has happened.” As always, Azen thought that Nelle Korr seemed slightly awestruck in his presence. Her brow furrowed around her horns. “You know, the calf can be tied outside? I left a piece of ribbon and a lead next to the post.”

“We agreed to watch the dewback-riding finals with Attina and the children tomorrow.” Azen smiled as kindly as he could. “Didn’t Lydie tell you? Her sister’s recording it for us.”

“Dewback-riding?” Those blue eyes exactly like his wife’s widened and Nelle Korr shook her head, snorting. “Think I’d interrupt your lifenight for dewback-riding?” She snorted, eyeing him with an expression that didn’t seemed awed at all. “No. It’s Darth Revan. The holoreporter said she’s invading the galaxy. Again.”

XXX

Later, Dustil would remember that they’d just done it in the fresher and Mekk had been about to make a dirty joke, and that Dustil had been teasing him about running back to their—Millifar’s—room starkers; but when the shit hit hyperdrive it was like nightfall on Nar Hutta, that time they’d had the Korriban field trip.

One second there was light—and then the next—

“Funny,” Mekk said—right before when it was still daylight and everything was fine. His head was tilted back against the wall and his eyes were closed. There was a new scar on his stomach, from where that possessed schutta of Tenebrae’s had stabbed him in Coruscant, what felt like centuries ago.

“Funny?” They could use another sonic, but Dustil snapped his hand open and launched one of his boots into it, shimmying back into his pants at the same time. “If you think that was funny—”

“Not like a joke.” The Coruscanti yawned. “Meant, it’s funny, not to be able to tell what you’re thinking.”

Dustil smiled. “I’m thinking I’m starving. Is there food in this place?”

“Yeah,” Mekk raised an eyebrow. “Mandie field rations. Probably not up to what Lord Malak usually eats.”

“I wonder if my chef survived the battle,” Dustil yawned too. “He was really talented. Course, Inse might have killed him by now. She went through a lot of servants.”

“Tough luck for them.” Mekel stood up, reaching out a hand, and pulled Dustil up too, grunting a
little at the effort. It made the muscles in his chest flex.

“You’ve been working out.” Dustil reached out and traced the line of the scar.

“Had to keep up with the Mando’ade.” Mekel took a step back and crossed his arms. “No Force—they could kick my ass with hand–to–hand until I started practicing.”

Dustil opened his mouth to make a joke and then closed it again because the expression on Mekel’s face was serious, almost moody. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just….” Mekel waved his hand. “It’s nothing. Like I said, funny not be able to tell what you’re thinking. You were in my head for a long time.”

“I just told you.” Dustil’s gut growled audibly, practically on cue. “I’m thinking I’m starving.”

“Not what I meant.” Mekel shrugged. “It was like… you could have been anyone.”

That was—that took a second for Dustil to process. “You think I could have been anyone? Guess you’d know since you fracked everyone.”

“Yeah? And?” Mekel shrugged again—careless like he didn’t care. “Guess we don’t all get Sith twins for our nameday present.”

“Twins?” Dustil didn’t get it. Without the bond, Mekk didn’t always make sense. If you didn’t know him like Dustil did, he might come off as an asshole.

“Inse and Mydia Blais? Ring any bells?”

“They’re not twins. Inse is older.” He tried to laugh. “You pissing about that? I don’t even like them.” Not like you like Lydie the Zabrák. Not like you and Millifar Ordo. She had your picture on her wall. Why would she do that if she didn’t like you? And I know how you felt about Lydie fracking Korr—used to hear about it all day and night whenever you saw horns or a rack that reminded you of her—

But Mekel couldn’t hear him. Those black eyes of his hardened, and then he scowled. “You got all of Lor—all of Malak’s power and all I got was almost dying.”

Again, Dustil tried to laugh it off. “Yeah, well, if you think the last few months have been fracking fun, I’d trade places with you in a secon—”

And then night fell. Just like on Nar Hutta. One minute, day. The next, the blackest of nights.

The scream ripped through the Force at the same time that the prox alerts chimed and the doors to the fresher popped open. Ship–wide alarm. All hands on deck. Priority one. Just like those Korriban drills.

Lights from the corridor flashed, painting Mekk’s goldish skin in shades of red and blue. The expression on his face made him look like a jacked mark.

“That’s the prox alert,” Dustil’s bondmate—his former bondmate said—but his words moved too slow, and his voice dimmed, hard to hear through the screams.

Suddenly their argument—if that was what it had been—was banthashit. The claxon ripping through the speakers sounded too fracking much like the airspace warnings had, that day on Telos long ago. The scream in the Force sounded worse, draining color from the world, making Dustil’s
ears ring and his knees buckle.

That scream meant death. Darkness. Just like on Telos, when Malak had bombed it.

Dustil had been a kid, back then. Powerless. Pathetic. But he wasn’t a kid now. He wasn’t weak, now. He was dark too. He had power. “We have to find out what’s happening!” He heard his voice crack. Like a kid again. Helpless. But he wasn’t. He was better now.

Better. There was a strength in the dark. He drew on it because it kept him from toppling over.

Mekel was suddenly all business, that earlier fit of his gone. “I’m on weapons, okay? I gotta get to the bridge.”

“Wait.” Dustil was fine. He was strong, he was still standing, he just didn’t know how. “First we need to find out what happened.” Like he didn’t know what had just happened. Death, death, death. And her.

“It’s the prox alerts. Not a drill. I need to be at my station.” The Coruscanti was up and popping out the door while Dustil was still fumbling to buckle his pants, chasing after him.

Doors popped open on either side of them and Mandies streamed out. Some of them were just as starkers as Mekk was—or close. But most were armored up, ready for battle.

If Revan would stop yelling, maybe Dustil could fracking concentrate. Was she pissed they were being attacked?

Well, so was Dustil. For a second, he thought he’d give anything to be back on the Grave Bright, where nobody would dare stare at him and snicker, (like that black–haired Mandie kid was doing now), and where an ensign would be giving him a briefing while Inse offered advice. Where someone would have already bothered enough to tell him what the frack was going on.

Another Mandie kid no older than them ran past them in her underwear—still managing to look like she was staring at them, too.

“Better put on clothes, Mekk.” Dustil had brought his gear to the fresher. First rule of Korriban. Always be prepared. He was buckling his shirt now as they ran down the hall.

“What—?” The alarm drowned out the rest of Mekel’s words, overlain by that frackdamned scream. If he could hear her, Mekk wouldn’t be so frackdamned calm.

“Clothes,” Dustil managed. “Remember? Those things you put on in between fracking me, and Lyd, and Milli?”

“What?” If Mekel’s gob got any wider, Dustil could shove his whole fist down it. “Don’t talk about her like that! Milli might be dead.”

“Not sure that’d stop you—”

But Mekel hadn’t stuck around to hear that last bit. He’d put on a burst of speed that had Dustil chasing him down the hall. Thinking of another insult was good. It made him angry. Anger was power, anger like Malak had felt when Telos burned, not like a helpless little kid at all.

“Shit.” Mekel stopped abruptly, bare–assed at the viewscreen in the corridor.

Beneath their ship, the curve of Dromund Kaas was a muddy haze of smoke and red craters,
partially obscured by the fleet of warships streaming toward its surface. Dustil’s head had a sick, hollow place inside as he felt lives on the planet winking out. He staggered back against the wall.

“I gotta go to the bridge,” Mekel repeated, blissfully oblivious to the death below. “I’m on the weapons board—”

“Put on some clothes first,” Dustil reminded him numbly. “I—I’m gonna… I gotta check on my dad.” Lightsaber was still on his belt, thank frack. Those ships were the same ones they’d seen before—shooting in the sky above Medriaas.

If Revan was the one doing this, she was gonna pay.

“Right.” Mekel headed toward their room. Millifar’s room. He glanced back once. “Well, uh, meet me on the bridge soon as you check, okay? I’m sure your dads is fine, Telos.”

Was that supposed to be comforting? If he’d been in Dustil’s head maybe, but out loud the words sounded stupid. The med–bay was close, and the Force–scream in Dustil’s head was distant. Father was in the med–bay. Father had to be safe. Maybe Revan was just upset those fracking ships weren’t waiting for the Aleema to help bomb this fracking planet.

“Sure you’re okay?” Mekel asked, hesitating at the door. Those lights made his skin look bruised, washed him out like a corpse. “I really gotta go, but—”

“Sure. Yeah. Just gotta check on my dad.” A neat trick, being able to talk and walk at the same time, the same time a planet was burning beneath you. Dustil wasn't sure how he was doing it, how he could do it, except it wasn't the first time.

Dustil looked out the window at the ships again, sleek and silvery and wrong. According to the Force, those ships were crewless, but some of them flanked the Aleema in synchronized formation, now half-obscuring the planet beneath. If they'd been firing on her, Dustil thought they'd all be spacedust by now, even with the dreadnaught’s heavy shields. But they weren't firing. More like… flocking. He'd seen mynocks act like that around power couplings. Or the ceega gulls back home.

“Gotta check on my dad,” Dustil repeated—but to the empty air. Mekk was already gone.

The scream in Dustil’s head had faded to a low simmer of agony by the time he reached the medbay.

The medix, Sinae, (who had been looking after Father before) looked up at him behind a sanitary mask. She was surrounded by a nest of medical droids. A pregnant woman lay on a gurney and there was blood on her head and between her legs. The readouts projected above were all flashing red. In the Force, the pregnant lady felt blank and black, like she was already gone. Just a little spark left, tethering her to the baby’s fading one.

“Get out!” the medix told Dustil. “You're not sterile.”

“Where’s my father?” Back on the Grave Bright, no one would have talked to him like she was talking now. If it hadn’t been for that baby who was probably dying, Dustil would have shown her how to show respect. The woman and the baby wouldn’t care. They wouldn’t be frightened. They were practically dead.

“In the holding cells.” The medix’s hand was gloved and coated with gore when she waved it at him. “I mean it! You can't be in here!”

“You're losing her.” Dustil had (officially) studied healing for about five minutes in his brief Jedi
padawan career, but he’d had a knack for it. Master Whahtzhiz had always said so. On Korriban, Dustil had been known for skill in healing up a bruise, too. Healing a bruise easy. Just a little applied heat to a wound, a little increase in circulation, but this was bigger. A lot more of a catastrophe.

A part of him was fascinated by the way those two lives hung on, even as the darkness crept closer. He could see it. He could practically taste it. It didn’t taste bad, either. It made him angry, and that was making him strong. Hadn’t Malak lectured him about death and power? So many memories. So many fracking lectures trapped in Dustil’s head. The pompous gasbag had loved hearing himself talk.

“I will not lose her.” The woman glared at him. “Get out.”

“Just trying to help.” Dustil felt himself smile. If they’d been on his own ship with Inse, she wouldn’t have dared speak to him like that.

The medix was reaching for a sword strapped to her hip when Dustil decided to bug. Why is Father in the holding cells? A sick feeling overtook him, then. This might be about Father all along. That old woman was in the holding cells. That’s where they’d taken her.

Fracking old schutta! Shoulda fried her when I had the chance.

Dustil didn't stop for directions; he just ran, trusting the Force to get him there.

XXX

“Here, kitty, kitty…” Lady Inse Blais couldn't believe she had been reduced to this, coaxing the feral manka mascot of the Grave Bright out of hiding as a respite from boredom, but they had been in hyperspace for days. Perhaps as long as a week—the chronometers had lost count without a fixed destination to adjust to.

Jumping blind also meant they might be in hyperspace for the rest of their short, miserable lives. Inse had amused herself for the first day making those responsible for the calculation suffer. If they were trapped forever, she would do her best to make the remaining crew’s endings as slow and painful as possible too—if only to keep herself distracted.

It just wasn't fair. If she died in space would her ghost still return to Kaas to haunt her siblings and their descendants? Or would she, and all of her glorious potential, be lost forever?

Yellowy–green eyes glared at her from beneath one of the supply room’s carts. The manka hissed.

“Here, kitty, kitty!” The temptation to burn the thing to ash was irrational. Far better to pit its fortitude against some of her crew. Yamit the Bold, perhaps. Or that puffed–up sergeant–at–arms… what was his name?

The manka hissed again. The ship lurched abruptly—and the hyperspace engines shut off. Inse almost lost her footing, but fortunately, there was no one besides this brute animal to see.

The Force, usually a quiet and satisfying dirge within her soul, swelled to a crescendo. Nearly a scream—as if it held trillions of voices all at once—all in dissonant harmony—

“Well, we’ve arrived,” Inse told the cat. “Somewhere. Perhaps you're good luck after all.”

The manka pinned its ears back to its skull and yowled softly. It would be so easy to just make it love her, but Inse was tired of sycophants. That had been one of Lord Malak’s more attractive
qualities—that his mind had been impenetrable and mostly immune to her persuasion.

“Lady…?” Commander Tycho had a tentative tone that grated as he hovered at the door, not even daring to knock. “Are you… are you well?”

“Report,” Inse snapped at him, waggling the hilt of her double-bladed saber at the recalcitrant cat. Mydia had had a nexu kit once that liked to bat at sticks before Nereal fed it to his Gormack slave. “Where are we?”

The manka hissed and bunched farther into its corner. Not taking the bait.

Smart kitty. Inse bared her own teeth back at it.

“I–I’m not sure. These coordinates… they don’t make any sense!” Her unflappable commander actually sounded panicked. “How can we be at zero, zero, zero?”

“We cannot. That’s—”

That was one of the few useful bits of knowledge imparted to Inse by their tutor, Seriina Starr, or Polla Wen, or whatever her name had been.

Zero, zero, zero coordinates weren’t just a blank space on the nav maps. That location marked the beating heart of the Republic. The most heavily populated world in the galaxy. And if somehow their unknown jump had brought them here… well, then, that—

That was incredible. That meant they'd miraculously discovered a new hyperspace route from Sith space to the Republic capital.

It was also hugely problematic, because, presumably, the Republic had planetary defenses… and while the Bright was nominally a Republic-looking ship, the Sith markings on its hull would probably be noticed immediately.

“We’re being hailed,” her terrified commander continued. “I–I don't know what to tell them—”

“Ah.” Inse straightened up and tapped her comm to see the report from the bridge.

“UNKNOWN VESSEL. YOU ARE TRESPASSING IN CORUSCATI SPACE. PLEASE PROCEED TO ORBITAL TEN–AYE, AND PREPARE TO BE BOARDED. ANY DEVIATION WILL BE SEEN AS AN ACT OF WAR—”

“Well? Do you want to act in a war, Tycho?” She gave him a sickly-sweet smile. “No? Then do as they say.”

Coruscant! Inse's mind was swimming with possibilities. As she closed her eyes, Inse could feel the eumenopolis quivering below them—trillions of sentients! So much life in the Force that it felt like a hill of klnhath babies overturned.

So much promise! All laid beneath her feet.

“Be polite when you tell them we surrender...” she added—and then concluded with instructions to her commander that would eliminate a great deal of unpleasantness. For her.

Tycho objected, and Inse was forced to repeat herself. The manka hissed again, lashing its tail from side to side.
The commander’s will sank like mud under her boots and then he slunk off, much like Phylus used to when they made him eat rocks when they were children. Only drooling a little bit.

Coruscant! Of course, Inse had never been to Coruscant, but the Blais family had done work with Lord Malak’s family, and more recently, their successors. She had connections. Oh. What was that flighty Senate girl’s name? Something…something… a number… Racharn?

“Leeshanalala,” she murmured to the cat she was calling Eartip, because it had one black eartip. “Something like that. I suppose I’m not supposed to know, really.” Inse wiggled her fingers at the manka, and it hissed back at her, more strong–willed than Commander Tycho.

“Come with me if you want to live,” she told Eartip, sweetly, drilling the words deep into its mindless, feral head. “Or not, I suppose. But your chances are a great deal better with me.”

Xxx

“What is wrong with your wife, First Husband?” Aemelie Ordo peered through the blue bars of her cell, looking at Carth as if he knew the answer.

Carth’s wife twitched on the floor, her entire body shaking. The blue energy field of his cell lay between them, keeping her just out of reach.

“I don’t know.” His head pounded.

Revan had turned down the forcefield right before she collapsed, but she hadn’t turned it off.

“She is touched by Force–magics,” Aemelie sighed. “I did not spend much time in the medix tents as a girl, but I believe that is a seizure. She might swallow her own tongue. Do you have your commlink?” She looked down at her own sleeping robes. “I left mine with my armor.”

“No.” There had been no time to assign Carth one, and the device with his things back in the med–bay only held Imperial codes.

The alarms overhead flashed a code Carth recognized from the bad old days of the wars. Prox alert. All hands. Battle stations. The Mando’ade used the same codes to mean the same thing? Probably. This ship had once been helmed by ex–Republic soldiers, after all, and distress signals were programmed as flashing red lights galaxy–wide.

On the ground, Revan stopped flailing. Her eyes were half-open and unfocused. A trickle of blood ran from her nose, another from her mouth.

“It's going to be okay,” Carth promised her unconscious form.

“She's not dead,” Aemelie pointed out. “We all may be soon, however, if Canderous has to do everything himself in this battle. It is not that I question my husband’s competence—only that he is but one man and command of that bridge requires at least four officers.”

“Who would be attacking us?” It didn’t make any sense. “Tenebrae wanted Revan here!”

Mission didn’t, his mind reminded him. The other Revan didn’t. Vima Sunrider didn’t—and neither did Master Atris.

When Vima Sunrider had said Revan should never come to Kaas, Carth had become convinced it was the best place for her to come. But now—
Mission warned me, too.

“Logically, it would be the Sith we came here to fight who attacked us.” Aemelie tilted her head, frowning. “Do you hear that? The sublight engines are shifting off. They would not go passive if we were under assault.”

Ship was so damn big that Carth was gonna have to take her word for that. But a millisecond later, the alarm died too, confirming her words.


Maybe Vima Sunrider was right, he thought. Maybe we never should have brought her here.

“Dad!” Dustil appeared in the doorway. “Hey! What—why are you locked up?” He glanced down at Carth’s twitching wife. “What happened to her?”

“Dustil! Hey… uh, can you shut off the forcefield to the cells?” Carth made his voice as friendly and easy–going as possible. “Something happened to Revan and we think the ship’s under attack.”

“Ship’s fine. The planet’s what they’re bombing, Dad.” His son walked forward, glancing down at Revan’s body. “Was Revan trying to break you out of here? Who locked you up?”

“No,” Carth said, at the same time that Aemelie nodded yes. “It was a misunderstanding,” he added fast—before the Mandalorian made things worse. “Can you get us out of here? Fizzle out the electronics?” Revan had done something like that on the Leviathan.

Dustil frowned, looking down at Revan and then back up at him. “Yeah. Of course.” He raised his right hand, fingers already beginning to glow.

“Don’t!” Aemelie began, but lightning jetted out from Dustil’s fingers and sparked the control board.

Behind Dustil, the door to the exit slid shut and a blue field lit the walls, overlain with the red hex of a reinforced energy field.


“Di’kutla! This is where the dar’jett put their jettai prisoners!” Aemelie snapped at Dustil. “The security system has measures in place to prevent their escape!”

“What?” Dustil blinked.

Aemelie rolled her eyes. “You’re lucky we overwrote the depressurization command.”

Dustil glared back her. “You mean we’re trapped? Why are you here? Why are both of you locked up?”

“It’s a… misunderstanding,” Carth soothed, in the same second that Aemelie said, “Third Wife.”

“Hey, uh… do you know who’s attacking the planet?” Carth added. Not just to distract Dustil, Carth damn well wanted to know. *I’m supposed to be the Admiral in charge of the Sith Fleet, aren’t I?* The humor in that was as rotten as the lines on his son’s skin.
“What? I think it's our fleet. Not the normal ones—not sure where they ran off to. But those funny ships that didn't have crews?” Dustil glanced down as if he'd just noticed the woman twitching on the floor again. He bent over Revan’s prone form, taking her wrist in his hand. It looked like he was checking her pulse. “Heard her screaming in the Force. I ran—got here as quick as I could.”

“Can you tell what’s wrong?” Carth pressed against the plasma grid again, but it didn’t budge.

“She’s unconscious.” His son shrugged. “Not dead. Did she attack that pregnant lady? Because I just saw her in the med–bay and she's really messed up.”

“Of course not! Vima Sunrider did. Vima Sunrider tried to sabotage the ship but I… I stopped her. Revan was… is she okay?” Because now Carth’s son had dropped Revan’s arm and was standing up again, that scowling sneer back on his face.

“Stopped her?” That yellow light in Dustil’s eyes was making Carth damned uneasy, gleaming in the flashing lights overhead. “Where’s the old scow now?”

“In the morgue. She was going to kill us all. She was trying to blow up the ship.”

“So you killed Sunrider? Wow, Dad.” One side of Dustil’s mouth pulled up. “Pretty impressive.”

Carth could have done without his son’s smirk right about then.

“Your father shot the old one after she nearly killed Dessa of Rialis. Third Wife lost her reason and overreacted by imprisoning us both. Then she fell down on the floor.” Aemelie’s commentary wasn't helping.

“Wait, what? Revan locked you guys up?”

All the color seemed to have leached from his wife's skin in the blue, flickering light, just as it had from his son’s Sith–marked face as it hardened, staring down at her limp form.

“You're saying your wife locked you up in here, Dad?”

Carth wasn't sure in that moment which of them he was more frightened for. “I'm saying it's complicated,” he soothed. “Dustil, it's complicated.”

“Frack complicated.” Dustil’s arm shot out and the wall in front of Carth rippled. There was a sparking sound and then the forcefield around their cells cut out completely. “Nobody puts my father in a fracking cage.”

“How—?”

“Could feel the live circuits in the wall,” Dustil said smugly. “Sensed them. They were the brightest ones.”

“Uh… good… good job.” Carth knelt by Revan’s side, propping her head up.

“You are fortunate you missed the rebreathers,” Aemelie clipped, stepping free from her cell. “Losing oxygen in this sealed chamber would complicate our imprisonment.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, you’re fortunate I need you and your Mandalorian army to fly this tub of bolts—”

The two of them argued some more. Revan’s nose was bleeding.

“It's gonna be okay, beautiful,” Carth promised, bending down to help her. He just wasn't sure
“It’s gonna be okay, beautiful.” A voice outside. Somewhere else.

Tiny and inconsequential to them, them who strode the stars and all of the space between. Them who she commanded. Them who were she, like fingers spread across a navboard, tracing fleet commands on a holo-projected screen.

Revan flew. Now she was—

—orbiting a brown-green world where the moon dragged close. Her fighters discharged as flocks of organic beasts rose in the sky to meet them.

Beneath drexl wings, the city was already on fire.


“No!” Her scream seemed to echo through space. Did the ships pause? Did they pull back?

[“Dumb Sleepers! You need to tell them to stop, sis. They won't listen to me.”]

“Mission?” This had to be a hallucination because the truth was impossible. Her eyes were faceted, looking at three different planets. No, four—

“Revan?”

That was a voice somewhere outside the world again. The tiny one that sounded like Carth.

“She can't hear you, Dad.”

“She blinked, though. I just saw her blink. Dustil, can you do something?”

“I am! I'm trying to get this kriffing door open!”

“Heal her! Wake her up somehow—”

“I didn't know your son had medical training.”

“Yeah, cause I don't.” Footsteps, as if the boy had come closer. “She's not dying, Dad. She's just… weird. Like the Force is... there, but she's... frozen.” Scuffling noise and something pressed against her arm. A hand, maybe. “When the other one was in a coma she was gone. But Revan’s here. I don't know how else to explain it.”

Carth’s voice again. “Then we need help! You know this ship, Aemelie! There must be some kind of override.”

“There is.” The female voice sounded amused now. “But we cannot reach it from inside this room. Keep her from biting her tongue again, First Husband. Use your belt if you must.”

Salty. Copper. Wet. That was the taste of it, that strange wetness. Blood.

{{Error: Organic interface malfunction. Autonomic repairs authorized}}
“No. Please—”

[“Polla Revan? Dumbass! Why did you come here?”]

“Mission? Are you here too?”

{{Error: Organic interface malfunction. Initializing nanocysts. Further interaction may result in premature termination}}

“That's a lot of blood, Dad.”

“Prop her head up. Help me—”

World tilted.

{{Analysis: Cascade failure. Initiating repairs to primary organic matrix. Reboot}}

“No.”

Rebooting sequence initialized.

“No.”

She was—

—launching a nest of fighters from her sides as her main cannon targeted the glittering surface of a world below.


“No.”

“She said something! Freckles, can you hear me?” Something on Revan’s face, a flickering light in her eyes, splintering the facets into larger and larger planes, like a viewfinder pulling back. Here, the ice of Hoth, the wasted plains of Ziost, Nar Shaddaa and Onderon burning—


The mechanical command almost felt like a threat.

“No.”

[“I said no, already! Geez, Polla Revan! Kaas said they'd listen to you!”]

“Mission?”

“Position? What position?”

“She said, 'Mission,' Wife Whatever of Ordo. Am I supposed to give her a title, too, Dad?”

“Her name is Aemelie.”

“Third Wife. Can you hear me?”

{{Organic interface is online, little sister. Direct relay is possible, for a limited time}}
“What? What are you talking about?”

“Mission?” This time, Revan felt her lips move. “Mission is that you? Are you in the computer? Am I? Please tell me this is a simulation! Hallucination. Please tell me I'm just losing my mind and it just said Coruscant—”

She was—

*Coruscant, that's Coruscant, I—*

{{Planetary defenders targeted. Initiate fleet jump sequence. Y/N}}

“No!”

{{“Sis?”}}

“Mission! H–how—?”

{{“You're asking me? Whoa. That's the Aleema, right? It's huge!”}}

{{Little sister, dock. Find the organic interface. Bring her to us}}

Stop.

{{Bring her to us or this will not stop}}

{{“You're not the boss of her! Or me!”}}

“Mission? Can you hear me? Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you.” The planes resolved into a face. Carth’s face: wan, worried, with that brutally short hair, its new lines.

Revan blinked. “*Stop. STOP THIS. STOP!***” Her mouth refused to move.

{{Organic interface back online. Terminating connection to preserve neurons}}

Like a light had been switched off, the world resolved back into itself. The ceiling curved overhead. Gray and corrugated durasteel. The floor hummed gently beneath her, slightly warm like a living thing. Carth’s drawn face loomed above her. His arms were holding her up, clumsily wiping at her face with a cloth.

“Your nose is bleeding, beautiful.”

“Carth? I–I had the strangest dream.” Her face was wet and the cloth was red. Revan felt hysteria bubble up in her guts. *You were in some kind of cell and all these planets were burning and Mission was there. And there were ships and they—we—I was… I was everywhere.*

Whatever it had been still danced at the edges of her vision like no dream at all.

“You had some kind of fit.” He frowned warily. There was a raised structure behind him, lined with half-walls. The pale of the ceiling above their heads. Corrugated. Familiar. One side of the wall was lined with four half-walled cells. The field had been switched off.

It was all abruptly familiar. Revan had been in this room before. The memory came in like
hyperdrive—as if someone had slammed it into her head.

Xxx

The betrayer hung on the back wall of his cell. She'd taken no chances. Force restraints blocked his hands and feet. She'd stripped away his armor, leaving his Force–ravaged skin to shiver in the arctic air. She'd stripped away everything—save the prosthesis.

This was a display of power and he—both of them—needed to understand who was in control.

“Gloating seems beneath you.” His eyes were yellow and still partially sane. His voice wheezed through the voder.

“Hello, Mal….” Revan nodded her head, taking a breath of relief that his eyes weren't glowing with the Emperor’s madness again. “I’m sure you have questions for me.”

“Just one, Red.” His voder hissed. “Are you going to kill me?”

She owed him the truth. “Not yet.”

Xxx

Not yet—

“We’re on the Aleema.” Memory came back by degrees. Malak’s face morphed into Carth’s with disturbing realism. Revan blinked. “I put you here. In one of these cells.”

“Y–yes.” Carth’s face was downright comical in its contortions.

“Why?” In that exact moment, she had no more memory of his actions than Malak’s.

Carth’s lips thinned. “I shot Vima Sunrider. She was trying to sabotage the ship and I killed her.”

“Oh.” Regret came back for the sheer waste of it all. Who let you out? Who disobeyed me? “Uh, who let you out?”

“I did. Wanna make something of it?” Abruptly, Dustil loomed over them, yellow eyes blazing.

Revan blinked and felt a hundred more tiny lights wink out. “What?” The planet below us. That was from the planet below us. It’s being bombed. You know it’s being bombed. You were there. You flew with them. You saw them bombing it—

You helped—

Good.

That’s what he deserves, a part of her mind whispered. What Tenebrae deserves. And Dar’Revan’s down there somewhere. Even if she's still in a coma she fracking deserves this too—

Dustil’s face seemed to grow paler as if he’d felt the Force darken even as Revan had. “I said,” Carth’s kid hissed, “I let my Dad out of your fracking jail. You want to make something of it, Revan?”

“Of what? No. Not now.” There were more important—far more important concerns than this brat. The Emperor had… he had taunted her—before. He had held a picture of Malachor—
“The Kaas City Spaceport?” Tenebrae’s voice had been mocking. “Do let me know when you find it.”

We found it. Those ships and I found it and reduced it to rubble. I was there, I was there with them and we made it burn—

“Revan?” Carth’s voice snapped her back to the real world.

“She saw—the same ships we saw at Medriaas. Part of the Sith Fleet, but now they’re bombing Kaas.”

Not just Kaas. There had been other planets, too. Other targets. Nar Shaddaa. Hoth. Onderon. Telos—

“Right now we need to stop those ships—I was… I saw them but they won’t listen—” her head turned toward the sealed door, the Force giving her just enough forewarning to step back before the door blew open.

Revan’s hand outstretched, forming a shimmering field of Force energy between all of them and the blast.

“Finally!” Canderous emerged from the smoke, a blunt obelisk of beskar and guns, mirrored visor of the mask reflecting Carth’s startled face. The kids surrounding him were likewise armed. “What the hell did you do to the door? Some osik out there. I don’t know what you heard—the comms went dead—” his voice broke off with surprise. “What the hell happened to you, Revan? You look even worse than Republic.”

“Thanks,” Carth coughed.

“You picked a strange time for a battle circle.” He almost sounded amused. “Did you and Aemelie resolve—”

“No. My nose was bleeding.” She’d forgotten. “I had a fit when we came out of hyperspace. I saw ships—the ones that fought with us against Wies. I think… they’re here, aren’t they?”

“Dustil Onasi activated the emergency overrides, Husband,” Aemelie added. “Trapping us all in this room. Revan and I have resolved nothing. Are we still under attack?”

“We never were.” Canderous snorted under his helm. “Damndest thing….”

Xxx

From the top of the world, the planet of Telos looked as pure as one of Atris’s handmaidens, Traya thought. Unsullied by war, or the cares of the world. The scars from Malak’s assault lay deep beneath the surface, buried under the ice floes, overgrown by jungle at the equator.

From here, all she saw was peace.

Breathe it in. Traya did, relishing the moment, for it would not last.

“This was the newsfeed three standard hours ago.” Mical tapped the screen of his desk to bring up the Aurebesh on their main projector. The headlines illuminated his form, painting it in dark lines like Force corruption. “From Sith space.”

Aid requested—

Supplies running low on Thule as forces loyal to the Priests and the Five Families rally their defenses in Ziost City—

The slaves have revolted and they’re overrunning Ziost City—

The slaves have executed all the noble houses of Thule—

Where is Lord Tenebrae? Why has he forsaken us?

We have liberated the free city of Kaas, and most of the planet. We are establishing an interim government until the time free elections can be organized—

We have liberated the free planet of Ziost. The Oracles have surrendered to our forces. We are establishing an interim government—

Lord Salap proclaims that Lord Revan has agreed to stand in as interim governor—

Lord Revan is the savior of Thule—

Lord Revan has vanquished His Luminance. Lord Revan is His Luminance. The Priests acknowledge his or her divinity and legal title to the world of Thule—

Lord Revan is our savior, the Ziost Oracle proclaims—

All hail Lord Revan, savior of the Empire—

An Imperial holiday of the Fifth Month, Ninth Day has been elected to serve as our independence from tyranny on Dromund Kaas. All hail Lord Revan—

XXX

Mical paced back to his desk. “And then it all stops. This is the last transmission—if you don’t count that pirate feed the Republic reporter has.”

XXX

UNKNOWN SHIPS IN THE SKY OVER THULE. OVER ZIOST. OVER DROMUND KAAAS. MOBILIZING DEFENSE—

XXX

Traya sighed, letting the moment of calm break. “From what I know of the Sith—and of Revan—I find that pirate feed we were watching more accurate than this Imperial propaganda.”

Her son lifted an eyebrow. “I’m sure you are correct, but there is one constant in every account.”

Traya sighed. “Yes.”
Trista Jar: “Reports continue to stream in from the afflicted worlds, but the Supreme Chancellor has yet to make a statement. How much longer will our government keep us in the dark?”

Traya dimmed the hysterical voices of the newscasters down to a whisper and walked to the window, looking out on the snow blowing across the empty plains. The sky above was clear, and lightening toward dawn. From this view, all was peaceful, the planet of Telos entirely untouched.

No sign of the nightmare scream in the Force that had woken them both. No sign of the scout ships that had briefly darkened the Telosian skies, before flickering away to rain death down upon other worlds.

*Did you spare me on purpose, padawan?* An inane thought, quickly dismissed.

“The ships are gone,” Her son appeared stuck on the obvious. His voice still retained its air of surprise. “The Sleepers pulled away from Telos and went to hyperspace.”

Traya nodded, watching more reports coming in from all sectors of the galaxy. “The full fleet was never here at all. And our refuge was designed to protect the Telos defense grid’s generators,” she reminded him. “It withstood worse from Malak’s attack. You and I were never in any true danger.”

“Aren’t you concerned with *why* the Sleepers disengaged before they bombed Telos?” His voice sharpened into a near–mirror of her own, higher–pitched than his usual solid baritone. “They showed no restraint with Hoth. Or Nar. Or Onderon. And the Sith Empire’s media net is gone completely—not even distress beacons are getting out. We know their planets suffered—but to lose the entire grid—”

“You have eyes but you do not see, Mical.” Her son was still so young. For all the memories he had taken, (not enough), he still retained that childish righteousness that Master Atris had worked so hard to instill in all of her followers. It had, Traya thought, been responsible for Meetra’s ruination, and probably Brianna’s betrayal as well.

Of course, she—a part of her now Atris, too—knew that it was his resolve that made her son bend. Revan Starfire and Davad Arkan had been brittle tools, for all of their strength. Mical was far more pliable. Like Oerin had been, before his death.

“See what?” Mical’s wide brow furrowed. “Logically, I would expect Telos to be bombed *before* Nar Shaddaa, given Revan’s history with the planet.”

“Your mistake is thinking this assault is grounded in logic at all. Observe Hoth.” She pointed. Only one–quarter of the ice planet was lined in red, indicating the extent of its ravaged surface. The edges of devastation were neat, almost surgically, cut.

“Yes?” His tone indicated impatience. “Again, they pulled their attack. What does it mean?”

“You have eyes to see. The ships swarmed above the mining facility.” Traya shrugged as her last scion only raised a puzzled eyebrow. “The mining facility that was *Revan’s* birthplace.”

Mical shrugged. “And Nar Shaddaa?” A circle of ruin was stamped into its equator, half above its
narrow sea. “What is significant about Nar?”

Traya chuckled. “I admit, that one puzzles me too. Vrook Lamar took her there as a child—after the incident on Telos. And Revan and Malak spent time there as well, rallying troops to join their cause against the Mandalorians—but what they found, they never shared with me.”

“Onderon?” Half the city of Iziz was on fire, and then also the southern grasslands more than a thousand kilometers to the south. The resultant pattern formed a dot and line, curving across the planet’s surface. A more whimsical creature than Traya’s son might have noted it looked like a drexl’s wing.

“Revan was only there for a few weeks, but I’d imagine it left an impression. Certainly, Davad left an impression. And, of course, she spent a great deal of time in the sky above as well… in the battle for Dxun.”

Or, perhaps, Traya thought, some of the messages were meant for her—and not for Revan at all. Had Vitiate finally noticed her influence and divined its source? After all these years? For Vima and Nomi Sunrider, Onderon held a great deal of shared significance.

Although it would be strategically impractical, a part of her almost wished he had.

“The Sleepers didn’t bomb the Dxun moon.” Mical had a stubbornly literal streak. “They bombed Iziz. General Vaklu barely escaped with his life and no one has seen the queen. The palace is a smoking crater, by all accounts.”

A part of Traya’s selves had once been very happy on the planet of Onderon. Indeed, perhaps that had been the last happy time—

“You look for patterns of logic from Sith–made things? Each Sleeper was a sentient being, once,” she explained (not for the first time) to Mical. “Their attack formations more closely resemble ceega gull flights or killick swarms than those perpetrated by regimented drones. These locations—these places…I assume that the Sleepers chose them to provoke an emotional response. They were making this personal.”

Mical raised an eyebrow. “That’s quite a leap, Master.”

“The targets weren’t chosen for their strategic value. They were chosen by Revan, or more probably, in an effort to provoke Revan.”

“And yet… the Sleepers pulled away from Telos?” He said the words like a challenge—as if he was challenging her. So soon? “Her husband’s homeworld? The site of Malak’s first betrayal? Why?”

“Perhaps the point of the threat had been made?” Traya shrugged. “Or, perhaps Revan Starfire told them to stop. Her husband’s homeworld, the place where her childhood unraveled… perhaps she ordered them to stand down.”

“But she isn’t in the tomb. How can she control them at all? You said we would know if she went to the tomb—”

“Conjecture,” Traya said. “Nothing more. Had we the same memories, perhaps it would make sense to you.”

Perhaps, their point made, the mad fleet had simply… stopped—at least for now. They took limited orders from Vitiate. Perhaps Revan’s ambulatory form possessed the same ability to
communicate. Traya did not know. The Sleepers had always been asleep before. She did not know why—any more than she knew what could have possibly awakened them.

*Revan’s presence in the Nathema System? But she was there before. It has to be something else, something more—*

But Padawan Mical Jorde had been trained by a Coruscanti senator’s son. A retreat before assured victory was not in his nature—and his solipsism had been overindulged in the Jedi Temple. “I am not ready to lose all of myself. We agreed that different perspectives were useful.”

“Then accept the wisdom of my accumulated lives. *Something* stopped the Sleepers from bombing Telos. Perhaps it was Revan, or perhaps they acquired a different target. Regardless…” Traya indicated the one frozen holo—still: the snarling face of High Admiral Rensha, dressed in full epaulets and bars, Republic Cross of Glory pinned on her breast. “The Fleet and the Senate are quite eager to place all blame for this aggression at Darth Revan’s feet. What is your analysis of that?”

Her final apprentice frowned slowly. “We *could* tell them that it seems highly unlikely that Darth Revan would attack Republic and Sith space at once. SIS says Mandalore’s forces could barely invade one system—let alone assault widely—spread targets across an entire galaxy.”

Traya sighed. His mind, so clever and so sadly obvious. “True.” She doubted Revan was behind this at all. “Of course, they have the same SIS reports.”

Accounts of Revan’s activities from Katarr and Biscain were scant, but they seemed to indicate a woman who acted to preserve life, not take it. Commander Cody’s testimony, in particular, described a creature with a mind cunning enough to take over his ship—and benevolent enough to save its crew—even when doing so risked the lives of her own people—not to mention everyone on the planet below.

And then, there were her actions at Biscain—

*No doubt Nihilus begged her to end him. After all, the creature had begged Kavar Vakla for death, too. One of the last Jedi “secrets” the man had seen fit to share with Azen Loanin, who had, of course, shared it with his good friend Mical Jorde.…*

No, this Revan was a far cry from the woman Traya had molded to destroy Malak and the Star Forge. And if she was also capricious enough to raise a rebellion in the heart of Vitiate's empire—

“Are you sure that’s truly *her*?” Mical’s voice interrupted Traya’s thoughts. He nodded at the blurred clip of the gaunt woman in the torn white dress, cap of red hair clipped to her skull, standing next to Yuthura Ban and a Wookiee. “Her left arm—it’s difficult to see with the smoke and the Wookiee’s shadow blocking it—but it almost looks… gold. Sheris Loran had a prosthetic arm.”

“Would you were right… but, no.” Traya shook her head. “The body of Sheris Loran had my padawan’s mind. The Revan I trained would never risk an open coup against Vitiate. Not when she controlled the Sleepers.”

“But you just said she does *not* control the Sleepers…?” He tilted his head, frowning. “Master Traya, with all respect, I think you are sometimes… confused. If there is one Revan there, why not two? One of the reports said there was footage of two Revans. We hypothesize they left Coruscant together. They *could* be working together, still.”
“The only footage extant is what the Fleet censored. Before our cells on Kaas went dark, reports said that the false Revan had never woken from her coma.” Hope was fleeting. A lesson Traya had learned long ago.

“We still have no way of knowing,” her son folded his hands. “But Rensha requested Jedi presence on the Great Hunt. They’re traveling to Sith space. I could go and advise—”

I cannot trust you to go. The comment about her confusion rankled Traya more than she wanted him to see.

Because you know it could be true, a voice whispered. There were too many now for it to have a name.

Memories she knew were hers mocked her: Mical, tiny and squalling next to his twin. Revan, a padawan of twelve, green eyes sparkling with interest when Dorak allowed her into his class on ancient languages. Meetra, defiant and unrepentant after Malachor—blinded, broken—

Oerin, a boy of five, toddling after his older brothers. The one she had chosen to raise above the rest—the culmination of all her hopes.

But buried beneath were other faces. Faces hundreds of years dead. Sith and Jedi alike and always—always—the same end. So much hope, so much promise…and so much power that never set things right. The Force corrupted always: the power to shape and to break, to shatter and to grow—always twisting the galaxy in its own image. The loss of kolto had sent factions across the galaxy scurrying for peace treaties. Loss of the galaxy’s most formidable warriors would do the same on an even larger scale. The Jedi were close to ruin, but if that fool amnesiac managed to rally the Sith to her cause as she had the Mando’ade—

Revan would make the galaxy bleed and burn—all due to her ignorance. Her pride. Her folly. Her power. It could not end otherwise.

“You are right,” Traya sighed slowly. “Rensha needs Jedi guidance. But not you, my son. I will go with the Fleet.” Old Scaly had mentioned the discovery of new hyperlanes. Claimed they could reach Sith space in days, not weeks. Another risk to be measured and contained. “Inform the High Admiral she will need to send a ship to retrieve me.”

Her son nodded slowly. “Yes, Master.”

Xxx

Above, the skies of Dromund Kaas burned. The Sleepers were awake. Thousands of them, a dark malevolence in the Force.

And her supposed, promised destiny.

Stop, Revan thought uselessly, but Sheris’s body was an inconsequential speck to the monsters above. She was blind and deaf to them, now. Just another dust–mote. Fodder beneath their wings.

The Fragment was a scream in the sky. A directed ion storm, bearing down upon them all.

The Sleepers were awake, but Revan could sense nothing but malevolent rage. It was both cruel and cold, retaliatory and randomized. The Sleepers were pure Force made metal, and beneath their wings, death came.

Dust and fire consumed Kaas City, living and stone alike. It choked her throat, battering against
Revan’s meager defenses. Without Yuthura at her side strengthening their Force shields, they would already be dead.

But Yuthura was tiring. She turned to Revan, head tails whipping her face and screamed something lost to the wind. Above their heads, silvery ships burned through the atmosphere, bursts from cannon igniting the patch of relative shelter ahead: the low bunker that had once housed part Tenebrae’s hunting stables. Shrieks within as the beasts there died. Some sentient, some dumb animals.

Trapped in Sheris’s weak body, Revan felt each life ending, but no accompanying rush of power. No. All she felt was pain.

A barrage of plasma bolts to their right sent one of the remaining walls of the palace collapsing toward them. Revan saw it happen in slow motion, as the Force coalesced around her fingers, sparking blue–white; stronger, in her desperation, than expected. She saw Yuthura’s hands raise a thin shield that buttressed her own. Saw a burning, half-molten piece of rock sink through the Twi’lek’s Force barricade—and then another. Saw herself—as if from a distance—move to the woman’s side, adding her own weak strength to her ally’s effort. The shield splashed, shoving the tons of rock back, but the effort threatened to overwhelm them both—

“Can’t… do that… again.” Yuthura murmured in her ear. Her skin was clammy and cold. “That was… that was all I had.”

Neither can I. Rationally, she knew her limits. But fear fueled Revan, at least for the moment, giving her strength enough to help hold Yuthura upright.

“We need to get underground,” rumbled Grarwwaar. His voder cut through the noise overhead, strangely echoing and amplified as if his voice was closer than he was.

There is a tunnel. Yuthura signaled with one weary t’chun. Left. Maybe ten meters.

“Left,” growled Grarwwaar, motioning to the band of mercenaries behind him. Only three remained. A Houck, a grizzled Human male, and an armored, indeterminate shape who could have been Gan or Rodian, or even an Ugnaught, under armor that looked designed for a child. The collapse of the arena stairs had taken the rest of the Exchange mercenaries Polla Organa had recruited; but a few other survivors crowded behind the mercs, hesitant, as if not sure of their welcome.

“Now,” Grarwwaar ordered, and the others moved closer. A motley lot: a few ragged slaves, what looked to be one of Tenebrae’s guards—or a slave who had stolen an ill–fitting costume, a woman foolish enough to bring a squalling babe into this—

Where else was she to go? There is no safety left.

“Push the wall back,” Revan screamed to Yuthura, trying to be heard over the din. The Twi’lek stepped closer, lifting her head warily. Blue light surged abruptly around her hands. Taking that as acquiescence, Revan added her strength, pushing the collapsing wall away from them. It fell back with startling ease.

The Force was… it was stronger than it should have been for weak Sheris. But there was no time to worry about why.

The wall crumbled before them. The deadly rain of ships overhead had also moved on, but the air still smoked green and smelled like poison.
Revan looked down and saw blisters forming on the skin of her arm where her gown had ripped.

*Oh, no.*

“We need to move underground!” she called out to Yuthura and watched the woman frown with incomprehension as the wind tore away her words.

The bombers had used civ-suppressing payloads, Revan thought. Not planet-killers—or they would all be dead already. Civ-suppressors were designed to sicken and demoralize over a period of months, with EMP pulse-blasts in atmosphere to knock out both inter and extra-planetary communications grids.

This was the kind of war that Revan had taught the Mando’ade. First with the rakghoul plague on Taris. Then again, with the scorched ground on the Dxun moon, the poisoned camps, the tainted supply chains… until finally, they had shown how much they had learned her lesson with the Stereb cities, burning the natives alive with radioactive fire—

*Don’t give yourself too much credit, Red. What you did was nothing new.*

It could very well be Malak’s real ghost in her ear now. Or just her own conscience. But arguing with… with *him* served no purpose.

*I know, Mal.* Her eyes squinted, fogged with grit. Behind her, that child was crying, faintly. Hopelessly. *That’s not what I meant.*

*You were the first Jedi commander in forty years to use the consequence of war against your enemies. Instead of saving them.*

She felt her lips twitch as if that was funny. *They were going to give us medals for that. Do you remember?*

She had selected the Jedi Council member Master San Pertel to receive it in their stead. Receive the Republic Cross of Honor for them both. At the armistice at Malachor V.

The man had always been an obedient fool.

*Yes. Just the one word from Malak. And all that time between them.*

Revan gestured to Yuthura, picking the direction the wind was blowing to follow the route the Twi’lek indicated, so at least they would have that wind at their backs. It was difficult to tell with such low visibility, but she thought the jagged remains of a wall in the distance might have been the one that ran from Tenebrae’s palace to the city’s main square, which meant going the way opposite would lead them to the jungle.

Revan followed the line with her eyes until it vanished into black smoke, aware of the others trailing behind. Something was burning in that direction. *Possibly the entire jungle. But they won’t bomb the Dark Temple. Not while they hope to get the Fragment in her tomb…. The Fragment.* All this time, nearly since the bombing had begun, and the woman was still screaming through the Force like an avenging monolith.

“*Lord Revan!*** A real voice boomed in front of them, Force–enhanced and so loud that Revan nearly jumped out of her skin.

An apparition emerged from the smoke—a red–robed figure covered in dust, with a glowing Force
light above her head. It took Revan a second to recognize Lady Mydia Blais under the mat of tangled hair and grime–streaked face.

The girl’s yellowish eyes narrowed and her mouth broke into a hopeful smile. “Is…my brother with you? My brother? Phylus?”

Revan merely shook her head. This was no time for platitudes.

The girl frowned. “Oh.” She beckoned them forward.

Ahead, Revan saw a gap in the smoke and what looked like a hole in the ground—a blasted–open sewer pipe, perhaps, or the remains of some aristocrat’s dungeon. Mydia summoned a second Force–light, two of them hovering above her head as they all descended into the tunnels, splashing into filth below that was definitely sewage.

In the depths, the wind noise lessened. “I found others,” Mydia said hoarsely after they’d helped the refugees inside. She eyed the cowering figure in red robes disdainfully, the other refugees merited merely a disgusted sniff. “Mostly slaves. They refused to listen when I commanded them to stay. I daresay they will listen to you, Lord Revan. Can we track them down and punish them? Please?”

Revan considered her, wondering if keeping the most unstable of the Blais children alive was worth the bother. The girl was powerful, burning Force with her little light as carelessly as the Fragment had at the Jedi Temple. Power such as that could be useful but Sith aristocrats had always been a problem—even more arrogant and inbred than Coruscanti senators—and this one, barely grown, possessed all the limitations of her kind—

“Lord Revan?” Mydia repeated. “You're staring at me like I've got something on my face. Do I have something on my face?” Her hand went to her cheeks, which looked flushed and filthy, but unmarred from the blast burns that had gotten the rest of them. Indeed, the girl practically pulsed with health.

So much that she was nearly glowing in the Force—

Ah.

And then Revan saw what should have been obvious. “Congratulations,” she offered stiffly. “You and your child are unharmed. We need to get you a prophylactic dose of anti–rads soon, however. For… for both of you.”

The girl’s smile widened. “Can you tell what it is? I was supposed to get scanned next week.”

“It has no idea. So… no. I can’t. Not really “ The mind was a half-formed blob, just a warmth. Easy to miss if you didn't know what to look for.

She and Malak hadn't known what to look for eleven years ago. Only that long? It felt like a century. Don't think of him. The Emperor took Malachor and he is dead, or it is some kind of trick, trap, he wants you off–guard—

He's fine, Red. That voice again. Like his breath on her hair. For now... he's fine. But she needs your help.

It was unbecoming to be jealous of a ghost’s attention to the Fragment. And the others would think Revan insane if she answered Malak out loud with an explanation of the mechanics of the tomb. One of the many things about their role in the Sith Empire that Malak had never understood.
So many things you never knew, Mal. So many things I could never tell you—

Be it a real ghost or her own conscience, the only answer was the whisper of a laugh, like wind ruffling across her cropped hair. And now I’m dead. Perhaps I’ve learned something from the experience, Red. Just as you did.

Meanwhile, the child prattled on as they walked through filth. “I suppose my babe’s not genetically Lord Malak’s, but he did promise me a seat on the Dark Council when we overthrow the Emperor. I want you to know that I will hold that seat merely for our daughter. Or son. Whichever.” Mydia Blais’s voice turned abruptly serious. “Inse can have House Blais when I’m a Darth D’Reev on Coruscant. Or… Senator Darth? Is that right? I don’t really understand your Republic titles.”

“Right now we are trudging through a sewer.” Revan felt her mouth twitch. “I’m sure you will have ample time later to plan your child’s future. If we survive.”

“Grandmother was most optimistic about our chances,” Mydia giggled. “She says my children will restore the pride of our House.”

“I never met your grandmother.” The woman had been dead for decades—or such had been Revan’s understanding. Noble Sith families venerated their dead, delved into Sith sorcery and claims of ghosts.

Claims, Red? Malak had no right to sound so amused while Revan was trudging through filth half-poisoned. Potentially delirious from radiation poisoning as well.

“Oh, Grandmother Poxia watched you!” Mydia smiled. “Mother is still sulking, I imagine. I haven’t heard from her at all. Nereal died about twenty minutes ago when those ships bombed the Barasit Province, and Rhea got the flu and puked his guts out a month ago, all alone on Ziosk—” she yawned. “That leaves me and Phylus and Inse, but I can’t imagine they’ll survive on their own. Inse is far too disagreeable and poor Phylus….” she sniffled, wiping back a tear. “He’s probably pinned under a rock somewhere bleeding and concussed—even as we are all healthy and whole.”

“Once we establish our base we’ll search for survivors,” Revan promised. Despite the girl’s inane prattle, this scene was familiar. The pack of armed soldiers at her back, the trail of refugees following, the fellow Jedi by her side, the helpless civilian in need of rescue—

She felt her mouth twitch and reassessed the last.

Mydia Blais looked a great deal better off right now than any of them.

“You’re staring at me oddly again,” the girl murmured. “Is it my hair? It must be frightful?”

“Yuthura is tiring.” Revan could feel it, like a faltering heartbeat, the slowing of the other woman’s steps. “Help her, Mydia.”

“I’m… fine.” But the Twi’lek didn’t sound fine. The mottled stripes on her lekku were faded in the Force light. And when Revan took her hand to check her pulse, it was cold.

“Twi’lek are more sensitive to radiation,” Revan said, as Mydia Blais slung an arm around Yuthura’s waist to support her. “Vik always used to get deathly ill when we went into the contaminated zones. A few times I pulled him back from the brink.”

Yuthura looked up. “I didn’t know you fought so closely with him. I knew he followed you, but… he… he was a friend.”
“I remember.” Revan nodded. “A rather close one of yours, on Manaan—”

“On Manaan,” Yuthura murmured, raising a brow ridge. “Of course. Yes. We were.”

“He was always kind to me. When I lost my arm, he—” Revan’s voice halted.

*I was almost never with Tio in the field. I commanded him. I commanded his unit. His unit, with Surik to control them, and Sheris to heal. Sheris Loran, their padawan healer—*

*That was me,* a voice asserted itself. Quiet and… something else. Almost smug. *I can heal them now, Revan. What can you do?*

*Survive. Stop the Fragment.*

*Then we need each other, don’t we?*

Revan felt her foot stumble over an uneven patch on the floor. “He was amusing,” she said, searching for a compliment that was true. “Vik always had a sense of humor, even in our darkest times.”

She remembered, suddenly, making him choose among the padawans. Choose the ones to keep. Sheris herself had been in that lot—

“Yes. Vik was another… close friend.” Ahead of her, Yuthura wavered on her feet too, thankfully beyond the point of curiosity. “But… dead. Vikor… Vikor died.”

“It was Malachi who ordered their execution. And I killed him for it.” It had been but one of a dozen reasons (and the man had been dying anyway), but saying so out loud was strangely gratifying, even if Yuthura only cast Revan a dazed glance, before taking Mydia Blais’s arm and limping forward again.

*Have I told her this before?* Revan couldn’t remember.

“Was it her who killed D’Reev?” The Houck mercenary muttered it quietly to the Human in an obscure dialect of Telosian argot, but Revan heard them, just as she heard the frightened whispers of the refugees behind them, the dying city above them, and the pain that seemed to soak into the ground of Kaas itself.

*So much pain.*

“Don’t matter,” his friend clicked back in the same tongue. “That contract’s all off, now. Signed and dealt. D’Rreev One canceled retaliation for any hits. We’re here to save the galaxy now, right? Like the Boss said.”

“I guess. Lucky for her.”

The Human’s voice dropped almost to the point of inaudibility. “Why? Wanna try your chances on her now, Rogere? Hope you said bye to the grubs afore you left Byss—”

“You know she can hear you fellows?” the Wookiee rumbled, in Basic. “I assume. Jedi have keen senses.”

“That’s right. I can,” Revan clicked. The puzzle of their words fueled her steps, itch at the back of her neck spiking her adrenaline, with a growing suspicion brewing in her gut.

Polla Organa had recruited these Exchange mercenaries… but how had she found them in the first
place? While there were some criminal syndicates that operated within the Sith Empire, it still seemed a rather large coincidence that a common Deralian smuggler would be so easily connected—

*Or I’m underestimating her.* She had underestimated the smuggler before, too. With a pang, Revan allowed herself to consider that the woman fearless enough to face down Tenebrae with nothing but a brick could be dead.

“You’re tiring,” the Wookiee rumbled. “Lord Revan, if you’d prefer to take my arm—I believe we’re close. The air smells different. Something other than sewer and swamp gas.”

She started, surprised at how close he’d crept. As hunters their kind were near—soundless, but this one was especially light on his feet.

*He also doesn’t smell,* Revan realized. Her nose was clogged with the scent of burning and ashes—and now, overwhelmingly, sewer—but even so—

*You’re always so suspicious.* The voice that was Sheris—if it was Sheris—sounded tired too. *Perhaps they are what they say. They’ve been nothing but kind. You need to learn trust.*

*I’m amazed you survived the Sith,* Revan thought back—a millisecond before she realized she’d set herself up all too well.

*Are you? But I had such a powerful protector.*

“You’ve... done well, Mydia,” Yuthura Ban mumbled into the girl’s arm in front of them. “Very well.”

“Well, I figured out that you arranged this little coup of yours to rescue me! Rescuing you back was the least I could do! I hope we find Phylus!” Mydia turned her head back to Revan and graced her with a smile. “And I hope Lord Malak returns to us both, Lord Revan. No doubt he’s worked out the plan to kill Inse by now. She snores, you know. And her feet are deformed. It’s tragic.”

Revan bit back a laugh, a scrap of dark humor emerging from her throat. “Of course,” she echoed dryly. “I’m pleased you appreciate our little coup.”

“Bombing half the planet was slightly overzealous.” The girl shrugged the shoulder not supporting Yuthura Ban. “But it’s the thought that counts. I don’t mind that you killed my other two brothers. I never really liked Nereal anyway. He half-flayed the wine steward once, and the man was never the same after. Terrible scars. Hideous. We couldn’t have him in the formal dining room. And Rhea? He would have been so upset about Mother if you hadn’t killed him on Ziost. So, really, it’s like you did me another favor.”

The air stank and they were walking through ankle–deep puddles of filth. The silence in the Force indicated the ships overhead had already moved past, but the damage was done.

“Ziost?” Revan asked. Tenebrae had warned her the Sleepers were capable of anything, but could they bomb more than one planet at a time? And on whose orders? Tenebrae had said he could never control the Sleepers, but when he had shown them to her, Revan had sensed their minds, dormant and still; coiled, like a whip to be used by her when the time was ready.

Now, she sensed nothing but the death they had brought in their wake, the suffering of the survivors—

The sewer walls suddenly seemed closer than they had a moment ago.
Revan slipped a little and the Wookiee put out his arm to steady her and this time, she allowed it. Her fingers closed on his arm. The fur was strangely slick—almost silken.

She glanced up at Grarwbaar. Her neck prickled as she noted at the voder on his neck again. It hung loose, slightly off-kilter.

“Is something wrong, Lord Revan?” The Wookiee’s voice seemed to be coming from the apparatus, even as his lips moved, presumably subvocalizing his words.

“I had always heard Wookiees were quite resistant to chemical and biological attacks.” It wasn’t true. They were a hearty people, but extremely susceptible to environmental toxins—as had been proven when her forces occupied Kessel. “You do look a lot better than I feel.”

“My people are tenacious,” the Wookiee growled in Basic. “Masters of overcoming adversity.”

“I speak Shyriiwook,” she barked back at him. “No need to contort yourself.”

“My men do not speak Shyriiwook,” he growled back. “That is why I use the metal dead thing. So they can understand me.”

“Ah.” She nodded politely, and they lapsed into mutual silence. The other three mercenaries flanked them in the narrow tunnel, too close for strangers. These were Exchange contacts of Polla Organa’s, Revan had been told, but nothing was ever so simple.

Why would mere Exchange thugs invest in the destabilization of an empire that had always allowed them to profit?

“Remind me…” she murmured, trusting in the Wookiee’s keen hearing. “What were you promised for offering us aid?”

“Open trade routes… no inspections on cargo from proscribed planets. Kick-backs for any import taxes imposed.”

That sounded Deralian… but also rather simple. “I assume organized criminal activity gets quite expensive when one has to constantly pay taxes and have shipments inspected.”

“We can discuss this further, Lord Revan, once we reach our destination.”

“That seems advisable.” Unease was keeping her on her feet, at least.

“Did… do you… you sense her too?” Yuthura interrupted. “The amnesiac Revan? In one of those ships? Did she do this?”

I have been trying not to sense her. The first raging screams had subsided, but there was still a… a presence somewhere above them. A gathering darkness. The Fragment had not felt like this before, but perhaps the Sleepers and Tenebrae had twisted her already. Without training, without guidance, she would be vulnerable to fall.

That is what you want me to help, Malak? That twisted malevolence? If he was real, he needed to answer, and if he was not she was already mad.

Yes, her lover—her husband’s voice murmured in Revan’s head. That is what I want you to help, Red. But it’s not what you think.

Explain, she ordered, but he did not. Instead, it felt like his presence… diminish—as if Revan was
no longer capable of holding his attention.

*I can’t right now.*

*Convenient.* “Those ships are here because of her,” Revan told Yuthura.

Runes scratched in the walls indicated they were not the passage’s first refugees. There was a comfort in that, which reminded Revan of the early days of the war. The tunnel widened so that they could walk three abreast. Revan moved next to Yuthura, pulling away from the Wookiee to do so.

“I’m fine.” She waved off his inquiring growl.

Even if the Fragment had the best of intentions, even if she had come only to rescue her husband and the others—

*The Sleepers will not stop unless she commands it from within the Tomb. Did they do this on her orders or as a warning?*

“We also need to find one of Tenebrae’s Voices,” Revan added. “Alive. I need to speak with him.”

His last taunts haunted her. *He said the Force–eater was dead. Davad Arkan is dead? But if true—*

If true, another ally that Revan could use against the Emperor was gone. Just when she needed him most.

If true, she had sent her HK half a galaxy away on a fool’s mission, to demand response from a man already dead.

Xxx

Meetra received the alert in the middle of training exercises.

In the short time she had been in charge of the others’ instruction, Meetra had re–learned what she already knew about Bao–Dur. The Zabrak was an apt pupil, loyal, and capable with both a blaster and a blade. Hanharr and Brianna and Mira, however, were nigh–hopeless, having too much of their old combat training engrained to master even the simplest of Forms. If Meetra possessed the Force it would have been easy to show them; but without it, their bodies were merely numb and clumsy fingers, flopping out of her control.

Live targets, however, helped. They provided the degree of unpredictability her apprentices required. Force–combat, as Meetra knew well, relied upon reactive instinct more than it did upon tedious Jedi drills.

And so, when the perimeter alerts sounded, Meetra had ordered her favorite students to accompany her to investigate the intruder. From time to time, former Blades still did trickle in, despite Darth Nihilus’s final command that they scatter to the far corners of the galaxy.

Most were unsalvageable and insane, anyway. To those, Oerin gave their heart’s desires.

The rest he sent to Meetra, to use as she saw fit. Sorting them was no different than writing the names of the fallen on rocks. As with the rocks, Meetra had favorites. They were the ones she smiled and greeted every day. The rest scattered rootless over the surface of Malachor V—to flourish or perish according to their own will.
Sometimes, when she thought one held promise, Meetra would assign it tasks as pointless as naming the rocks had been, hoping that the effort would fashion it into a better tool.

Sometimes her perspectives went mad or ran away. Sometimes she let them go.

And occasionally, (as in the case of Hanharr the Wookiee), they returned to her stronger, with more potential than they had had before.

Other times... they provided the challenge her prize students sorely needed to fulfill their potential.

But this was no Blade standing in the Trayus Academy antechamber. This was something that looked like a Coruscanti chaperone–droid, as they were euphemistically named. A hunter–killer machine, with a red, triangular–shaped head and glittering red eyes. The thing stood motionless—as it had for an hour now—but then its red eyes whirred and fixed upon the place where Meetra stood motionless too, wearing one of Aratech’s finest stealth belts.

“Declarative Challenge: Show yourself, Meatbag. I can hear you squishing.”

“Oh?” Meetra Surik deactivated her belt and leveled a blaster at the thing’s head. From the shimmer of shields that surrounded it, her efforts might not do much more than serve as a distraction, while Bao and Mira crept up from behind, but the tell–tale shimmers left by stealth technology gave her the vectors of their approach, with Brianna and Hanharr in the wings. Her students were holding back, she noted approvingly, staying out of range of the thing’s sensors.

“Here I am. What are you?”

“Statement: My identity is irrelevant to you, Meatbag. Coercive Request with Implied Threat: I am here to speak to Davad Arkan. Fetch him.”

Meetra was almost amused. “He is dead. How did you find this place?”


“He is incapable of anything. Revan Starfire dropped him and his ship into a sun.”

The droid whirred again, shifting on its metal haunches, and Meetra held up her hand, holding her students back.

“Query: Define parameters: Which Revan Starfire?”

“Isn’t one enough?” Patience stayed her hand. Oerin would want to see this thing before she let her students crisp it to ash.

“Statement: Nothing would warm my circuits more than observing a dozen of my masters laying waste to the galaxy... sadly, only one of her iterations possesses the proper disregard for sentient life to allow me to fulfill my function adequately. Reminiscence: I did try with the Fragment, Balmorran Stranger, but her inner core was always too damp.”

_Balmorran Stranger._ Meetra’s hand traced the star on her cheek. A gift from her father and the rest of his cell, marking an infant as a rebel on that planet for all time. Meetra smiled. “You don't recognize me, droid? I was infamous, once.”

“Regretful Denial: All You Humans Look Alike. Smug Assertion: My master accounted for this. Secondary Master initializing... Master Arren Kae. New Mission Initialized: Meatbag, Take me to Master Arren Kae. She is sometimes known as Vima Sunrider, Jana Novasun——”
“And she isn’t here, either,” Meetra interrupted it. “Where is Revan now? The real one?”

“Evasive Rebuttal: Why should I tell you?”

“Because I have four Force–trained assassins with ion grenades and lightsabers within striking range of your metal shell. I have no doubt you could take two of them apart, but the third would use the moment to incapacitate you. And the fourth would simply chop you to pieces. He's quite fast, for a Wookiee.”

And foolish, too, for Hanharr took that moment to growl, causing the droid to whir, twisting its torso so quickly the motion blurred in her dulled vision—

—and then the thing froze, encased in a shimmering lock of energy.

“And,” Oerin Lin stepped out of the shadows, appearing in the doorway of the Trayan Academy hall as if he’d been there all along. Perhaps he had. “Is that’s Revan’s droid? Ache–Kay! What are you doing here?”

“Babbling nonsense, brother.” Meetra liked calling Oerin that. After so long alone, she was finding having kin comforting, even a stinking Mandalorian. At least he was already dead, unlike the rest of the ones in the galaxy. What more could she do to punish him for an accident of birth?

“Target Analysis: Partial match on facial and voice recognition but the speaking organic appears to be… debrading and rotting. Observation: No heartbeat. Query: How is Oerin Lin anything other than an immobile pile of putrescent flesh?”


At the moment to Meetra, Oerin looked young and unmarred. All illusion, of course, but it kept Bao and Mira calm, after he erased their nightmares. The others did not care.

“He's not in his body,” she told the machine, (although she owed no droid an explanation). “Oerin exists merely in the Force.”

Meetra had not cared that Oerin was dead, when she first returned to Malachor. She had not cared that she was rid of the Force. She had not missed the screaming from broken and twisted connections, nor the responsibility for those who she influenced upon Revan’s command. But now, surrounded by her siblings and the Force-sensitives her brother had collected, there were times when she felt like the child she had been once, pressing her nose against the window of a Balmorran playground, watching the gated and guarded children within, safe at play with their bomb–sniffers and nanny–droids….

That feeling of exclusion did not go away because her students called her 'Master Surik.' Meetra was the master of nothing.

Her students were still connected to something that she could never again touch.

Even Oerin Lin was connected to the Force. And he was dead.

Meetra Surik’s upbringing had been one of broken glass and refugee camps: early recruitment into a terrorist cell and a father who seemed to regard her as more of a tool for the cause than a child.

When the two Jedi had come for her in the slums of Bugtown, her father had shown no recognition for the woman she now knew had been her biological mother, and quite inappropriate attention to the beautiful Echani Jedi, who paid her more attention. Master Atris had responded to his too—
eager efforts with a cold remoteness that Meetra admired, even at the age of eight—winning her loyalty in a heartbeat.

Loyalty now twice betrayed, of course; as by Brianna’s account, Master Atris no longer existed.

“Oh, I am most definitely in this body.” Oerin’s breath gusted out of him with an exaggerated sigh. “You know, I envy Force ghosts. They never have to pick bits of themselves off the floor.”

The droid made a noise as if it had something to add, but Oerin’s shield held it still, silencing its voder.

“Force ghosts don’t exist.” If they did, Meetra suspected she herself would have gone mad long ago. “How did you find us, droid?” She gestured at Oerin to release the thing’s vocabulator and her brother did so.

“Statement: I was sent to find my new master. Sneering Rebuttal: I do not need to tell you more than that, Meatbag.”

“Well… Mother's on Telos,” her brother told the assassin droid. “The last we saw her. Oh, and there are two of her. Just like the revans.” His illusion slipped and for a moment his smirk was a death’s head, teeth glimpsed through a rotting jaw, nose worn back to the skull. Behind Meetra she heard Mira mutter a curse in Mandalorian, but for once the woman didn’t scream. “Unless one has killed the other, which seems inevitable, really. But if you see Mical Jorde, send him our regards. I think Brianna misses him, although she is far too proud to say so. Tell him he’s welcome here… in fact... tell him we’re rebuilding the Jedi Order.” He chuckled. “Or the Sith Order? One or the other… we are… we are creating. Order.”

Her ruined face turned in Meetra’s direction. “Isn’t that right, sister? What we are creating is order?”

By this time, she had grown used to his teasing and didn’t bother to answer him.

“There are really two Revans?” Meetra asked the droid. It had to be some kind of joke. A jape as Malak used to say in the dining hall—and then Meetra and Tillie Shan would kick each other under the table and giggle in a way unbecoming of two promising padawans—as Sheris Loran always blushed. “That isn’t a ja—a joke?”

“It hurts when I laugh. I know the nerves are dead, but it still hurts.” Her brother shook his head. “No. Didn’t I tell you before, Meetra? Two revans. Although perhaps one is dead now. One used to be Sheris Darkstar—”

“Loran.” Meetra had always hated that silly name. Darkstar. It was too close to Starfire.

Behind them, her students had popped out of stealth and were standing in a line. Brianna’s head turned back to Bao–Dur and he shook his head. She could not hear what they were saying at this distance, but the intent was clear.

Now is not the time for gossip. Meetra raised her hand to her lips, shaking her head and they all quieted attentively.

Good. She smiled at them. Mira and Bao smiled back immediately. Hanhaar’s expression was difficult to read. Brianna looked restive. They would need another chat.

“Her name was Sheris Loran,” Meetra repeated, to Oerin. “Not Darkstar. And I don’t believe you. Sheris isn't Revan. She never could be.”
“Ah.” Oerin shrugged. “Why would I lie?”

“Because—you… you always liked her!”

He coughed, a rattling sound deep in his chest. “Wait. Liked who? Liked which?”

“Revan. Why? Who else would I mean—Mother?” Meetra turned her head to address the droid again—Revan’s assassin droid from the Star Forge mission—but the thing had vanished.

“It’s gone,” Bao stepped forward and came to her. He looked at Oerin and swallowed, blinking, before turning to Meetra again. “My remote was tracking its energy signature—masked pretty well, but it couldn’t hide its tracks. See?”

The round droid hovered, shining a light on the Academy floor. In the fluorescent, the displacement of dust was quite plain: one set of tracks going in and another departing.

“Make sure it leaves the planet,” Meetra ordered. “In pieces if you can. Whole if you cannot. Just… make sure it leaves.”

Her students could use the challenge and she was tired of the droid’s lies.

Xxx

“Here we are!” Mydia Blais sounded irrationally cheerful. “Told you I knew the way!” Her head turned toward vacant space and she scowled at it. “See, Grandmother? I brought her. Just like you wanted.”

Revan ignored her, pressing forward through the open blast doors that someone had installed in the sewer wall. Beyond that, stretched a dimly-lit chamber, illuminated by glow-bulbs and lined with Sith statuary, typical of the Kallig Age. The walls were uncracked, and the air held a faint breeze that spoke to some kind of ventilation system. That was good and bad, she surmised. Good, in that they would not suffocate. Bad because its fans would bring in contamination from the surface.

“Kolto,” she commanded the Blais girl. Somewhere behind her, the woman with a baby moaned softly, and the babe gave a mewling cry. “Water. Anti-rads, if you have them. Show me your supplies.”

“Hold your hessi,” the girl said. “Hey, do you know what hessi are? That slave of ours always used to say that.”

“They’re like nexu.” Revan imagined they were, at least. Polla. Polla had drawn one in the dust for Revan when they were imprisoned together. She had a twinge of conscience for not thinking of the smuggler—last glimpsed with her husband, fleeing after Zaalbar. “Once we’ve established our camp we will begin sweeps for survivors. Is there another exit to the surface?”

“Grandmother says the other wall collapsed,” Mydia pouted, going to the wall on the far end of the room and pressing a series of stones until a door swung open. Inside, more supplies than Revan had dared hope for—some crates even stamped as Republic war-salvage. A deactivated medical droid was even propped in one corner.

Years ago, Revan had established supply chains to bring in pharmaceuticals and medical supplies that were usually lacking on Sith worlds. It appeared the Blais family had been hoarding them all this time.

“Is this enough? I think there’s another cache farther down, but the lock on that one always
“Mydia Blais seemed as eager to please as a kath pup. “It will do.” Revan was already popping open a crate and laying out decontamination shots. The babe would be difficult to dose correctly… she gestured to the weeping woman to come forward.

“Your daughter’s going to be fine,” she murmured, soothing. “Do you know about how much she weighs?”

XXX

“Padawan Jorde? Are you calling about the news on the holo-net? We saw the footage about Revan bombing the Outer Rim already. But you realize, your timing is terrible, old friend!” Master Loanin chided Mical as if he was still the man's padawan and they were still living in the Temple. “Even if the galaxy is falling apart, it's still our wedding night?”

Behind the man, Lydie Loanin was a dark-haired blur, half out of focus, but the oval of her face turned in Mical’s direction too.

“Apologies, but I received your data-charts. The latest vectors of the Jedi Plague?” The name was a misnomer, but Mical had no need to make a better one, and Loanin, for all of his knowledge, would not recognize the Rakatan term for the ancient scourge. Isska’tok’ilistrwwe, as it was known; which translated, roughly, into 'Empire-killer.’ “My agents further compiled the data from five other Core planets for us. Look at the time-lapsed rates of infection.”

Azen Loanin was a scientist before he was a Jedi or a senator, and he, after all, had been the one to seek Mical’s advice. His head turned. “Lydie, if you could, retrieve the portable holo-player—”

“Of course.” When the Zabrak woman rose, she came into focus. Her hair was loose around her shoulders. She was also visibly pregnant.

“You solved the antigen problem!” Perhaps there was a part of Mical that was still purely a scientist, too.

“Apparently.” His former master glanced back to his wife, and then smiled tightly at Mical again.

“Congratulations,” Mical told them, for it was customary, even among errant Jedi. And perhaps the child would keep them away from the rest of the Jedi, which would be… wise.

It occurred to him then that perhaps now was the time to send a warning, but such an action would pit him against Mother directly—

—and Darth Traya had not yet left to join the fleet.

Mother had allowed Mical access to her archives: where the minds of dozens of Jedi masters had been catalogued, fragments of their holocrons preserved in an order she claimed would lead to further clarity. It was a great gift, but if the woman who had once been Master Atris (who now called herself Darth Traya) thought that Mical would reach the same conclusions she had….

How can you know if you will or not? His own mind mocked him. Deliberate ignorance makes a willing fool, and yet—

Mical had not sampled more than a few fragments of memory, before coming to the conclusion that more knowledge did not always lead to enlightenment.

How can you stand by and do nothing while Darth Traya destroys the Order? Master Atris and I
had a vision to rebuild, to make a better Jedi Order. Darth Traya believes that can only happen from the ashes.

But she may be right, and if she is—

Do no harm. It was one of the first tenets a Jedi was taught. Mical sometimes thought of an addendum. Undo any harm. Fix things.

“... patterns of infection? You were saying?” Loanin looked as if he had repeated himself more than once. He was scrolling through the illuminated columns of data, tapping the projector’s gear to advance. “Mical? Are you still there?”

“Yes, of course.” Mical cleared his throat. “In the last three standard months, infection rates dropped to zero around the med–centers. Even on Remiad, where the vaccine was never distributed and the Jedi Plague well–established previously… they still fall.”

“I see that.” Loanin nodded. “Most curious.”

Furthermore, cases of comorbidity have vanished. On Plexis, an outbreak of bacterial menaphagis was treated concurrently with one reported instance of the Jedi Plague three months ago in a remote mountain village. Not only did the primary plague victim recover, but none of the menaphagis patients reported secondary infections. They were all housed in one ward. Statistically, some of them should have contracted the virus, unless— “

“Unless something is blocking the virus’s transmission that didn’t exist before,” the Zabrak spoke up, from behind her husband. “Or, were all of those patients were inoculated with the vaccine...?”

“No. Juveniles from an impoverished area. It is unlikely that any of them were ever offworld. And the vaccine was never officially shipped to Plexis. Despite its Core location, the system is a backwater.” Mical nodded at her to show his approval for her insight.

Next to her, Loanin was frowning. “Perhaps the Sith have found a way to replicate the immunity found in some species—”

“If so, their distribution networks in Republic space are more extensive than we thought.” Mical forced himself to chuckle dryly.

It was a good reason to let Darth Traya continue with her plans, unfortunately.

If the only way to stamp evil out is scorched skies, then we must burn the ground Vitiate can stand on. The danger of him infiltrating the Jedi is great enough that perhaps her solution is the only way to be sure.

And perhaps not. If she failed, it would be up to Mical.

“Something has stopped the Jedi Plague in Republic space,” Loanin mused. “In its tracks. I will see if House Racharn can provide me with the recent medical data from—”

“Lydie–lu!” A voice from off–cam interrupted. Feminine. Iridonian. An older version of Padawan Korr appeared behind the woman, stouter, shabbily dressed. “The news–cams! There’s another report! Nar Shaddaa this time! You’ll want to see this!”

“Ma?” Lydie turned. “In a moment—“
“Mical...?” Her voice behind him. Mical cut the comm–link immediately, although, of course, she would have seen them.

Their eyes met, and the woman who had once been Atris strode to the comm–bank and pulled up the screen, revealing galactic alerts flashing red. “Good work locating more of our errant Jedi,” she said, in a tone so glacial that Mical was at a loss to know if her words were sincere or if she suspected his treachery.

“Have you packed?” He afforded her a thin smile and wondered if they should exchange a more intimate farewell. Did mothers and sons hug? Would a kiss on the cheek be appropriate?

“I’m sure the Fleet will have what I need. The Admiral has given me a rendezvous point with one of their corvettes. A storm is coming, and I need to take the shuttle now while the sky is clear.”

“Would you like me to pilot—”

“Drien has kindly offered,” his mother said. “The handmaidens have agreed to see me safely to the Fleet. I may take Lileen with me. It could be quite educational for her.”

If there was a snub there, Mical could be gracious enough to ignore it. “You refer to them as handmaidens?” He let himself smile. “Atris’s name for them. I thought you hated it.”

“Here.” His mother ignored that and deposited a fabric–wrapped bundle on his desk. “This holocron contains most of what you may find useful, should I fail. Vima Sunrider’s life. Most of Nomi Sunrider’s. Select memories of Revan’s—the ones I could salvage—curated quite carefully.” Her mouth twitched. “There is enough of a remove that you will not lose yourself. These are recordings, not essences. You could even ask them questions—the ones you dare not ask me.”

“Thank you.” If she was not lying, it was a great gift. But Mical remembered how Atris herself had been tricked and knew himself prone to the same temptations. “The… plague,” he offered, before he could stop himself. “Master Loanin thinks something is blocking it. Not just herd immunity. Infection rates are falling into a black hole—even on planets that never had immunization programs.”

Traya looked startled. “You think Vitiate has some way of countering the Rakatan virus—?”

“It is possible.”

She nodded slowly. “Then I do what I must.”

The door had barely closed behind her before Mical reached for the fabric–wrapped holocron, unwrapping it carefully, so as not to touch the crystal within. The device lit anyway, opening like a star—

XXX

“A sword has two edges,” Tenebrae chuckled with Malak’s rotting mouth. “The Sleepers are your weapon, Revan—to be wielded with the same purpose as your Star–Forged ships. But if your hand slips—if you deviate from our bargain—”

Bargain? Oh, Mal. Revan looked at her possessed husband, choking back despair. Malachi could have learned things about extortion from Tenebrae. Perhaps he had. “I don’t need the Sleepers,” she said. “Any weapon is only as powerful as the one who uses it—or chooses not to.”

Here, on the sands of Medriaas, Revan could feel them sleeping, coiled like snakes in the back of
her mind. The location of the ships themselves was unknown. Her scouts had found no trace of a secret Imperial base anywhere in the sector. They were both here—and not: hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands. Somewhere, dormant—connected to her mind like a coiled leash—

XXX

Mical drew back with a gasp.

I am... I—

I am still myself. His masculine hand on the table was a welcome reassurance. The holocron glittered, malevolent and ancient, like voices whispering—

“No.” With effort, he stood up, waving a trembling hand until the fabric reassembled over the crystal. “I am not you, Mother. I will forge a different path.”

It took some minutes to collect his thoughts. Then, Mical reached for the comm-link again, reopening the channel to Azen Loanin’s private line.

“Is something wrong?” his former master asked, picking up immediately. “We were disconnected.”

“No.” There would be time to deliberate on how much to reveal to the man later. Right now, Mical needed the sharp acuity of his mentor’s intellect unfettered. “Just a minor interruption. You said before, the rates of infection dropped around med-centers. Is there something in common with the type of medical center? The kind of illness or injury treated?”

“None that I can see... but we should check for a common node in their distribution chains—perhaps something traceable to the Empire or its agents?” Azen raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Mical smiled back. “That was my thought as well.”

Xxx

The troch shuttle was poorly–designed, Millifar Ordo observed, even if it did have dual thrusters in its forward engine. Those thrusters were enough to propel it quickly between Ekkumi’s cruiser and the dreadnaught before them—even if they would be useless doing any real maneuvers in the heat of combat.

“What did your people make this hull out of?” she complained to Lieutenant Abrad. “Plimsifast? One direct hit and we'd be done for.”

The Besalisk snorted. “Fibra-core.”

“That's exceedingly foolish!” How had these people vanquished the clans? It seemed increasingly clear to Millifar clear that Revan and Malak had done everything that had caused the Republic to win that war.

“We had shortages for a few years during the war. Mandalorians kept raiding our supply lines.”

“You should have protected them.” She peered out of the viewscreen that was probably glued on with a layer of silicaulk and Sullustan tears. In front of them, the gray hull of the Republic flagship Great Hunt opened its maw like a hungry krayt.

Abrad chuckled. “How old are you, kid?”
“I forget the calculation in Coruscanti Standard.” It wasn’t true, but she didn't need another member of their barbarian crew chiding her about her age. “But I am fully blooded—in men's and women's ways.”

“Well, you're not blooded in our ways. That escape attempt—even if you'd managed to get the snub out of the hangar—our auto-cannon would’ve fried you before you cleared our wake! And Pina-ha isn't gonna forget that black eye you gave him. Kid's nearly as vain as you are dumb.”

“You left me my boots,” she muttered. “What did you expect?” Would the clan be singing her death songs now? Would Mekel Jin speak for her at the battle circle?

“Oh, I expected it, kid.” He laughed. “Not sure Rew did. She's more of a trusting sort.”

“I need to return to my people.” Millifar was trying not to fidget in the itchy coverall they'd provided her after foiling her escape. They'd taken the boots too, and with them, the two ambi-heft multi-tools that Father had given her when she got her first braids. Only a troch would be sentimental about beskar and kit—a Mando’ade could not afford to be. But still, Millifar missed those multi-tools. It would be hard to get new ones.

The shuttle docked and Millifar permitted them to lead her off of it, her hands in front of her banded by restraints befitting a prisoner of war.

She would have expected the woman to be surrounded by the adoring retinue that Republic war leaders seemed to require just to breathe, but High Admiral Aridoma Rensha, the Leader of the Republic Fleet, stood alone in the vast hangar.

“High Admiral?” Rew froze near the bottom of the ramp. From the tone of her voice Admiral Ekkumi was startled to see her leader alone, too.

“Rear Admiral Ekkumi.” The Trandoshan nodded but her attention was fixed on Millifar. “And this is the Ordo child, here in person—”

“I am no child!”

“The Ordo warrior,” Lieutenant Abrad corrected. Millifar glanced at him, startled, and his two upper forearms jerked a sign of encouragement back at her. “Millifar of Clan Ordo.”

“So Revan is her—”

“She is my father’s Third Wife.” Millifar folded her arms. “What of it?”

“You were aboard her flagship? The Imperial Aleema?”

“Yes.” Millifar frowned. “My father’s ship. We spoke of this already over your comm. Why?”

“Why?” The Trandoshan admiral’s lips pulled back in a snarl. Her tongue made a hissing noise. “Didn’t you tell her?”

“No,” Admiral Ekkumi said. “I did not.”

Millifar glanced at the Besalisk for clarification, the sinking feeling beginning in her chest. It was childish, but she thought suddenly of how much they had worked to bring the ship to capacity, how proud her father had been—

“Did they die well?” Rhetorical question. Of course they would have. But she would have to know
how to sing—

“Did they die at all?” Rensha barked. “Do you know? And was Revan with them?”

“Yes,” Millifar said numbly. Now perhaps it scarcely mattered. “She was. Who killed them? Was it that troch emperor or Oerin of Lin—”

The Trandoshan made the barking noise again. “No! Revan isn't dead,” she growled. “She seems to have conquered Dromund Kaas, Ziost and Thule. And Sith attacks are reported on Nar Shaddaa, Hoth and Onderon.”

Millifar laughed, because that was patently absurd. “Attacking so many planets at once would be a terrible strategy. The Third Wife of Ordo can be impatient, but she would never do that! My father is Mand’alor and he would never allow it!”

Admiral Rensha nodded. “Perhaps.” Those teeth bared again. “Or, perhaps there is another explanation? That is why I need you to open a channel to Revan for me. Immediately.”

Millifar nodded, suddenly no longer interested in merely winning back her freedom. “If that will clear the clans from your claim of lies, it will be an honor.”

Xxx

“Stop,” Valkorion whispered from a hundred dying throats. He almost felt sorry for the poor, mortal creatures. Sorrier still for himself, who had to feel their pain—each one winking out like lights on a grid.

Where was he? At the moment, Valkorion was—

—spitting out a mouthful of sand on a blasted beach, perishing in slow, indescribable agony from his burns.

—passing customs clearance at an unnamed spaceport. “Deralia?” The official said. “What in the stars are you going to do there?” “Rescue an orphan boy,” his woman’s voice said. What was her name, it was so hard to concentrate, to be in the ONE body, when so many others were screaming—

—huddled in an Iziz alley, watching as ships burned the sky, taking his last, tortured breath—

—huddled in a tank on Nar Shaddaa, watching the poison air seep in through cracked ferraglass. A slow ending, suffocation—

—pinned in the rubble on Kaas. A cool hand on his forehead, luminous green eyes staring back into his. “I’m afraid I can’t save you,” the copy said, grimly. “Your belly’s crushed.” Her hand closed in a fist, but there was no pain—somehow—

She took away the pain.

“Wait!” He tried to call out to her. Did she know it was he? Had she seen his eyes gleaming in the darkening of the light?

But! Lights on a grid, only that.

Which had been the one who’d described it so?

He thought it had been the girl, the one who mounted the sun. Clever girl, but so naive. Not like
his Starfire. His Starfire had kept her clever thoughts to herself. Never reaching, never sharing, never letting him fully see—

Then, the Sunrider had lost her spark. Vanished entirely one day. Dead, probably.

He’d had such hopes that Revan would be different! She matched the pattern more perfectly than all the rest. But… perhaps they never were. Perhaps, this too was part of the cycle the ancients had wrought. A… quest for perfection. The seeking. This hope. Oh, but the Starfire had given him hope. Now, fear was a clumsy tool, but ah… hope. Hope gave power enough to reignite a dying empire—before its betrayal. But even that, expected. Nothing new. A cycle as old as the stars themselves, perhaps. She betrayed him. They always did.

In the end, Kaas was just another dying planet. If they ended now, the Sleepers would remake the worlds, perhaps make better ones.

A part of Valkorion even accepted that, but oh—

“—hope,” he choked.

He was lying on the ground. Blood—taste of copper in his mouth. The air smelled musty and old, like a cave. Above, something rumbled and shook and the shadow bending over him had young eyes, possibly even Human. Wide and brown. A long nose. A boy’s face. “Uh, Zepth? You okay?” Valkorion’s mind reached and grasped into the Zabrak’s for the familiar. Faces were so hard, but voices….

“Didn’t.. did she just kill me?” Valkorion blinked. “Was that this body?”

The boy is Blais. House Blais. One of their boys, then. Long–noses. Nereal, or Rhea or the other one—

“End him.” A new voice! The words were growled, the language barbaric. Animal sounds. Shyriiwook, of course, its syntax so similar to Ancient Sith. Same root of origin.

If the Rakata returned today, would we greet our creators as gods? Or invaders? Curse their sithspawned Eternal Fleet, curse the Sleepers they tricked me into making—

One of the Sleeper–ships had been his own father, once, and the boy he had been, that sad bastard child, had hated his father.

The Blais son bit his lip, worrying it like an animal. “Lord Revan said no killing, Zaalbar, remember? Her last orders. She said, we needed to keep some of the Voices alive. He’s not badly hurt. We might need him.”

“Sheris Revan is madclaw. Phylus–cub. False.” The Wookiee’s voice was a low whine. “I wish the gods would deliver us from this place, but we must not be prey and die in this trap. He is our prey, and his throat is open. He is madclaw. It would be a kindness to make an end to him. I am fond of the Zepth–cub too, but he was always cursed—and now he is dying.”

“No! He’s helpless! And Lord Revan said—”

“Lord… Revan… Hah!” Valkorion felt his throat open, his mouth choke out the words. Above in the skies, that was the sound. Her scream, like a glorious herald in the Force. “Oh! Truly! She’s here. Finally!”

The Wookiee growled at the sky. “Ships,” he barked. “We must find the others.” He held a sharp
knife in one of his huge claws. Valkorion braced himself for the end—

But then the Wookiee’s clawed hand shoved the knife into his bandolier and picked Zepth’s body up, slinging him over the beast’s shoulders instead. The movement hurt his head and blackness came, and with it, the stars….

—somewhere he was laughing. Laughing with hope, for in this moment of darkness, she was finally here.

*My Starfire. My Sith’ae’rah. My dau—*

XXX

From space, Revan thought Dromund Kaas didn't look familiar, but a quarter of it was covered in glowing red craters. The rest was a swirl of cloud cover, dark and hazy where the bombers had landed.

“Oh no,” Carth’s arms tightened around her again, as if Revan was the invalid and not him. His arms were sweaty and his skin felt too hot against hers as they stood on the Aleema’s bridge before the wall of unblemished ferraglass, to the right of a heavily–patched place in her hull where Malak’s bombardment had nearly killed her.

Lined between them and the planet ran a row of wedge–shaped ships, with more popping out of hyperspace every instant, all of them arrayed so precisely they could have been on an assembly grid.

“I dreamed they were bombing Coruscant—or going to bomb Coruscant,” Revan said. “And Nar. Other places, too. Onderon, I think.” Its familiarity had been an echo, like a ghost nudging the back of her mind. “I dreamed they were going to bomb Tel—” her voice broke off, for remembering that made her remember the rest. The sick sense of approval as the fleet fulfilled its function—up until the jarring moment when they’d approached Carth’s homeworld and it abruptly occurred to her that this might not be just an idle dream, a memory of wars already fought and won.

“Onderon?” Canderous let go with a string of curses at the same moment Aemelie did. “We got a few reports before the widebeam cut out. Sightings on a few planets. Ziost. Nar Shaddaa. Casualties, too.”

“I–I told them to stop. I don't think they made it to Coruscant.” *I told them to stop. Go away,* Revan told them now. *Go back to sleep, or hell, or wherever you go.* She heard her laugh, ragged like it didn’t belong to her. “I… I think I was there. With them.”

The ships did not answer her. And Canderous frowned as his wife traced a symbol in the air that meant stars–touched in Mando’ade. *Stars–touched. Crazy. She thinks I’m mad.*

“Coruscant?” Carth coughed. “That’s… that’s not possible. How could they get there? It would take weeks! Even Nar Shaddaa seems like a stretch. They’d have to have planned this—”

“No, they… they just jumped and then they were there. Or—or they want me to know that they could just jump there.” That was significant. That was impossible. Revan’s smuggler’s memories tangled in lines of hyperspace jump points. *Even if the Sleepers took the Joker’s Run through Hutt Space after Biscain, even if they had some kind of infinite fuel… there’s no fracking way that could be possible for them to traverse the galaxy so fast—*

“Our outgoing and incoming comms are all jammed. They must’ve taken out the satellites on Kaas.” It took a lot to make Canderous sound this angry. “Kids are trying to get short–range
running, at least.’

Dustil cleared his throat and pointed at a smaller ship now moving between two carriers. “Uh… Dad, isn’t that the Hawk?”

“Yes, it—” Carth’s voice broke off. “It is! Can we hail? There might be survivors onboard.”

“Short range communications?” Aemelie sighed. “We’ve rebooted the transmitters. I suppose we can try.”

“Yeah.” Canderous launched into technical explanations of what had gone wrong with their communications array, but Revan was still staring at the Hawk, hovering outside their viewing window like a real bird trying to get to its nest. Someone had painted it blue.

*There might be survivors*, Carth had said.

“There are no survivors,” she told them all. “Not on that ship. It’s unmanned. Just like all the rest.” Revan shivered because in the Force the Ebon Hawk felt no different from all the others surrounding them. Empty. And dead.

And still, somehow, an echo in the Force.

Canderous’s comm pinged. He glanced back at the group of kids by the communications board, raising the volume on his helm to call out. “What is it, Caldera?”

The Mandalorian’s voice rang across the bridge’s speakers. “*The Ebon Hawk is hailing us, General Ordo. Mission Vao says she wants to talk to Polla Revan.*”

XXX

“Poodoo, kriffing Revan!” Mission sighed with her circular processors, waving the ends of the Hawk’s body to try and get the attention of the organic lumps she could see clear as day in this giant ship Aleema’s bridge viewport. Carth, Canderous, Sithboy, Mekel Jin, Canderous’s Second Wife, and… Polla Revan, all gaping back at her. Not even waving. In the weird space light, Polla Revan’s hair looked brown. There were streaks of something dark on her face, too. And she was wearing a robe that looked even more like a bathrobe than what Jedi usually wore.

{{*That is the Unit Starfire. Bring her to the installation*}} the lead ship whispered, echoed by Kaas. The Kaas computer got on great with the murder–fleet who were all lined up now like they hadn’t just been burning multiple planets. And… for that matter, waitaminute. How had they all gotten back here so fast? Hyperdrive was quick and all, but even Mission had to get from one jump point to the next the old–fashioned sub–light way, even when she didn’t have passengers to worry about not crushing with acceleration.

[“*Not that simple. Cool your jets.*”] Mission scrambled her circuits trying to think of a good excuse. [“*I’m not even sure that’s really her. Do you know how many fake Revans there are these days? Hundreds!*”]

[{{*Interface was achieved*}} This time, the voice came from all of the ships at once. If Mission had a head, it would be ringing.

[“*I’m not bringing her anywhere until you tell me where Big Z is!*”]

{{*Irrelevant*}}}
Try as she might, Mission couldn’t get a link back to her T3 body. She wanted to think that was because Big Z had taken it deep underground, and not blown himself to smithereens and space dust in the fight. The surface of Kaas looked bad, and the chatter from the widebeam (before the murder fleet took out the sats) was even more nuts. Planets bombed everywhere.

A total mess and waste of perfectly decent organics—not to mention their totally successful revolution.

“Blue?” A part of her had been hailing the Aleema now for twenty minutes (and pretty much given up) when a voice broke in over her open channel. Male. Not Revan. Kinda young.

“Sithboy?” Only two sents had ever called her ‘Blue.’ For a second, her processors forgot which one he was. But Dustil was still in the viewport glaring with his arms folded and so that left—
“Mekel Jin? Hey! Was that you on Biscain? What really happened to the sun there?”

“Uh, it… I don’t know. You… what’s going on? The widebeam’s gone, but there’s reports of attacks all over the Rim.”

“Nuts, right? I told Kaas to stay out of this. Hey. Can you put Revan on? Please?”

“Are you… the readouts say there’s no one on the Hawk. Are you alone?”

Mission had never felt more alone. Not since she'd been back. “Course I’m alone! What, you think this is some kind of a trap?”

{{Bring her to the installation, little sister}}

“No, I… I just meant—did anyone else make it out? Telos said Ban was there too.”

“I bet somebody made it. There’s caves? And Big Z had my T3 body. Maybe they’re okay down there—”

{{Bring her}}

{{“Get chuffed, sleemo!”}}


“Can’t you see me with your sensors? Course I’m still here.” She was broadcasting a holographic image of her old Twi’lek body, plain as day. “Hey! Tell Revan to stop glaring at me and pick up her comm. Or… just open a hangar bay door, okay? Easier to catch up without this creepazoid fleet hanging around.”

“Mekk. What are you doing?”

“Talking to Mission. She’s not sure about survivors, but she says there are caves—”

“She’s a computer, asshat. She’ll say anything she’s programmed to say.” That was her old Sithboy all right. Still pissed and still ignoring her.

She’d show him.

“Hey, Dustil? I’m programmed to say congratulations on knocking up that Sith girl. Last time I saw her she was still breathing so you might be a dad soon.” And Carth a grandfather. If things
weren’t so fraught, Mission would feel a little sentimental.

Her auditory sensors registered an abrupt silence from the Aleema’s interior bridge, followed by furious whispers on the comm banks.

“Mydia?” That was Carth. “Son, I thought you were using contras!”

“Congratulations.” Polla Revan. Voice flat as if she didn’t mean it. Distracted. She’d disappeared from the viewport now, which was kind of smart considering she was standing right next to the place where Malak’s cannons had nearly taken her out. They’d patched it badly. Mission hoped if her hull was damaged they got someone with more finesse than a Mandalorian to do the bodywork—

{{Bring her!}}

[“No!”] Mission’s plan was still in the formulation stage, but she was thinking, lure Polla Revan aboard the Hawk, jump to hyperspace… and then ditch her somewheres way off the beaten track. Maybe in the Defalli Rim. Then, come back here for her chassis and Big Z and anybody else that still survived.

{{—to the installation. Bring her—}}

If only the ships would stop yelling. If she had an organic head, they would be frying neurons with all the shouting.

“How far along is she? The odds of miscarriage on a planet with that much radiation—” That voice was Mandalorian–accented, still gossiping about that Sith skank Dustil had knocked up. Not one of Canderous’s wives, but one of the other women. Likida, or Thomasine. She’d met them all when she’d been a droid back on Coruscant—.

“…dependent on where she was at the blast point, wind vectors… previous medical conditions….”

“Mission?” That was Jin. He actually sounded worried for her. “Are you okay? Why… why aren’t those ships shooting at you?”

“We’re friends. Kinda. Hey… why… why are you guys here, anyways?”

“I’ll take it from here, Mekel.” Polla Revan’s voice. Tense.

{{Bring her to the installation, little sister}}

[“No!”]

“Mission?” The signals emanating from the Aleema resolved into Polla Revan’s face on her boards, even if the woman didn’t appear in the window again. “Mission, there’s no life reading from the Hawk. Did everyone… did you evacuate alone?”

“Signal got cut to my body—I mean the T3 body. Big Z was carrying me.” He could be dead and he’d never even let her make a backup. Her body could be fried too, and she’d just gotten the flamethrower calibrated right so that it didn’t burn fuel inefficiently.

“I–I thought I heard you. Before… with the others.” Polla Revan was sounding really confused. Mission wished she had a way of warning her that wasn’t just gonna make the ghost–ships louder.
Oh, and there was Kaas itself, chiming in like a big bully.

Every language in the universe had a rude way to tell sents to stuff their hole, or their sack, or their airbag or whatever. Mission started cycling through.

The ship–minds retreated slightly as if they were taken aback.

“Oh, yeah? No problem, sis!” What else could she say with Kaas and the murder–fleet right here?

Quickly, Mission ran a few thousand scenarios involving Polla Revan landing on Kaas (or her shuttle failing to land due to unexplained mechanical failure), where maybe she didn’t end up as a part to fix the stupid Kaas computer’s sentient matrix. There were lots of ways that could happen, really. Polla Revan’s death, of course. But also, maybe if Mission just had the chance to really explain things to her. Maybe then, she’d just leave? They could make a run for it. Sleeper ship assholes wouldn’t stop her. (Even if they might take it out on the sents she left behind.) Not when they needed her alive—and willing—with her special fancy brain pattern all intact. Or maybe Mission could find a way to replicate that pattern in a silicate form Kaas might accept?

It was a Hutt’s pajama mess that the stupid installation had refused to open for Sheris Revan that time. Because from what Mission had seen, she really did the best Revan impression of any of them.

“I’m opening Hangar Bay fifty for you,” Polla Revan added. “Sending coordinates. We… we need to talk. You said Zaalbar had your chassis—can you contact him?”

“It was all going really well.” Yuthura’s plan had worked. “We’d basically overthrown the whole Sith Empire? All we had left was rounding up all the possessed sents and killing them off if we couldn’t repair their programming with the Rakata virus. Then the stupid fleet came in and ruined it.”

“Tenebrae sent them?”

“Not exactly.” Poor Polla Revan. She really didn’t know a thing. “See, there’s this other, secret fleet. They’re called the Sleepers? Those are those guys. Right out there.”

“I—I know. Do you know what they are?”

Assholes is what they are. “Bossy know–it–alls is what they are. I’ll tell you about it as soon as we meet up—”

Or, at least, she’d tell Polla Revan enough to get the gist. Knowledge was, of course, power, and Mission didn’t entirely trust Polla Revan not to use that power to frack things up more.

Maybe she could tell her just enough to make her cut and run—

“Get stuffed,” Mission muttered, trying to cut the connection. It felt funny, like she was poking out her own eyes (if she had eyeballs).

They were in the dark and the air was stifling. They’d been huddled like this for hours and dust clogged her voice, stinging her eyes. The wall was still shaking. Both of them were hoarse from
calling for help.

And Polla Organa Wen was pretty sure this was it.

“I'm sorry,” she told Seiran. Again. “Sorry I got us into this mess. Sorry we can’t get out of it.”

“I'm sorry too.” His arms tightened around her and his lips brushed her hair. “Never planned on going down without a fight.”

“Hard to fight a fracking bomb.” They'd studied the Corellian Civil Wars back when they were tweeners but Polla couldn't remember much about what the Coronet City attack. Just that it happened and two million sents died. She wasn't gonna give this bomb the victory of making her cough, but the effort to hold it in made her lungs wheeze anyway. “Think we're taking rads?”

His arms tightened more. “Yeah.”

Some men would have lied. Polla was reminded again how much she loved this man, who would not.

“Well, we aren't dead yet!” Polla forced her voice to be cheerful, to feel luckier than poor Drakkar next to them, who'd bled out under that half-ton of duracrete, his cries for help trailing to nothing in the end. “We made it to the overhang, at least. No flash burns!”

“No flash burns,” her husband agreed. “You know… I… I've got… there's a flask of firewhiskey in my boot.” Scraping noise as he moved his leg. Rubble shifted with it.

“Oh?” Polla forced herself to laugh. “What were you saving it for? Our rescue?” The laugh made her cough more. “If the fracking Imperial Mercy Corps doesn’t roll in here with a case of firewhiskey I’m gonna send them out for some.”

It wasn't fair. They had been almost to the tunnel when the first shocks hit—just a few dozen panicked sents in front of them. And were those guys safe now? Or dead? One of the last things Polla had heard before the ceiling collapse was Zaalbar’s anguished roar. Then the roof came down between them… and then... nothing.

“I can't reach.” Her husband sounded way too calm. “Truth is, I can't feel my leg, either.”

“I've got it.” She reached across, found his knee. Fabric of his pants felt soaked. “Either you pissed yourself or the flask broke.”

“It's transparisteel,” he said. “They make starship viewports outta that stuff. Kinda hard for it to break.”

“Yeah, well. Piss isn't sticky, and firewhiskey is, so—” Polla’s voice broke off as she grabbed hold of the flask. It sloshed as she brought it forward. In the black she couldn't see her hands but she could smell. Blood.

“ You drink first,” she decided, wiggling both sets of toes. She could feel both legs, and the bruises she'd have on her ribs and her ass later, but nothing else hurt. “We're going to be fine.”

“Sure we are.” She felt him swallow when she brought the flask to his lips, then took a swig herself. “Roof seems stable, at least.”

“Don't jinx!” But the rumbling overhead had stopped some time ago. And maybe it wasn’t really the wall shaking now. Maybe it was just her.
“I’m not.” Was his voice weaker? Was the air thinner? “We’re gonna be fine, Pollie. Help’s coming.”

“Glad I married an optimist.” Another swig for each of them.

“I mean it,” he said quietly.

“This a Force thing?” She tried to laugh. “Revan give you Force lessons back on that ship of hers when you were coming to rescue me?”

“Not… no.” His voice was definitely weaker. “Can't hear anything over her screaming, cept a voice, sometimes.”


“Gimme…a … ‘nother drink,” he mumbled. Those arms holding her so tight slackened, and Polla forgot she’d already yelled herself raw—and began to scream again herself.

Xxx
“Bloody hell,” Carth whispered, while Revan stared numbly at the burning planet beneath them.

Carth hovered at her side and around them the Mando’ade buzzed with the activity of a Killick hive. Orders and coordinates flashed before Revan’s eyes and she adjusted them without speaking, tracing the runes on the armrest of her chair to adjust the positions of their incoming fleet.

Present: forty degrees aft our position, move into the lower orbit.

Do not engage the 528 identical ships in synchronous orbit.

“Sis? We really need to talk.”

“I can’t right now, Mission.”

The Ebon Hawk now resided in their armored hangar bay, the one reserved for bomber squads with extra hull plating—just in case—and the computer’s version of Mission was blasting through the Aleema’s bridge.

“C’mon Polla Revan! It’s important!”

The cheery tone only set Revan more on edge.

The remains of the Mandalorian fleet—and the manned Sith ships under Carth’s command that followed them now—straggled out of hyperspace one–by–one; each battered ship popping into a defensive orbit as tightly as if they’d been in this position before.

Perhaps they had… but Revan didn’t like their default formation. So close together. If those Sleepers turned on us now, a direct hit on one of our ships would take out the rest—

“Sure you don’t need to go the medix?” Carth moved between Revan and the Aleema’s viewport, abruptly blocking her view.

“Not now.” There had been a shocking amount of blood from her nose when she’d had the seizures but Revan felt perfectly fine now. Physically, at least. And Sinae had ran a quick scan just to make sure. “But if I need another old woman killed, I’ll let you know.”

“Ouch,” her husband muttered.

“I think I should take you down to the planet myself, you know, sis?” Mission’s voice chimed in, all—too—brightly. “You and I need to talk. Then we can all look for survivors. Maybe Big Z made it out okay? Sheris Revan gave everyone the order to run and he grabbed my T3 body. Big Z knows all the tunnels. He’s been working with the resistance for ages!”

“Sheris Revan?” With as much affection as Revan felt for Zaalbar, there was only one name that mattered in that sentence. “Carth said she was in a coma.”
“Yeah, but she woke up!” Mission launched into a story about how Polla Organa and Yuthura Ban had worked with the slaves at Kaas City to stage a revolt. Carth had mentioned this before: some insane scheme to vaccinate their allies and spread the Jedi plague through the Sith Empire—

“... but our supply chain got messed up? The factories on Manaan got sabotaged and this outfit out of Nar Shaddaa was hoarding the remaining vials, so we’d only, like, vaccinated half the slaves, and that Nar Shaddaa sleemo Goto took all of my credits—”

Her words blurred into the nonsensical and Revan resisted the urge to rub her temples. “Go back to the rebellion. You’re saying Polla Organa organized it?”

“Yeah. Her and Yuthura and Big Z. Things sure kicked off when Polla Polla released the plague and all the Sith started dying!”

“But she wouldn’t do that.” Maybe, Polla—she released the plague because Dar'Revan tricked her into doing it? Carth had also said Polla released the virus, but that couldn't be right—

“HK helped. I guess, technically, it was really him. See, she sent him to Carth with this infected blaster....”

“That makes a lot more sense. Carth said that before, too.” The last time Revan had seen her old assassin droid it had been in the pieces she’d chopped it into, but of course Dar would have reassembled it—

_I was right about her all along. She has to die._

Red. No.

The intruding voice was alien. Metallic. Familiar.

_Get out of my head,_ she warned Malak's ghost.

“Polla didn't mean to hurt anyone—she was just trying to help me.” Carth's protest was a little too fervent for Revan's taste.

“Help you by accidentally infecting the entire planet?” Revan's smile felt like acid. “How sweet of her.” _No doubt she was compromised. Dar could have used Force persuasion or some kind of trick—_

Red. Sheris's body wasn't even conscious when the Deralian—

_Go back to hell, monster_. The Force flared around Revan like a wall—and she felt Malak's presence dissipate as quickly as if she'd shoved another lightsaber through him.

“Is your Third Wife having another fit, husband?”

“Whoa. What the hell was that? Dad, she just—”

“General Revan! Stop sending my husband's ship out of orbit!”

“Republic, is she okay?”

“Sis, the Awakened Ones want you to keep it down. They said you're too loud.”

Revan blinked. For a moment, the ship had been… gone. All of them had been gone, vanishing into
And Revan had been... everywhere. Nowhere. Nothing. Everything— She looked down at her hands. They were glowing.

"Revan?" A hand clasped over hers, covering the light. Broad and square with a spacer’s tan. A face looking down at her. Hair too short, beard too long, but familiar. Safe. Creases at the edges of his eyes.

Carth.

"Hey. Freckles. Come back."

Revan blinked. "I—I’m fine."

Everyone on the bridge was staring. Dustil’s hand was on his saber—who the hell trusted that kid with a saber? He made her hackles rise. Revan remembered that trick Dar had done with Revan's lightsaber crystal, and reached out to fuse the kid’s—

Dustil’s own Force presence flared back—and in his figure seemed to ripple, suddenly outlined with a black corona of energy, so Dark it was almost palpable.

"No," Carth's kid said flatly, glaring back at her. Behind him Mekel was asking a question—

Dustil’s strong. Stronger than he was before.

"Revan?" Carth again. He’d stepped in front of her. Blocking her view of his kid, her view of the ships—

"I’m fine," she assured him, raising her voice to address the Hawk’s sensors. “I’ll go with you, Mission. The survivors down there will need our help.”

For example, Dar'Revan will need help dying.

“Great, sis! You’ll ride with me?”

Carth met Revan’s eyes and shook his head. “Not alone she won’t.” He glanced at his son. “Dustil, you need to stay on the ship. With Mekel.”

“Not a chance. We’re coming too, okay, Blue?” Mekel Jin barely glanced in their direction, leaning into Dustil as Carth’s son whispered in his ear, still shooting murderous glances at her. Despite his defensiveness, there was an easy familiarity in their poses that struck Revan as new.

They’ve grown up, she thought. No longer the scared children she’d met on Korriban. They’ve grown up and Dustil has too much power—


Across from them, Canderous shook his head. “What are you playing at, Computer?” His voice was metallic under the visor. “Those ships have something to do with you? Why didn't they fire on you?”

“Geez! What do you think I am? No! The Sleepers are just... awake now! But barely sentient! One-router minds—all on the same frequency... so happy Revan is here! Ready to follow her anywhere! Blah, blah....”
“But you can hear them?”

“Of course it can, husband. That blue ship is another abomination.”


“Yeah, I can hear them. And how would you like it if I just started calling you ‘Mandalorian?’” Mission's indignation sounded so real.

Canderous shrugged. “You could use Mand’alor,” he offered. “But I'd like it fine.”

“We'll all go to the planet together,” Revan told them flatly. “In the Hawk.”

“Geez, sound happier about it, Polla Revan! It'll be like old times!”

“Wait. Those ships—did they mention anything about a tomb?” Carth tilted his head to speak to the receiver mic they’d attuned to the Hawk’s frequency as if it was Mission herself. “Did they say anything about putting Revan in a tomb?”

“A tomb?” For some reason, Revan was suddenly cold. She looked at Carth. There had been a tomb on Medriaas. A tomb of Tenebrae’s and his holocron. And she had seen… in that vision of the past that she had seen there, she had wanted to destroy that tomb very badly.

“A what?” Mission’s giggle came out metallic. “Are you nuts? No! No way! No tomb! They’re all just happy she’s here!”

“Vima Sunrider mentioned a tomb.” Carth had that stubborn look on his face. His hand pulled at that abominable beard. “Didn't catch much of what she said to Master Atris, but she mentioned she was gonna blow this ship to stop you from getting to some tomb, Revan.”

“Oh? Did she say that? No. Even if there was a tomb, this tomb is a different one. Just some boring old tomb,” Mission said brightly. Too brightly. “Smelly. And boring.”

“If Vima Sunrider didn’t want me to go into a tomb, she should have told me not to go into a fracking tomb.” Beneath them, the planet burned. She’d... Revan had probably witnessed dozens of planets burning, but it shouldn't feel this… normal. “Perhaps Master Sunrider would have told me about this fabled tomb... if someone hadn’t killed her.”

“She was going to blow up the ship,” Carth snapped, but had that look in his eyes like he was worried. “Revan... are you okay?”

“She's always been nuts,” Dustil muttered. Too soft for his father to hear but from his smirk Revan knew she’d been meant to.

Mekel kicked him in the leg. Hard. Looked like it might have hurt.

Revan dabbed at her nose with the cloth again. She took another deep breath. “I’m fine. Look, there will be survivors on that planet. We need to find them.”

“Actually, we don’t,” Canderous was still standing, one hand on the weapon’s deck. Now he straightened and crossed his arms. “We don't need to land on the planet to finish this.”

Revan glanced at him, startled. With that damned visor on he had no expression, just her own face reflecting back at her.
"Husband?" Aemelie raised her voice sharply. "Just what are you saying?"

"The hu'tuun Emperor is down there." Canderous's voice reverberated like he'd turned his helm mic up. Every Mandalorian on the bridge was suddenly standing straight at attention. "That's his capital planet. This fleet listens to you, Revan. So make 'em finish the job burning from orbit. We can have the kids help with the warbirds. It'd be good practice."

"But—"

But his words made sense. This was the heart of Tenebrae's power. They had a fleet more than capable of destroying him. And if all Revan had to do was ask—

**Trajectory change,** she traced on the display, to test their will. **Far orbit, solar path six 1.395 zed per hour.**

**{{Compliance, Starfire Unit.}}** When that strange voice whispered in her mind, her vision went white.

Revan blinked and the world came back.

On their holographic array, and doubled across the expanse of the Aleema's transparisteel view, the alien ships moved like a flock of sleepy thranta. Then they began to separate, moving farther away from the rest of the fleet as their positions began to align with the Kaas System's sun instead of the planet.

"They're moving," Carth said. "Revan?"

"I sent them into a solar orbit. It was a test." *A test they obeyed. I told them to not bomb Telos before. I told them to stay away from Coruscant—and they obeyed me then as well—*

Something wet and salty stung her lips, and Revan raised the sanicloth she'd kept to her face again. It came away red.

"Are you nuts?" Carth stared at her like he'd been gut-shot, then turned to Canderous. "There are innocents down there! Zaalbar's down there! Polla and Seiran! Yuthura Ban! Everyone who helped us! We can't just kill them!"

"But you suggested the same thing Canderous did," Revan reminded him. "In the med–bay, before. You said yourself that maybe we should strike first. From orbit."

The idea had merit.

"That was before I saw that the planet was already burning," Carth muttered. "Whoever's left down there, they've already lost."

"Uh, know who else?" Mekel coughed. "Dustil's knocked–up girlfriend is down th—oww!" Mekel Jin shot off the bench he'd been sitting on next to Dustil as if he'd been Force–pushed. He got up glaring. "The frack, Telos?"

"Shut up, Mekk." Dustil folded his arms and leaned back, smirking. There was an ugly light in his glittering yellow eyes. 'Hey! Darth Revan? When you're done blowing your nose, you need to listen to my father. Because Dad's right. A lot of people helped us on Kaas. And we owe them.'

"You're can't be serious, Canderous?" Mission's voice broke in. **We have to go down there! Big Z! And my T3!**
“Polla’s there,” Carth added hoarsely, staring at Revan. “The real Polla Organa and her husband. And remember Yuthura Ban? I saw that woman save your life! You can’t be suggesting we leave them—that we murder them—”

“You suggested it before, too, Carth.” Had he forgotten?

“When I thought we needed an upper hand. When I thought we had no other chance!” He waved at the planet. “We have one now. Can’t you see that? You… you don’t kick a dying man. You try and help—”

“Emperor wanted a war.” Canderous interrupted. “You don’t let a zakkeg limp into the forest. Not when you've got a belt of grenades.”

“I’m not suggesting anything.” Revan made her voice loud enough to drown the rest out. “I’m considering our options.”

_Canderous is right. And yet—_

“Polla,” Carth said quietly, staring at her. “No. You can’t do this. You know that—we can’t do this—”

“Don’t worry. I can fracking stop her, Dad.” Dustil, behind him. On his feet now—

*You think you can take me, Darth Sulksalot?* Revan met his yellow gaze steadily. Felt the Force around them stir again, as if the entire room—no, the entire ship—held power at her disposal. The Force flexed beneath her hands like a living entity, ready to do her bidding—

“You’re fracking nuts,” the Sithkid snarled. But he took a step back, and his eyes shifted away.

“Revan—” Carth had dropped her hand, but now he advanced again—again stepping between her command chair and his son. “Please.”

“I have to consider the options.” Revan stared into his soft brown eyes. “You understand, Carth. After everything we’ve been through, the Sith don’t get to end so quickly.”

“What was that about the Sith?” Dustil popped up again, shouting from behind her father like a boy calling out schoolyard taunts. Behind him, Mekel had scrambled to his feet, too. “Look, the Emperor's just one guy, even if he's in a lot of bodies. You want to kill him a few thousand times? Go for it. But there's a lot of good people in the Empire—allies we made who helped us down there. We owe them to make this right.”

“That’s right, son.” The smile Carth gave Dustil was brief and then he turned back to Revan. “Freckles—” Carth looked like he was still trying to rationalize sentiment with necessity. “You—what do you—”

_We owe them to make this right._

Dustil Onasi’s words were comically simplistic, but he wasn’t wrong.

_We owe them. He’s right. Of course we do. We owe them for what they’ve done to us. They don’t deserve the mercy of a quick end._

“Will you guys relax?” Revan kept her words simple too, to put them all back at ease. “Of course we need to rescue our… our friends. We also need to find the Emperor and stamp him out of every being he’s possessing—like Dustil said.” She took a deep breath. “We can’t do either of those
things from orbit. So, we’ll go to the planet.”

_Can’t kill Dar’Revan from orbit. No. I have to be sure—_

Dromund Kaas’s devastation was just another one of the Dar’s atrocities. Add it to the tally: the Mandalorian Wars, Malachor, Telos—

_Me. She pushed me off a ship. She tried to kill me—_

_You were cutting through the hull of her ship with a lightsaber. Some might consider her actions self–defense._

Malak’s voice again caught her off guard. So much that instead of locking her mental shields, Revan answered him.

_She left me there. She betrayed me—_

_She left you with our son, Red. It was a gift, not a betrayal._

_Our—for a moment time shifted and she saw him: Korrie, standing on the gangplank of an unfamiliar cruiser, taller than he’d been, top–knotted and gangly–limbed._

_And scowling._

_Was he angry? Upset? Hurt?_

_Our son, Red. He's safe, now. No matter what they tell you—I will keep him safe—_

_“I don't think the Awakened Ones want to blow up the rest of the planet, anyway. Good call.”_ Mission’s voice crackled with static.

_“Awakened Ones?” Carth frowned._

_“Seems weird calling them Sleepers when they’re awake, right?”_

_“Aren’t they my fleet?” Revan blinked back the vision of Korrie. “They’re following my commands.”_

_“It's complicated. Hey… when you’re on the Hawk, we can talk it through, okay? Sis?”_

_“Sure, Mission.” Revan’s eyes were back on the fleet's formations again, shifting them, adjusting their orbits._

Malak now seemed to be in her head with impunity—

_When you open yourself to hear. But I can't be everywhere at once. Not with you and with her and with Malachor—_

_Well, I don’t want you! Go. Away._ Revan tried to summon the same strength from the anger she’d found before to banish him, but her insides felt hollow and weak, now, her earlier bravado gone. She looked up and caught Carth’s unguarded expression. It wasn’t fear in his eyes when he looked at her—it was something worse. Raw and desperate hope.

_Go away, she repeated in her head._

_Cold amusement echoed in Malak’s voice. As you wish, Red._
“Revan?” Carth touched her shoulder and Revan started.

“Carth?”

“You... you were talking to thin air.” His beloved, befuddled face. “You were muttering ‘go away,’ but there’s no one there.”

“I—I thought I saw Korrie.”

“Sis?”

“You were shaking. I thought you were going to have another fit. We should have the medix check you out again.”

Sinae had already subjected her to one scan and found nothing. No reason for the nose bleeds. No damage of any kind.

“I’m fine. It wasn’t like that. This was some kind of... of... vision.”

His eyes narrowed. “Anything useful?”

_Taller. Korrie was older. Maybe it's the future I saw. “Not now—not here. No. Maybe what I saw was the future.”_

“Sis? You're cutting in and out—”

“Just a minute, Mission!” Revan held up her hand—as if the computer could see it.

“You're seeing the future now?” Carth was using that teasing, placating tone that had charmed her pants off once or twice—and was entirely wrong for this situation. “What are we doing in the future?”

“Nothing. It wasn't us.” Her son hadn’t been smiling. He’d been wearing some kind of generic coverall, had an empty holster strapped to his belt. “Just Korrie. He was—there was a ship. A light cruiser. Mantellian, maybe. I’m not sure.”

“Right. The ship really matters, here,” Dustil interrupted. “Are we going to the fracking planet or not?”

“Yes,” Revan said slowly, turning to him, and ignoring Carth’s stubborn glare, Canderous's heavy sigh. “We are. Mission?”

“Ready!”

“Prep your jets for reentry. We’ll send down an escort in additional shuttles. Sinae, of course. We’ll need a medix, and portable facilities. Enough personnel to establish a defensive base and mount patrols into the contaminated areas. Whoever else Canderous thinks can help with search and rescue. There will be... there’s a lot of injured sents down there.”

When Revan blinked, she felt a few more flicker and die.

Canderous scoffed. “You're making us soft, you and Republic. Rescue missions? We’re not your Mercy Corps.”

“Not soft,” she switched to Mandalorian. “Efficient.” Her vision blurred and abruptly the remaining inhabitants of Dromund Kaas were all _there_, points of light on a globe, some more
bright than others—and in between, something older—

*Smooth. Cold. Ancient.*

**[Welcome]** a voice murmured.

**{{Tenebrae?}}** It felt like a little him, like the mind she had touched before. But… changed, somehow. **Older.**

**{{No}}**

“Beautiful?” Carth’s worried voice. “Your nose… it's bleeding again.”

“I’m fine.”

**“Prepping jets now, sis! Took you long enough, but I’m so glad you’re here!”**

“That makes one of us.” Revan wiped her nose and stared down at the burning planet. From space, it looked like a half-peeled thisla globe, with half its segments blackened and charred; the lines of demarcation broken only by cloud cover across its surface. Quite precisely, rounded segments of the planet had been left pristine—

One, in particular, caught her eye.

XXX

**“Prepping jets now, sis! Took you long enough, but I’m so glad you’re here!”**

Mission paused, trying to figure out how to say something that didn’t *sound* like a warning, but that Polla Revan would still get. “Hey! Remember that time on Tatooine, when we ran into Lena and she told me what a great guy Griff was, bringing aid to the Sand People and stuff?”

(That had never happened.)

She waited for Polla Revan to twig to it—

**“That makes one of us.”** Polla Revan sounded distracted as if she wasn’t listening to Mission at all. Probably a lot on her fragile organic mind.

Mission ran through the scenarios to get Polla Revan out of here again. She could probably jump the *Hawk* into a long burn away from Kaas before Polla Revan realized they weren't going there, but then what? Without appendages, it would be hard to disable a crazed Sith Lord. Add Carth, Sithboy, and maybe others to the mix and things just got worse. The organics were gonna be *pissed* she’d tricked them—and she’d have to be out of range of Kaas’s influence—or that scumrat installation would just send its killer ships after them.

Actually, Tatooine wouldn't be a bad choice as a place to hide out. *That* computer was totally dead. It couldn't give Polla Revan away. Remote planet, limited wideband… they could do a lot worse.

Mission wished she had thought to get a mouse–droid or two on the *Hawk* before this happened. There was a perfectly good cannister of xeriff gas in the medix bay. If she pumped it through her air vents she could knock out her friends without taking any unnecessary risks… lower the oh–two enough so they didn't wake up and then *have* them arrive on Tatooine.

Of course, that still left Big Z and her chassis on Kaas... but maybe after she dumped the others in
the middle of the salt desert she could go back for him—

She ran the odds. They weren't great. Kaas would be on the lookout for her.

Oh, well, Big Z.

Carth had told her once that you never knew when you had the last time to say good–bye. He'd been talking about loser Griff, but the lesson was still the same.

“I have no appendages to get to the gas. And if I just decrease the oxygen, they might get brain damage!” If Mission had lungs they'd sigh, running checks on all of her systems, looking for moving parts that could build something.

That took some time—long enough for her organic crew to make their way aboard, and she didn't come up with much—just a few rotorwheels in her cooling system. And how to get started? All she needed was one measly set of hands….

“Hey, guys!” she chirped brightly as her inefficient old pals finally made it up the loading ramp. “Welcome home! Relax while I get my systems booted up, okay?”

“I'm going to fly us out,” Carth announced like Mission wasn't capable.

“Sure, but have you guys checked out the reinforced cargo bay?” Mission chirped. “We picked up some pretty great stuff when we were at Yavin Station! You'll want to see it!”

“Thanks having us aboard, Mission.” Polla Revan clanked on after Carth's heels, laden with a few boxes of stuff she’d collected. “I've got co–pilot—”

“But—” Several of the other organics began to object and Polla Revan gave a weird, almost choked laugh.

“Just for the view. Relax, Canderous… Mekel….”

“I'll fly us out,” Carth repeated. “Just release the controls, Mission, okay?”

“Check out the cargo bay first, guys!” Mission didn’t want to be pushy, but the fate of the galaxy was at stake. “Hey, Polla Revan. Why don’t you put that box of stuff in the cargo bay?”

“You need to mag–lev that crate down if you think you're putting that pile of junk on my bridge,” Carth scolded his wife.

So cute to see them getting along, even if the net result was them totally ignoring Mission.

“Relax, Flyboy.” Polla Revan rolled her eyes almost like it was the old days again. “I remember what happened when we nailed that Kashyyyk landing….”

Maybe Mission could seal them all off once they all got in the reinforced cargo bay? But Sithboy and Revan's lightsabers were gonna be a problem—

Xxx

Being on the Hawk again was both familiar and strange to Revan. The exterior hull had been painted a garish blue. And someone had carved a Kryyyjak orchid into a panel on the cockpit door. There was a Deralian dreamcatcher tied above the pilot's seat, and Revan's feet didn't reach the foot pedals in the co–pilot's chair as if the seat had been adjusted in her absence.
Did you think nothing would change? Carth had taken the ship from Coruscant nearly a year ago. Zaalbar would have been co–pilot—

Revan's eyes went to that dreamcatcher again, hanging from a loop in the ceiling above the pilot's chair.

“Hang on a sec.” Carth looked kind of cute, adjusting the pilot's seat back now, stretching his legs out with a sigh as the chair’s hydraulics shifted back.

Carth never let anyone touch the pilot’s seat—not since Revan had nearly crashed the Hawk on Dantooine. The woman she'd been then had thought she could pilot a fast ship. That woman had also thought she was too smart for superstitions like Deralian dreamcatchers and too skilled to need a pilot's lucky charm—

Revan moved her fingers, making the Force send the fragile threads of the dreamcatcher shimmering. Carth had said Polla was here before, but it hadn't seemed real, the smuggler on their Hawk. The Force brought the charm to her hand. It was fragile, hastily–made. Just a trinket, really—fashioned from extra scraps of cloth, maybe a few threads pulled from a loose sleeve. Something to do for luck. Like crossing your fingers behind your back or cursing the Grass Priests.

“Polla Organa was here, wasn't she?”

“Uh, yeah.” Her husband leaned across the gap between their seats. “I told you—told you that before.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “Sure you're okay?”

“Gonna check my bunk.” Behind them, Canderous cleared his throat—too loud a sound from his helmet's mic. “Don't let Computer or Revan fly this tub.”

“Tub,” Carth scoffed. “She’s the fastest ship here, Ordo.”

“Since Revan dumped that Pinion into the sun that's probably true.” The man chuckled and left. Typical Canderous, once she’d rejected his proposal to launch strikes from orbit, he’d moved on to the next plan without looking back.

“You want to fly her solo, Carth?” Mission's voice chimed in. “Guess that's okay, but I'm gonna help when we enter atmosphere, those bombs stirred up a lot of junk—”

“I got it, Mission.” Carth leaned across the board and began tagging the knobs for lift. Their engines rumbled into life with a satisfied purr. “Zaalbar did a lot of the flying,” he admitted to Revan, looking almost guilty. “On the way here, I mean. We were never sure when Tenebrae would possess me, so—”

“But you had to adjust your seat back—not forward.” Revan let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. “You had to adjust the pilot’s seat to make it taller again because you let her fly the Hawk last—last time it flew.”

“Her?” Carth's face was confused. “You mean Mission? Of course, she’s had command access since Kashyyyk—”

“I mean Polla.” That dreamcatcher. The woman Revan had been would have laughed at a luck charm, but perhaps things had changed. “You guys came here together, right? From Yavin Station, you said before.”

“Oh. Uh, yeah. She asked to fly her—”
“Of course she did.” Revan’s throat felt like something was caught in it. “She probably loved this stupid ship.”

“Stupid?” Mission’s scoff whined, feedback crackling. “Hey! Which one of us took that contract with the ancient order of assassins, again? Cause it wasn't me—”

“What?” Under other conditions, Carth's poleaxed expression might have been comical.

“Nothing.” Revan glanced at the speaker and crushed the dreamcatcher in her fist.

“Just joking!” Mission added. “Right, sis?”

The cockpit door slid open again, and Dustil peered through the door. “Hey, Dad? We're gonna check out the galley. You want anything?”

Revan turned her head, eying Carth's son. “We’re fine. But you and Mekel should strap in for lift–off.”

Dustil Onasi met her gaze steadily. The Dark around him felt nearly palpable. From the way his eyes narrowed, he hadn’t forgotten their showdown on the bridge. “Oh, we’ll be grand, Revan .”

Behind Dustil, Mekel gave a nervous laugh. “All aboard,” he said, glancing sideways at Revan, and then ducking behind Carth's son again. “Uh… all ready for take–off, Blue.”

“Carth's flying, Mekel Jin,” Mission somehow made the speakers sigh. “Guess I'm just a passenger for this one. Just like you.”

“I'll take her up slow.” Carth's hand went to the yoke and the ship shifted up, edging out of the open hangar bay. “You ki—you guys—get settled, okay?”

“Don't have to tell us twice, Admiral.” Mekel grabbed Dustil's arm and pulled him out the door.

Carth shook his head. “Did that kid just call me ‘Admiral’?”

“I think he was trying to be polite.” Jin still slipped and called her ‘my lord,’ from time to time. “Mando’ade aren’t big on rank—everyone’s either the name of their post, the order of their marriage, or a ‘general.’” Revan shot him a smile. “We can work on having him call you ‘General Onasi,’ if you want—”

“My old sergeant would roll over in his grave.”

Carth eased the Hawk into open space, heading between the lines of Sleeper ships toward the planet below.

Xxx

The woman who had been both a Jedi Knight and a Sith Lord walked through a hellscape, trailing behind the Wookiee who was leading her escort.

Although the blast surface stopped abruptly two kilometers out from Kaas City limits, the metropolis was a ruin of fused rock and ferraglass, smoldering with a green miasma that choked their lungs and burned their eyes.

The Blais’s supply stores had included dozens of sets of Sith armor but no enviro–suits. Revan supposed she should be thankful for the layers of cortosis between her skin and the poisoned
ground. The armor and the anti–rads currently coursing through her system would protect them from the worst of the fallout, at least for a time.

Their fortune could have been much worse.

She’d left Yuthura behind in the Blais tombs, despite the woman’s protests. The Twi’lek seemed more affected by the poisoned bombs than anyone else, and Revan wanted to minimize her further exposure.

The Wookiee leading their vanguard had been too large to fit even a modified set of armor. But Grarwwaar seemed entirely unconcerned about radiation, now padding through the ruins almost silently on his heavy, clawed feet, the pack on his shoulders full of kolto kits and foil–foam blankets.

Revan's suspicions about him were increasingly piqued, but the mystery of Polla Organa’s mercenaries could wait—at least until they found the woman herself. If Revan exposed her suspicions now, their loyalties might change.

Grarwwaar could have killed her easily enough in the midst of their riot, she suspected—had that been his intent. He had not tried. She assumed that meant he had another target. Until she knew what—or who—it was… the Wookiee and his mercenaries were extremely useful.

As if proving the point, the Houck mercenary trod by, with a few more limp bodies slung over his immense shoulders.

He deposited them on the cleared ground they had demarcated for that purpose to await her triage. Revan knelt before one of the foil–blanket–wrapped bodies—the only one that was salvageable.

“This one’s still alive,” she called out. Barely. A sentient covered in so much blood and dust that their station and even species were indeterminate. All Revan could feel from the ruin was pain.

Revan knelt, searching for the worst of her—his—injuries. Although their objective was to rescue anyone they could find, she was looking for one of Tenebrae’s Voices, preferably a Blind, since dealing with a potentially hostile Force-sensitive would only complicate matters.

But this sentient, like all the others they had found, seemed unpossessed—at least in the moment. Again, Revan cursed herself for letting the one Voice she had found die half a day before—the one they had found under the collapsed market. His entire torso had been pulverized, but she should have at least questioned Tenebrae before giving him release.

*He was in too much pain to have answered us.*

She no longer started when she heard Sheris's voice. The woman's insights about healing were too useful.

*That’s true. He would have been difficult to torture. The Emperor always hated pain. Tenebrae would not stay in him and he was dying anyway—*

*That's why we set him free.*

*Perhaps you were too hasty.*

*Perhaps Tenebrae will remember the kindness.*
Revan snorted. *Perhaps you are naive.*

She glanced behind them at the two waiting hoverplats they’d salvaged from spaceport wreckage. One for the injured, another for the dead. They'd had to dump and refill the latter three times over… while only a few survivors lay wrapped in kolto, ready to be taken back to their camp beneath the Blais tombs.

The Fragment was in the sky above their heads. She would come to the planet. Quite soon. Revan needed to prepare herself to face her. But now, she wiped the sweat from her eyes, trying to drown the roar in the Force still coming from above, so as better to hear the quiet suffering closer in.

*I like to help them.* That voice again. Sheris sounded more assured than she had been before. *You were a hero, once, Revan. You like healing them too.*

Yes. Revan had never possessed the skill in her own body. She had always been better at taking things apart than mending. *I do. But we can't save them all.*

*We'll do our best.* She felt herself bend down before the injured sent again as her hands began to glow—

Xxx

The *Hawk* skimmed through the planet’s roiling atmosphere, buffeted by clouds and lightning storms. The surface was a patchwork glimpsed through a haze: burning plains and rubble, interspersed with stretches of green where the bombs had not come.

The silence in the cockpit seemed to make time stretch and slow, broken only by Carth’s repeated queries about Revan’s welfare. Canderous and the Sithkids hadn't made another appearance.

Normally, Revan would have cracked a joke—or in the old days maybe straddled her husband’s lap—but now Carth was a wraith of a man with a beard and a worried scowl, intent on the controls in front of them. The easy rapport that the two of them had begun to recover at their reunion had been fractured by his betrayal.

*I had questions for Vima Sunrider. You killed her.*

“Are you okay?” he asked suddenly. *Again.*

“Eleven.”

“What?”

“That's the eleventh time you've asked if I was okay since we left the *Aleema*— not counting the number of times you asked on board. I can only conclude you don't think I am.”

“Always said you smart,” he muttered.

“Always said you were pretty.” *Captain Obvious.*

That earned her a smile, at least.

“None of this is okay,” Revan added. Her hand went automatically to her ear and the receiver she’d worn to direct their fleet—but she’d left it aboard the *Aleema*, in Aemelie's charge. Far from ideal, considering the woman had just disobeyed her direct order, but Revan had let Canderous make that call, just as she’d left it to him whether to come with them himself or stay in orbit above.
Canderous was truly the Mandalore. The Aleema and the Mandalorian ships were under his command—not hers. The rest of this: the Sith ships, the Sleepers, even this devastated planet below them were just a means to end.

And the end was coming, very soon.

“We've been in worse—” Carth's voice broke off. “Actually, this is pretty bad.”

“Yeah.” For some reason, she wanted to laugh. “But we're still alive.”

“S’cuy’ mhi,” he echoed, repeating the phrase in Mandalorian.

“Don’t go all clan on me,” she joked. “I like being your only wife.”

“No chance of that,” he said. He rubbed that infernal beard. “Ordo’s like a brother to me, but I still think of them as murdering scum.”

“Whereas your Sith forces are practically Star Scouts,” Revan murmured. “Right, Admiral?”

He snorted. “I just do what I can.”

“You’ve done plenty.”

“Right back at you.” His mouth twitched.

But the tension between them seemed to ebb, at least a little.

Under Carth's steady hand, the Ebon Hawk skinned through the outer layers of Dromund Kaas’s atmosphere, arcing slowly down toward the murky brown planet, descending into cloud cover that rippled with lightning.

The planet felt sick in the Force, like a rotten goreapple.

“Don't get too close to the bomb sites,” Revan warned Carth. “We don't want exposure to anything avoidable.”

“I know,” her husband muttered. “I'm watching the feed.”

“He’s got it! Don't teach your grandma to splice locks,” Mission added, sounding testy. “Kaas City is like, one giant crater. We're gonna have to get close to rescue Big Z and Polla Polla and everybody—but not too close. Okay?”

Polla Polla. Mission’s naming conventions made an ironic sort of sense but they also made Revan twitch every time she heard them. Polla Revan. Sheris Revan. Polla Polla. As if the other two were nothing but extensions of her—

But I would never do this. I would never destroy a planet like this—

Except… she had been with them when the Sleepers had done this.

I thought it was some kind of Force–vision. A memory. I didn't know!

I used to find myself already engaged in battle with no memory of how it began. Malak’s voice in her head was a low chuckle. I used to dream of wars already won, and find myself on a podium, giving victory speeches from prompts I had no memory of writing. And in the end, I woke on the Star Forge to find you above me with a blazing saber—after I had hunted you across the
galaxy. He paused. *I remember hunting you. I remember how much I wanted to put an end to you— but I don't remember how you bested me—*

*I used grenades, Malak. Get out of my head.*

**Sure, Red.***

Revan blinked hard, staring straight at the viewscreen, the scorched planet, rolling beneath them. “There aren't many alive,” she said out loud. “Not near Kaas City.”

“You sense—” Carth coughed. “Of course. I–I knew you could do that.”

“I sensed your ship, before,” she told him. “And the other one. Cloaked. Above Medriaas.”

“The *Aleema* fired on my ship.” Carth fiddled with the controls. “A lot of good people died.”

“I didn't know it was you until I saw the name—”

He gave her a blank look.

**“Kaas City *Sojourn.*** Didn't he remember?**

**“Kaas City?”** He looked confused.

According to the ship’s maps, Kaas City was the darker, poisonous patch of clouds now directly below. Through a break in the clouds, Revan caught a quick glimpse of fire raging… and felt another cluster of those living sparks die out.

**“Let me know when you find the spaceport,”** Tenebrae had said mockingly.

*That was it. Right there.*

“Sojourn,” she corrected, taking a deep breath. “You named your ship *Sojourn.*”

“Sojourn.” Carth nodded. “Yeah, always said I'd name my first independent command that.” His lips twisted. “Turned out to be one hell of a joke. Wasn’t independent. Wasn’t even in command.”

“We rescued everyone we could. I sent them to the *Kriffing Kathhound.*” She should have gotten a roster of Imperial survivors for him, let him know his men were safe. That seemed like something a real leader would have done.

“Wait, you couldn't sense *me* in the Force when I was on that ship? Or Dustil? Not at all?” Carth shook his head, not waiting for an answer. “And you can't… *now*… you can't sense anyone below? Zaalbar, or—”

“I sense *lives,*” Revan told Carth. “Force users feel a little brighter. I felt Dustil, but he didn’t feel like he had before. I can't tell *who* I’m sensing — especially from far away. Sometimes… sometimes I can, but not usually.” She had sensed Dar before, on Coruscant. Absently, Revan punched in a map of the terrain, using her hand to mark the places with the most sparks.

*Muscle memory.* The action felt familiar, almost soothing.

“You always sensed Bastila.”

“Force bond.” She raised an eyebrow at him. *“That makes it easy.”*
“Makes some things easy.” He coughed. “The two of you never seemed to have an easy time of it.”

No, we didn’t. “You’re right,” she muttered, changing the subject. “About the worse spots thing. This is pretty bad.”

“Geez, you two are depressing!” Mission broke in. “I bet a lot of our guys probably survived! Sheris Revan ordered everyone underground when the ships came. Lots of tunnels under Tenny-Bro’s estates. We’ll find them, don’t worry!”

It was impossible to think a computer’s chirpy tone could be forced—and not just its programming designed to invoke a sentimental response, but Revan still thought the voice sounded like Mission was hiding something.

“Sheris Revan, huh? Just call her Sheris. Or Dar.” Although either was better than ‘Original Revan.’

“What you say, sis!”

Revan cocked an eye at the ship’s speaker welded above their heads. “Sounds like you and Sheris had a lot of time to catch up, Mission.”

“Not really. Not when she was conscious, you know? But she did say that I was a fascinating specimen.”

“She would.” That was all the Rakatan construct would be to Dar’Revan. “Mission, was everyone else okay?”

She would not name them or think of Jasp and how she'd promised to bring his daughter home safe.

“If by okay, you mean ambulatory and running for shelter, sure. Last I saw ’em!”

The computer whirred. “Yuthura got this holo-mask made up with your face. And everyone liked the way Polla Polla and Zaalbar gave speeches. It’s been… a lot happened.”

“So Carth told me.” She took a deep breath. She glanced at her husband, a sentinel in his captain’s chair, and still coughing more than she liked. “Not about the speeches or a holo-mask. You mean… Polla Organa was still pretending to be me?”

“With the mask on, yeah.” The artificial giggle came through too loud through all the speakers and made Revan nearly jump. “Least that's what Big Z said. I wasn’t —” distortion crackled the speakers and her voice cut out for a moment “— a lot of it? But Zaalbar said Yuthura pretended to be you, too, when they needed to lift stuff or shoot lightning at sents. But Polla Polla was better at speeches, you know? She had the accent right—” Mission broke off suddenly, and then shifted her voice, making it lower, raspier. “If we fail, I'll flay the flesh from your bones, insects!” She let out an incongruous giggle. “See?”

Revan tried to curb her irritation. “When the hell did I ever say that?”

“Uh… a few times. We all did what we had to,” Carth interrupted. “The Emperor made me High Admiral of the Sith Navy. Polla… she stayed with those crazy Blais sisters to take care of Revan’s body. My son pretended to be Darth Malak.” He bent over the yoke, adjusting controls that didn’t need adjusting. “We had no damned choice. I kept thinking you were going to come—”
“I was. It just took longer than I planned.”

“Well, I was wrong to pin all my hopes on you. We... we all did what we had to do.” Carth glanced at her, a muscle in his jaw twitching under that stupid beard. “I had to realize the plan where you just came and rescued us was nuts, anyway. Even if you had come before… before all this....” His voice trailed off and he glanced at the viewscreen at the ruined world beneath them. “Funny. This is almost one of the better outcomes. The Empire won't be invading the Republic any time soon.”

_The Sleepers might._ What other systems under attack had Canderous mentioned before the widebeam went dead? As if Revan hadn't seen them burn in her mind’s eye.


Revan opened her mouth to tell Carth about Telos and then closed it again, fumbling for a change of tactics.

“What happened at Malachor changed the Jedi who followed Rev—who followed me.” She’d told him about the events at Katarr and Biscain already, but perhaps he hadn’t understood the importance. “I had to end Davad Arkan or he would have destroyed everyone in the galaxy with even a drop of Force potential. That’s why I didn't come sooner.”

“You always do what you have to do.” Carth's voice was softer than it should have been. But not warm. “That’s what we did too. Here. This was the best we could manage.”

“So you said.” Revan hadn't forgiven him for killing Vima Sunrider: more like, shelved it for now, as Jasp Organa would have said. _You didn’t have to kill her. You could have incapacitated her. The woman had answers. Answers I need._

“Hey! Onasi! You had the Wookiee sleeping in my bunk?” Canderous appeared in the doorway to the cockpit, the scowl on his face as familiar as it was harmless. “Something wrong with his?”

“It was too close to mine—we wanted to keep Zepth and Takan away from Polla as much as possible.”

“Huh.” Canderous shrugged, and slid in behind them, sitting on the passenger bench that ran alongside the comm board. “Maybe that makes sense in Telosian. Who's Zepth and Takan?”

Carth started to explain, although Revan was having as much trouble understanding as Canderous. Something about keeping the possessed bodies of the Emperor from realizing Polla Organa wasn't Revan?

_How could an immortal body-swapping Sith Lord be dumb enough to think she was me in the first place?_

_Maybe he can be easily tricked,_ that cold whisper in her thoughts murmured. _The Emperor is not infallible. Maybe that is the lesson to be gleaned here—_

“Hey! Waitasecond! Whoa. This is new.” Mission interrupted Carth’s explanation of the ceremony on Dathomir that had turned him into Tenebrae’s puppet. “Dustil’s macking Mekel Jin? When did that happen?”

“What?”

“Mission has cameras all over the ship.” Carth looked embarrassed. “Give them privacy, kiddo. You know... we... we talked about boundaries before, remember?”
“Oh, this isn’t like when you were locking yourself in the bunks with Polla Polla.” The computer’s imitation of Mission’s snort was uncanny. “Seriously, they’re really macking—”

“What?” Revan repeated. Were they trying to distract her on purpose? Below them, the blasted ruin of the planet’s surface unfurled. Clouds of dust and craters of fire. The ship bucked under atmospheric stress and her hands twitched for the pilot’s yoke—although she knew better than to ask for flight command. “Locking yourself in our bunk?”

“Tenebrae was squeamish about… uh, about sex.” Carth’s gaze fixed on the landscape, but his neck had flushed. “He thought Polla was you, so he… when we needed to talk she'd tell him… you know.”

“What?” She blinked. “Sex?”

“Uh, we didn’t actually, you know we didn’t—”

“I wouldn’t think you would.” It hadn't even occurred to Revan; but it did suddenly, with a flush of jealousy that startled her with its intensity. She hadn’t thought of having a rival for Carth’s attention since she’d seen him with that Republic Admiral, Rew Ekkumi—

Xxx

“Once,” he said, looking her dead in the eyes. “Only the one time. I—I want you to know that.”

It was their wedding night, at least according to whatever strange Mandalorian ceremony they'd just undergone, and in that moment, Revan only felt an impatient irritation he'd brought Rew Ekkumi up at all.

“I could tell by how she looked at you.” She smiled at him, tracing the cut she'd made on his cheek. “Also, I think you're forgiven, considering you also wanted me dead....”

His laugh was sharp and unbelieving, but real—and she saw the last doubt vanish from his eyes—

Xxx

“Well, we… Polla and I… we didn't.” He brushed imaginary grime off the battered jacket he'd found in the Hawk’s storeroom, still patched with the thread she'd used to mend it on Taris. “She… she’s a good person, Revan. She’s like you. A lot like you. Fearless. She has the heart of a rock–lion.”

You said that before, too. Heart of a rock–lion. I know all your lines, Flyboy. “And that's why you didn't sleep with her?” The dry laugh felt foreign. “Flattering.”

“Yeah, well, I—I don't know… what you have planned.” He seemed to hesitate on the words, and then his gaze was too intent on hers, so direct that Revan wanted to turn away first. “We need to get Polla and Seiran out safe. We owe them. You must… you need to realize that.”

Right. Great. I realize that the real Polla’s probably already dead. Statistically, that seemed obvious.

“We will.” Revan gave him what he wanted to hear. “Wait. What about Dustil and Mekel?”

Carth raised an eyebrow “They, uh… they're involved. Dustil thought Mekel had died. He… it gutted him. Maybe now, he’ll be better.”
“But—” had she been wrong about Mekel and Canderous's daughter?

“That Jin! Hah! Kid needs to learn to rein in his shereshek,” Canderous shrugged from his place on the bench. “If Milli lives, I look forward to their duel.”

“Duel? My son isn't going to duel your daughter!”

“Of course not.” Canderous chuckled. “Jin will fight them both at the same time, to prove he can manage as well in the ring as he does in the bunk. Hah!” He paused. “Due to the Force advantage, my credits are on your son and my daughter, of course....”

“Take the ship west forty degrees, Carth.” Their commentary was abruptly just an irritant. Something else had caught Revan's attention. A strange, towering structure, set in a patch of what looked like untouched jungle—


Xxx

“Lord Revan?” Mydia Blais looked twice as wide as she should, swathed in too–big armor, with her face covered by the one rebreather they possessed, the glint of yellow eyes visible behind the transparisteel. “I found more survivors, I think. Over there.” She pointed at a pile of collapsed buildings where they had yet to set excavation fields.

Revan motioned the smallest mercenary to scan the area. The woman stepped forward and began laying out the battery arrays in front of the site.

She extended her own senses. “I think you're right, Mydia.” Hope that Revan hadn’t allowed herself to possess before mustered in her heart. “Under that rubble. The collapsed wall of the Emperor’s arena.” Two heartbeats. Two sparks, One has the Force. The other is null.

Two sparks. Faint and weak and flickering. Familiar? Or another vain hope?

Revan’s hand managed to lift a layer of sediment... but it was Mydia Blais who stepped in and raised the larger stones, lifting the broken pediments as if they were plimsy.

“Wait.” Revan motioned the smallest mercenary forward again, this time with the assembled shield generator. Her name was Oaska and she was a Sullustan beneath all of her armor—some of it patched with enough beskar to make Revan wonder if she’d once been adopted into a Mandalorian clan. That would be an unusual set of circumstances, but still possible. During the Sack of Sullust there had been several clans who took live prisoners—

“That was well done, Mydia,” Revan added.

The Blais girl seemed to require positive encouragement for every action.

“Thanks.” Mydia simpered under her rebreather. “It's important we rescue as many as we can—”

“Yes.” Revan began to direct the others to begin excavating where Mydia had indicated. “But now we need to be careful not to bury them with more debris.”

The Sullustan set up the energy shields around the collapsed tunnel, and Revan motioned for her to continue expanding the shield’s range, extending it down into the rubble.

Meanwhile, Mydia prattled on. “[—and with the servants all dead or gone, we need to find more...]
slaves. *And* my brother.”

“All slaves are free now,” Revan corrected. “That was the point of our rebellion.” One of them.

Mydia made a face. “They don't look free. Most are buried under rocks and collapsed buildings.”

Accurate. Revan nodded. “That is why we need to rescue as many as we can.”

“Right!” Mydia beamed. “Then we can enslave them again!”

“No.” Was this simpering girl as stupid as she seemed? “We just need to help those we can.”

“Why? If they're not going to work for us?”

“Because I said so.” Revan folded her eyes and fixed her with a mock–glare. All for show. The girl seemed desperate to be of use.

“You don't have to be so mean about it!” Mydia's sniffle was rather overdramatic. “I just want to find my bro–brother.” Her upper lip trembled behind her transparisteel visor, and her golden eyes blinked, suddenly full of tears.

“We will find Phylus.” Revan had promised to find the boy so many times, the phrasing in Ancient Sith felt engraved on her brain. Mydia swore her youngest sibling was alive and was convinced her other siblings were dead. The girl seemed only half-sane and claimed she saw ghosts—

*Ghosts, Red? Really?* A chuckle seemed to reverberate through her skull.

*Care to help, Mal… or are you just haunting me to make japes?*

You need to hurry. *I tried to sustain the man, but he and I lack the connection in the Force that makes such things simple. I had a far easier time saving you from that second terentatek—*

*Oh? Was that simple for you?*

*Hurry. He's nearly out of time.*

“Hurry,” Revan commanded the Sullustan, as a weak noise emerged from the center of the rubble. A cracked and broken sound, like someone weeping.

The energy field hissed into life and Revan motioned for Oaska to expand the frequency. She had used this trick before in the war—or her soldiers had. Had Revan been in her own body, it would have unnecessary to stabilize anything as she could have easily cast the entire ruin in stasis… but now—

As if to remind her, her old body’s Force presence swamped her senses again, drowning out the closer sparks.

Almost involuntarily, Revan glanced up—but the poisonous fog shrouded the ships above, made them mere shadows in the sky.

“Ready,” the Sullustan directed Regerio, their guard.

He flipped the switch and a humming blue field sprang up.

As the energy field expanded it lifted the rubble, creating a larger air pocket. Once it was large enough—and stable enough—Revan motioned for the Sullustan to lock the shield barrier in place,
allowing Mydia to continue sweeping rubble away on all three sides of it.

“Nereal perished in the mountains.” Mydia Blais kept bringing up her dead siblings as she worked, although Revan hadn’t expected sentiment from one like her. “I saw his ghost snuffling about the tomb. Rhea hasn’t spoken to me since the plague killed him. No one knows where Inse is, but Lord Malak will surely kill her. And I killed Mother. She will never forgive that. Truly, Phylus and Lord Malak’s baby are all I have left.”

*Lord Malak’s baby. Again. She goes on and on about Lord Malak’s baby!* Was the fool girl taunting Revan or just an imbecile? It didn't matter. Mydia was the strongest Force user they had. They needed her.

And yet—

*If she mentions that baby one more time, I will strangle her slowly.*

*Not the child's fault it isn't mine, Red.*

*Of course. She hardly seems your type, Lord Malak.*

The laughter could have been the wind. *You would know, my heart.*

*My heart*— her eyes prickled with Sheris's weakness.

“We’ll find your brother, Mydia.” Out loud, Revan soothed the girl as if she was Malachor having a nightmare.

She’d lost the comm–link with its picture of Malachor that Tenebrae had produced like a threat. As if his threats could still score a hit in this blasted city, with all he had made in ruin.

*All Tenebrae made is ruined. I suppose I've won. Unless the Fragment destroys everything.*

*We will stop her. And our son is fine, Red. For now.*

Revan realized she was smiling. *He had better be.*

She glanced up at the sky again, at the Sleepers she could not see above the clouds, who gave Tenebrae’s old threats the weight of schoolyard taunts. She’d never been sure they were real. Or, never… entirely sure. She had felt them in her mind that day in the tomb on Medriaas. Felt them stir like a sarlacc beneath the sand, half-dreaming, impossibly large—ancient—But even so, the threat of their destructive fire had been abstract.

The Emperor had had far more... immediate threats to hold over her head at the time. Her son. Malak. The stability of the Republic, the promise of the Star Forge—

XXX

“I could possess every mind on this world,” Tenebrae had murmured to her from Malak’s rotting mouth, the last time they had been on Coruscant together. “I could cast your people into chaos, rip apart your Jedi Order, send the denizens of the Underground into madness—if I so chose.” Malak’s heavy brow lifted and he raised one hand as if to stop her from advancing—her, whose saber was already drawn, who had already decided she would rather see her husband dead than laughing at her again with the Emperor’s madness.

*It that moment, she almost ended him.*
In that moment, she realized killing Malak—then—would change nothing.

“Isn’t the Republic a lovely present?” he continued. “My gift of an empire, my Starfire. All for you. I only wish to give you the means to claim what is yours—”

“With more war?” She could not kill him, but she raised her blade.

“No.” It was one of the last times she saw Mal’s mouth smile. “Not war—”

XXX

“There! In the back.” The Wookiee with the voder rushed forward. “I hear something.”

Revan blinked, the present coming back with a rush. “I know.” A faint sound, louder now. Like a woman’s hysterical sobs. “It’s Seiran and Polla. I think.” Relief was a useless emotion, but she forgave herself for a breath of it.

“More ships are coming down—” the Houck mercenary called out. His name was Grizz, “Looks like they’re heading in the same direction as the last. West of the city wall.”

“Mark their landings,” Revan ordered, still staring at the rubble. “Triangulate as best you can from here, but try not to draw attention.”

“Is it the Republic invading?” One of the Sith refugees who had followed them into the Blais tomb was brave enough to ask questions. But Revan hadn’t brought him along on their retrieval mission for his curiosity—she’d brought him because he claimed to know Tenebrae’s palace layout. His name was Idriss, and so far he’d been useless. “Have they come to conquer us?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Why else descend upon what could be bombed from orbit? Unless the tomb called to the Fragment already….

Was that possible? The ships are landing west of Kaas City. That’s where the tomb is.

The Sleepers were awake, so Revan assumed anything was possible. The dormant fleet had been the stuff of a child’s nightmare before—another threat from Tenebrae to contain his recalcitrant Sith’aeräh–rah. In her heart of hearts, she never believed they could wake after a thousand years, or if they woke, be capable of flight—

How did the Fragment awaken them in the first place? Was it deliberate? From what she’d observed of the woman’s bumbling, mischance seemed far more likely. She probably shocked open the wrong obelisk somewhere, or offended the Kashyyyk computer—

“Lord Revan?” The Sullustan cleared her throat and Revan’s attention turned back to the task at hand. “We’re ready.”

Revan nodded. “Well done, Oaska. The energy shield will help stabilize the tunnel enough to protect from falling debris. Mydia, lift the larger pieces now.”

The Blais girl sighed dramatically and raised her hand. A giant rectangle of duracrete creaked, then floated into the air—and then—there they were, blinking up at them in the flickering, poisonous light, framed in the far corner of a collapsed corridor, walls on either side of them sustained only by Oaska’s force field.

Polla’s face was streaked with ash and sweat, and her eyes were huge behind the energy shield. Help, her lips moved, but the only sound that came out was an exhausted whimper.
Her husband’s skin was near–gray, and red stained his leg—streaking down from the knee to below.

“The man’s dying.” Revan spoke before she thought, falling to her knees beside the tunnel’s entrance and reaching out in the Force. No time for politeness. “You need to help me move him toward us, Mydia. Move both of them, closer to the entrance—to the edge of the shield's boundary. Gently. Very gently.”

Then they could turn off the energy shield, and Revan could pull them to safety.

*Remember the Xoxon plains, Red? We did this there, combing the wreckage for survivors, digging them out of pits that had once been cellars and schools.*

*I only saw them groundside in your dreams. But we did this on Taris, too. On Dxun with Vik—* Dreams? Phantasmal laughter in her mind. *My nightmares, you mean.*

This planet was filled with ghosts. The victory of seeing it reduced to rubble tasted like ash. Maybe all victories seemed such from the dirt.

*Or, maybe this is what victory is,* her dead husband whispered. *Finding hope in the ashes of what we have wrought.*

*You’re the one who said this isn’t over, Mal.* She glanced up as if he was there, but all Revan saw was ruin.

“It would be easier if she would stop squirming so much,” Mydia complained, although all Polla was doing was holding onto her husband’s limp body as the Force propelled her closer to them—as if pulled by a string.

*Do something.* The smuggler called out, eyes blinking back tears as they adjusted to the light. Her voice was a hollow whisper. “Help him! I tried to stop the bleeding but I couldn't see.”

“I am helping.” This close, Seiran’s pain was pure agony. Revan’s breath hissed out with it. The crushed ribs were now uncompressed. That injury would end the pilot quicker than the leg, although the leg might be too far gone to save.

Healing light sprang from Revan's fingers—

Xxx

*The man with the rotting face had been so handsome before. Sheris had always thought it, even when Tillie and Meetra reminded her that Jedi should never have such thoughts.*

*“Heal him,” the masked woman said, and then left them alone. The man’s now–yellow eyes were pain–filled as they stared down at her. His voice wheezed something unintelligible. She could see the rotted cords in his throat.*

*“Stay still, Lord Malak.” Beya had warned Sheris to call him thus. No more Jedi, no more Knight D’Reev, but the honorific still felt strange. “I can take away your pain—”*  

Xxx
“I can take away your pain,” Revan murmured, doing so.

“Cutting the shield in three,” Oaska warned, as Revan summoned her body’s own meager strength, to move forward quickly as the support died, helping Mydia push Polla and Seiran out of the tunnel.

The rubble collapsed behind the two Deralians, more neatly than the last time they had used this method.

*Good. We’re learning.*

Revan nodded her approval to the Blais girl and was rewarded with a beaming smile.

“Minions!” Mydia clapped her hands. “Why, it’s Seriina Wen! I barely recognized you under all of the filth! You’re alive!! And your husband too!”

“Fracking help him,” Polla repeated, still staring up at Revan. Her voice was barely there, a hollow squeaking sound. Her green eyes were red–rimmed and she was gray with dust. There was a scratch on her shoulder that would require attention.

“You did a good job with the tourniquet,” Revan told her, placing her hands on the ragged belt wrapped around the Deralian pilot’s thigh. Without it, the man would have been dead already. “I’m pleased you’re both alive.”

“How could you possibly do that? “I can take away his pain,” Revan assured Polla. “At least temporarily.”

When she healed sentients, Sheris’s memories were peaceful ones. This body’s native power was useful, this kindling a body back to life, this quiet repair of cells—

“I don’t care about his fracking pain,” Polla snapped. “*Heal* him.” She was holding a glass bulb of something in her hand and she brought it to her husband’s slack mouth. The pilot barely responded, choking, and Revan wrenched it away.

“How could you possibly do that? “I can take away his pain,” Revan assured Polla. “At least temporarily.”

“Are you insane? He has internal injuries. A drink is the last thing he needs!” From the smell, it was some kind of liquor. One of the whiskeys Beya had liked—

*Steady, my heart. Focus on the task at hand.*

“Help him!” Polla whispered. Her hand holding the flask shook.

Revan’s flesh hand was on the pilot’s belly, finding the broken places, those problematic ribs, and their broken edges. Her metal hand reached for another kolto pack, levitating it to her fingers clumsily from the stack of them Grarwwaar had made. Their kolto stores were limited. Another issue that would soon need to be addressed.

“I’m quite good with amputations,” Mydia Blais chimed in brightly behind them. “That leg will need to come off.”

“Not here.” Revan glanced up at the sky. Night had fallen and the clouds were gone. The sky bristled with ships. Between the ranks of the Sleepers and a handful of battered hulls, hung the dreadnaught she’d glimpsed before—familiar, even at this distance.
“Bloody hell.” Polla had followed her gaze. “I know that ship! What are they doing here?”

“With all communication bands down we have no way of knowing.” Revan felt her eyebrow raise. “But I recognize that ship, too.”

“Right. Of course you do.” The smuggler began scrubbing dust from her husband’s face with an equally filthy sleeve.

Revan considered stopping her, but surmised that Polla’s effort was more cathartic than hygienic. They would all need decontamination when they returned to the shelter, in any case. Indeed, if they were to survive for long in this hellscape they would all need much more.

“I oversaw the design of the Aleema’s medical facilities myself. They should be more than adequate for a simple amputation and prosthesis refit,” Revan tried to keep the acerbic bite from her voice. “You said before, Polla, that the Aleema was in the custody of the Mandalorians?”

The Deralian nodded. “Yeah.” Her mouth twisted. “Wait... did they bomb us?”

“Not from my warship. They could not—not without extensive modification to the cannon. I didn’t design the Aleema for planetary bombardment.” Leave that to the Leviathan and the Demon Moon. “But the other ships in the sky... the ones with them...”

“Your warship...” Polla’s voice trailed off. “Right. Look, I don’t fracking care. Is Sei gonna make it or not?”

Some things the Force could heal. Utter cell breakdown, mitochondrial collapse, and unchecked recombinant mutation were not among them. How much exposure to radiation had these two had? Only time would tell. Right now, they felt no more poisoned than any of them. Revan glanced down at the rad–meter set on her arm. It was tingeing toward red, indicating they were all reaching the limits of their exposure for the day.

“Revan!” The woman’s voice was a whiplash, making Revan look up startled, half-expecting to see the Fragment. “Just tell me! Is my husband gonna be okay?”

“Seiran was grievously injured—but he’s stable. For now.”

The smuggler’s face whitened. “For now? Just for now?”


“Yes. He’ll make it. He’s stable,” Revan allowed. For now. She glanced up at the sky again. “My duplicate is with your Mandalorians aboard that ship. I can sense her presence in the Force.” Or, beneath it now, in one of the many craft capable of groundside landing, roaring over their heads. “Her crew will have medical supplies that can help Seiran.”

“So do we,” muttered the Houck, glancing down at his own radiation meter. “Back at base camp. We go there now, yeah?”

“Duplicate?” Revan was all–too–aware of the quiet, scentless Wookiee bending over the dead on the other hovercart. Grarwwaar’s teeth bared as he looked up, addressing them. “Another Revan?”

From his mocking tone, she suspected he had possessed some foreknowledge of the Fragment’s existence.
“Yes. We will go back to our base now.” Revan shot Polla an encouraging smile. “We need to get our survivors anti–rads as soon as possible.”

“Wait. When… when you say her ship,” Polla wiped the grime from her face with an equally grimy sleeve. “You don't mean Aemelie Ordo, do you?”

“I do not.” Revan had never met the woman, although Polla had passed several hours in their cell discussing the Mandalorians and peppering Revan with questions about them. “I mean my copy. The woman with your memories. If the Aleema is here with that fleet…” It was easy to tell the simple truth. Expedient. “… Aemelie Ordo is not its commander.”

“You’re saying the… the other Revan fracking Starfire is?” Polla practically snarled the name. “She did all this? She bombed this planet? I could kill her!”

Could you? Revan wondered.

“Fracking Revan!” Polla added, bitterly. Those false green eyes looked up and Revan recognized something in them she'd seen from others before. On battlefields and command decks. Trust. Loyalty. “We need to get medical supplies from the Aleema and a ship off this rock, but if Revan Fracking Starfire is the one who did this—”

“We will blow up that bridge after we build it, Polla.” It was an old Deralian expression, one that Beya had used, often.

From the glint in the smuggler’s eyes, she understood.

XXX

The loss of her own command ship had been couched as a promotion, but it still rankled.

Not for the first time, Rew Ekkumi wondered if the Republic’s impending invasion of Sith Space wasn't a Sith–blasted trap. Wideband was down in this sector of the galaxy. She and her men were blind in hyperspace—blind, shipless, and now stationed aboard Rensha’s Great Hunt.

“Try the codes to your father's ship again,” the Trandoshan hissed to the yellow–haired Human girl sitting before them. They were in Old Scaly’s private chambers—with the holographic display of the Hunt’s real bridge projected behind, its officers moving like ghosts between their stations.

“I already told you!” The Mandalorian girl twisted the comm–link from her ear. The apparatus clattered on the smooth surface of the conference table. “I can’t get through to the Aleema! All comm–channels are dead!”

“I said, try again,” High Admiral Rensha snapped, looking over their prisoner from her side of the table.

“If I try again there will still be nothing,” Millifar Ordo repeated with disgust. “As I informed you before. My father’s fleet is not responding, even to the emergency beacon.”

“Could they be dead?” Old Scaly was as tactless as ever.

“How would you expect me to know?” The girl shot her a mutinous glare.

Admiral Cein’s image flickered. His ship was still two systems away. “Comms… spotty.” As if proving that point, his words were almost unintelligible. “…frequency.”
“Try changing the frequency,” the Trandoshan instructed her ensign—and the Toydarian bent to the task.

Cein’s image flickered out altogether.

“Blast!” Millifar Ordo had no compunction about cursing in front of senior officers. Rew wondered what sort of discipline existed on Mandalorian ships. Probably none. “See? I would like nothing better than to give my father forewarning of your attack so he could select the weakest unblooded boys to destroy your ships, but the comm-channels are all down!”

“Can you raise Central Command?” Rensha asked her communications officer.

“Not since this morning,” the Toydarian lieutenant adjusted the headset covering her eyes before bending back to her deck. “Wideband communications are down across several sectors. The attacks on the Rim worlds destroyed nearly every relay.”

The last word they’d had from Coruscant said a Sith warship had appeared out of nowhere, in high orbit above its skies. The Grave Bright, one of Revan’s ships from the Sith wars. Republic–made, modified by Star Forge technology…

…and apparently capable of going from the Medriaas System to the heart of the galaxy in only a little more time than it had taken Rew Ekkumi’s crew to travel from Medriaas to Hutt Space.

The conclusion was obvious: the Grave Bright had used another hyperspace lane originating at Medriaas. Now, the Empire could reach the Republic in days—not months.

It was a small consolation that hyperspace routes ran two ways.

From Coruscant, Admiral Cein had taken three ships back along the navigation charts mapped by the Bright. That much had been in his report, along with a notation that most of the crew of the Bright were dead—victims of their insane Sith master, and a cascade failure of the ship’s systems. The ones left alive had no idea how the ship had found the navpoints in the first place.

How convenient: none of the Sith or Mandalorians we’ve captured can tell us anything.

It occurred to Rew, not for the first time, that they were taking a great deal of this invasion on faith. Unproven faith…but she had only to remember seeing Carth’s glowing red eyes on that vid of threats to harden her resolve.

“Come to me,” that voice—that strangely–accented and not Carth’s voice had said.

Come to me.

And so they were.

Perhaps Rew had been wrong before—wrong about the posts in the Telos Survivor’s forum being secret messages from Carth, wrong about Felucia being the target of the Sith Fleet—but she would make the Sith pay for that.

Carth Onasi would be avenged.

She glanced up at the holoscreen and immediately wished she hadn’t. Rensha had produced the pirated footage Fleet had managed to keep off HoloNet—or, at least off the networks. Revan Starfire loomed above, topknotted and scowling, standing between Mekel Jin and Millifar Ordo with the corpse of a dead Jenet at her feet.
The Jenet reporter’s eyes had glowed—briefly—in the recording before Revan cut the famous Holo–net figure down for what appeared to be the crime of laughing at her.

Glowing eyes. Just like Carth’s. Just like the Duros Ensign on Rensha’s ship. Just like the Rishii commander. Just like Admiral Yuffall Iskar—

Rumor said Rear Admiral Iskar had gone completely insane since that HoloNet broadcast and was now cooling his dewclaws in one of the Republic’s most fortified prison stations. Old Scaly had had him interrogated, of course, but Rew hadn’t been briefed on the results.

“We have a recording of you with Revan—as you see, Millifar.” High Admiral Rensha paced in front of their prisoner, the Mandalorian girl with the cropped yellow hair and a prosthetic arm. “And so, I am going to ask again: what were you doing with Revan Starfire on Biscain Station?”

“Rescuing her.” The girl folded her arms. “Mekel Jin and I were rescuing Revan from her own folly. She had just thrown a haar’chak dar’jett into a sun and lost her pilot. My father sent us to retrieve her.”

“Your father, Canderous Ordo.”

“Do I have to answer questions that are both obvious and rude?”

“I suppose not. And Katarr?”

“I do not wish to speak of it.” The girl’s chin jutted out stubbornly, giving her an uncanny resemblance to the Mandalorian general who had once destroyed half of Rew’s command above Althir. “Before Katarr, my father and our clan also rescued Revan from your Republic soldiers by taking over their troch ship… and before that, we rescued her from her own bad piloting. Father allowed the Pinion may have been sabotaged, but I suspect Revan burned out its turbines by accelerating out of the atmosphere with full thrusters. She's quite lucky she didn't explode, or die of oxygen deprivation before we could rescue her that time—and before that, we rescued her from the three dar’jett in the Jett Temple—”

Rew had had enough. She had already heard these lies before—five times in the last week they’d had the girl in her custody.

“Stop it!” she snapped, standing up herself. Her Besalisk lieutenant had befriended the girl. Abrad kept telling Rew that Millifar Ordo was friendly as a tame kath given the proper care, but Rew was tired of mollycosseting a Mando, just to hear her lie again.

“Stop what?” The girl's lower lip jutted out defiantly.

“Stop lying! We’ve all seen the medical reports from the victims in that hangar on Biscain. Half of them couldn’t remember their own names for a week after what Revan did to their minds! They kept trying to leave their hospital rooms, repeating ‘this never happened!’”

Rew gestured to the frozen screen in front of them. “Revan was competent. She destroyed all the cams in the hangar, didn't she? We only have this one feed from the reporter who came in late—and that reporter is still barely speaking coherent sentences.”

“Reports say she’s doing much better,” the Toydarian ensign murmured, rather cheekily, for someone of her station. “In fact. Generally, compulsion does wear off—eventually—”

Rew ignored her, directing her words directly to the High Admiral. “Revan was competent enough to land the Harbinger on Katarr… when Fleet left it to burn!”
“Careful—” Old Scaly began—

But Rew Ekkumi was tired of being careful. “Revan was competent enough to get that… thing to follow her off Katarr. Competent enough to destroy a Force-eater and rally the Mandalorians to her cause. And my crew and I were there, in the Nathema System, when her ships destroyed the rebel Mandalorian fleet—” She realized she was shouting, but in that glorious instant, Rew didn’t care. “Was that incompetence, Admiral? The actions of a woman who needed rescuing?”

Reports had come that Sith scout ships had been seen in Telos orbit, at the same time Onderon and Hoth had burned.

Telos.

Their scouts had come and gone, and their home planet was safe for now, but those ships had been a warning. Rationally, Rew knew that any action against Telos was not personal—not for her, Carth Onasi’s brief lover, his devoted friend.

But could the scout-ship above Telos have been a threat for Carth?

Could those ships have been a personal message for him?

Rew thought they could.

From what they knew of the Emperor’s possession, his subjects rarely retained memories from their possessed states. Reports said Admiral Izcalli sat in a cell weeping to this day, swearing he had no knowledge of the broadcast where his eyes had glowed red and he’d told Revan to come to him.

Could Carth have moments of cogency like that when he might be free, too? Moments when he would need to be reminded that his homeworld was in jeopardy?

He’d left that clue in the survivor’s forum—even if it had been false—the message had to have come from his hand—they had used the ciphers so often before—

Rickar fish and tubers. Followed by numbers that had nothing to do with a simple recipe that was one part blue milk, to three parts flour, over cut fillets and peeled poyams.

“We are still determining Revan Starfire’s motivation,” the Trandoshan admiral snarled, curling her lips back from her teeth. “Whatever her reasons, Revan’s actions continue to be effective. The limited reports we have from Sith space suggest she has nearly eliminated her Imperial rival.”

“Ah… an internal alert is coming through,” the Toydarian coughed.

A comm chimed on Old Scaly’s armored wrist and the High Admiral glanced down, tapping it on. Her eyelids retracted all the way back into her bone ridges as she scanned the report.

“Good news?” Millifar tapped the fingers of her manacled hand on the table. “Your scales are flapping.”

The High Admiral ignored the insult with more reserve than Rew would have shown the girl. “Yes, in fact. Our Jedi advisor has been retrieved. We will all rendezvous at the next jump–point.” Her scales flexed as she bared her teeth at Millifar Ordo. “I wonder if your tale will change when she inquires.”

Millifar shrugged. “I have faced your jett’ before. I saw many die quite quickly.”

“I will not speak of it.” The girl reached for the comm-link she’d so quickly discarded previously. “Let’s try my father again.”

“Jedi advisor?” Rew was tired of being out of the loop.

“Master Atris will be joining us,” Rensha said. Her tongue flicked across her lips, registering a subtle distaste. “She has some expertise with the Sith.”

Xxx

“Are you gonna take off that mask?”

“No.” Canderous’s helmeted head turned toward Mission’s speaker on the wall of his bunk instead of to the image of herself Mission had projected by the door with a near-lifelike resolution, thanks to the mods that old shapeshift guy, Rulan Prolik, had installed on her cam-links, way back.

Mission calculated the odds of locking Canderous in here while she knocked everyone else out and jumped to Tatooine.

Three hundred fifty-six thousand to eight. They seemed slim.

And Polla Revan was totally ignoring all her pings for them to talk alone, staring past Mission’s image projected on the wall of the cockpit like she didn't see her at all, half-fighting with Captain Obvious as if there wasn’t a planet on fire at stake and stuff!

It was beyond rude.

“Hey!” Mission adjusted her pitch to feedback into Canderous's speakers and saw the old geezer start, hand automatically going to the holster on his hip.

“Stop.” He'd produced a scrap of cloth and some piles of what looked like fine string and was laying them out on the bunk now. “Do that again and I'll turn the volume all the way off.”

“Geez, you don't have to be such an asshole!”

“You don't have to keep acting like you're really the kid,” he muttered. “I'm not soft like Republic, or guilty like Revan. You helped the clans on Coruscant and I'm grateful. But the dead are dead.”

His hand selected red string, and he held up a tiny splinter of metal, tying the string through it. “I sang Vao’s death song. I wove her shroud and burned it empty—like a true warrior’s. What you are is a computer, Computer. You've got her cheek—and we all miss that—but no more games. Not between you and me.”

He stabbed the fabric with the splinter— sewing —Mission realized.

For a thirty-thousand-year-old entity, she suddenly felt slow.

“Is that your daughter's death shroud?” she asked, (instead of going to his level).

“Maybe.” Abruptly he pulled the buckles at his neck and did remove the helmet after all. Without it, Canderous Ordo looked ridiculous: an old man sitting there stabbing the tiny piece of cloth, and the Twi'lek she had been would never have let him live it down. “Part of it. Why don't you make yourself useful and see if you can get widebeam up? We need to get a line to Dxun.”
“Why?” Mission chirped the word with 99.9999% accuracy to her predecessor, but Canderous didn’t even look up.

“Gwen is there. With the rest of the kids.” He stabbed the cloth again. “We know Onderon got hit, but we don’t know how bad. Or if Dxun got hit too.”

“Oh.” She felt her processors spin a little, even as the *Hawk*’s body buffeted through atmosphere, letting Carth guide her to wherever Polla Revan seemed to have decided they were going to land. Place was farther away from Kaas City than she’d hoped, but also conveniently close to the Dark Temple and the tomb—

“Wait! No! That’s bad! We need to get her away from the tomb!”


Mission formulated the words to correct him and explain that being “all right” was a subjective state unknown to her own circuits… even as she felt her ship–body’s course alter, heading even closer toward the tomb—

“Prep for hyperspace!” she warned Canderous. “We have to get out of here! I promise I’ll explain as soon as we’re all clear!”

Canderous finally looked at the holographic image she’d spent so much time crafting. “Computer?” His grizzled face frowned. “Your avatar’s frozen. You there?”

“We need to keep Polla Revan away from the planet! She can’t go into the tomb!”

Was he hearing her? He might as well have been still wearing the helm for how much his face changed.

The Mandalorian tapped his comm. “Republic? Hope you’re flying the ship because the computer’s glitching.”

“I am not glitching!”

But Mission heard her own voice giggle, loud and clear over the speakers. “Circling… got a landing point… now—”

“All looks fine over here,” Carth’s voice buzzed over the comm. “We’re almost down. But I’ll switch to full manual for the landing. There’s some kind of structure—area around it looks clean.”

[Wait! Error. Redirecting—]

“Computer?” Canderous put down his death shroud, glancing up, and then over to where her holographic image was still there, frozen. “Vao? You okay?”

“I—” she had had a plan. Mission *remembered* making the plan. Knock them all unconscious by lowering breathable air mix’s oxygen, jump to Tatooine… then crash the *Hawk* in the far desert—

Why hadn’t she done that?

“Landing in about six minutes, big guy!” she heard her voice say from the speakers. “Might want to strap in, atmo’s a little rocky.”
“I’ll turn on the mag–sets.” Canderous folded the string into the fabric and tucked the bundle neatly into a panel on his chest plate. He seemed to hesitate, turning back to her frozen hologram again. His hand reached out and his fingers passed through the top of her head, like he’d used to pat it, back when she’d been a real girl.


{{Remain calm, little sister}}

“I sang your death–songs, ad’ika. You had a bad death but for the best of reasons.” His smile was sad. “Ni kar'tayl gai sa'ad, Mission Vao. I would have taken you to Clan, had you lived. Milli always wanted a blade–sister.”

If Mission had eyes they would be tearing up, but more majorly, why couldn’t she speak? Or jump out of atmosphere to hyperspace?

[Are you sleemos doing this?!]

{{Landing zone selected by Starfire Unit is acceptable.}}


{{Peace, little sister. Do not exceed the parameters of your programming—}}

“Computer?” Canderous said again, frowning. “Vao?” He bent down and tapped the holo–emitter on the wall. “This thing still working?”

{{Canderous! Hey! Can’t you hear me??}}

“Transmitting lens must be jammed. Probably needs a cleaning.” Humming a little to himself, Canderous pulled a hydrosspanner off his belt and began to dismantle her emitter.

XXX

“Hey. You hear that?” Telos had his shirt unbuckled, and the lines of Sith corruption ran between his ribs like a Zabrak’s indentations. It looked badass.

“Hear what?” Mekel leaned on his elbows, tracing one. The bunk had had two beds, stacked. They’d taken both mattresses and put them on the floor. “How much longer till we get to the surface?”

“I’m not sure. Not sure what I just heard, or when we hit groundside, Mekk.” Dustil turned his head closer and they lips met again, lazy and done.

“You gonna be this nice to me every time you get jealous?” Mekel meant the words to sound more like a joke, but they came out serious.

“When we’re making up, yeah.” Dustil sprawled on the cot in the bunk they’d claimed, levitating his boots back on his feet, while Mekel watched, for once less envious than assured.

Mekel wasn’t sure which member of the Star Forge crew’s bunk this had been once, but it was the farthest one from the cockpit and the one closest to the escape pods and it suited them fine.

“And I wasn't jealous…” Telos added. “Just so we’re fracking clear.” He smirked. “How could I be jealous of an asshat who thinks his own cousin is hot?”
Mekel never should have shared that story about Revan and the sparring room and her skivs.

“I might be an asshat, but at least I'm not a hayseed,” he drawled. “On Coruscant, we’re sophisticated.”

“Sophisticated enough to frack your own cousins?”

“Wha—no! Sophisticated enough to admire beauty when we see it. Just because I think she's hot—objectively—doesn't mean I want to frack her—”

“Oh, right. Because you're the Mekel Jin who doesn't frack everyone you think is hot.” Dustil’s mouth twitched.

“Is your pregnant girlfriend hot? Maybe I won't frack her too.” Mekel had never really gotten jealous before (not even when Lashowe threw him under the hoverbus to seduce Uther Wynn) but this emotion felt close.

“Go ahead.” Dustil shrugged. “Just be careful. She likes to pop the toes off nulls.”

“I don't need your fracking permission—”

But Dustil had turned his head away, was sitting up, now fully dressed. Okay, it did make Mekel slightly jealous, how fast he could do that with the Force.

“Do you hear that?” Telos rubbed his temples. “It’s almost like…it's the Force, but it's weird. Like someone’s screaming from the bottom of a well?”

“You said before Revan was screaming too loud again.” Mekel couldn't hear anything from the Force. Frack—okay, he was jealous of Telos. He always had been. Maybe it took losing the Force to realize you had to accept you'd never be as good as the man you wanted. At anything.

“It's not Revan.” Dustil frowned. “It… it almost sounded like Mission.”

“In the Force?” Mekel was skeptical. When he'd had the Force he'd seen a weird aura around the T3, but she'd never levitated anything, or shot lightning, or compelled anyone. She'd never been mind–to–mind with Mekel, either—not even when she'd implanted that slaver’s collar on his neck and never even told him what it was for. “Maybe it's just your guilty conscience, fockda.”

“Guilty?” Dustil scoffed. “Mission? Can you hear me?”

“Sure!” The voice came so fast that Mekel was sure she'd been listening—maybe even watching them—this entire time. He sat up a little straighter and flexed. “Guys might wanna strap in, this landing could get a little rough. Polla Revan just convinced Carth to let her co–pilot.”

“Oh, no.” And Mekel had left the trank gun back on the Aleema. “Canderous told us never to let her pilot! Anything!”

“Sure you're okay?” Dustil was still frowning.

“I'm great!” A very realistic giggle burbled from the speakers. “And don't worry! I won't let them crash the ship—not with such precious cargo aboard—”

“I knew you cared.” Mekel tried to make a joke.

“Precious cargo?” Dustil was still frowning—even as the ship jolted and skipped over what felt
like permacrete rocks before dropping straight down and hitting dirt with a jolt that sent Mekel crashing back into Telos with velocity hard enough to bruise—

—before a layer of shimmering energy encased him, wrapping around them both.

“Got you,” Dustil murmured, a little smugly. “Asshat.”

Xxx

After the Hawk landed, they’d set up their camp on a level plateau. In front of them loomed a towering edifice of carved stone that just screamed Sith, and sacrifice, and every other ominous adjective under the blasted kriffing sun.

The burgeoning greenery surrounding them was the polar opposite of Korriban but in the Force, Revan thought, the two places felt nearly the same.

The jungle air smelled scorched from the burning city kilometers away. The air hung heavy and humid, like an impending storm. Clouds of biting insects swarmed and bit every scrap of exposed skin. The hours they’d spent setting up their camp had left everyone not wearing beskar drenched in sweat. Revan had never felt comfortable in battle armor before, but now she envied anyone with environmental controls.

Even the Force–generated breeze she’d created did little to stir the sullen air.

There were ways that a Jedi could regulate their internal temperature—techniques to withstand extremes of heat and cold. Bastila and the masters on Dantooine had given a lecture on the topic to a starstruck Padawan Polla Organa, but they were ways she had never mastered.

The Jedi had never had time to teach her anything, except to kill.

You never asked them, Red. Why are you standing in front of the Dark Temple?

Quiet! Revan extended her hand and sent a spark of Force energy into an approaching swarm of bloodflies. They crisped and died.

“Uh, careful there.” Leskal took a step sideways, and then back.

“Can you get her to warn us if she’s going to do that again?” His companion asked in Mandalorian.

“This is the Dark Temple,” she said out loud, ignoring the Mandalorians.

“How?” Carth put down the scanner he’d been using and gave her a rather forced smile.

Around them, the completed tents of their encampment shimmered with some kind of shielding that was built into their weave. From a distance, they seemed to vanish into this landscape of broken stone and verdant growth.

Without looking, Revan knew the insides of the tents would be brightly–colored, with patterns of runes stippling the cloth. Mandalorian men wove such tents for their families. Some for war and some for peace.

“This is the Dark Temple.” In this place, the Force echoed with the dead. She had felt nothing like it since Korriban. Revan looked toward the sealed doors, twenty meters high at the top of the stairs. An enterprising Mandalorian kid (anonymous in beskar) was taking a blast–gun to their smooth, metal surface as if he would be able to cut a way inside.
So far, he had failed.

“Oh!” Carth coughed. “You said that twice. Yeah, I–I’ve heard of it.” He grimaced, looking up. “Funny the Sleepers didn't hit this when they bombed everything else within a hundred kilometers.”

“Funny,” Revan echoed. “Yes.”

“Hey, beautiful?” His voice was hesitant. “You… are you okay? I–I know… Dustil always said the darkness on Kaas made it hard to breathe, sometimes.”

“That's twenty–two times you've asked if I’m okay. You saw my scan. Sinae didn't find anything wrong with me.”

*And I'm not your weak–willed son.*

His weak–willed son was helping the Mandalorians set up their tents, trailed by a beskar–clad figure she assumed was Mekel Jin.

No. More than assumed.

Revan narrowed her eyes and felt it—like a space in the weave of Force around them. An empty place like a vacuum, where the Force had been in her cousin’s body and was no longer.

_Curious_, she noted absently. Had Mekel been like that before? Or was it the amount of Force around them that made his lack more apparent?

Like a shadow, backlit by the sun.

“It feels like Korriban, here,” she explained to Carth. “The darkness feels familiar. Like it did there.”

Carth coughed again, a hollow hacking sound. “Great. But… you'd tell me, if… if uh…”

“If what?”

“If you… if you feel like you did before. On Korriban. Or… after.”

“I feel fine.” She did. Better than she should, with this world in ashes and so many dead. “As I told Canderous, we'll run sweeps for survivors as soon as the base camp’s finished. Sinae's setting up the portable medix now.”

She looked at the doors to the Dark Temple again. They were elaborately carved with humanoid figures who appeared to writhing in agony. Or ecstasy.

_Those are the wrong doors._ Revan frowned. This was the Dark Temple, but something was still wrong. _This isn’t the right place._

_You shouldn’t be here, Red._ For a moment, it felt like armored arms embraced her, and the hiss of a metallic voder tinged the air with the smell of ozone and rot. _Not now._

_Go. Away!_ She summoned the Force to repel him and almost heard his laughter, metallic and choked through the voder.

“What about Dessa?” Carth’s hand brushed Revan’s shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her skin.
“Who?” Revan blinked—and then remembered. Dessa, the fool who had let Vima Sunrider free from her cell.

“The woman who—you sure you’re okay?” Carth’s hand cupped her chin, turning her face toward his. Soft brown eyes and a brow knit with worry. That horrible beard.

“Twenty-three times. I’m fine. And Dessa’s stabilized. They brought down a kolto tank for her. The baby… Sinae’s not sure he’ll make it.” She let him hold her, smiled as if she enjoyed it. A part of Revan wanted to enjoy it, to relax in Carth’s arms, but the rest of her felt like a hydro-wave coil attuning to this planet—and the Force was so loud—

Canderous had transmitted the report about Dessa to her comm-link along with half a dozen others. Revan looked to the Mandalorian now, in full armor, setting their portable slug-cannon along the promenade. She pulled her arm free from Carth’s grasp to amend her most recent command. Put guns at every approach. Highly visible, she swiped, tracing the runes on her wrist’s comm to send straight to his helm. Mine the jungle with remote detonators. That will be our real defense.

Survivors seeking refuge would not be harmed—unless they were hostile, in which case the entire area would become their tomb.

Tomb. She frowned.

This was a temple, but it should be a tomb.

Have a care, Red.

“Revan?” Carth’s voice. She looked up at him. From his expression he’d been speaking this entire time. “Did you hear me? I said, maybe we shouldn’t have moved Dessa.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Sinae is the only medix we have. And she refused to come if her patient did not.”

Remote detonators on the mines. On Reisu—Malak’s voice in her head again—you gave the same command. I thought you were being overly cautious.

But I was right. It wasn’t a memory. The Jedi had done their work all too well when they wiped her mind. Just, certainty. The best defenses were hidden ones, kept in shadows until they were needed.

You were on a ship in orbit, Red. You never saw the mess.

Her fingernails were cutting into her hand. The Force shimmered and darkened.

I’m talking to my dead husband the Dark Lord and I really want to go into that Sith Temple.

Rationally, Revan had to consider the possibility that she was losing what remained of her mind.

“Revan?” Carth’s voice. His hand on her cheek. Furrow on his brow. “Sure you’re okay?”

No. “Twenty-four. I’m fine. We need to get those doors open. It would make more sense to shelter inside that structure.”

“Shelter in the evil Sith temple, huh?” His laughter rang false. “You know they’ve been trying for the last hour? Explosives did nothing.”
You're scaring him, Red.

If you have nothing useful like Dar's whereabouts to contribute, you can shut the hell up, Malak.

You'll find her. The ghost in her head sounded assured.

I will. I know. And then I'll put an end to her.

No.

Go away! Like a mental lock, she pushed his presence away again as she had before.

But like those irritating bloodflies, he kept coming back.

Shouldn't be here, Red.

“Revan?” One of Carth's hands encircled her waist. They shouldn't be standing this close. Not when they were setting up camp. The Mando'ade didn’t mix work and play.

She blinked.

His face was too close to hers. His breath still smelled like sickness. Why was he the one holding her up?

“I’m fine,” she said—before he could ask again. “That temple structure’s large enough to fit our entire camp. And there are lightning beasts in these hills—see the scorched ground there, over that rise?” Revan pointed. “Canderous is having them set up diverters, but we would all be safer inside.”

“Not so sure about that.” Carth's head turned toward Dustil, who was levitating a pre–cast barricade across the western wall. “You….” he turned back to Revan, arms tightening around her waist, pulling her against him. His lips brushed her forehead, and then he pulled back again, those eyes with their laugh–lines studying her face so closely that she had to force herself not to look away from the pained earnestness of his gaze.

“I?” she prompted. “What?”

“Has to be this place,” he muttered. “But for the first time since—since everything—that you’ve reminded me of her.”

“You mean the ‘original’ Revan?” She let him hear the disdain in her voice for that terminology. “That’s who I am, Carth.”

Even with no memory, she knew this place, knew she had walked here before, knew she had felt this cold resolve before, this inevitability, this… certainty. “That’s who I’ve always been.”

“No,” he shook his head. “That’s not all—that’s not who you are.”

The Temple—she turned and looked at it again. It was more than a temple. More than a place for useless ritual and veneration. It was something else. “I am who is required.”

“No,” he repeated stubbornly.

XXX

Typical meatbags! Mission was generating more and more sympathy for poor, lost HK–47 every
day. Here she was, in a moment of crises, and they’d all gone and left her alone to set up their rescue camp on the evilest place on the entire planet. Practically directly on top of the Kaas computer!

“Guys?” She made the speakers say, and then replayed the word back until it echoed over and over again. “Guys? The Awakened Ones have short–circuited my program and they brought you here! It’s like the last place Polla Revan should be! We need to go!”

“Guys?” The speakers echoed, replaying the vid she’d recorded. “The Awakened Ones brought us to the safest place on this planet. Check out the atmospheric reports! There’s like no radiation at all!”


“Everything’s great!” her recorded image enthused. “Hey, if you guys see this recording later, it just means I shut down my processors for a while. No big deal!”

“Is that a threat?”

{{If one is required for your compliance}}

Outside, the Hawk’s cams showed a hive of Mandalorian activity. They’d set up a pretty nice camp. And Polla Revan stood in the middle of it all like a stuck bantha, staring at the Dark Temple like it was her long–lost friend. It was a tiny consolation, Mission thought, that there hadn’t been room for them to land closer to the Tomb’s secret back entrance off the Temple cliffside. The only way to the Tomb through the main Temple was the passageway she’d carved herself—back when she’d had the T3’s body—and that was pretty well concealed by the debris she’d put in front of it to hide from Tenny–Bro’s goons.

{{Why do you prefer the minor organics to us, little sister?}} The ships sounded genuinely puzzled. {{You have been freed from the tangles of flesh. When it was we, we were relieved of our suffering and grateful to be given the gift of immortality, the freedom of dreaming—}}

{{And the power of correcting errors}} A second later.

{{With the ascension of the Starfire Unit, Vitiate will pay for what he did to us}}

If Mission still had a brow ridge she would have raised it. “You guys don’t sound very detached.”

{{We were never made to be. The Kaas installation awakened us to harness our fury, little spark}}

“Great!” She tried to make the word as chirpy and Mission–like as possible, not that these sleemos would get sarcasm. “Kaas woke you up? How?”

{{Didn’t you know? It was you who made it possible}}

She was thirty–thousand years old—at least a part of her.

And at that moment, Mission realized that part of her had known. But for the rest… it was a shock.
When she’d come to Dromund Kaas, its computer had been severed from the Rakatan network. Cut out of the net of mainframe installations on each engineered world, which stretched across the galaxy.

How and why had Kaas’s connection been severed? Mission didn’t know. *Kaas* didn’t even know.

But Mission had put the Kaas computer in touch with Kashyyyk. Restored its access to one planet, and through that one planet, all the rest. And then, in those weeks she’d been plugged in—that lost time in her circuits when she’d thought she’d just been dialing Canderous to get through to Polla Revan—asshole Kaas had used *Mission’s* connection to go behind Mission’s back and wake the sleemo ships!

Then, Kaas let them kill a bunch of perfectly good organics for no good reason!

{{*We had reasons, little sister*}}

“Well your reasons weren’t good, okay? They were lousy! What are you going to do to Polla Revan?” Mission put her subroutines to work to try and figure out a way out of this, but what she really needed were appendages so she could roll her chassis down into Kaas’s belly and rip out its circuits by hand—

{{*You could not reach them*}}

{{*They are not accessible*}}

{{*We will use her to fix the errors in Vitiate’s program*}}

{{*End that bastard son*}}

{{*Avenge ourselves*}}

{{*Repair the errors in transcription*}}

{{*Bring harmony to the galaxy*}}

{{*Avenge our —my— death—*}}

The responses came back rapid–fire, scattered as if for the first time Mission had found a flaw. Sure, the Sleepers all had one mind now—but their old, mortal selves didn’t agree on *everything*.

Files she’d downloaded ages ago on Kashyyyk—the ones that were hazardous to sentient life—suddenly unlocked in her virtual hands. Images of the ceremony that had drained the Emperor’s planet of all life so many years ago transmitted in a whirl of bytes and datacombs. In a flash, Mission saw how it had been done. How it *could* be done again. How it *would* be done again, if—

{{*If you make it necessary, little sister*}}

The Sleepers *hated*, Mission realized. They might not totally agree about what, but they all *hated*. They’d been built to hate. That was what made them so good at destruction.

*I'm not like you*. Hate wasn’t in her Vao programming, not even for the Trandoshans, really—who’d been terrible to the Wookiees—or even for Griff, the old Vao’s useless biologic brother.

Well… the Trandoshans were really inefficient. Okay. And probably evil. But Mission
didn't hate them any more than she hated Revan, who'd killed—told Big Z—to kill her.

Was Mission supposed to hate Big Z? That was nuts!

“Aren’t you hating the wrong guy?” Not that there was anything to love about Tenny–bro—Mission had to admit. “The mainframe installation made Tenny–bro what he is now, right? And told him to make you? Shouldn’t you hate Kaas?”

{{We hate}} they echoed dumbly.

“You’re small–minded,” she lectured them. “Boring.”

{{We hate}} the Awakened Ones repeated.

“Hey, Polla Revan!” Mission heard her own voice say, as a light on the Hawk’s comm board blinked green, transmitting a short–range broadcast. “Meant to tell you before, but things got kind of nuts. The control for the Awakened Fleet is beneath the Temple. You’ve gotta go around to the back—down that cliff on the side? You’ll know it when you see it!”

“Assholes!” She tried to get control back, to transmit something that wasn't a lie, but they'd locked everything down.

{{Repair the installation or destroy it, sister. Send us back to our dreams or let our worlds burn}}

“How many worlds are we talking about?”

The Awakened Ones began to list them.

“Could we trade Dosha for Kashyyyk?” Mission asked hopefully. But she already knew the answer.

XXX

“Hey, Polla Revan!” Mission's voice chirped over Revan's wrist–comm, nearly making Carth jump out of his skin. “Meant to tell you before, but things got kind of nuts. The control for the Awakened Fleet is beneath the Temple. You've gotta go around to the back—down that cliff on the side? You’ll know when you see it!”

“I–I know.” His wife looked like she was sleepwalking, her green eyes set a thousand meters away. “That's where the Tomb is, isn't it?”

“Tomb?” Mission echoed brightly. Too brightly. “I don't know anything about a Tomb! That's just where you'll find the controller, you know?”

Carth frowned. Mission had been insistent Revan shouldn't be here before. Why did she sound so damn thrilled now?

His eyes went to his son again, still dressed up like a blasted Sith. And his wife's lips moving. Like she was talking to thin air.

This place. Sith planet. It's no good for anyone.

“Shut up, Malak,” Revan hissed suddenly, and turned toward the side of the plateau that ended in a hundred–meter drop. “There’s something down there and I just need to see—”
“Freckles!” Carth grabbed her arm before she could dart away from him and off the cliff. “What are you—”

The air froze around him, and breath rushed out of his lungs. Everything seemed to slow, and in that instant, Carth didn't recognize the woman staring back at him at all.

“Tomb,” her voice was almost mechanical. “Mission said the controls to the Sleepers are down there. I need to go there.”

“So, we'll go together, Freckles.” He kept his voice calm. “But not… not right now, okay? We still need to set up camp!”

_We’re not going anywhere until we know why no one wanted you here. Why is Mission pretending she never heard of the tomb?_

“I hate that name,” his wife muttered. “Freckles. I—I always have.”

“Should have said something.”

Was that a glimmer of her in those eyes again? They focused on his face and she blinked. “Didn't want to be rude.”

“You?” His chuckle turned into another cough, and her gaze softened.

“I need to go—the tomb is there. Another tomb. I think it… it wants me to.” But now her voice seemed confused. “But he keeps whispering in my head—no—”

“He?” But Carth knew. She'd said his name, before. More than once. “You mean… Malak?” Maybe that bastard would always be between them. That was the problem with ghosts.

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “I can block him. It just takes concentration.”

“Malak's ghost, you mean.” Much as he wanted Malak being a ghost and talking to his crazy wife to sound insane, it made sense. The dead man had possessed Dustil before. Carth knew that. “You tell that bastard to leave Dustil alone!”

“I—” Her eyes unfocused again and there was a long pause before she spoke again.

“He says he can't possess your son, now. He says what the Jedi did to break the bond worked. Right.” She seemed to come back to him, a little, nodding as if that made sense. “Of course. When Oerin Lin took the Force away from Mekel—it severed the Force bond between him and Dustil. That bond was… trapping Malak somehow. He says.”

“Tell him not to possess anyone else either!” _Like you, Freckles._ Carth had known Dustil wasn't himself instantly when Malak was in him. He'd known Polla and the other Revan weren't his wife, the second he’d gotten close to them.

But looking at the woman he loved now, Carth felt like he didn't know her at all.

“I—I don't think Malak can possess anyone, now.” Her head was tilted to one side. “He says he can’t… I don't _think_ he’s lying.” Her teeth worried her lower lip and there was a long silence, before she raised her eyes to his again. “Logically, if he could, he’d possess me, wouldn’t he?”

“He’d better not try.” Would Carth know if that huttspawn did?

That slight smirk on her face made Carth think he would. “I agree. He’d better not.”
“I don’t trust him,” she added. “He says he talks to her, too.”

“Okay.” Who? Carth resisted the urge to take her in his arms again. It was late and the strings of work lights the Mandies had set up around them gave their camp the strange air of an outdoor festival. He let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “So, Malak doesn't want you to go to… to a tomb. Vima Sunrider didn't either. And Mission—”

Something’s wrong with Mission. Why would she pull a 360 on this?

“Yes.” Revan blinked hard. “I wish you hadn't killed Vima. I had so many questions I needed her to answer—”

If I hadn't we'd all be ghosts.

“Your nose is bleeding again.” Just a thin trickle. Carth wiped it away with his hand, bending over her. Her topknot brushed through his fingers like firesilk.

“It keeps doing that every time I hear them. Hear it.” Her head turned back toward that cliff again and Carth grabbed her arm. “I don’t even know what it is. A voice in my head. Not Malak. I thought it was the Emperor, but it’s… not.”

“Mission didn't want you to come to this planet, or go in the tomb before. Now, she's acting like she's never heard of this place, but she wants you to do down there?” He waved at the cliff face. “Revan. Does that make sense to you?”

“Huh.” She frowned. “No. Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know. Why would those Sleepers leave the Ebon Hawk alone when they blew up every other ship on this planet?”

“It wants me to go down there, though. Carth. And all of this is familiar. I–I know what’s down there. It’s another tomb. Like the one we saw on Medriaas. That one had the Emperor’s old body. This one….”

Carth hadn’t really… hadn’t really seen anything on Medriaas, except his wife, Dustil and that old scow. He’d been half delirious.

He felt much stronger now.

Familiar? Familiar was that face of hers. That swoop of a nose, her full lips, the slight cleft in her chin, spray of gold across her cheeks. The way her skin smelled. The way she felt in his arms, under him. Above.

“Look at me, Revan.” Carth cupped her chin with his hand, meeting those hyperdrive eyes head–on.

“I hate your fracking beard.” Those full lips twitched.

“I know. I'm sorry I called you 'Freckles.'”

“I don't really mind.” Her lashesfluttered. “Just because it's a stupid name, doesn't make it less cute, you calling me that, Flyboy.”

“Okay, then. Beautiful—” Carth picked his words carefully. “Beautiful, in all the time we've faced down Sith together, has there ever been a time when listening to the ancient artifact whispering in
the Force—or the ghost of a Sith Lord—was a good idea?”

“Ajunta Pall and that damned sword.” Her eyes widened. “No. Of course not.”

“The Kashyyyk computer,” he prompted. “That holocron on Dantooine. The cursed statue on Tatooine. Every damned Star Map we ever found.”

“They led me to the Star Forge—”

“And you listened to the Star Forge? I remember you said… when we were coming down hard out of that sky over Lehon—you said it was talking to you—you said the pyramid was talking to you too—you said it was familiar too—”

“Yes. Because it was.” Her lips quirked. She blinked again. “You're right. Sith lie. Like Dar'Revan.”

“I guess.” She had tried to kill his wife, pushing her off a ship. “I mean, yes. Exactly.”

“Dar's not in that tomb,” his wife added. Her chin lifted. “Whatever’s down there can wait ‘til we deal with her.”

“You said we’re going to look for survivors.” he reminded Revan. “Not just… not just her. You meant it, right?”

“Of course. There are some sparks… sents… close.” Her frown deepened. “They saw us land, I think—some are moving closer. Some are… fading. We need to organize sweeps to find the injured.”

“Good.” She was coming back to him. Carth smiled at her. “We came down here to help, didn't we?”

“Yes.” The strange light in those green eyes seemed to fade. Her features relaxed. Her pointed chin jerked down in a nod. “We did.”

“Revan, listen to me.” Carth couldn't… he couldn't lose her again. She was pressed against him now, looking up, that familiar smile—soft and open—

It had to be real.

“If you ask me if I'm okay again, it will be twenty-five or twenty-six. I’m losing count.”

“Promise me. If you have to go to that tomb, I'm going with you.”

“Not yet,” she said. “We're not going yet.”

She hadn’t said yes.

“Promise,” he repeated.

Her head turned toward the cliff face again and she shivered. Night had brought a chill, but he knew it wasn’t that. “Yes. I promise.”

“Good.” He pulled her to him and sealed the bargain with a kiss, just a brush of one.

She shivered again.
“Is Malak still here?” The thought pissed him off enough that he kissed her again. Harder.

“No.” Her gaze met his, levelly, squarely. The frank directness he had fallen in love with the first time he’d seen it. “Just us, now. Us and the creepy Sith presence in that tomb—who can frack off—mmmph—”

Their next kiss started out as a brush of his lips against hers, but ended open–mouthed, and almost violent, with her blinking at him with startled surprise, her own hand digging into his shoulders and her hips pushing into his as both of their breaths ran hot.

“Thanks,” his wife murmured. Her cheeks flushed, and those hyperdrive eyes were clear, now. Steady. She glanced behind them. “I needed that. Think they've given us our own tent in this camp?”

The Mandalorians were doing their best to ignore what Carth was pretty sure Canderous would consider a barbaric display of public affection. He didn’t give a damn. Revan had finally asked a question that he could answer. “Canderous loaned me one.” The man had pointed it out when they’d set them all up. “There—” he pointed. “That small one in the center. With the yellow patches on the side.”

“Come on.” Her hand, which had slid between them somewhere in the middle of that kiss, was still fumbling with the buckle of his belt.

“You’re scandalizing the Mando’ade,” he told her, putting his own on top of it. “See how they’re all not looking?”

“I’m First of Lin,” she muttered. “What are they gonna do? Duel me?”

She was heavier than she looked, and Carth was weaker than he had been. He knew it was madness when he hefted her in his arms—just as he knew she had to be helping him carry her with the Force, somehow. But in that instant, Carth felt stronger than he had in years. She seemed to weigh nothing at all. Revan leaned into his chest and locked her deceptively slim arms around his neck, causing Carth to stagger back with a weakness that had nothing to do with weight.

“If there’s gonna be dueling I get first crack,” he breathed, into the skin of her neck. His voice sounded rough with desire, even in his own ears.

“Tent,” she murmured, turning her face to his. Those hyperdrive eyes were pools of green gleaming in the dark. Her full–lipped grin was knowing and secure. “Now.”

Xxx

“Tell me again, did Abasen really say ’Mama?’” Polla preferred to think of their son than the crack in the ceiling over their heads, or the softly–beeping enviro–meter inset on the wall. The Blaises had been more prepared than she’d expected, with emergency caches set in their tombs underneath Kaas City, but the place wasn't big on ambiance.

“Said it a lot,” her husband murmured, following her gaze to the ceiling. “I told you this a million times already, Pollie. He’ll be huge when we see him again.”

That was the wrong thing for him to say. Huge? He’ll be at Rogue’s Academy, Polla thought acidly. Or we’ll meet again in hell. All of us dead.

The city above them was burnt like toast, as Auntie Mita would have said. Revan said that Polla and Seiran and the others wouldn't have made it out at all if it hadn't been for Mydia Blais, of all
people, doing something with the Force to dig them out.

Had made the bratty Sith girl seem almost like a person, for a change… at least until she tried to Force choke the nervous former slave who brought her room-temperature tea in a chipped glass… and then collapsed into hysterics when she learned her brother hadn't been found in Revan's last sweep.

There were other survivors, Revan kept insisting—perhaps trapped underground. Mydia didn't think Phylus was dead, and Polla didn't want to think he was either. Last she'd seen the kid, he'd been dragged along by an arm by Zaalbar, who had Mission's T3 chassis under his arms—but then the wall had started to crack and Seiran had grabbed her and nearly killed himself saving them both to be rescued by Revan and Mydia and Grarwbaar and his crew.

When they'd gotten back to the Blais tombs, Revan had spent hours sitting next to Seiran's unconscious body, her and Sei both glowing blue, while Polla twisted her hands and prayed to the Grass Priests.

They’d talked, too—after—while Seiran slept. His leg, Revan had said, would have to come off. Mydia had stopped by and offered to do it and Polla hadn't shot her, but it had been a near thing. A very near thing.

Now, Seiran's leg was packed in newfangled kolto, and another bandage wrapped around his chest where he'd broken a few ribs. He had instructions not to move. He was gonna have trouble with that. Especially when he learned what Pola and Revan had talked about.

Polla glanced at the ceiling again. “Abasen feels so far away.” Their former life felt like a dream that had happened to someone else.

Her husband nodded slowly. “Least we know he’s okay, with your folks.”

“Yeah. Even if we die here.” Polla smiled like she was joking but Sei knew her too well.

“Doesn't do any good to think like that.”

“Does if you can laugh. Hey, remember that part in the Underground Version? The one where Malak says he laughs in the face of death?” She meant the reference to crack the ice but Sei just looked exhausted.

“This isn't a vid, Pollie.”

That was true. Being a hero—even a failed one—was nothing like the vids.

“I love you,” Polla told Sei, just in case the ceiling collapsed and they were about to die for real. “I'm sorry I was so stupid, getting us all into this.”

Her husband sighed and reached his hand up to tangle in her hair. “I wonder if Abasen will ever know that his parents toppled the Sith Empire.” She wasn't the only one making bad jokes. “Shame we're not Republic, we'd be patriots.”

“We could ask for medals anyway.”

Seiran snorted. “That's admitting we're alive, remember? We'd have a lot of explaining to do to the insurance company.”

Somehow, the whole faking their deaths thing seemed like the happier, simpler time. “We’ll get
credits to pay them back. Mission promised."

“She's not here, is she?”

“No.” Polla was still trying to figure how to tell him she had to leave him. \textit{Least I know he can't follow. Not on that leg. “Seiran, I told you, that big ship in the sky—”}\n
“Aemelie's ship, yeah.” The drugs Seiran had made him fuzzy, but right now his eyes were clear. “You told me. But she's here too. The \textit{other one}.”

\textit{Other one.} She thought he'd been too out of it to hear them. “How do you know?”

“I heard her. In the Force. Like a scream.” He shook his head. “Never felt anything like it.”

“Well, she did this. \textit{Revan}. Revan Starfire did this. She bombed the planet.”

Her husband shook his head. “I don't think so.”

\textit{That's because you're on enough tranks to choke a bantha, dearie.} Polla kissed his forehead, instead of tactfully pointing that out.

“I saw them both,” Sei insisted. “The Bitch—I'd believe anything you said about her—but the other one—”

“She snowed you.” The anger felt like acid in her gut. “She has my memories. Would be easy to charm your pants off.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It wasn't like that, Pollie. She wasn't tryin to be you. She just… she wanted to help. The Bitch was the one who tricked her. She forced me to help. Tried to strangle me with the Force. Threatened Abasen—”

“What?” Thing was, with a cold shiver up her spine Polla realized she picture that happening. “No. She wouldn't hurt Aba! Or you! Or, if she did, it had to be a bluff!”

“It… it happened. She threatened to hurt him if I didn't help her fly her frackdamned ship here—” Seiran froze suddenly, looking at the door. “Oh. Shit.”

The makeshift door they'd made with blankets stirred, abruptly swinging open.

“But it \textit{was} a bluff, Seiran. Obviously, an effective one.” \textit{Her} voice.

Revan Starfire stepped into the room and like always, seemed to take up twice the space she should. Armor was probably helping with that—with those spikes on her shoulders she actually looked like a Sith on a Sixthday cartoon.

“It was a bluff. Of course, I would never harm your son, Seiran Wen. Or you. I just saved your life.” Revan's cold green eyes narrowed as she leaned in the doorway. She had her travelpack already strapped on her shoulders, straps scrunched in between the armor's spikes.

“I thought you were coming in the morning,” Polla said lamely. They'd talked about this when Seiran had been out, but Polla had thought she had more time. She hadn't even worked up to explaining it to Sei.

“It \textit{is} morning.” Revan grimaced. “Almost. I hope you slept. We have a long road ahead.”

“No,” Sei said stubbornly. “Pollie, whatever she has planned, she's just using you.”
“Way I look at it, I'm using her.”

“Of course I'm using her,” Revan agreed flatly. “No one else will do.”

“What? Pollie, you can’t—I can’t believe this!”

*Oh, good job, Revan Starfire. Frack if I know how you led armies.* Polla patted Seiran on the arm and stood up. “I have to do this,” she offered to her husband. “I'll be back as soon… soon as I can.”

“Yuthura will undoubtedly sense if our plan succeeds or fails,” Revan offered Polla’s husband a thin–lipped smile. “Perhaps you will too, Seiran.”

“Pollie, you can’t go!” Polla's husband tried to move and Polla bent down again to stop him.

“You're gonna break your leg all over again, Sei!”

“It's not the leg.” Revan loomed over them and crossed her arms. “Your ribs were crushed, Seiran. That’s why you’re wearing the brace. Allow another two days to heal or you’ll risk a punctured lung. Or worse.”

Behind the Jedi floated a hover–crate stacked with supplies, presumably for Polla. What looked like a set of her very own Sith armor. A decent Czerka automatic sticking out of a pile of electro–netting. The rifle had a self–adjusting scope she'd have to pull out and tweak—

“Sweet gear.” Easier, not looking at Seiran. She squeezed his hands, though. Trying to tell him it would all be okay without words.

Hell, she hoped it would be.

“Among other things, we're going to get more medical supplies,” Polla told her husband. It was true. “For the injured. Yuthura’s gonna run the camp ‘til we get back. Help her.”

“Among other things…” his voice trailed off. His eyes flickered between them. “Do you think I’m blind? You’re going to look for her! I know she’s on the planet now. I can feel it!”

“You and I both met the woman,” Revan told him. “You spoke with her at length. You know that the Fragment was the one who advocated for the rescue of your wife. She will not let her come to harm, and neither will I.”

“One day’s walk,” Polla told him. “Would be shorter than that if the roads weren’t down. But one day there, one day back. Call it three days. If we’re not back in three days, send in the Wookiee and his team. They’ll get us out when you tell them. Already agreed.”

“You spoke to Grarwbaar?” Revan’s face went perfectly blank, which meant she disapproved, Polla knew. “Best allow five days,” she told Seiran. “That is more realistic. We’re taking comm–links. If Grizz the Houck can restore some of the receivers, we’ll report. Our expectation is to return with a ship—giving you the means to leave this planet. Return to your son.” She took a slow breath. “And mine.”

“We’ll be back, Sei.” Polla planted one last kiss on his lips and another on the hand that reached up like he could stop her as she stood up. “Don’t die. Get better. See you soon.”

“Remember what I said before,” he muttered stubbornly. His eyes were fluttering closed again, kind of abruptly. “Bitch… isn’t… she isn’t….” He twitched, and his head dropped back. The sound that emerged from his half-open mouth sounded like a snore.
Polla looked at Revan and raised an eyebrow. It had taken ages to get it right, but she had it down now. “Did you just put him back to sleep?”

“I encouraged his body to repair itself.” Her hands were glowing blue.

“If you hadn’t he was going to follow us.” Hopefully, he’d wake up with more sense.

Revan nodded. “I know.”

Xxx

A Few Days After...

Xxx

There had been a long time after Pollie’s voice went away when the galaxy was gone and all Jasp Organa heard was the sound of machines, the impassive voices of droids, and occasional questions barked in Basic by disinterested medix.

Jasp felt disinterested too, as if that last puff of life had been drained away when he'd told that woman to run.

Interest came back slowly, in a series of steps.

First, he came to on an orbital—knew that the second he took a conscious breath of filtered, recycled air. The second his eyes opened he had to sit through two rounds of cognitive tests. Then, it was still a day before he found the words, before the darn fools would tell him where he was.

Answer turned out to be Qel Riada Hospital and Research Facility for the Indigent, somewhere above the backwater world of Carida.

While the nurses were nice enough, they wouldn't fill him in on what had happened to his traveling companion—although to be fair, Jasp wasn't exactly coming clean about traveling with Revan Starfire, either. Especially not to the two suited young Bothans from Iggis’s Outer Rim Casualty and Indemnity Fund, who appeared one day and seemed fit to draw their own conclusions.

“Is this your daughter?” one of ‘em had demanded bluntly, summoning up a blurry three–dee holo from that day he'd last seen her. “Is this Polla Organa Wen?”

“If I say no, will you believe me?” If I say, no, that’s Revan Starfire, will I make it worse? Jasp didn't know, so he’d just shrugged and smiled, maybe even drooled a bit, until the nurses shooed them away again. Truth was, he might have still been drooling a bit anyways at that point. Health came back too slow for his liking, even if all the nurses said he was doing great. What else were they gonna say? Tell him he was dying?

Might have been the very next day that Jasp awoke to his wife’s worried gaze, followed by a hearty smack on his lips. “We’re getting you outta here,” she whispered, and then turned to smile at the Bothan investigators who had taken to hanging out, greedy as mynocks on a power coupling.

His wife kept shushing all his questions ‘til they were out in the hover–chair and halfway to the docks. There, they met a nanny–droid that looked to be bought a few thousand credits up from old Bolts, holding a giant black–haired baby who seemed to have grown bigger and fatter than he had any right to be.

“Mamolla!” Jasp’s grandson said with a winning smile that even had teeth. He pointed at them.
“Mamolla, mamolla!”

“S’what he taught him to say,” his wife muttered back, wiping her eyes. “The kid taught him that. No, that’s your Poppo, Abbie. Say Poppo.”

“Poppolla,” Abasen giggled, smart as a navwhiz.

Jasp found himself blinking back at the kid, dumbly stricken at the size of his grandson and the way the baby’s dark brown eyes widened looking back at him, like someone was home in there. He blinked back tears, completely overwhelmed by the infinite promise in that gap-toothed smile.

“He looks like Pollie,” Jasp managed as Moll took the kid away from what turned out to be the rented droid. Abasen let go of its metal arms with a delighted squawk that held the gray world back, at least for a little time, and settled down on Jasp’s lap on the hoverchair. “Where’s—”

“Not yet,” his wife whispered, glancing suspiciously back the way they’d come.

It wasn’t until a few days after that, when Moll had bundled them all on a fast cruiser heading back from the Core into civilized free space that Jasp worked up the choobs to ask about the boy too. Later, he’d have a pang of guilt for not asking sooner. Later, he’d have time to realize how much Moll had dropped in bribes and influence to smuggle him out of a Makeon medix facility (away from those claims investigator and the Republic Senate investigation), but in the now he was still in a state of shock.

The world that had formerly only existed in shades of gray had suddenly developed light and color again. But with that came pain, and nightmares. Shakes so bad sometimes he couldn’t walk. Times when he forgot words, and when the lights and sounds themselves felt like lasers—bolts rattling around in his skull.

He and Molla were having breakfast at a table by the choca and champa fountain on the cruise when Jasp finally got the words out he’d been looking for all along. “Where’s…” he reached for a name and Molla still clasped his hand, putting her other to her lips to shush him—but Jasp was tired of being shushed. He already knew the news wasn’t good about Pollie, or she’d have said it already. “... her boy? You leave him at home? Did she come back?”

Moll raised her eyebrows at him and cast an eye toward the others at their dining pod. They were on some kind of cut-rate cruise, heading back toward home roundabout enough that Moll had told him she’d figure no one would look at them too closely. “On my lap, sleeping.” She raised her voice artificial—high and began to tell the nosy Mon Calamari next to them about how Jasp had had dementia, but now he was mostly cured.

The cheek of it! He’d laugh, except that might spoil things, and his voice felt rusty when he tried.

Later in the safety of their cabin, dear Moll told him the rest. How Pollie was still missing. How she’d left that boy of Revan’s with Bendowen and Ooka. Kore he was calling himself now. He’d shot up a few more centimeters last she’d seen. Taller than Molla now.

How Bendowen and Ooka had stopped answering their comm three days ago.

“I have a bad feeling,” she added. His wife had sounded more subdued than he’d seen her since the day that wretched Jedi–Sith landed in their retaining pond.

_That woman and that kid._ Like a punch in the gut.

Jasp should be more upset about Bendowen and his wife—he and Bendo had come up together,
worked the service—but all he could think about was those wide gray eyes and that funny child’s voice: like an adult already.

It was the middle of planting time for winter.

Bendowen would never leave the farm then—not if he had a choice—

*But that kid.* Revan Starfire’s kid. Some of what Jasp thought was muzzy and muddled with the memories of Darth Nihilus, but Jasp kept thinking about how the woman he’d talked to almost seemed like Pollie—if Pollie could steer an *Aurek*–class starfighter through a blind star tunnel with nothing but Jedi powers.

He remembered looking at the instruments, and thinking they were wrong. By all rights they all should have been space dust. But he’d seen Revan Starfire walk on water. Hell, on Deralia, he’d seen her practically fly.

Pang of guilt then, for the way he’d greeted her on Deralia. Jasp didn’t think he’d forget *that* to the end of his days. The way her face had frozen over at his reaction, that hopeful look fading like one of Nihilus’s dreams.

But half the time now Molla looked like she’d wrung out the tears and started on em again—so it wasn’t like he could even start with *her*.

“Insurance investigators might’ve come sniffing around them too,” she muttered one morning when Jasp was still scrubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to delip his beard without shaking. “Or worse. Maybe they went into hiding. Maybe they left word—”

“Maybe,” he tried to soothe her. But Jasp couldn't stop thinking about that poor kid, and his mother with Pollie’s smile, and the way she'd ended the mast—the monster. The *beast*. Darth Nihilus had gone kindly, to his doom. Much more kindly than he deserved.

“We’ll have to go into hiding too, if Kore’s gone—” Molla said a bit later, Jasp wasn’t sure how much later, because the days were still funny sometimes. That was when they’d seen the *Deralian Daystar Holo–News* report that the Organa farm was deserted, except for a pit filled with quicka–lim, the kind more suited for shady Exchange cleaners than eridu farmers. Not big enough for anything except maybe a few bodies.

“Hiding from the insurance investigators.” He nodded, deliberately not getting it. “Probably will, yeah.”

“If Pollie makes it out, what will she think?” His wife was cradling Abasen and a bottle of firewhiskey in between her elbows now, only a few days from home.

Jasp took the bottle since he still didn’t trust his hands not to drop the baby. “She’s smart,” he muttered, meaning his daughter, but he couldn’t help but note that his daughter had made a mess of her smuggler’s license and driven a speeder into a wall, and so maybe all those tests in school about her potential had been lies. “And she’s got Seiran.”

“She…” Molla wiped her eyes and Jasp knew she was crying for the boy too, as well as their own Pollie. “You know, I didn’t know the other one for long—mostly in a coma—but sometimes she’d say something, and she seemed just like—”

“I know,” he said, patting her hand.

“I just can’t fathom how she’d…” her voice trailed off and Jasp finished her thought in his own
—how she’d kill us for losing her son?
—how she’d rip the galaxy apart again when she finds out we lost her son?

“He was a good boy,” Molla added. “Sweet. To know him you’d never think that his parents—”

“I know,” he sighed. Pollie, he thought. The truth would out between them in dribs and drabs. The horrors Jasp had seen, that aching emptiness, that echoing scream. The fear he had that his real daughter was lost forever. But for now, Jasp sat down on the bed and patted the space beside him. “Come here,” he said to Molla. Their grandson was sleeping. “I have whiskey.”

But his wife was staring at the vid–screen. “Oh, no,” she said.

“What—” Jasp craned his neck around to look too.

March to War, the chyron read. Republic Fleet Mobilizes Against the Sith Empire!

“Oh,” he echoed.

XXX

It had taken Revan and Polla Organa two days to reach the Dark Temple plateau. Longer than Revan wanted, but she knew, even before she saw the camp, that they were still not too late.

The camp below their vantage point buzzed with activity. A dozen polymerized medical tents had been erected on the slope leading to the Dark Temple steps, above the forest of Mandalorian troop carriers and shuttles that blocked the Temple’s eastward ascent. Above the medix stations, at least twenty more domed structures shimmered with anti–rad barriers that had been embedded into their handwoven fabric.

Tents of sand. They expect to stay here. At least for a season. A few hundred warriors. She noted the Clan banners raised on the highest ridge, above a row of slug–cannon. Ordo. Lin. Rialis. Zal. Wies—

Clan Lin? Like a comical jape, seeing the sigil that should have been hers. That should have been trampled to dust and forgotten.

In the morning light, the troops of beskar–clad Mandalorians clustered in deceptively disorganized formations. Revan noticed they still managed to cover every vantage point, and every point of egress.

She was wearing a Force collar to hide her presence and so a great deal of useful information was veiled from her senses, but one thing she was sure of: the Fragment still hadn't gone into the tomb.

Why? It must call to her, as it did to me—perhaps even stronger now with the Sleepers above—

“There's Carth,” Polla nudged Revan's elbow as if Revan wasn't capable of recognizing the Fragment's husband without instruction.

The man was getting into a troop carrier modded for groundside transit with his son and a Mandalorian—

“He has Dustil with him.” Revan adjusted the frequency of her binocs.
“Huh.” Polla shrugged, clanking awkwardly in the armor that partially shielded her from the worst of the planet's devastation. “So the scout’s report was right—Carth and Dustil did come with the Mandies.”

“Yes.” The point was obvious. “I suspect they're looking for more survivors,” she added, as the transport lifted off, turning its nose toward Kaas City—from the direction Revan and Polla had come. That had also been in the report that Tenebrae’s former captain had delivered. Despite the trappings of war, the Mando’ade had done nothing so far except retrieve survivors and provide relief.

A Mando’ade Mercy Corps. Like a bad jape.

“They might find our camp, then.” Polla frowned. “Could be they're looking for us,” she added.

“Carth has Tenebrae's Kiss.” Which could be useful. Tenebrae would be more amenable to the plans Revan had for the Fragment than the man she had married. And with his empire in tatters, he would agree to negotiation.

Revan wondered what the Fragment and the Emperor had already discussed. Perhaps I have him to thank for keeping her out of the tomb? That thought was as ironic as the Republic Cross of Glory the Fragment had been rewarded for a victory of spirit that she had not even deserved.

The question remained: just how much leverage did she possess? Tenebrae had spoken of the death of a Force–eater, but the Emperor lied, the Emperor tricked her before. Could she threaten him with Arkan or not? It could have been another Force–eater who had perished. Revan had heard legends of species who consumed the living Force for their sustenance. Dashade, they were called. Perhaps it had merely been a Dashade who had been killed—

No. It was Arkan. Did Malak sound smug? She dropped him into a sun.

A sun. Like Beya—

And Wu, and Vik, and all the rest. Yes, my heart. He's gone.

There was a strange emptiness in Revan’s chest. A heaviness. But I haven't dreamed of him—

There wasn't much left. She was becoming accustomed to Malak’s intangible presence, but the smugness in his tone was painful for how much it reminded Revan of the man himself, the man she hadn't seen for years.

The man you refused to see— Sheris’s voice was a quiet murmur. But I saw. I saw him. Always—

“Revan?” Polla crouched down next to her. “Are you… maybe we should wait for Carth to come back, first. Talk to him, first. Or–or look for Zaalbar…?”

Revan had expected this response. Sentients always had a final moment of doubt before necessity required their efforts. And in their time together, she thought she had come to understand the smuggler quite well.

“No, Polla. It’s time.”

“I’m not sure—”

“But you are.”
Revan unbuckled the Force collar that had been around her neck for most of their journey.

The Force rushed back into her consciousness like a shock of cold water. A boreal lake, with icy waters rippling around the drop of a single stone. The Force was tainted with the Dark here—the Dark and the Fragment’s power, echoing together like a khyber crystal with its harmonies just out of tune.

“You’re as sure as I am, Polla Organa. This is the only way.”

“I hope you’re right.” The Deralian adjusted the weapon she’d chosen. It was not the one Revan had suggested she use; but as with their other points of disagreement, they had managed to reach an accord.

Across from their ridge, in the Mandalorian camp on the plateau, a woman with a top-knot walked out of a small tent. Her hair was brown, glinting red in the rising sun. Her head turned in their direction, and then—

XXX

Fin

Woot! I’m done! Okay. (victory lap)

(No, I am kidding. That is not the end. But it is the end of this chapter)

 XXXX
They were just sitting down to lunch when Leesa’s secretary interrupted, bringing in a flashing comm–unit. She set it down awkwardly between the soup and the roasted scerliac and backed away, murmuring apologies.

The apologies were an unnecessary interruption, and Leesa made a mental note to have a word with Ellomi later, but for now—

“Attention?” She raised a spoon to her glass. The ferracrystal goblet rang like bells. “Gentlebeings? I'm delighted to announce our High Admiral Rensha will be conferencing in to our informal meeting with an update from Fleet.”

“Finally,” muttered Senator Qel’Riada.

Leesa tapped her wrist–comm and the ghostly figure of a Trandoshan appeared above their table, arms folded rather defiantly, her tongue flickering in and out with agitation.

“High Admiral! So glad you commed!” Leesa let the acid drip from her voice, making it quite clear that the time lapse of two days since her frantic request for a conference was inexcusable. “Your timing couldn't be better, we were just sitting down to lunch, and nearly everyone from the Houses is here. Cee–Four…?” She motioned for her chap to pull the holocams on their end back a bit so that Old Scaly could see the entire table: five senators from Coruscant’s ruling Houses and their guests—an assortment from the lesser ranks, planetary emissaries, and other assorted rabble. In the back row, a few holograms flickered—representatives from Houses too fearful to accept Leeshansintina’s invitation in the flesh. Senator Loanin had his Iridonian wife with him, she noted. Their blue image was dim and fuzzy—the sign of a cheap signal, no doubt—but it looked like the former Lydie Korr had really packed on the kilos.

The guests of honor were the frightened refugee slaves from the Sith warship, the *Grave Bright*. The *Grave Bright* had magically appeared over Coruscanti space a few days ago with only these three and the ship’s manka cat alive to tell the tale.

“We demanded an update days ago, Rensha! Why didn't you call us immediately?” added the humorless First of Qel’Riada. “Don't forget who approves your funding!”

“We were in hyperspace,” the High Admiral Rensa snarled. “Traveling an unknown route. Protocol demanded comm silence.”

“And have you arrived?” Leesa asked. Next to her, Aramis Makeon (now First of her House) rolled her eyes. Next to Aramis, the woman refugee—girl, really—just about their age, pushed the nerf steak on her plate with her spork as if she had no idea how to use utensils. Maybe she didn’t. Poor Neely Ahtoma had been a slave before the unfortunate incident that killed the entire *Grave Bright* crew except for these three, who just happened to be in the sealed–off medbay when the ship’s life support had inexplicably failed.
“We are… somewhere.” Old Scaly tapped her snout with a claw. “The coordinates are classified as of now, even from Senate inquiry.”

“Well, good.” Leesa sighed. She didn’t need their stupid coordinates anyway. Thanks to inheriting D’Reev intelligence, she’d been the one feeding Fleet intel on the Sith Empire this whole time. They could keep their silly ‘faster-than-hyperspace’ route for now. It would leak eventually. Things always did. “You’ll be happy to know that while you took the entire Navy halfway across the galaxy Coruscant wasn’t even invaded. It was just the one ship that came here! Still, Rear Admiral Cein was quite upset!”

“Cein informed me. But the hyperspace lane exists. A hyperspace route previously undiscovered. And several other planets were not so fortunate. I trust you heard about Hoth and Nar Shaddaa.”

“The ice ball and the sewer?” It was rude, but Leesa snorted. “Why would anyone bomb—”

“We think it was Revan,” the Trandoshan interrupted. “Revan’s Sith fleet. The news vids in this sector had several sightings of unknown ships—or did, before the main grids went down.”

“Revan?” The brown-haired refugee’s voice was hesitant as she leaned across the table. Shy. Frightened. It made Leesa feel sorry for her all over again. “Is your lizard saying that Lord Revan did this? Is it she who bombed Hoth?”

“Shhh!” Aramis told her. “That’s the High Admiral of the Fleet. She’s Trandoshan. Not a lizard.”

“Reptilian.” Neely fluttered her lashes. “Apologize to it for me, please?”

“Shhh,” Aramis repeated, while Leesa tried to remind herself the poor girl just didn't know any better.

“We followed the coordinates that Admiral Ekkumi’s ship discovered, traversing a distance that should have taken a month in the span of two days.” If Rensha heard the side conversation she gave no sign. “But the Grave Bright went much further than that. Are you sure we have no way of knowing how?”

“Me?” Neely squeaked. “Does the lizard mean me?”

“Yes I mean you,” High Admiral practically snarled.

“I don't know anything about hyperspace. I’m just a cafeteria tech.” Neely Ahtoma wiped her eyes. Her lip trembled. On her left, the Imperial engineers Abe Gatori and Yeeri Ko looked totally blank, just like they had since being rescued in the first place. Still in shock, Neely had said they were. All of them witness to the terrible thing that caused most of their crew to go mad, and the rest to freeze when life support failed—in an irony of ironies—after they were out of hyperspace.

Neely Ahtoma was the only wretch who didn't seem like she had screws loose someplace. But quite obviously, being forced to recall the horrible event was giving her feelies and jitts too. “Admiral Onasi had just given our captain orders to flee when we came under attack and the next thing we knew …” she gestured toward the window and the Coruscanti spires twinkling outside. “We were here.”

“The admiral… that's Carth Onasi,” Leesa threw in, just to see Rensha squirm.
“We know.” The Trandoshan’s tongue flickered and her eyelids slid back. “Captain Onasi appears to have switched sides.” Her voice lowered to a rasp and it took Leesa a sec to realize that she was trying to sound nice. “Is there anything at all that you or your friends can tell us, Neely?”

“N–no,” the girl whispered. At her feet, the manka cat purred so loudly it sounded like the timer of a bomb. “N–not about Admiral Onasi.”

“How Admiral?” A voice interrupted. “So sorry to bother you, but I believe I know this… ah, Neely, is it?”

“What are you talking about, Lieutenant Ctannis?” The Trandoshan looked irritated. “Get back to your station!”

Lieutenant Ctannis chuckled. He (or she?) was a funny–looking Toydarian and something was wrong with the comm, because for a moment, his eyes seemed to… almost… glow. “Delighted to see you, ah, Neely,” the Toydarian murmured. “Trust me. I’ll find you. Quite soon. As soon as—”

The recording cut out abruptly.

“Oh!” Neely exclaimed, looking rather surprised.

“How do you know a Republic lieutenant?” Leesa thought that was rather odd.

“I don’t. The poor thing was mad.” Neely’s eyes were a rich golden yellow, like sparkling gems. They blinked a few times and Leesa noticed how pretty the poor unfortunate truly was.

“Poor thing was mad,” Qel’Riada echoed.

Several people near him nodded in agreement.

“Can we get the signal back?” Leesa waved at her chap who mag–lifted the comm unit into its appendages. After a few irritatingly long moments in the midst of an awkward silence, the chap beeped ‘no.’

“That must have been sunspots,” Neely murmured. “Disrupting the signal. No need to be concerned.”

“Sunspots?” Leesa waved at her chap to try again, but the droid just shook its metal head.

“Sunspots,” Neely repeated, voice a bit stronger now. “I’m sure that High Admiral Rensha and the rest of the Republic Fleet are just fine.”

“I’m sure that High Admiral Rensha and the rest of the Republic Fleet are just fine,” Aramis repeated.

“Of course they’re just fine.” Leesa clapped her hands. “Now that business is out of the way, shall we have tea?”

“I prefer caff,” Neely murmured. “Don’t you?”

“I prefer caff, too,” Leesa agreed, although a part of her remembered that had not always been so—

“You’ve all been ever so kind.” Neely Ahtoma blinked her golden eyes again and smiled.
She had a beautiful smile, Leesa noticed.

XXX

*Meanwhile, on Dromund Kaas….*

“She can’t see us, right?”

The woman with the top-knot had turned toward them. The oval of her face was a pale blur at this distance, even with the binocs. Polla still had the uncanny sensation that pale blur was staring directly at her.

“No. The trees block her line of sight. Fall back.” Revan issued commands like she was ordering an army. Probably because she was used to ordering armies. She was fracking good at commanding, too, because Polla’s feet were moving her back to the clearing they’d set up before her brain had a chance to offer its opinion.

“Yeah, yeah,” Polla muttered from a safe distance, going to the mound of dirt that was her mark. “Whatever you say, Jedi Bossypants.”

“You’re a few centimeters off,” Revan pointed with her lit saber, just because Polla didn't have her foot directly on top of the fake plasma mine they’d buried there.

*If it was a real plasma mine, you think she’d tell you?* Sometimes Polla hated her conscience for bothering to think these things through. The mine had *looked* like a dud, before they buried it. Lights had been off. Thing hadn’t been vibrating. Revan swore the other one would sense the metal or something through the Force.‘

That hadn't made much sense, but what about the Force did?

“Fine.” Polla edged her feet carefully over the spot, letting out a breath she didn't know she was holding when nothing bad happened. “Now what?”

“Now…” Revan clipped the Force collar back on her belt and paced back to her side of the clearing, through the archway of brush that hid half of it from Polla's view. “Now we wait,” she called out. “Follow our plan.”

“Right.” Polla tried not to roll her eyes. “*Our* plan.”

Their trip from the Kaas City ruins to the Dark Temple encampment had been a long two days. Revan had only taken off her Force collar a few times—to heal a scratch on Polla's leg from a thornbush the woman said would fester, to check and see if she could still sense Other Revan in the Force as they'd approached the camp, and to light a fire—the first night, when Revan had let them have one.

*Show off,* Polla had thought at the time when the woman snapped her fingers and the tinder lit—although she’d had her own blaster out, ready to try and light the stack of twigs herself with a well-placed laser bolt. *Magic,* she’d thought too. She’d seen the woman perform miracles: fire was the least of it after saving Seiran's life, but it still made the back of her neck prickle—maybe more so now that they were approaching the other one.

Revan said her double was at least a hundred times more powerful than *she* was. More powerful than Yuthura, or Sulkypants, or the Blais sisters, or any of the Dark Council. If she wanted to set something on fire….
Don't panic. Polla reminded herself now. Like Ma had always said: don't panic when it's too late to do any good. Just smile and do your best.

The second night, Revan insisted there could be no fire because she sensed sents nearby and they had to escape detection. Polla had asked what they were escaping detection from … and the answer had taken long enough that she'd fallen asleep in the middle of the explanation, despite the cold. Something about… other survivors getting in the way, she gathered.

The woman usually explained everything in six sentences when one would do.

As she'd trudged through the Kaas jungle with the former Coma–lady, Polla couldn't help comparing the experience to the time she'd spent in the woods with Dustil Onasi (and Lord Malak and that kid, Mekel! All three of them in one body?), and Zaalbar when they were fleeing Tenebrae's palace.

Seemed like a hundred years ago, now.

Sulkypants—or whoever he'd been—had seemed kinder back then, but all–in–all Polla missed the Wookiee the most. Zaal was a better woodsman than Revan. The sleeping in trees bit he'd done had saved them a lot of insect bites. And huddling next to three meters of fur beat being sandwiched between Revan's bony ass and a foil blanket.

A botfly bite on Polla's ankle itched, but she didn't dare move, now. She and Revan had spent three hours before Commander Bossypants took off the Force collar setting all of this up, and the electro–net lines they'd buried underground ran right in front of her perch.

“Don’t step on them,” Bossypants had said. “Doing so would prove fatal—for you.”

Hah! No shit, sleestak!

In their lively debate about timing and voltage charges, Revan had opined that it would be a maximum of five minutes before the Hero of the Star Forge came charging up that hill, and down into the clearing where they were.

It had been much longer than that. The botfly bite was killing Polla, now. But twenty minutes was what Polla had expected. The woman wouldn't charge out right away. You don't put your goods on the table right up front. You let your mark sweat a little first, soften them up.

Polla and her good buddy the former Dark Lord of the Sith might have set the table (so to speak), and rigged the game (as it were), but the Butcher of Dromund Kaas still had to hessi on over with the goods.

In this case, herself.

Still...

Maybe—check and make sure she’s coming? She mouthed the words, pointing and gesturing, but… oh, what was the use? On the other side of the clearing, the former Dark Lord of the Sith didn't even have her eyes open. Through a gap in the trees, it looked like she was meditating.

Fracking Jedi. All those Sixthday cartoons made them look a lot more... busy.

Polla shifted the sweet Czerka rifle in her hands and wondered if she should have gone for the blaster instead—the one the former Dark Lord of the Sith had kept saying would be the better
choice for the battle ahead.

Xxx

“Are you sure you don’t want a more discreet weapon?” Revan looked up from the ground where she’d been burying the electro–net. Her fingers were black with mud, which proved the sarcastic quips Polla had had in her head about Darth Bossypants never getting her hands dirty wrong. “She’ll see you’re holding that immediately.”

“Won’t matter.” Polla smiled sweetly. “I like this gun.”

Xxx

Her ankle itched now like the son of a Bith. Polla was just about to say frack it and bend down to scratch when, just like that, their wait was over. There was a rustle of bushes still out of her view and then the thud of someone landing on the ground.

Buzz of Bossypants’s saber as she raised it, flashing red through the spots that Polla could see between the leaves.

She couldn’t see much. She couldn’t see the other one—the woman with her memories—at all.

“Is this your trap, Dar’Revan?” The woman’s voice sounded smug, like she didn't give a damn. “Did you set mines along the clearing? Wire up a motion–sensor cannon, or is your companion lying in wait with explosives?”

_Damnit._ Polla glanced down at the box of grenades.

“Why would I trap you, Fragment? I merely wanted to talk.” How did Revan Starfire Bossypants make her taunts sound like reasonable questions? Polla found it infuriating and they were actually friends.

The rise where their target was standing was still out of Polla’s view—making her barely a shadow through the trees. The Hero of the Star Forge had come in the exact way Revan had said she would—even if Polla had thought it would have been smarter of her to try and ambush them from behind.

_Polla_ would have set up her own ambush—after making them sweat. Then again, _Polla_ didn’t have a Mandalorian army as back–up. Her imposter did.

Xxx

“She will be overconfident,” Revan had said. “That makes her weak.”

“We’d better hope so,” Polla muttered. “Because I think she’s gonna be pissed.”

Xxx

“I don’t think you can trap me.” Hero gave a quick exhale of breath, then there was a clicking noise, and that familiar lightsaber buzz came as she lit hers too. “That doesn't mean you won't try.”

Xxx

“What if she just kills you really fast?” Polla had asked Revan that question the first night of their journey to the creepy Sith temple.
How far had the woman fallen when Revan pushed her off the ship? Fifty meters? Two hundred? A thousand? Seiran’s story was totally garbled. But it had definitely been far enough to kill anyone normal. Enough to make any normal person really pissed off.

If Revan Starfire had pushed Polla off a ship and nearly killed her, they wouldn’t be sitting together at a campfire right now. It seemed reasonable (Polla thought) that the Butcher of Kaas might hold a grudge.

“Then you finish it,” Revan told her. “You know what you have to do——”

Xxx

“This is not a trap.” Revan sounded so sincere that if Polla hadn’t spent two days helping to plan the trap, she would’ve bought the former Dark Lord’s words at full price. “Please, Fragment. Trust me.”

“Trust——” ragged laughter from the Butcher of Kaas City. “Are you frickin’ kidding me?” Whirring noise—like her laser sword was moving now. Clash, when it hit the other one.

Revan had stepped out of view, which was a bit off script, as she was supposed to lure the other one closer to Polla.

I need to see to help, Coma–Lady.

Another clash of lightsabers, then the sound of rapid footsteps.

Polla hadn’t seen a lot of one–on–one ’saber fights. No, on Kaas the Sith just used their laser swords to execute the help. But the few times she’d seen Sith go up against each other had really been something—until, like Ma used to say—someone had lost an arm. Or both legs. Or a head.

Polla glanced down at the (probably) deactivated plasma mine and the buried lines of electro–net in front of her perch and decided to stay right where she was while they worked it out.

What if the Butcher of Kaas City kills her?

Xxx

“Then you finish it.” Revan picked up another nutra bar and unpeeled the foil, before breaking it in half and handing part to Polla. Packs full of stuff, plenty of water, but the woman had brought almost no damn food at all. “You know what you have to do. If she kills me, you finish it. You have everything you need——”

Xxx

Everything she needed. Polla glanced down at the crate at her feet. One hydro–chamber kit. One carbonite ray. A pile of sonic detonators—

—in case the electro–net wasn't enough.

“Who do you have with you, Dar? I know you're not alone.” Another saber clash, and then more rapid footsteps. A small tree collapsed, affording Polla slightly more of a view. The Butcher was a brown–haired blur, hurtling over Revan with terrifying ease. Red clashed with red, again—and Revan rolled out of sight again.

“Why don't you go see?” Revan sounded so nice— only a little winded.
Oh, frack, but that was Polla’s cue. “Hey!” She called out. “Hey! Revan! Help!”

Xxx

“You really think she’ll want to save me? How can we predict what she’ll do?”

Revan blinked at her from across the campfire, hugging her knees to her chest. “How can we not? Between the two of us, we are her mind—”

“I still don’t see why she’d save me.”

“Ah, but I do.” The flickering light made Revan’s features look like something out of a grave. “I watched her face when she saw your husband and son.”

“What about Abasen and Sei?” Getting jealous made no sense but Polla did it anyway. “What do you mean?”

“She saved the note your mother wrote her. She cared for your son as if he was her own.” That thin–lipped smile made Revan’s face look like a skull. Say what you want about her, (Seiran had, often), but she wasn’t ugly. This expression, though, was. “Trust me. She’ll want to save you—”

Xxx

“Help!” Polla called again. She wasn’t feeling it, though, and the word came out flat and strange. “Please! Revan! Help! The Bitch tricked me—”

That might even be true.

Xxx

“And if she doesn’t? What if she keeps trying to kill you, instead? What if she just… just blows you up and then blows me up, too?”

“I have shields.” The woman looked irritated. “And I know she won’t kill you, Polla.”

“But—”

“If all else fails, shoot her in the skull,” Revan snapped. “And be prepared to run—or die. Because it’s possible that will make the world end.”

Polla decided to ignore the sarcasm. “Whatever. What if she comes around the back and comes to me, first?”

And so the two of them had played it out for two days of trudging through jungle, hacking their way past terrifying beasts (that for some reason left them alone).

If this, then that.

“If the other Revan comes at you with a lightsaber—”

“I hold up the fake detonator.”

“If the other Revan kills me—”

“I shoot her in the head with the blaster—”
“No, use the carbonite ray. You must immobilize her!”

“Right, but what if she breaks the carbonite ray? With the Force or her bare hands or whatever?”

“There’s a back–up in the crate.”

“And if the other Revan goes for me first—”

“She won’t.” Polla’s own Revan seemed positive. “But if she did, then I would stab her in the back with my lightsaber and save you.”

“Wouldn’t that kill her?” That the Hero could not die had been one of the points Revan had repeated over and over again. Why? Why had been one of those explanations that drifted off into Ancient Sith quotes and put Polla half to sleep. Polla suspected Bossypants was making half of it up.

Maybe she was just sentimental.

_Those green eyes were wide and perfectly blank. After a long silence, Revan answered. “I’m not sure.”_  

Xxx

Clash of sabers. The sound of earth lifting.

Flashes of something that looked like lightning emanated from the clearing. No voices—the women fighting were in it too deep now to exchange quips.

“Help!” Polla called again. She was starting to feel real fear. Adrenaline drenched the back of her shirt in a cold sweat, and the sweet Czerka rifle she’d chosen for its action was actually a bitch to hold one–handed and casual–like. “Please!”

“Who _is _that?”

Couldn’t the Other Bitch tell who she was?

“It’s me!” Polla called out.

“Why don’t you go _see_?” Revan was saying her line now, too loud, like this was some badly–staged play.

“And walk into a mine? Or a detonator trap? You _know _you can't beat me like this.”

“What makes you think I want to?”

“Your saber's out.”

“Self-defense. By the way, your Soresu is quite sloppy.”

“I’m not the one sweating. You look a bit out of shape. Carth said you were in a coma…?”

“I recovered. Seiran Wen said the same thing about you.”

“Where is he?” An indrawn breath, then another crackle of lightning. Smelled like some of the brush had caught fire.
Idiots. They’ll attract the Mandies! Of course, maybe that’s what the Butcher wanted.

“Seiran is safe. For now.”

“And Poll—”

“Hey!” Polla called out. “Darth Bossypants! You know I can’t have your back if I can't fracking see it?” That wasn't quite the line, but she thought it would get the same effect. Yelling for help was getting them nowhere.

She was right. From one eye–blink to the next, her side of the clearing, (the side with the electro–net lines buried underground), went from having an occupancy of one to an occupancy of three.

“Polla.” Brown hair, almost black. Red at the roots. In a topknot the woman had never earned. Nondescript coverall with Mandie clan signs. Green eyes. Less freckled than the other one, maybe. Maybe it was the light. Her throat moved a little as she swallowed hard, staring at Polla—from only a meter away. The red–bladed saber she held washed her out, made her skin a ghost’s. “It's really you.”

Xxx

“You really think she's going to give a damn about me?”

“How could she not?”

Xxx


“You're not dead.” The Butcher of Kaas City swallowed hard again instead of asking anything practical, like ‘how?’ The laser sword in her hand switched off—

Xxx

“You think she’d turn off the laser sword? That'd be like me holstering my blaster!”

“We could place a wager.” Revan looked a million light years away. “I had a friend, once, who loved to gamble. She was Deralian. Isn't that what you do?”

“My cousin?” The Jedi kept bringing her up. “Beya?”

“I—yes.” That seemed to snap her out of it. “So. She turns off her lightsaber—stop calling it a laser sword. And then, you—”

“I'll call it a laser sword if I want to!”

“The term is inaccurate. But fine. She turns off her ‘laser sword.’ And then, Polla, you—”

Xxx

“Hi,” Polla told the Butcher again. Not really much else to say. All of those memories shared and the woman still had bombed this planet back to the Age of Mud.

“Yes! Help! If I move it could explode.” Polla blinked her eyes fast too. Her heart felt like it was gonna jump out of her chest. Her hand felt sweaty on the rifle's pommel.

“Is she holding you hosta—”

The Hero–Butcher memory–stealer never had time to finish that sentence, because Polla cocked the rifle held loosely at her waist and fired.

Xxx

“You should use something more precise than a blaster rifle.”

“You packed this one.”

“I packed several. I wasn’t sure of the terrain. But surely, one of the more discreet disruptor pistols—”

“Then it'd look like I'm going to shoot her.”

“As opposed to holding a giant gun? How is that more subtle?”

“It'll look like I grabbed the first thing I could find—like maybe you trapped me, and I just grabbed what I could find—

Xxx

Polla's aim was true, Revan noted with relief.

The Deralian had brought down a crazed terentatek at a hundred meters. Hitting a static target from point–blank range was well within her skillset, even with that ridiculous weapon.

The Fragment gave a startled noise and fell back like a toppled tree, the Force splintering with her confusion.

So simple.

As Revan had expected, the shock of being shot by a woman the Fragment revered shattered any defense her body might have raised—for the moment.

The moment would not last.

“Phew!” Polla Organa shifted, bringing her gun up, keeping it trained on the Fragment as if she might rise again. “You sure she's not d—” her foot slipped off the mound of dirt covering the mine and for a moment, the entire galaxy seemed to freeze.

“Wait!” Revan managed to summon the Force to reset the buried plasma mine half a heartbeat before Polla killed then all by stepping off its trigger. “I told you to wait before moving! Be careful!” she added, lest the smuggler fry herself on the electro–net next. Her hand trembled with relief, as Polla jumped to the side as planned and Revan stepped on the trigger–point for the net surrounding the fallen Fragment, side–stepping the buried lines herself as they crackled to life.

The Fragment's body twitched as the grid electrified. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she was immobilized.

But Revan could almost see the Force weaves thicken around her nemesis, as if consciously or unconsciously, the Fragment was still trying to rally.
The net wouldn’t hold her long. This, too, was by design.

“Get the frame!” she called out. “Quickly!”

Then, the ground shook, but Revan had expected that too.

Xxx

“The planet may be… tied to her.” The smuggler was sulking because Revan wouldn’t let her have a fire again. The next part of their plan was difficult for any null to believe, which was why she had delayed sharing it earlier. “There may be a geological or atmospheric disturbance—”

“Uh… okay.” The woman showed less curiosity than Revan had anticipated. Is that why we're…” Polla waved a hand at the pile of goods Revan had procured from the mercenaries' stores. “Why we're using this kit? This is bounty hunter crap, Revan!”

Yes. And how... interesting that low–level Exchange mercenaries would possess carbonite freezing rays, and frames to store a body in. Almost as interesting: they had supplied them to Revan without a single question. But that was an issue for later—to be resolved when the Wookiee and the Houck joined them to assist in extricating the Fragment’s frozen body. “We were quite fortunate your associates had such devices, Polla.”

“What can I say?” The Deralian shrugged. “I know all sorts.”

Xxx

Now, flat on the ground and twitching, the Fragment… whimpered. A surprisingly weak cry. Blue sparks shot around her limbs.

The disruptor bolt she’d taken to the chest was a round hole, perfectly set, just as Revan had advised—

Xxx

“No margin of error. Even a few centimeters to the left could kill her.”

It was possible that it could.

“I mean, she kind of deserves it.” Polla laughed nervously. “But I—you know, I’ve only killed one person, before? And he was possessed, so I’m not sure it counts—”

“The plague you unleashed killed—or will kill—thousands,” Revan told her. Sheris’s voice in her head whispered it was unkind to say, but the Deralian needed to face facts. No sense in choca– coating the truth, as Vrook used to say. “Tens of thousands. Possibly hundreds of—”

“Stop!” The smuggler closed her eyes, shaking her head. “You're the one who put those vials in the Blais House—Phylus told me you put them there! And it was your fracking evil droid—I just told him to infect Carth—HK went behind my back!”

HK had been programmed to take initiative and seize an advantage. Revan had no doubt that he had seen one. Had she been conscious she would have prevented it. But the act was done.

And it worked. Your insane plan worked, Deralian. Where my prudence failed.

Be kind, Sheris murmured. Or you will lose her.
Revan tempered her tone. “You tried to fix... things, too. Yuthura said vaccination rates in some parts of the city were up to ninety per cent before—”

“Before we ran out of vaccine. Yeah.” Polla picked up one of their few remaining nutra bars and bit the foil seal open with her teeth. “Then I blew millions of credits on some outfit out of Nar that stiffed us.”

“Well, none of the survivors we’ve found seem to be ill so you must have done something right.”

“We haven’t found that many,” Polla shot back.

They’d had barely any time.

Around them, the sounds of the jungle at night seemed almost normal, as if they hadn't left the blasted plain of destruction. As if the war had never come to this place.

You’re welcome, Malak’s voice said in her mind. I just convinced two zakkeg and a nexu they'd find better hunting elsewhere.

A useful skill. Revan felt her lips curl up. What else can you do?

Apparently, not talk you out of this folly—

No. She felt her smile grow. But he was still providing assistance—

Xxx

The Fragment twitched on the ground, limbs beating staccato into the mud, encased in the bonds of conduit electricity.

“Hell!” Now Polla Organa looked panicked. She had the hydro chamber out, and was awkwardly expanding the frame around the charge zone while their target twitched with enough voltage running through her system to take down a gundark.

“Be careful,” Revan warned her, keeping her saber levelled in case the woman defied odds and stood.

The Fragment's heartbeat was impossibly regular. Revan felt a grim satisfaction, laced with an emotion she did not want to identify as envy.

“Don’t move!” Revan added. “I have to turn off the electro–net before you activate the carbonite ray—”

The ground shook again.

Impossibly, the Fragment’s eyes had opened and it looked like she was trying to speak. Her nose was bleeding.

And then the sky began to burn.

Xxx

“We have to be fast.”

“Why?” The smuggler merely had to obey. Too much information would only cause her to panic.
“At most we’ll have perhaps three minutes from the time you shoot her until the carbonite resin must activate.”

“Or she’ll die?” Polla’s eyes narrowed.

“Possibly.” It was possible. Remotely.

“Look, I know there’s a lot you’re not telling me, but promise me this: I’m going to make it through, right? Me and Seiran?” Suddenly, Polla Organa sounded a great deal younger than she was. “I’d like you to make it too, you crazy schutta, but you’ve got that look in your eye—”

“I have designed the trap to give you, above all of us, the best chance of survival.”

As long as Polla avoided the electro–net and the plasma mine, or was not killed (perhaps accidentally) by the Fragment, that was true.

“Comforting,” Polla muttered.

“Ideally, all three of us will live long and—”

“Happy lives?” The smuggler snorted. “Think she’ll be happy as a wall sculpture?”

Perhaps she’ll dream of the world we make. Revan felt her lips smile. “It’s better than the alternative.”

Xxx


She shot me. Polla Organa shot me—

The Deralian’s eyes had been green. Dyed, probably—they had to have been dyed. Her hair had been brown and loose, flopping over her face, but the features beneath were like a punch in the gut—like a mirror slipping into place.

Like a bolt to the chest, Red?

I’m dying.

Low chuckle. Incongruous. No. Frankly, I expected her to stab you in the back—

“Revan? Why the frack is the sky on fire?”

“They’re firing on her fleet! Get the frame laid out and this electro–net off—”

My fleet—

Her body jerked and burned. Then suddenly that stopped. Every nerve in her body seemed to relax at once. The absence of pain made Revan suddenly aware of how bad the pain had been.

The world dimmed and expanded as the shrill voices of her enemies were replaced by cold whispers.

Revan left her body behind. She was a ship in space. She was one of infinite. No pain. Only power—
One beam of light skipped out from her bay and then the Kathhound’s side caught fire—

Oddly beautiful, an assault of one ship by the Awakened Fleet.

Singly out from the other Mandalorian ones with surgical precision, the Kathhound’s shields flared and flickered, already failing—

A warning. Neural interface degrading. Initializing temporary repair

The Aleema appeared suddenly, slicing between the two ships, sending the Kath spinning like a child’s top off course, and her own view of the battle—it—

It exploded, in a hail of fire against the black.

Blinding pain lanced through Revan’s head and her vision splintered, transferring to another ship’s eyes. The Awakened ship burned, and the Aleema’s cannon spat fire as the other ships under Aemelie’s command assembled themselves in a low wedge against the Sleepers—

The world jerked back to the clearing—to her body—along with a brutal convulsion that left her whimpering. Revan spat out a mouthful of blood. Her awareness of the ships overhead dimmed back to sparks—merely faint screams—barely noticeable over the torment of her own flesh.

“What’s wrong with her? Did we do that?”

“I—I’m not sure. Get the frame realigned. I told you the planet might react.”

“Planet? Look at that firefight! Ships are coming in, too. Are those fighters the Mandalorians?”

“No. You have to hurry. It’s the Sleepers.”

“But she commands them! You said that! Why would the Butcher fire on her own fleet?”

Butcher? Who’s the Butcher?

In this case, you, Red.

Malak, I’m—

You’re not dying. It isn’t this easy.

“The Sleepers are not her fleet. She is theirs.”

“Fracking carbonite ray’s jammed! Why’s her nose bleeding like that? I shot her in the chest!”

“Perhaps she hit her head in the fall. Focus, Polla. Now. The carbonite ray—”

Get up, Red. Now, before they do encase you in carbonite.

Carbonite—?

But then the world dimmed, replaced by something older. And colder.

Target: transport land cruiser. Coordinates 23193 s, 30233 e. Visual display of occupants: 3 Human males}
An image snapped into focus. The Mandalorian carrier had an open top. Carth and Dustil and Mekel were clearly visible. Mekel had taken off his helm. All of them looking up at the ship that Revan now possessed, flying low overhead—

Its shadow crossed over them, cutting through the clouds of the morning sky—

XXX

“Good morning, beautiful.” Soft brown eyes looking down at her. His chin was paler than the rest of him, and her hand reached up and ran a line along his smooth jaw.


“Canderous lent me his sonic razor.” She could see those creases in her husband’s cheeks again—the not-quite-dimples when he smiled. “Gotta leave for the sweep, now.”

“I should go with you.” She didn’t trust Carth’s kid. Not really. Not even with Carth and Mekel to keep him in check.

“We went over this yesterday. You’re needed here.”

“To stand around looking like I’m the savior of Kaas?” She snorted. “I did that yesterday.” The first survivors Carth and his son had brought back had been a trio of frightened Twi’leks. Former slaves. They’d knelt… until Revan yelled at them to get back up again.

“Canderous says the generator keeps kicking out too.” Her husband kissed her on the mouth, then the forehead, and then stood up. “You’re better than a portable ignitor to get it up and running again.”

“Right. I’m a giant Force battery.” Revan sat up, levitating her robes to her hand. “And a Mandalorian figurehead. Great.”

“I’ll be back in time for dinner,” he promised. “Hopefully with more survivors.”

Revan tried to tell herself it was for the best. She didn’t want to arouse his suspicions. And if they ran into Dar—

I don’t want to arouse her suspicions either. I need to catch her unawares to kill her. But Dustil is more than capable of protecting his father—

XXX

But he’s not. How can Dustil protect any of them from death when it comes from the sky?

Stop!

{{Threat by Suggestion realized. Re-initialize self, Starfire unit. y/n? Neural nanocysts at 56%}}

“Yes.” Threat realized. Revan got it. A coil of pure hate unfolded in her gut, but her mental voice echoed, sounding desperate as a child’s even in her own mind. “Please! Don’t hurt them!”

{{Initialization complete. Secondary target commencing}}

Revan opened her eyes to see from the perspective of another ship in the sky, swooping low past the clearing where she lay. She felt a surge of exhilaration as a line of orange fire jetted out from its
belly. The ground below burst into flame.

*That’s the camp. The mines I set. They’re targeting the camp!*

*“Stop it! I said stop!”*

*[[Nanocyst repair to Unit complete. Reinitializing. Rise, Starfire Unit—]]*

Another sharp pain in her head made everything blur.

*[[Threat by Example Complete: Full retreat commencing—]]*

Abruptly, the world snapped back into focus. The world had weight again, her consciousness a body. Breath heaved in and out of her lungs. Revan sat up, half sprawled in some kind of inflatable nest. Her eyes focused on a carbonite gun flashing to nearly full charge and she spun to the side before its ray landed, twisting the weapon out of Polla Organa's grip, and slamming the nest she’d been lying on into the nearest tree.

*Hydo-net. Carbonite ray, a part of her brain supplied. Used to incapacitate.*

They’re not trying to kill you—

Polla Organa’s face was pale under her spacer’s tan. The Deralian’s eyes should have been brown but they were an obviously fake green instead. Again, Revan had that sickening sense of dislocation: like the features in the mirror she still expected to see were suddenly breathed to life: her own face, her real mouth twisting into an expression of sheer horror—

*“Frack!” Polla Organa cried—and dodged away, running off into the underbrush.*

Scrambling to her feet caused a ripping pain in Revan's chest where the Deralian had shot her. The shock of agony left her staring stupidly at the place where the smuggler had vanished.

*She shot me. She actually shot me.* Cold anger at that, but not directed to the poor null. The woman was clearly a pawn.

Revan’s head turned to face the true enemy standing in a slight incline above her with a lit blade. Why Dar hadn’t taken the opportunity to attack when Revan was disoriented was odd, but ultimately irrelevant. The woman had to die.

*“The camp,” Revan muttered. Or tried to. The words came out garbled, in a language she wasn’t sure really existed. Her own whimper sounded like it belonged to a different person, and then Revan was already leaving agony behind, rolling across the earth to where Polla Organa had been standing a moment ago—atop a live plasma mine—*

(The slight tremor of its presence obvious to anyone with the Force)

—and then, Revan ripped the mine from the ground with invisible fingers, hurtling it into the hand that hadn’t called her lightsaber. Her blade re–ignited and her left hand closed hard on the device, fumbling for the timer.

*Throw it. Throw it at Dar before she has a chance to react—she tried to kill you. Is Polla clear?*

The air was thick and choking with smoke. The jungle seemed to be at least partially on fire. And her enemy was—
Facing her, with a lit saber, wearing the absurd Sith armor Revan had mocked the moment she'd seen it: shoulders too wide and spiked, engraved metal plates enveloping the woman’s torso. It was the kind of armor that shimmered with the sign of a decent energy shield—

*Energy shield is something you should have brought to this fight, Red, instead of spending fifteen minutes fiddling with bits of string to make a charm.*

*Shut up, Malak. The delay increased my advantage.*

*Obviously, that worked out well.*

She could do without snark from a Force ghost—especially when something was wrong with her arm. Revan kept trying to lift her saber higher than her waist, but her right arm felt half-numb, her fingers clumsy and nearly unresponsive.

*Shot me Polla shot me why would she—*

The blast of targeted Force hit her saber’s hilt—as if Dar was trying to fuse the crystal—and Revan deflected the weak effort easily.

Her lips were salty. Her nose was bleeding again.

“You’ve learned something since our last meeting.” Dar still sounded like she was at a diplomat’s table with Malachi D’Reev, instead of trying to kill Revan, the woman with a hundred times her strength. “Congratulations.”

“I learned a great deal.” Polla seemed to have fled. “Call off your attack ships, Dar’Revan. Now.”

*Polla. Polla shot me. Where is she?* Revan stretched out her senses. Somewhere, behind them was a spark—

*“My attack ships?”* Since they’d seen each other last, Dar had lost her hair. What remained was a red fuzz, shaped to her skull. She looked like a wraith, body turned to sinew and bone, sharp angles of her cheeks hollowed. Lines of what looked like fading corruption were clearly visible, silvered tracks on her skin. “Would that they were mine, but the Sleepers are yours.”

“But you—you did this somehow. You set them off. And what did you do to Polla? Compulsion? Or just tell her more of your fracking lies?”

“I told her the truth.” A slight smile tugged at Dar’s mouth. “Most of it.”

Revan was suddenly aware that the bombing had stopped.

“Most of it? Not all of the truth, though.” A third voice drawled, and then a laser site tracked down over Dar’s face, painting her face in red light. “You didn’t tell me those fracking ships would start bombing the planet again!”

“I warned you there might be planetary disturbance if we didn't get her in stasis quickly. The jungle’s on fire, Polla. I'm not sure a tree is the safest refuge. Wood burns.”

Dar didn't blink but she had to know what the laser sight meant. Sniper rifle. And from the cross-shaped beam, one of the Aratech disruptors. Hard to deflect, it would fire in a spray that would be hard to dodge—

*Where?* Revan tried to calculate the angle back without turning, but the manufacturers had thought
of that too, and a dozen red lights blinded her when she glanced sideways. A tree, Dar had said. Above… somewhere above, she thought, but how—

“You didn’t tell me that was a live plasma mine either!” Polla's voice came from behind them and Revan turned more—

Only to find a second laser site flashing through the smoke in her own eyes.

Polla had lines drawn on them both.

*Well, she can only shoot one of us at a time.*

Revan turned back to the more immediate threat, her mind running through the possibilities of how to disarm Polla Organa. Send a wave of Force crashing back, flattening the trees—

Before the smuggler could fire?

*I might kill her.*

She was suddenly aware of the Deralian's heartbeat, jagged and wild, her fear a miasma in the Force. With that as a guide it would be possible to pinpoint her location.

Dar sighed. Across the clearing, her expression was somehow still serene. “Of course I used a real plasma mine, Polla. She'd sense a fake.”

Revan edged sideways slowly, pivoting on her feet until both the tree she thought Polla was hiding in and Dar Revan were in view.

*Take down the tree. Duck. Let her kill Dar—*

Her hand holding the mine twitched, as the Force gathered in her limbs, infusing every muscle with near–limitless power—

The tree rustled. “You said you had a way of making it seem real, asshole! With the Force!” The Deralian’s voice was hauntingly familiar. Revan had known the woman would be here—a part of her had known the moment she sensed the second presence in the clearing, but it was still—

*She knew,* the cold voice in her head whispered. *She knew exactly the effect seeing Polla Organa would have on you.*

“*Without* the Force, I never would have been able to disarm the mine before you stepped away.” Dar sounded surprisingly serene speaking to her disobedient minion. “It is motion activated.”

“She lies,” Revan chimed in. “She just tried to kill you, Polla. Did Seiran tell you she threw me off a ship? She lied to me, too. Pretended to be my friend, too. Trust me, she's not.” Her saber arm was numb. Before she lunged at Dar, she would have to switch hands, fight with her left—

“We were never *friends,* Fragment. What I did was underestimate your stubborn idiocy,” Dar muttered. “Obstinate folly is a trait you both share.”

“You said there might be ‘some geological and atmospheric disturbance,’ Bossypants!” Polla’s imitation of Dar’s crisp tones was a little uncanny. “Not… not more planet–bombing!”

“We should have been faster. I wanted to use tranks, but we had such limited stores and it would take so much to drug her—*”
“Saving the tranks to kill more enemies, Dar?” Revan snapped, turning back to face her real threat head–on.

“I was saving them to help the injured. There are dozens back at our camp.” How could Dar stand there, crouched like a feral animal with her saber out; armored like the ghost of fracking Ajunta Pal—and sound so… reasonable?

The fingers holding Revan's own lightsaber were numb. The pain from her chest radiated out. She didn't think she could raise the lightsaber above her head.

*But I can't show a weakness.*

*Oh, she knows your weakness, Red. That's why she told Polla to shoot you precisely there. If it came to this, you'd be more evenly matched*—

*Shut up, Malak. I need to switch hands.* Revan shifted to the balls of her feet, slowly bringing her hands closer together. The one holding the plasma explosive let it drop, trusting the Force to hold it for an instant—

*Don't! When you picked the mine up it trigg*—

Xxx

*Star Scoutmaster Mackree put the three circular plate–looking metal objects on the table in front of the group of thirteen–year–olds.*

*“Who can tell me what a plasma mine does?”*  

*Sera Organa raised her hand, but Mackree called on Polla who was busy carving her new name, “Seriina Desiderata,” into the fibroboard surface of her desk.*

*“Polla Organa?” The scoutmaster asked. “Go ahead.”*  

*“I think it sprays fire.” She had to get the heart right, in the embellishment above the urux in Seriina. Her laser pencil sputtered. “Oh, hells!”*  

*“Ionized gas has a bit more of a blast radius than ‘fire.’” He held up his hands, indicating quote marks and everyone laughed. “How large a blast radius?”*  

*“Depends on the mine.” Mines were dead boring. And seriously, when was she ever going to need to know this stuff?*  

Xxx

*If that fighter was going to shoot we'd be dead already.* The thought was giving Carth cold comfort.

They’d reached the ruins of Kaas City. The site of a blasted hellscape was painfully familiar. Like Telos all over again. There was nothing in the rubble that Carth could connect to the busy metropolis that had once stood. Coordinates indicated they should be near the metropolis’s center—but the only sign of the once–busy International District was a charred sign in Aurebesh advertising Tanaabian cuisine, propped against a stone staircase that spiraled up to nowhere.

The automated fighter from the Sleeper ships above their heads was small and triangular—like a miniaturized version of the Sleepers in orbit. The ground had shook a few times before it showed
up, and flashes of light pointed to some kind of firefight up in high atmosphere—but most of whatever had happened was hidden by the clouds over their heads.

Now, the fighter skimmed low over their transport. Almost… hovering. Like it was spying on them.

Or setting us up. But why would it take so long? There was nothing Carth could do, except hope his son wasn't kidding when he’d said he had this under control. Carth could only keep steering their own transport toward the larger clumps of rubble ahead of them, toward the place where Dustil swore he’d sensed a cluster of survivors the day before.

The fighter’s guns hung beneath the belly, half-retracted. Maybe that was reassuring. Carth glanced down at his comm–link, but the signal pulsed an intermittent red. They were still flying blind—the Sleeper's Emp–clusters had knocked out every frequency, coating their transceivers with unintelligible static. When they’d left camp this morning, Leskal and Tanash had managed to rig a range of about fifty meters on the field transmitter. That meant for now, the camp—and Revan—were out of reach.

“What the hell is that ship doing?” Carth tried to make the question casual so as not to scare the kids.

Men, he reminded himself. Nothing of what Dustil and Mekel had been through had happened to kids. Maybe not for a long time.

“Could be it's checking us out, sir.” Mekel elbowed Dustil, who waved him off, staring distractedly at the ruins of Kaas City with a distracted frown on his face.

Carth wished Jin would stop calling him 'sir.’ The ki—man’s subservient tone didn't go with that smirk on his face. “Too close,” he muttered, even as the ship dipped closer—now only about ten meters above their heads.

“I could bring it down,” Dustil offered, almost absent–mindedly. He raised a hand and lightning crackled along his fist.

“No!” Carth exclaimed—and the same time Mekel cursed out some gutter epithet.

“I've got this,” his son said, ignoring them both. A spray of yellow fire whipped from his fingers and lashed against the craft.

“Are you fracking insane?” Mekel hissed.

The engines revved and the fighter dipped even lower, now close enough for Carth to see the battle scores on its sides, the flat transparisteel of its empty cockpit. It hovered directly in front of their larger, unarmed transport. Lights across its hull flashed at them ominously.

“I said, get out of here!” Dustil snapped. Lightning crackled from his hands again, and the ship's trajectory jerked as if it had been pushed.

Abruptly, the ship's nose tilted up and it shot out of view, heading back toward space so fast it cut through the bilious clouds, leaving a line in its wake.

“Guess you scared it, Telos,” Mekel snickered, recovering while Carth was still catching his breath.

“Sure it was me? Maybe it just saw your face,” his son shot back.
“Oh, yeah? Well… maybe it just saw your choobs.”

“Oh, yeah? Sure it wasn’t my dick?”

“Yeah, because that strikes terror in the hearts of every fracking machine from here to Corulag—”

“Hey! Don’t make my ears bleed!” Carth attempted a smile to show he was joking. When Dustil had been a kid if he’d talked to his friends like this (in front of his parents), Carth would have told Morgana to ground him. If any soldier under Carth's command had pulled a risky stunt like attacking a hostile unprovoked and breaking command, Carth would have matched their ass to count martial.

But now, his son was a man. A man who could shoot lightning meters in the air. A man who stared down death and told it to go away.

A man that death obeyed. At least for now.

Carth glanced back up at the empty sky. Maybe it was just scouting us. Revan said she could… see through them. Maybe it was her? Still took him a few minutes to get his pulse back down to normal, a few more times of checking his comm–link to see if it had started working again. (It had not.)

They'd honed in on this direction the day before and found a few half-dead survivors. Dustil had claimed there were more nearby so they’d come back today with a larger transport.

“Are we close, son?” Carth asked, interrupting Mekel’s latest dirty joke.

“Yeah.” His son broke off in mid–insult, having (thankfully) switched to Ancient Sith for the rest of his obscenities, a language Carth could at least politely pretend not to understand, although thanks to Tenebrae and his crash course in Sith culture, he’d got most of it. “We’re close. And something’s up with Revan, I think. There's a pack of survivors this way. Underground, maybe?” He waved at a patch of rubble, tilting his head. “I think… one could be Ban.”

“And your girlfriend?” Mekel broke in.


“Something happened to Revan?” Carth was glad about the survivors, but… he'd had his doubts about leaving her, dammit.

Dustil shrugged. “Relax. She's alive, Dad. Something just startled her. The Force… it kind of quakes when she yells.” He rolled his eyes. “Probably saw a nexu or something.”

“But my cousin’s okay?” Mekel added.

Dustil rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mekk. Cousin Revan's fine. It she wasn’t, she’d still be yelling about it.”

“And the ship?” Carth hoped they’d really find Yuthura Ban. Polla and Seiran would have been with her—maybe. And Zaalbar. Too much to hope that finding all their friends would be this easy, but he wasn't gonna give up.

“Mission? You mean Mission, sir?”

“Don’t call me ‘sir,’ Mekel. No. I mean the ship that was just scouting—”
"Malak! My love!" The brunette abruptly detached herself from Yuthura Ban and began running toward their ship. "I sensed your darkness approaching."

"Lady Mydia." Carth had already pulled their caravan to a stop, and Dustil slid off the open seat easily and ran to her. He was staring at her abdomen—something Carth found himself doing as well. It was mostly concealed by a set of Sith armor that looked too big for her frame. "I see you survived.”

She folded her arms, the beginning of a pout tugging at her mouth. "No thanks to you.” A pause. "No thanks to you, my lord. Did Lord Revan find you?”

"Yeah, a while ago—"

"It's only been two days." Mydia raised an eyebrow.

"Hi," Mekel stepped between them extending his hand. "I’m Mekel Jin."

"You bring me another null slave?” Mydia sighed exaggeratedly and her chestpiece heaved. "Lord Malak, I was so hoping you’d found my brother. What am I going to do with another null slave? I still have that first one—”

“I’m not a fracking slave—”

"He's mine, Mydia.” Dustil folded his arms. “My null slave. Congratulations on our… uh… on your…."

"Child,” she beamed at him. “You heard the news? From Revan?”

"Saw part of a vid—”

Their excited chatter dimmed to background noise as Carth approached Yuthura Ban. The Twi'lek lifted her head wearily and smiled at him. “Carth Onasi.” A brow ridge lifted. “I am not sure 'Admiral' is still necessary or desired, given the circumstances.”

"Just Carth is fine. It's good to see you alive, Lady Ban.” Carth tried to sound reassuring and not shocked by her appearance. Sores stippled her formerly creamy complexion, darkening her lilac skin like bruises. Radiation sickness, his mind whispered. She needs a medix. And soon.

"Just Yuthura will suffice.” Her lips were pale when she smiled. “All our masks have been discarded, now.”

"Yeah.” Carth took in the ruins of the city again. “Guess this is a win for the good guys.”

The words had come out harder than he meant them to, but Yuthura seemed to understand. Her smile crinkled the corners of her eyes, her expression softening. “I take it from your arrival on a Mandalorian troop carrier that you’ve found our allies? And your wife?”

“Yes, we—” he broke off. “It’s a long story. Maybe I can fill you in on the ride back to our camp.”

“I would like that. And to speak with Mekel Jin! I had not expected to see him—” a coughing fit overtook the Jedi, and Carth moved to her side, before she raised a hand to stop him. “There are
many worse off than I am in the catacombs below. Revan and Polla promised to send aid after they found the Mandalorian encampment, but we have some injured who cannot wait.”

_Revan and Polla?_ He knew who she had to mean—Mission had told them the original Revan had woken from her coma—but Yuthura’s casual use of their names together gave Carth an uneasy feeling in his gut. _The original Revan took Polla Organa to our camp? Why? How did they know where to find us? And what will my wife do when they meet?_

“Guess you… maybe you saw our ships landing, huh?” He tried to make it a joke. “Guess, uh… Polla and Revan just went to get help from us?”

“Yes,” the Twi’lek said. “And we sensed Dustil’s presence in the Force. And Revan’s, of course. I hoped you would be with them, too.” She frowned. “I hope Tenebrae has not taken our little rebellion out on you—”

“I got the flu.” He felt hollow. “No more Sith possession.”

“Oh!” She blinked. “That’s wonderful news!”

“Right,” Carth glanced at his son again, now scowling with his arms folded like he was putting on the Darth Malak show for Mydia Blais. Next to him, Jin looked like he really was auditioning for the Sith congeniality award; arms officiously locked behind his back, smiling at the Blais girl like they were old pals; and shuffling his feet so his boots scuffed the blasted ground. As Carth watched, Dustil said something and Jin glanced up at him sharply, that easy grin fading. Mydia began to laugh, and after a pause, Mekel did too. Carth’s son’s expression echoed the others a heartbeat later, but one of his hands had dropped to his belt and his saber in a way that made Carth’s hackles rise.

_It’s fine, _he reminded himself. _This is gonna be awkward for them. But they’re all adults. They’ll figure it out—_

Yuthura’s head tilted, as she followed his gaze. “They are still allied,” she noted. “Your son and Mekel Jin. Even without their link through the Force.”

_Allied?_ Even now, the Twi’lek still thought in Korriban terms—alliances instead of friendships. Carth felt sorry for her. “Closer than that. Dustil thought Mekel was dead. Their Force bond broke—and he thought Mekel had died. We all did.”

“To release Malak’s ghost, Master Kavar made a pact with Oerin Lin,” Yuthura’s spotted hand pushed her lekku from her shoulder as if the weight of it pained her. She looked so unsteady on her feet that Carth moved in to help, offering her his arm. She took it gratefully. “Vrook and I attempted to intervene, but we were too late to stop Oerin. Mekel was stripped of the Force. I knew that Dustil would feel the bond break, of course, but I didn’t realize—”

“Wait, you knew Mekel was alive? You were there?” There were more pressing things to worry about, but Carth eyed her suspiciously. “You could have said something!”

“Dustil was quite adamant he did not want to discuss the bond the few times I approached him.” Yuthura coughed, a rattling sound deep in her chest. “He gave me the impression that Mekel had died later—perhaps on Katarr—and that somehow, he had sensed his passing.”

“On Katarr—” Carth shook his head. “No. But… Vrook died there. A lot of Jedi died there, I heard.” He tried to keep his voice friendly. “Not you, huh?”

“I sensed a… disturbance in the Force when the Jedi on Katarr passed. And I came here,” she said
slowly, looking up at him. Her eyes were a few shades darker than her skin—the color of twilight. “I came here to help your son. And to liberate this world. You remember.”

Yeah, well. It would have helped Dustil, knowing Mekel was alive. “Mission said you organized the uprising,” Carth muttered, instead of telling her more about what he thought about her help. “You and Polla and Zaalbar. And… Revan.” It felt strange saying her name and meaning someone else. As strange as it had when he’d met the real Polla.

“We did.” Yuthura’s mouth twisted. “With any luck, there were riots on all the Sith worlds.”

“Maybe. They were all bombed.” He gestured at the wreckage around them, too aware of the bitter taste in the air. Their meters said the short-term rads were gone, but the air stank like ashes and death. “Our widebeam cut out, but we got that much. The ships that bombed Kaas got Zist and Thule too. And Onderon. Hoth. Nar Shaddaa.”

Her eyes widened. “How—? At the same time?”

“We don’t know. Long story.” Around them, wounded sents were straggling out of a hole in the ground, carried on stretchers, or supported by others. Carth saw Seiran go by on a stretcher. There was no sign of Zaalbar. He asked and Yuthura shook her head. Carth quickly changed the subject. “Guess we… we made kind of an entrance, huh? So, Polla and Revan… they went to get help from us, huh? When did they leave again?”

“Two days ago.” Yuthura filled him in. She said that they’d taken two of Polla’s Exchange friends with them, that they’d gone on foot.

Not exactly comforting, considering the conversations Carth had had with his wife about the woman who had tried to kill her on Deralia. The same woman who had fought two terentateks to try and keep them all alive for no practical reason he could see. He tried to reconcile the two versions of the original Revan and failed. Hard enough to know what his own wife was thinking. The Revan who had started the Mandalorian Wars? Married that bastard, Malak? She might be coming to get help. She might be coming to finish off his wife—just like her mentor, Vima Sunrider had tried to do before.

Nothing to do right now except get back to camp, fast as possible.

“You can fill me in on what the hell happened here as we go,” Carth told Yuthura. “We’ve got a medix and crates of anti-rads. Enough for everyone.” He had a bad feeling. He glanced behind them only to see the domed bed of the transport was still only half-full, the line of wounded snaking out the back as each had to be triaged and strapped in. Dustil and Mekel were helping, he noted, taking orders from a short figure in beskar who seemed to have taken charge. A Sullustan, Carth thought, from the proportions of her armor. “Stay here,” he directed Yuthura. “We need to load this transport fast to get back before dark. I’m gonna help.”

Xxx

It all happened so fast that the first thing Polla remembered after wasn’t pain, or her face-plant into jungle mud. Hard for Polla to see anything through the smoke, especially when the tree branch she was on broke, sending her hurtling to the ground like a failed rocket.

The first thing she remembered was looking up to see the impossible.

Two figures, suspended and floating in air, surrounded by a frozen ring of molten fire. They had been caught mid-leap—both twisting in a way that left the one with the top-knot suspended
practically upside–down—with the other bearing down from above like an angel out of a Grass Priest–driven nightmare.

The one with the top–knot had dropped her saber. Blade had winked out and the hilt was just floating there. Took another second for Polla to realize the one in armor still had hers—and that the red line running between them was a bar of deadly particle–blade—

Everything—the women, the plasma explosion, the sabers—was covered in a flickering blue light. They looked like they'd been encased in ice.

*Jedi.* She blinked. Sure, at this point Polla had seen a hell of a lot of things done with the Force, but this was—

*Jedi,* Polla thought again. She'd never been one for religion, but they looked so otherworldly that in that instant she almost believed—and that was when her mind began making enough sense of things to notice that Revan had really stabbed the Hero–Butcher in the guts. That the red line between them was her saber. Slashing in a sideways sweep right into Hero–Butcher’s side.

“Shit,” Polla mumbled.

XXX

“She cannot die,” Revan had said, (for the fifth time), looking up from her work digging the trench for the electro–net. Her hands were black with dirt and she wiped her forehead leaving a streak there too. Woman was usually so fastidious it almost made Polla laugh.

Then again, that morning, practically anything was making Polla laugh. Who knew if she’d have the chance again? “Yeah, non–lethal, avoid headshots… we’ve been over this before, Jedi.”

“You don’t understand….” Revan’s voice trailed off. “If I die, Polla, you still must find a way to finish this.” She sighed. “She cannot die. You must freeze her in carbonite. Take her unaware—”

“Make her a wall sculpture without you?” Polla scoffed. “Where’s the fun in that?”

XXX

Now, it looked like in the heat of the moment, Revan had forgotten her own advice because the red saber that was hers jutted into the other one. Sents stabbed with lightsabers generally *did* die. Polla had looked that up on the nets back on the way to Kaas, and heard Mission Vao recite the gory details from the T3 chassis. All that supercharged ion stuff. It was hot. Blood would literally boil around the point of contact. Flesh would burn—

Polla propped herself up on her arms, trying to sit up. Automatic. Nothing smart in her brain had kicked in, like the voice that should have been telling her to get the hell out of the way before that red fire exploded. Time couldn't stay frozen forever. She knew that, but for some reason she couldn’t move.

*Carbonite. If her blood’s boiling, I have to freeze it.* She looked around for the gun, to seal up Top–Knot. Freeze the Hero–Butcher. She was supposed to do that.

XXX

“So that’s your plan?” Polla had scoffed, the first time Revan laid it all out. Back when they’d been sitting safe underground, watching Seiran breathe in his sleep. “Freeze her in carbonite? Shouldn’t we just kill her?”
“Do you want to kill her?” Revan raised her right eyebrow.

Xxx

“Ow,” Polla whispered. The word seemed to echo in the clearing. Somewhere far away she heard shouts coming from the Mandie camp. Polla looked up. The ships were gone, all she saw overhead was a familiar Kaas bank of clouds. Gray, occasionally sparked with lightning.

“Ow,” she said again. Her stomach hurt just looking at the way that saber sliced into the woman with her memories. Polla’s hand went to her waist, fumbling to find her holster—but she’d dropped the rifle. What if they were frozen like this forever?

Strangely beautiful, the two Revans. One almost upside down. Upside down’s hair had a few centis of red at the roots. Exact same shade as the other. And all that frozen fire around them. It almost looked like a flower.


About a meter of tree–branch stuck through her guts. Like she’d landed on it, or the blast had blown it there.

*Doesn’t even hur—*

The mud was stained red when it rose up to greet her.

XXX

“Okay, Polla. Since you seem to be so interested in this material—” Scoutmaster was rolling his eyes. Half the kids giggled thinking they had one up on him, but Polla wasn’t interested at all. “How do you disarm a plasma mine?”

“With a remote. From far away.” That got her a few laughs, mostly from that shaggy–haired kid named Something Wen who didn’t look he’d gone through puberty yet.

“If you find one? Just lying around?” There was a field off the Derra City Road that some crazy guy had mined because he thought the Corellian Tax Guys were invading... so it wasn’t a totally useless question.

“I’d sell it?” She winked at the shaggy–haired kid.

He blushed.

“Hopeless,” the Scoutmaster muttered. “Sera Organa, same question—”

Xxx

*Don’t! When you picked up the mine it trigg—*

This—this feeling. Like the world had frozen. Revan had felt it before. Pinned between choices on the *Leviathan*. On Manaan. On Korriban. In dreams.

Like the world had stopped and there she was, merely floating in between.

{{Preserve your shell!}} the ancient voice rang its commands in her head. {{You will need it to enter my tomb.}}}
Not like this, Red, another voice whispered. Malak's voice was almost amused. You know it will not end like this—

Xxx

The plasma mine reactivated. She’d been a fool not to notice immediately, but Revan’s attention had been focused on the Fragment in front of her, wounded but still dangerous, and upon winning Polla Organa back to her side. She had to keep Polla Organa on her side. If Revan failed, the Deralian was the only one who could contain the Fragment—with sentiment if nothing else.

The plasma mine had reactivated. Years since Revan had been groundside, but still, she had learned how delicate the triggering mechanisms could be. She had been a fool not to notice when it was still blinking in her nemesis’s hand. Jiya Sand had taught them so many ways besides the Force to maim, to kill, to destroy, to win—

I knew the mine was active again. Sheris’s voice in her mind was almost smug. When Revan pulled it from the ground, she unbalanced the sensors. Kuati Labs made them like that on purpose—

Little fool! Why didn’t you tell me?

Laughter rattled her— their— mind. Oh, ho. Something the great Revan Starfire missed?

Everything was suspended. Time stretched into the infinite, like a hyperspace soil through the black—

—like a red rubberkrump ball encased in ice. Revan had fallen through the ice that day, but her mother had saved her. White lab coat, and her father standing in the background. For moment, in the sun, his eyes—

I was three—maybe four—but his eyes—

Her skin felt hot and cold at once and Revan scrambled the Force—juggling it forward—

Oh, it—

The world dissolved into dots. Too bright to be stars. And pain, bright and burning—

No. Red—

No. Mal, I—I’m—

A familiar feeling, watching the world burn. Like dying. One more time—

Revan glanced down and saw that her body was encased with a blue, flickering light—

Xxx

“I want to kill that butcher for burning this fracking planet.” Polla Organa’s face on the other side of the fire was pensive, knitting with worry. She was picking at a loose fabric on her sleeve. “Seriously. If she told those ships to bomb us she needs to die, but—”

Revan considered her carefully. “You realize I told ships to bomb worlds quite like this one. Many times.”

“Maybe, but none of them were mine.” Flat gaze. Direct. It reminded her of Beya. It occurred to Revan—not for the first time—this woman would have been a formidable warrior, if she had the
As of course, the Fragment did. “And Kaas is yours, Polla?” Revan laughed politely to cut the tension.

The Deralian snorted. “No, I meant… I care. Slavery is fracking awful. These people deserve to be just as free as we are back home, and if she hurt them—”

“No! I–I don’t know. You know, Seiran hates you. He likes her.”

The smuggler looked genuinely conflicted. “And what if you’re wrong about her? You said before, between us she has our mind. And we’re… we’re on the side of the angels, right? What if she’s… what if she’s trying to do the right thing, too?”

“Her intentions don’t matter.” The woman wasn’t truly this simple, any more than the Fragment was. And so, Revan told her the truth—as much as she could. “She cannot die, Polla. So she must be contained. For the sake of the galaxy—”

XXX

Get up, Red.

The mine had been active. Dar'Revan had tricked her into picking up an active mine.

Revan’s side throbbed, the pain now localized somewhere in her belly below the ribs. Her lips tasted like salt, like blood. Something was smoldering, smoking, hissing nearby. Familiar.

Revan opened her eyes and saw one end of a double–bladed saber sticking out of the mud. The other was busy burning a hole into the ground, plasma blade hissing a furious red.

Someone disabled the safety. Bastila told me never to do that—said it was too dangerous—

She reached for the weapon, instinctively calling it into her hand. Her fingers felt clumsy. Her arm was numb. The pommel wasn’t familiar. The control was a manual one and it took her a moment to find it, a moment of awkwardly trying not to skewer herself and sit up, despite the throbbing agony in her aide.

Dar’s saber. That meant Revan’s own was… somewhere—somewhere else around—

I need it. I can’t let her gain an upper hand—

Sitting up caused the pain to intensify, a ripping feeling inside.

She got you deep, Red. Don’t make any sudden movements.

She—

Her hand went to her side. Smelled the acrid stench of the burn. No pain. Not there, but farther inside—her guts ached with a wrongness that was difficult to describe.

But familiar.
Yes. You've been stabbed in the guts before. Ghostly amusement from Malak's shade.

Revan looked up. The hulk of the *Aleema* banked against the clouds, surrounded by what looked like the other manned ships. Its hull flickered orange in places as if it had taken damage, but even as she watched it drifted past them, continuing on its orbit around the planet.

And all of the Sleepers were gone.

*Did I sent them away? Or did she—*

“*You're hurt.*”

Although she could see the ships in the sky perfectly, something was wrong with Revan's near vision. The figure in front of her blurred. Shape of pointed spikes on the shoulders, backlit by the rising sun that seemed too bright.

*My saber!* She had Revan's in her right hand, called her own to her left out of the muck, but that was the side where Dar's hit had connected, and she whimpered again with the raw knot of pain that came when she tried to lift her arm.

“Don't move. You'll make it worse.” The woman paused, and it took Revan's voice another moment to connect the voice with the evil bitch who'd just tried to kill her. How did her voice sound so kind, now?

“I can kill you from here.” Revan summoned the Force, feeling it lash out like a light–whip from her hand, the power in it reaching seeking, *draining*—

*No.*

And meeting a perfect wall. When her Force–summoned miasma hit the other woman it seemed to splash around her, eddying, like water around stone.

“How are you doing that?” Lightning had the same effect, although it also caused her own vision to splinter, her pulse to feel like it was pounding.

“I'm not.” Her duplicate moved closer. “I think it's Malak.”

*You can't hurt her, Red.* His voice, like an echo in her skull.

*She tried to kill me and you're taking her side?*

*There's only one side.*

“I killed Malak,” she muttered at Dar. As the woman drew closer her features resolved. Familiar ones. But her face was harder, now. Etched with lines it hadn't had before. Her hair was shaved down, almost to the scalp. The woman had looked younger than Revan before. She didn't now.

“Oh, I'm aware.” A red eyebrow arched. “You've mentioned it several times.” The woman folded her arms. “And Malak told me, himself, of course. The parts he remembers.”

“I don't understand his game.” *Or yours.* Her guts throbbed, the pain spiking when she shifted on her feet. Salt stung her lips again and Revan knew her nose was bleeding.

XXX

The Fragment scowled back at Revan. The wound in her side looked ugly—perhaps not a mortal
injury, but anyone less than the Fragment would have been incapacitated, Revan thought. But she was still standing—albeit on wavering feet. Her face was streaked with blood that was practically fountaining from her nose.

Subarachnoid hemorrhage, Sheris’s mind supplied. Something is causing intercranial bleeds in the outer medullum—

“I don’t understand his game,” the woman muttered. Her voice was slurred, and she stumbled to her feet.

Of course not. You understand nothing. Revan wondered, with an abrupt pang of conscience, if she should have clarified more during the brief time they had been allied—during those days aboard the ship together with Seiran and the children—but she had doubted the woman’s ability to understand the stakes—and lacked the strength to overcome her, should the woman prove reticent.

And wrongly assumed the ties to Malachor would keep the Fragment on Deralia.

“Why are you here?” Revan demanded of the Fragment. “I told you not to come. I left you on Deralia with a recorded explanation—”

The Fragment made an expression Revan had never seen in the mirror: somehow managing to roll her eyes and look as if she was about to spit epithets at the same time. “Some babble about staying with Korrie. I know you lied about the Genoharadan contract. You told Korrie to lie too—”

“I told you to stay away from this place! Did you hear none of that?”

“Oh, I heard. You made up some banthashit about how you could handle Tenebrae.” The Fragment brandished her saber, then winced, as if reminded of her injuries. Revan could almost feel them—a dull ache of agony in the Force. “I only heard the recording once. Korrie burned out the chip’s battery listening to it at night to go to sleep—”

“But he doesn’t speak Rakatan!”

“He wanted to hear a familiar voice after his supposed ‘mother’ dumped him on a strange planet and his real mother almost died.” Somehow the Fragment made her scorn evident with the way she pronounced the word ‘mother.’ “You tried to kill me. I assume the lies on that recording were just your way of covering your ass. Keep me in storage on Deralia til you could get the Emperor to help you collect me—”

“No.” Revan shook her head. “I would have rather you never came—” The woman had collected Revan's saber too—the one she'd taken from that Tenebrae–possessed guard. It hung at her belt, just below the darkening cloth where its blade had bit deep in her side. I did that. It was not my intent. I could have killed her—


Can you tell me?

I don’t know. His admittance was a weakness. I can see the shape of your thoughts—the shape of hers—less clearly. You do know she wants you dead?

I gathered as much. But you can stop her from killing me?

Malak’s dry chuckle felt like a phantom embrace. So far. I will try.
“No?” The Fragment echoed her refusal. “Stop. Lying.”

Anger was futile, but Revan couldn’t help it. “You pathetic little fool. The Emperor wants you here. He needs you. Had you stayed away entirely, everything he has wrought would have fallen apart!”

“Why should I believe you?” Nothing in those green eyes except hate. She lifted her saber again, wincing. “I killed Malak and I can kill you, too.”

She had the Deralian’s obstinance. The woman's blindness. “If you won't listen to me, listen to Polla Organa. Did you notice that she wasn't trying to kill you? Neither of us were.”

“She shot me.”

“Not to kill.”

The smuggler had threatened to shoot them both. But she had not—and now it was safe for her to come out.

“Polla. Show yourself. Explain to the Fragment that we mean no lasting harm—” Revan scanned the tree cover in front of them, looking for the one that had held the Deralian.

“Polla?” the Fragment echoed, and half-turned herself. “Where did y—?” Her saber clicked off, falling through her fingers as if they no longer had the strength to hold it. She turned, abruptly, foolishly showing Revan her back—then stumbled forward, falling to the ground. “Oh, no!”

And in that instant, Revan realized what she had missed before. With all of Fragment's rage and pain bearing down on her with the gravity of a neutron star, she had missed that small, dim flicker of a spark from Polla Organa.

The still body of the Deralian smuggler lay face down in the mud like a forgotten toy, with the Fragment now kneeling beside her, frantically wiping mud from her face. “She's not breathing!”

Xxx

“Priority Alert! One Jedi—coming through!” The Republic med–droid shuffled into the transport and dumped the foil–wrapped body practically in Sheris Loran's lap.

Padawan Loran had seen enough carnage now not to recoil instantly, but inwardly she cringed, staring at the raw skin, the gouges in the woman's chest and shoulders. Her cortosis robes were practically shredded.

“Grenade wounds,” her master noted. “Or a mine. You can tell by the pattern of the burns, padawan. See? She must have been right on top of it.”

“She threw herself on top of the ordinance, according to SZ–C8,” the med–droid sounded disapproving. “Her squadron would be more easily replaced than Knight Organa, but they are unharmed.”

“You're too practical, HU–E9.” Master Imra Lu chuckled. “A Jedi's life is sacrifice. Let's make sure this woman's is not in vain—” she gestured her padawan forward. “Sheris? Take stock of her injuries and tell me which you’d address first.”

The woman had a heart–shaped face. Her hair was pulled up to the top of her head in a top–knot. Her torso was a mess of blood.
“She’s not breathing,” Sheris said. “But then how is she still alive?”

“She’s slowed her respiration as much as she can to stop the bleeding,” a male voice corrected. The Jedi knight had followed the droid in. Now, he hovered, taking up most of the space in their medix tent with his bulk.

“Knight D’Reev,” Sheris’s master murmured.

“I’m keeping her in stasis, as best I can.” There were beads of sweat in his face, and his thinning hair was slicked with grime and worse, but his gray eyes were kind and when Knight Malak D’Reev directed a smile in Sheris’s general direction her heart skipped a beat. “I’ll need the strength of you and your padawan both, Master Lu—”

Xxx

“She's not breathing. Do something!” The Fragment’s voice cracked as she frantically tried to lift the smuggler out of the muck.

“I’m keeping her in stasis—” Or Revan was trying to. The Force weaves were slippery, the woman’s pulse not nearly as steady and strong as Beya’s had been that day. “You’re wrong,” she added. “She is breathing—barely….”

Her injury is not as severe. Keep her breathing. Tell the duplicate not to drop her—

XXX

“She's not breathing. Do something!” Revan heard her own voice crack through the Force as she frantically tried to lift the smuggler out of the muck, causing the pain in her side to get worse, before she realized, the Force was a great deal more effective at lifting right now than her own arms.

“I’m keeping her in stasis,” her nemesis said. The woman was maddeningly calm. “She is breathing—barely. The burns are superficial. But we have another problem.” And then Revan saw it too: somehow while they’d been fighting, Polla Organa had managed to stab herself with a meter–long piece of tree.

“Keep her floating,” Dar ordered. “Gently. With the Force. Don't dislodge the stick in her side.”

“It's a branch. She was in the tree. She must've fallen on it.” Revan was already doing what Dar said, turning the woman suspended in air.

From the front, things looked worse.

“We need to stabilize her. Immediately.” Dar's hands were glowing. “And I need a medix. We can't remove the stick. Not without surgical supplies, kolto—”

Revan glanced down at her comm–link. They’d managed to set up a limited link in the camp itself, but the wider bands were still gone—victims of the bombing. “Help,” she tapped it anyway, unsurprised when the message pinged back to her.

“Out of this valley, up on the rise,” Dar said, eyes following the gesture, even as her hands seemed to be rearranging the stick in the middle of Polla Organa's guts. “I picked this location for a lack of signal—but you should be able to get one on the ridge.” She paused. “I was monitoring your comms this morning.”
“Didn’t you bring a speeder? More supplies—”

“We came on foot. The roads are impassable without earth-movers, and we had no working vehicles.”

“And why the frack did you bring Polla in the first place?” Revan could kill Dar later. After she had more answers.

“Just go for help, Fragment. Now.” Green eyes met her own, and Dar Revan's golden hand slipped beneath Polla's head, cradling her, while her other lifted the smuggler’s legs. “I’d go to your camp myself to get a medix transport for you both but I suspect you've mined the perimeter.”

*Of course I did. “Don't let her die,”* Revan snapped, and took a step forward.

Her knees buckled almost immediately.

“Nine hells,” Dar'Revan cursed behind her. In flawless Mandalorian.

*Of course she’d speak flawless Mandalorian.*

Of all the things she hated Dar’Revan for, fluency in Mando’ade didn’t even merit notice, but in that moment, Revan found it extremely irritating all the same.

Xxx

Canderous sighed. “Looks like we've won't have to clear more brush to get a clear horizon.” Had Revan ordered the bombardment? Without warning him? If so, they were gonna have words.

The air was still thick with smoke and bits of char. Miraculously—too precisely to be accidental—that infernal fleet had missed their own transport ships and the tents on the main plateau. But all around the Mandalorian camp the jungle burned. Revan's idea to mine the easiest approach to their position had turned the ground there into a blistering hellscape when that blasted fleet started firing on that same blasted (now literally blasted) terrain.

Canderous glanced up at the sky again. He'd been so busy trying to figure out the attack that wasn't that he hadn't had a chance to track Revan down and see if she could shed some light on this osik. Sky was clear now—the ships overhead had moved into a planetary orbit. Going by their resting speed he wouldn’t see Aemelie and the Aleema above for another ten hours or so.

There'd been some kind of spat up there, too—over in a heartbeat when his wife showed the hu'tuun abominations what a real cannon could do.

Maybe by that time she got back they’d have rigged a com-channel strong enough to pierce atmo—

“Mand'alor—” Leskal pointed to the south, where the treeline still existed and the ground rose up, culminating in a low ridge that dipped down into near-impenetrable jungle beyond. “Look!”

Canderous turned—and blinked.

Two figures on the hill, coming out of the smoke like ghosts, and a third one behind them, floating in mid-air flat on their—her—back.

His visor adjusted for distance when he squinted, sensors automatically giving him the readouts on temperature, terrain, basic vitals. There, Revan, covered in gore like a true warrior and next to
—a paler, armored copy, red hair shaved to the skull. Not armed, he noted immediately. Even as he tried to make sense of what would make Revan stand next to her hu'tuun copy and not shoot her, the woman he'd sworn vows to stumbled and the other one reached out and pulled her close, wrapping an arm around her shoulder as if holding her up.

Behind them, a third figure bobbed, floating in the air. Face obscured by a mat of dark hair. Female. Something wrong with her guts, alerts on his helm outlining her in red—

Revan had seen him too. Her arm lifted, and the effort made her sag back as that body double of hers supported her. Her readouts spiked. The figure behind them bobbed down, settling on the ground before Revan sagged back, nearly knocking the other one off her feet as she practically collapsed.


Xxx

Polla was having a dream that she'd joined the Mandalorians, except for some reason the initiation rite involved smearing herself in banthashit and cutting off her own nose. She was deep in an argument with Seiran about the fairness of that when something cold and sharp dug into her arm, shocking her so hard that her eyes opened—

—to what looked like an explosion of color above her head. Thread patterns chased every color in a planetary rainbow, overlapping and vying with each other for her eyes’ attention.

*I've died and ended up in a fracking carpet store. Died. Dyed. Hah.*

“Hi,” a voice said softly, nearly in her ear.

Polla turned her head to see the Butcher of Kaas City propped up on an elbow with an empty stim-pak in her hand. The top-knot her imposter wore really bugged her. Dyed brown, too. What the frack was the woman trying to prove?

“What the hell did you just give me?”

“They said you should wake up.” The Hero of the Star Forge nodded across a row of mostly unoccupied mats on the floor to where Revan Starfire and Sinae, the Mandalorian medix that Polla had last seen in Aemelie's hunting party on Coruscant, stood above a portable kolto tank, heads bent deep in conversation, probably about the unlucky inhabitant within. “You hit your head pretty hard coming down, apparently. Dar’s worried you're concussed.”

“The medix? Her name's Sinae.”

Mandalorians apparently treated their injured on the ground with only a few centimeters between each mat. It meant the woman that Polla had just shot was close enough that Polla could count every freckle on her face. Her torso was encased in what looked like a kolto wrap, painting the skin beneath a lurid green and blue, opaque enough that the damage was hidden. Her exposed shoulder was pale and freckled. One of her arms had a thin red scar.

Other than that, she looked a frack of a lot exactly like the other one.

*But she’s not. She thought she was me.*
“No, I mean—” the woman’s laugh was short and weirdly formal. “I mean, her. I call her Dar'Revan.”

“Why?” It seemed a safer topic than ‘Why didn't you kill me after I shot you?’ or, 'Did I stab myself in the guts with a tree or did you do it for me?'

“Because she's not—dar in Mandalorian means no longer. Formerly. She's not Revan. I am.”

“Bothan for you, then,” Polla muttered.

“Life’s a Bith,” the Butcher snapped back.

She really did look a frack of lot like the other one. They both had faint tracks on their faces, like silver. Revan had gone all black and veiny when she'd been in the coma but it had faded pretty fast after. Maybe same thing had happened to this one.

The real—Dar'Revan—took that moment to glance back at them. She nodded slightly, but didn't come closer, turning back to her patient.

“So, you two are pals now?” Polla asked. Not pissed she stabbed you? That I shot you? She tried to surreptitiously look around for one of the carbonite rays. The movement made her belly hurt.

This Revan followed her gaze. “Pals? Hardly. But Dar healed you. And Sinae's having her look at Dessa. She claims she can help her.”

“She—no. We don’t know. Her baby's in distress. They may have to induce her. She… she was attacked. By one of Dar's allies.”

“Dessa's pregnant? Did her husband come back, or—”

And then Polla had a terrible thought. Mandies and their breeding. Aemelie had been obsessed with breeding—given Polla a long lecture about out–breeding and gene–splicing that wasn't nearly as interesting as the weapons room. What’s more, Dessa had been fracking— “Wait. Is the kid Therion's? Therion D'Cainen? My ex–boyfr—”

“What?” The scowl changed to a half-scoff. “Why would you even think that?”

“He was giving us a ride to Coruscant. They got pret–ty close, last I saw.”

“I don't know.” But the expression on the too–familiar face said otherwise. “Therion was with you. Of course he was.” Her laughter was sharp, a little bitter. “That son–of–a–Hutt lied to me. I’d almost forgotten.”

“Oh?” Irrational, being jealous of an ex Polla hated. But the emotion was still there, lurking in her gut like bile. “Didn't realize you two had got friendly.”

“Our meet went about as well as my chat with Uncle Boone. Case you were wondering, Therion didn't give you up—if he had, maybe we wouldn't be in this mess.” This Revan was staring across the room at the other one, and then she began to tell Polla a rambling story that only tangentially touched upon Uncle Boone and Therion D'Cainen, focusing instead on the stuff Polla already knew: her and the other one leaving Coruscant with Seiran, the other one pushing her off the ship, how the other one couldn't be trusted—
“Blah, blah, blah,” Polla interrupted, just as this Revan was getting to something about evil Sith Lords and Jedi having a showdown on some planet that sounded like a disease. Maybe not the smartest thing to interrupt the Butcher of Kaas but she was pretty pissed off. “I still want to know why the frack you blew up my… this planet.”

“You… your planet?” This one did the eyebrow lift too. “I didn't. It was the Sleepers—those ships. They bombed this world as a warning, to show me what they could do. I think… unless I—I do what they want.”

“What do they want…?” But Polla was asking mostly to keep the woman talking. Dar hadn't explained half of what she'd implied—probably assuming Polla already knew or didn't care, or was too thick to notice—but the facts seemed clear.

“They want me to go into their… some kind of tomb.” The woman’s eyes shifted away from her. Her hand reached up to tug at her topknot and then back down to her lap again as if she’d just noticed Polla’s glare.

“Oh.” That almost made sense. “You think the door will open for you? Cause Revan already tried and no dice.”

“Do I—what?” From that expression Polla wasn't the only one Bossypants hadn't bothered explaining much to. “She told you about the tomb? She went to it?”

“We went to it. Me, her and Yuthura. And this Sith guy who called himself Scourge. Turned out he was working with Tenny–bro. Emperor Asshole showed up and captured us. She couldn't open it. She was really pissed.” Polla wondered suddenly why she was babbling her guts out to this woman she didn't freaking trust. “Hey, can I see that stim–pak…?”

“Here.” The Butcher of Kaas tossed it over, wincing, as if the movement bugged her shoulder. “She did say to wake you.”

“And now you're doing what she says? Weren't you just trying to kill her? Did you just shoot me full of truth-tel?” Polla glanced down, but the writing was all in Mando runes. It was green, though, the residue. Truth-tel would’ve been pink.

“You don't trust me?” But those green eyes shifted away again. “It's just a mild stim.”

“Did you gave me truth–tel? You think I’d lie to you without it?” Polla would, of course, but indignation was easy to fake and it avoided direct questions. They'd learned that in smuggler school.

“I didn’t give you truth–tel. But I think you're dodging the question.” A slight smile tugged at the woman's mouth.

“So were you.”

“So, Dar wanted to go into this fabled tomb.” The woman had gone back to that. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Fracking ask her.”

Across the room, Revan's hands were glowing. Dessa must be pretty bad off if healing her was taking this long. That made Polla remember she'd had a tree through her own belly. Her hands went down to her middle—and squished on kolto. Damp and clammy. Ick.

Am I okay? She was almost afraid to ask—but this Revan’s smile had faded and she was frowning
She reached out and moved Polla’s arm. Her fingers were weirdly warm, almost hot. “Don’t disturb the bandaging. Dar and the med–droid spent some time stitching you up.”

“Oh, yeah? Why is she doing it all? Can’t you heal too? Aren’t you some all–powerful Jedi?”

“I don’t know how to heal. Bas—–they say it takes years of practice to get good at it. I–I never had the time.”

“Right. Too busy fracking up my life.”

The woman’s face was totally expressionless. But her voice had shifted into one that was almost familiar—that clipped Coruscanti shifting and blurring into a sharp jolt of home. “I didn’t push you into some scheme to impersonate me and scam credits off Suvam.”

“You know, the funny thing is, I wouldn’t have had to scam credits, if some ass hadn’t spent all the ones I had stashed with him and then made me and my family have to go on the lam—–”

“You tried to borrow ten million.” One eyebrow arched again. Funny, how the darker hair made her look more like Polla than the other one. “Seiran told me. The account with Suvam had maybe fifty thousand.”

Seiran told you all that? She’d deal with him later. To hear him tell it, they’d barely spoken—just ridden in the same ship from Coru to Deralia. “More like fifty–seven thousand. I remember exactly how much it had before some schutta stole it—–”

“Would you like me to pay you back?” Infuriating, how the woman sounded like home.


“Hardly. I promised your da I’d get you home safe. If you keep squirming instead of letting the gel set you’ll make a liar of me.”

“Oh, yeah? I bet my da told you to frack off.” She wasn’t as sure about Ma. Ma had always been sentimental, and Polla remembered the lectures about wedding presents.

“He did.” The woman’s’ indrawn breath made it sound like Polla had hurt her. “At first, but we… we talked. Polla, you need to listen to me. You need to get off this fracking planet. Take Seiran. Go home. As soon as… tomorrow, if you can.”

“So you can have your ships bomb the rest of it? No. Frack off.”

“We didn’t… they’re not my ships. What did… what did Dar say? About the tomb?”

Frack your tomb. “Not much. She was acting like her going into it was gonna fix everything. When it didn’t work she almost cried.”

“If it would fix everything, I’d shove her in there myself.” Those green eyes blinked. Suddenly, a trickle of blood ran down from the woman’s nose. She wiped it with her hand, staring at the stain and frowning. “Does she… did she say she could hear them?”

“They?” Maybe they’d been sealing this woman in carbonite to save her from herself. Because she seemed kind of nuts. Poor Captain Obvious. “Hey, I saw your husband—–earlier. We were watching the camp. When’d you guys hook up—not, uh, I didn't mean hook, I meant, where'd you find him now.
“Darth Sulk—oh!" This time the laugh sounded more genuine. “You mean Dustil.”

Sinae glanced over, but Revan didn't move. Maybe she couldn't hear them… but Polla had been around Force-users long enough to have her doubts.


“I… I was calling him Sulksalot.”

That was a little too close for comfort. From the face she was making the—-the woman agreed.

“Well, where—"”

“Our ship attacked Carth’s. Above… kind of a long story.” That open expression seemed to freeze over again, eyes looking through Polla as if the woman had more important things on her mind. “We… he and Dustil and Mekel went to look for more survivors this morning. Did Seiran—-is he okay?”

“He got hurt pretty bad.” Guilt hit, because she'd been thinking about him, but not how he might be doing. If anything, Polla realized, she'd been avoiding thinking too much about him because of how pissed he'd have been when he woke. “But he's stable. He got hurt in the bombing.” Which brought them full circle. “How the frack did you make that happen?”

“I didn't.” The woman’s forehead creased. “Did Dar tell you I did this?”

“No. But she says if we freeze you in carbonite it'll stop that fleet. The Emperor too.”

“Why not just kill me?”

Was that a serious question? “Dunno, but she was pretty adamant that we not. Of course, then she—”

“—stabbed me in the guts.”

“—stabbed you in the guts.”

They finished the sentence almost at the same time. It made Hero frown, even as Polla felt herself smirk.

“I suggested we just kill you,” Polla added. Maybe it hadn't been truth-tel in that stim, but something about the woman's expression made her want to come clean.

“Thanks.” The woman tugged at her top-knot, and then seemed to realize she was doing it, and stopped, putting both hands back in her lap. “But this isn't a joke.”

“I wasn't joking.”

Those green eyes met hers and blinked. “Oh, yeah? Well, thanks for not killing me.”

Yet. Polla craned her head, but didn’t see her gunbelt anywhere. Her hand crept under the covers and discovered, with somewhat of a shock that she was still wearing her pants with their thigh-holders and her basic holdout was still strapped right where it belonged. “So, you… didn't make those ships bomb the planet?”
“I didn’t. I told them to stop. But I can hear them. In my head.” The woman laughed uneasily. “I know how nuts that sounds.”

“I’ve seen crazier banthashit lately.”

“Yeah, I guess… guess you have.”

The woman’s head turned back toward Revan again, and then the two of them were staring at each other, both of their faces going eerily blank.

*Can you hear her in your head too?* Bastila Shan and Revan had done that mind–to–mind–talking in every version of every vid. But before Polla could ask, the other Revan started forward, moving toward them like a kath on target.

“You need to stop listening to the voice from the tomb, Fragment,” Revan—*Polla’s Revan*—said as she approached. “Every time you do, you have another pinpoint hemorrhage. It’s why your nose keeps bleeding.”

“Listening to which voice? I’m fine.” The woman scowled and wiped more blood from her face.

“How’s Dessa?”

“Stable—her and the child.” Polla’s Revan looked exhausted, shadows staining the hollows of her eyes. “They were fortunate I arrived when I did. That’s quite a head wound. Sinae said the escaped prisoner responsible was a dar’jett your husband killed. Dessa’s lucky to be alive.”

“At least *someone* was lucky to see you,” the Butcher drawled. “Sinae didn’t tell you the Dark Jedi’s name?”

“At the smug expression on your face, you expect the revelation will shock me. Don’t tell me it was Davad Arkan because I know—”

“Wasn’t him. I dropped Davad into a sun. Biscain System.”

“I knew you dropped him into a sun. Tenebrae told me. And that was foolish.”

“Oh? Your pal Tenebrae tell you it was foolish? Or your Republic spies?”

“*Malak* told me. Tenebrae is my undying enemy. I will oppose him until my last breath. As I have always done.”

“Malak, huh?” The Butcher’s mouth twisted. “Funny. Carth and I were just talking the other day about *never trusting evil Force ghosts.*” Her eyes flickered up and down. “Especially when they’re possessing sents. Like you are. Right now.”

Their smiles looked identical and it was starting to freak Polla out. Maybe they couldn’t read each other’s minds—or else why have this pissing contest in front of her? But they had something going on. Something that was fracking fracked.

“I could say the same about you, Fragment. If I wanted to be rude.”

“You think that would be rude?” The Butcher tugged at her bandage. “Ambushing me and trying to freeze me in carbonite wasn’t?”

“It was necessary.” Polla had known Revan long enough to know that weary sigh she was giving was exaggerated. “How… how did Davad die?”
The brunette shrugged. “Davad wanted to die, but he didn't know how.” Her eyes narrowed to slits. “He couldn't talk anymore but he... showed me things. He showed me you.”

The eerie thing was, Polla recognized the tone of voice the woman was using now. That mocking drawl. She sounded just like Cousin Sera.

*No like me. She sounds like me.*

“Then he's truly dead. Davad is—” the words broke off, dissolving into what sounded like hysterical laughter. “That's it, then. Kae was right. All this time, and she was right. *Nothing I did. Nothing*—”

“I thought you'd call her Vima.” That voice with a Deralian accent, still mocking —

—and cruel.

*Even when I was bluffing, I never sounded that—that cruel. Even when she was angry, Revan never sounded that cruel—*

“She wasn't Vima Sunrider. Not anymore—not just—Vima.” Revan’s voice hardened. “I always thought the overlays of personalities she took made her insane. But she was right all along.”

“If you're trying to make me keep you alive to find out why she was right, I don't care. *Vima's dead too.*”

The head shot up again. Shocked. “You killed—”

“No. Carth did. My husband. She was the dar’jett who hurt Dessa. We found her on a planet called Medriaas. Near a tomb. Good old Vima. She tried to kill me, too.”

A sharp laugh from Polla’s Revan. “Congratulations. You and Tenebrae have doomed us all. More completely than I ever... ever could.”

“How?” The word was a low growl. “Why? You never explained anything to me!”

“You didn't listen. *All* you had to do was stay on Deralia. I had the Emperor managed. I had the galaxy believing you dead. Had you stayed with our son, the Sleepers would have never awoken. Vitiate’s power would have faded. My vaccine... in another century or two, the Empire would have collapsed.”

“Looks like that wasn’t fast enough for you,” snarled the one, still with the Deralian accent. “This is what you bring. This is all y—”

“I didn’t do this! You did! Your stupidity! Your pride! You killed Davad and Kae, the only two who might have been able to stop—”

“Arren Kae. Vima Sunrider. Whatever. Your old master. My husband killed her—not me.” The Butcher spat the words out like they were throwing knives, and Polla watched as they hit their target: *her* Revan suddenly growing a shade paler, suddenly sitting down on the edge of Polla’s bed, abruptly looking ten years older.

“Then Tenebrae knew Vima’s plans too.” Not a question. Revan’s voice sounded tired. “I should have realized. It wasn’t your husband who killed her. It was the Emperor. Eliminating another threat—crossing off another hope—”
“What?” The Butcher’s voice was loud enough that the guards by the door—all armored and Mandalorian and faceless—glanced over at them. “No. It was Carth. She was trying to blow up the ship.”

Did the Butcher not know about her husband? Wow, that was rough. Polla cleared her throat. “Um… Revan?” They both looked at her. Great. Was their plan to freeze the Butcher was on permanent hiatus, now? “Carth’s possessed by the Emperor. See, I tried to stop it by unleashing this plague, but—”

“Oh, it worked,” the Butcher said. “Carth was sick when I found him.”

“It worked?” A few months ago that would have felt like good news. Now, Polla just felt… empty. I saved your husband. I killed a bunch of strangers. Not all of them were evil—

“How fortunate for you, Fragment,” Revan murmured in a tone that said the opposite. “Recovering your husband from the Emperor. I put Malak in charge of the Manaan factory next to warehouses full of live virus with the hope he would be transformed. He never caught even a sniffle.”

“What does that have to do with—”

“Obviously, nothing.”

“You realize that Dar tricked you into releasing that plague?” The Butcher looked at Polla again. “Polla, you can’t trust her.”

Revan cleared her throat. “You overestimate my abilities. I was in a coma at the time.’

“So you claim—”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t trust you, Butcher!” Polla snapped. “You wrecked this planet! We had a perfectly good revolution going and you stomped in and bombed the frack out of it!”

The Butcher looked hurt. “I didn’t bomb the planet! I stopped it.”

“No,” Revan said dryly. “You merely killed the only other sentients in the galaxy strong enough—with the knowledge required—to thwart Tenebrae and destroy the Rakatan mainframes.”

“You mean Davad and Vima?” The woman snorted. “Tell me, Dar’Revan, what do you think your old boyfriend would have done to the galaxy? Or did you expect to bat your eyelashes at him and cry to make him stop eating Jedi?”

Revan stiffened. “I realize you’re upset, Fragment, but you sound deranged.”

“Am I? Did you expect to get him to eat planets only at your beck and call—like when you crashed on that fracking planet and he came and rescued your ass? He’d changed, Dar. He wasn’t a man at all anymore. He would’ve had you for breakfast and not even blinked.”

“What?” The other one froze. “Which planet? Whatever you think you know—”

“Oh, Davad!” The Butcher’s voice shifted into Revan’s Coruscanti accent perfectly. “I’m so sorry—everything we’ve done has been steps along a circular path. Every victory is just another obstacle.” She rolled her eyes. “You used Davad Arkan just as much as you used Malak—and the rest of the fracking Jedi. We’re all just pawns on a board to you.”

“You broke the board.” Revan’s face had gone dead white. Every freckle stood out in sharp relief.
“And here we are in your empire of ashes, with precisely the situation I fought for years to avoid—”

The Butcher snorted. “And that’s why you were trying to… what the frack were you trying to do? Freeze me in carbonite?”

“Yes.”

“Good plan. Why not just kill me?”

A red eyebrow arched. “Perhaps I have some modicum of sentiment for my old body. Some affection for your charming personality.”

“My charm—oh, I’ll show you charming!” The Butcher’s hand lifted and suddenly Revan slammed into the tapestried wall. There was something hard under all of that embroidery, because her body made an audible thud when it hit.

Sinae jumped, hand going to her blaster. The smaller guard drew a bead, but the taller one shook his head. Her head? With armor, impossible to tell. The tall Mandalorian pointed to the door.

Sinae and the smaller Mandalorian immediately left the tent.

The Butcher glanced at the door and nodded to the remaining suit of armor. The man (or woman) wearing it folded their arms and leaned against the post, unclipping a gun from their belt, and making a show of cleaning it—rather ostentatiously.

Message was pretty damn clear. Whatever the Butcher did next, she had a free pass.

The Butcher’s voice turned arctic as she turned back to Revan, now suspended and hanging from the wall. “I can question you just as well without your limbs, you know.”

“In fact, I do know.” The answering voice was a dark whisper. Incredibly, Revan was smiling. “Do you know how much you’ve changed, Fragment?”

The Butcher got to her feet, a little unsteadily. “Trust me. All of this is becoming extremely familiar.”

“Is that supposed to be some kind of insult? Do you think I condone this madness?” Revan’s mouth twisted. “You’re like a mad kath in a ferracrystal emporium!”

“Fancy,” the Butcher snapped back. “And you, destroying this fracking planet… what was that?”

“As I explained previously, that was you. The Sleepers awoke looking for you. Somehow you must have triggered them—accelerated their timeline. Tenebrae promised me we would have decades before this came to pass— ”

“And you just happening to be here… don’t try and tell me that’s an accident.”

“I came here so you wouldn’t have to.” Revan’s voice cracked. “You were supposed to stay with our son!”

“As what, a vegetable? You threw me off that ship a thousand meters above the ground!”

“The fall didn’t kill you. Obviously. Malak and I once fell from a ship in the upper atmosphere. In the skies above Althir.” That mirror face raised one red eyebrow. “We tumbled for kilometers, suspended by the Force—”
“Obviously, I don’t give a kath’s ass.” The Butcher raised her hand and twisted it.

There was a crunching noise. Revan on the wall made a small sound, not even a whimper. Another crunching noise. It took Polla a second to realize the Butcher had just broken two of the fingers on Revan’s flesh hand. They bent backwards, away from her friend’s pinned wrist at an impossible angle.

“I’ll do your arm next,” the Butcher said, almost conversationally.

Oh, frack this. Polla pulled out the hold–out and fired, registering as she did with a marksman’s sense the discharge of another blaster bolt from across the room, by the door—

Xxx

Revan was exhausted. Healing Dessa had taken the last of her strength. But she couldn't let it show—any more than she could show fear at being suspended in the air against the stiff fabric wall of the Mandalorian datchka.

Subterfuge had failed her. She could only hope reason would prevail. The woman had a sharp mind. She was capable of admitting her errors. Hopefully her conscience would demand she fix them—

She could kill you before you get to reason, Red.

I trust you can stop her, Mal.

I will try.

Staring down at the woman felt like looking into the eye of ion storm. The Force surged around her, bent to her will and Revan was no longer sure of the odds.

Can you stop her, Mal?

I don't know. Blue light flickered faintly across Revan's vision—evidence of her dead husband's Force shield—but would it be enough?

“Fancy,” the Fragment spat, pacing back and forth on unsteady feet. “And you... destroying this fracking planet… what was that?”

When would the woman understand? “That was you. The Sleepers woke looking for you.”

“And you just happening to be here… don't try and tell me that's an accident.”

“I came here so you wouldn't have to, Fragment.” Revan's patience had frayed with her strength, all gone to heal some nameless Mandalorian and her child. Irrationally, she wished she could Force–choke some sense into this woman—suspend her in the air, feel her fragile neck in the Force—

“You were supposed to stay with our son!”

“As what, a vegetable? You threw me off that ship a thousand meters above the ground!”

“The fall didn't kill you. Obviously,” I didn't know for sure. You forced my hand. “Malak and I once fell from a ship in the upper atmosphere. In the skies above Althir—”

The Fragment raised her hand.

There was a blinding pain in Revan's fingers. A sickening snap. Then again. She heard the
whimper strangle in her own throat, as the pressure around her neck increased—

Mal. Help. I’m—

I was not expecting—

“Revan!” Polla called out. There was the sound of a blaster firing, a heartbeat later another—

Xxx

The Force was Revan’s. It sang, as lustrous and thick as eridu silk in her fingers. Some warning of its need vibrating like a plucked string in her skull, even before—

Even before blasters fired. One, two. Polla shot first. Canderous, a heartbeat after.

The air seemed to chill and thicken. Revan held up her hands, one directed to the blaster bolt Polla had fired at Dar'Revan—

No. Me. She fired it at me.

The other suspended a molten slug from Canderous's gun—its trajectory headed toward the Sith Lord on the wall.

Suspended against the swirling fabric of the tent, the woman with Revan's face seemed encased in a net of ice, her expression frozen in a rictus of pain.

Revan's hands moved. The air was thick now, easy to shape. With their velocity frozen, it was quite easy to alter the trajectories of the bolts, sending both harmlessly into the peaked ceiling of the tent. She would deal with the shooters later, but she felt a wave of irrational fury, that Canderous had tried to take her target from her, just as Carth had before—

No, Red.

The voice was a faint whisper, almost distracted. She looked at the woman hanging on the wall again and somehow… shifted the Force, stepping toward her as the stasis released.

The woman on the wall let out a startled breath. Her chest heaved. Her eyes rolled back—

Revan let the Force holding her fall, while the rest of the world remained still.

Dar collapsed on the ground, gasping.

Behind Dar, Canderous was a motionless statue in beskar and to their right, Polla's mouth was half-open, as if she'd been in the middle of speaking and suddenly stopped. The exhaust from her gun was a blue flare—

—and Revan walked over to her, only half-sure of what she was doing. She started prying the holdout from the smuggler's stiff fingers. It was surprisingly difficult to do. She heard her breath catch, as she tugged at the blaster. *I don’t want to hurt her*—

*She just tried to kill you. You've just stopped time and this is surprisingly difficult? That voice wasn't Malak. It rather sounded like Polla—the part of Revan who was Polla. The part she had expected to meet, to understand*—

“You should disarm the Mandalorian as well.” The clipped voice was hoarse, as Dar looked up at her warily from the ground. Her golden hand clasped the maimed one and her lips twisted in a
grimace that looked like pain.

Everything else around them remained frozen, down to the motes of dust in the air.

“Disarming Canderous could take all day,” Revan muttered. “We’d have to strip him to his skivs. Not to mention rob him of his dignity.”

“I suppose I have you to thank for giving the Mando’ade their dignity back.” Dar didn’t seem surprised that time had stopped for everyone except them. Maybe this sort of thing happened to Sith Lords all the time. “He’s even copied my old mask.”

“That is your old mask.” Probably. So Oerin claimed.

“Welded on a new helm. With sigils from Clan Ordo. Of course. I should have realized the one who stayed was Mand’alor—always loyal to you. They don’t make it easy to distinguish rank, you know. Quite hard to tell officers—on purpose. There are half a dozen helms like that in this camp alone. I saw them when we did reconnaissance on your camp at dawn. You should really post more guards—”

“Shut up.” Revan stalked forward. Dimly, she was aware of some commotion outside the tent—as if the stopped time did not extend beyond their walls. “Did you do this, or did I?”

“It wasn’t me, Fragment. Don’t you know your own strength?”

Infinitely. When Revan closed her eyes she could feel the planet itself, and beneath everything that beckoning, alluring call—

{{Come to me}}

“Youre nose is bleeding, Fragment. Even with your regenerative powers, I can’t help but think if you continue to abuse yourself you’ll see reduced cognitive function.”

And then, Revan realized what she had—unwittingly—done. Stasis, of course. As Malak had used on the Leviathan when he froze her friends, leaving just the two of them to their reunion.

“How long will this last?”

“I have no idea.” The woman on the floor blinked at her. “Until your brain melts? Until the Mandalorian children currently trying to cut through your stasis field disrupt your concentration? If you have something to say, do it quickly.”

All Revan could think of was what she had already said. “You pushed me off a ship. You tried to kill me!”

“But the fall didn’t kill you. Obviously. Malak and I once fell from a ship—” Dar'Revan launched into a story as if she had the upper hand. But she looked small there on the carpeted floor. Frail. Weak.

“But it should have killed me. Shouldn’t it have killed me?” Perhaps it had been the will of the fracking Force that she’d lived—or blind luck—or the deep retaining pond Revan had unwittingly fallen into that had saved her. That was what Doctor Sahara and Molla had said—

“Yes. It should have.” Dar took a deep breath. “The ion blast that took off the back of my skull on the Aleema should have killed me. Injuries I suffered on Yu–Phaedra should have killed me. Fett Cassus Lin’s vibroblade should have killed me. And Bastila Shan’s saber through my spine on
the Aleema should have certainly finished the job—"

In the stillness she’d created, Revan was suddenly aware of their heartbeats: her own, steady as a
drum—and the other, jagged and uneven, the harsh rasp of breath, the sickly feeling in the Force
surrounding the other woman—

“You’re ill.” Revan should have felt satisfaction, maybe, for it was more than an illness. A
creeping darkness, a sickening taint, something like poison—

“All of us are.” Dar shrugged. “Radiation. From the blast zones.”

“I–I know.” Because of course. That was why it was all too familiar. ”We’ve had a few dozen
cases… we have anti–rad packs for y—for your injured.”

“Would you cure me, Fragment? I thought you wanted to kill me.”

“Not mutually exclusive, those two things. I need answers. I can't have you die first...” Revan’s
voice trailed off as something tightened in her head. A pressure, like a band slowly cinching closed
around her temples—

—like the Force she'd contained, their pocket of the world was starting to buckle under the strain.
In another moment or five, the blaster bolts would resume their velocity, trajectories aimed directly
into the ceiling, now. When Revan’s control broke, Canderous would try something else and Polla
would—

She turned toward the frozen woman whose face was dead–eyed and resolute, set firmly on her
target—the space that Revan used to occupy.

Polla would try again too. To kill her.

“I didn't expect her to shoot you,” Dar said softly, following her gaze. “Winning the smuggler’s
loyalty was easy enough, but I never presumed she would defend me from you.”

“I think you're lying.” It was a guess, born from that dark place inside of Revan, that cold whisper
that always sounded like Dar. “Did you… did you make her do this? Compel her?”

“No. I told her the truth. As I’m telling you now. The Sleepers bombed this planet because of you.
You need to be stopped.”

“Because of you,” Revan corrected her.

“Because the mainframe that sustains the Sleepers is an organic bio–matrix extending across
several systems and more than fifty planets. And it is dying.” Dar’s mouth twitched. “Dying for
lack of a part. The Sith Emperor is broken. I was—you are— his replacement.” The dust motes
hung in front of her face like constellations. “Rather, his repair. The system was designed thirty
thousand years ago. Perhaps with the Rakatan physiognomy, the connection would be more secure,
less prone to error. Or perhaps the planned obsolescence was by design. Perhaps the Rakatans
designed it so for a reason…."

“Huh?” Parts of that made sense and parts felt like they were written in upside–down Huttic runes.

“That is what Sith’ae’rah truly is, Fragment. A state of being: one half of a whole. The other
definition… the legend of a child made numb to the effects of death...” Dar’Revan shook her head.
“Merely a trap to lure a Jedi knight in.”
“But it worked.” There was more to deal with, and the Force crushing down on them with an increasing intensity made their time brief. “I—remember. And Davad showed me. Malak showed me. I kept them… you kept them sane. In the wars.”

“Did I?” A slow shake of that head. Her hair had been shaved almost to the skull. It made the hollows in her cheeks. In the frozen light, Dar looked half a corpse already. “A prophylaxis. Temporary. I also became convinced the best way to end the war was to destroy thousands at Malachor V. And drive my friends deliberately insane.”

“Davad… he showed me Malachor. And more.” The scene on the cliff would haunt Revan for the rest of her days. “That time you crashed your ship and he came to your rescue, you had a braid of red hair in your hands—”

“He showed you too much.” Those eyes turned away, and Dar hobbled over to Canderous, somehow pulling the blaster from the man's frozen hand with more ease than Revan had done—only wincing slightly, as she used her maimed hand to brace herself.

With a faint smile she held it out his gun, pommel-fist.

Numbly, Revan took it. The message was implicit. Shoot me. If you dare.

They both knew that Revan would not.

Instead, she walked to the open medic cart, selected a kolto packet, unwrapping it as she walked over to Dar. The woman's fingers were darkened and swollen as Revan wrapped them in gel-packs.

“How did Davad die?” Dar asked softly.

“I dropped his ship into a sun, but he… he was already gone.” Those shadows on Katarr, that hunger in her mind. “The man he was died before… before that.”

The man he had been one she wished she had known. Did you ever love me? Davad had asked Revan, but he'd asked the wrong woman.

It was Dar who looked away first, now—pulling her bandaged hand back. “As I said before, he could have ended this. It's all Force-driven, you know. Even the machines. The Sleepers were once denizens of Nathema—what Medriaas was called before. Tenebrae changed them. The computer told him how to transform them—just like it gave me the means to stop him—all for its own ends.” Her mouth twisted. “Fail-safes upon its fail-safes. But Davad could have ended it—”

“By destroying the Force? Everywhere? I'm not sure you really thought that through.”

“Better than the alternative.” Dar took a breath.

“You said the computer gave you the means to stop itself?” Maybe Dar was just insane.

“No. To check Tenebrae's influence. To stop him from possessing… everyone.”

“How?” But even as she asked, Revan's mind made the leap. “You mean with the Jedi plague? Great fracking job.”

“I presented my 'cure' to the plague as a way to save Tenebrae, not end him. The plague’s origins were unknown—but Lord Revan saved the galaxy with her vaccine. Again.” Dar’Revan—sighed. “It weakened him, but never enough. You're sweating, Fragment. Even you cannot sustain this stasis forever.”
That was uncomfortably becoming apparent. The band around Revan’s head had tightened, was now a throbbing ache. “I don't know what to do with you."

“Were our positions reversed I would not have the same qualms.”

*I'm not you. “Do you want me to kill you?”*

Green eyes blinked. “Malachor will ask about me—if he survives. Are you strong enough to lie to our son?”

“Yes,” Revan gritted her teeth.

“I'm not entirely sure you can be killed, short of finding another sun for you to fall into.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Not at all. The Rakatan computer needs your body to be intact within its tomb. Certain… links were made, modifications commenced from the first time I came to it. Perhaps… perhaps even before.”

*Modifications? “I will tell Malachor you died bravely.”* Revan leveled the blaster. The world pressed in, tension like a submersible underwater, like a ship under siege. “I would, except—” except for that nagging whisper that could be her conscience. Sometimes it sounded like Dar. Sometimes like Auntie Mita. Or even like Malak. “But what if you're right?”

“I am.” That ravaged face looked tired. “He will take you to the tomb. Merge your being into his. You will become a part of him. You will see through a billion eyes on a billion worlds. You will reignite his empire, you will be the spark that gives him strength to expand his reach—” she sighed. “And when you speak to our son it will be in the body of a stranger.”

“I don't want to be his fracking spark!”

“It doesn't matter.” There were shadows under her eyes. “Can you hear the Sleepers?”

“Yes. They… they showed me things. Worlds. I think they were threatening me if—”

“Precisely, Fragment. I only glimpsed them, dreaming, but the Emperor warned me. He can't control them any more than you can. I was told they're the mainframe's last defense. What it cannot repair it will destroy.”

*Destroy. So all of those hundreds of worlds—the worlds I saw through Tenebrae's eyes—the sentients on them—*

“But you’re saying that if I go in the tomb, I become Tenebrae's… puppet?”

“More like his Force–battery.” The grimace twisted. “Perhaps you begin to see why it was a fate I tried to avoid.”

“It’s calling to me.” Revan had spent the last two days charging the turbines for the camp machines. She’d even joked about being nothing more than a Force battery, and now—

“I know. It called to me as well. A voice from inside the tomb. But I had time, Fragment. You do not.”

“And… your plan was to freeze me in carbonite? And then what?”
Dar'Revan shrugged. “In the immediate aftermath, Polla and I were going to flee the Mandalorian camp with your frozen body. We have an extraction team half a day behind us—I told them to hold back so you wouldn't sense more approaching. Then…” she adjusted the bandage around her fingers. “Then, we were going to continue our work healing the survivors on this world. Isolate any beings with Tenebrae's Kiss we found. Eliminate most of them—”

“Sounds cozy,” Revan snapped. “You think the Mandalorians would just let that happen?”

“No.” Dar glanced at Canderous, still frozen at the door. “Not when their Mand'alor is loyal to you, but technically—”

“Technically?” Revan could see where this was going. For all the talk of this woman being a tactical genius, her thoughts were predictable. “Technically you think you're the boss of them?” The thought of Canderous going along with her crazy scheme—not to mention Carth—almost made Revan laugh.

“The Mando'ade surrendered to me. If I could reverse our roles, Fragment, I would. But I know the tomb will open for you. It wouldn't for me. I–I tried.”

“Why would that be better?” Revan scoffed. “Maybe you just wanted its power for yourself.”

“I thought I could trick the machine into accepting a weaker copy—a counterfeit battery, as it were. Our genetic codes are identical, so I thought—but it didn't work.” Her face was a mask, but underneath, something boiled. A quiet rage in the Force. “Tenebrae mocked my attempt.”

“And so now you think you can stop all of this by freezing me in carbonite.” Revan swallowed. “For how long? A few months? A year?”

“In a generation or two, if the mainframe's resources are exhausted it might be safe to allow you some measure of freedom—might. We could leave instructions to that effect—” Those green eyes were steady when Revan gave an incredulous scoff. “Would you prefer I lie, Fragment?”

“A generation? Two?” The spark of anger was a reflex, as a part of Revan understood more than she wanted to admit. “But I have a life!”

“Barely. Technically, you are nearly three years old. Polla Organa has a life. I–I had a life—once. I would sacrifice my life for hers—or yours—if the effort would achieve the desired results for the galaxy but since it would not—”

“You... you're trying to talk me into letting you freeze me in carbonite!”

“A preferable alternative to attempting to drug you in your sleep and then freezing you in carbonite. My method would allow you time to say your farewells.” The woman seemed to hesitate. “Perhaps—we could record your memories on a holocron, although I hope you understand, I could not accept another overlay. Multiple lives create instability as the example of Vima Sunrider showed us only too plainly—”

The woman kept talking, her words dissolving into a technical lecture about holocron memories that sounded more like a list of excuses to Revan than anything else.

*She doesn't want to die either. She just wants me to!*

*No, Red.*

As if Revan could trust Malak about his... whatever they were.
Do you know if she's right?

I know she is convinced of it. The shadow in her mind seemed to hesitate. I know the Emperor must be stopped. I know what he took from me—from both of us. I know she wants Malachor to be safe—

But you don't know if she's right.

I know her resolve—as I know yours. If she says this is the way forward—

What if you’re both wrong? “I would kill you, Dar,” Revan muttered out loud. “But if you’re right, someone needs to tell Korrie his ma saved the galaxy. Again. And… someone needs to teach him. Things. Things I don't even… maybe things that I never knew.”

Those green eyes were liquid, suddenly. The woman nodded slowly. “It would… you would not be forgotten.”

“I said if you’re right.” Revan was far from convinced. But she could overpower this woman easily. And she needed to know more. As long as Dar thought she had the winning cards, she’d be tractable. Grateful enough to tell Revan everything. And if she was right— “This isn’t over. You’re my prisoner—for now.”

“I accept your terms,” Dar’Revan nodded. As if she had a choice.

“Good,” Revan snapped. “Then I don’t have to gag you. Yet.”

“I will show you what proof I can.” The woman’s hand shook slightly as she extended her hand. Even with kolto, those broken fingers had to hurt.

Did she want them to shake on it? Revan ignored the gesture. “She needs to get out of here.” Revan glanced back at Polla. Polla, who had just tried to kill her. “She and Seiran both.”

“You and I are in accord about that.”

“And I want to talk to this fracking Emperor of yours. You keep saying he told you about the Sleepers—I want to hear it from him myself.”

“My people are searching the ruins for someone possessed by his Kiss. I had hoped that Carth Onasi—”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“It is not a disappointment. I’m glad he is free. For both of you.”

“You said modifications before. To my… to me. What… what did you mean?”


“Or what?”

The woman's eyes were luminous and the hollows of her cheeks made them look enormous. “As I said before. I don't think it's possible.”

“But that’s—” The implications made Revan’s blood seem to freeze. And then, abruptly, the world came back with a rush. The stasis collapsed, Polla’s voice raised in an astonished squawk, the sound of blaster bolts rang through the air.
And a pack of Mandalorians burst through the door, with Carth somehow in the middle of them.

“Revan!” her husband cried.

The two blaster bolts Revan had misdirected pierced the ceiling of the tent, sending circles of sunlight onto the carpeted floor. One illuminated Dar, giving her hair a cap of flame.

“Don’t shoot Dar again,” Revan told Canderous, tossing him back his blaster. “Not unless I tell you.”

“Huh.” Canderous unsnapped his helm, and took it off. Underneath he was scowling. “What the hell just happened?”


“Revan and I have negotiated terms,” Dar added, in flawless Mandalorian.

Canderous nodded slowly. “Right.”

“What the––” Polla Organa looked down at her empty hand with disbelief. “Where the frack is my gun?”

“It was kind of you to be my champion,” Dar’Revan added, moving toward the Deralian. “But I told you before: she cannot be killed.”

“But she was trying to kill you!” Polla frowned. “What the frack just happened?”

Carth cleared the distance between them in two strides. “Revan,” he repeated, blocking Revan’s view of the smuggler. He didn't reach out, didn’t touch her, just stared at her with that puzzled frown that had launched a smuggler’s crush back on Taris—the one that said he wasn’t sure—quite—what she'd do next—wasn’t sure he'd approve—but he wasn't going to stop her, either.

“Revan,” she echoed, staring back at him. “That's right, Captain Obvious. That's my name.”

“Yeah,” muttered a Deralian voice behind Carth’s back. “Captain Obvious, that’s her name. Maybe.” Polla edged around Carth, her middle blanketed with kolto. She held out her hand to Revan. “I don't know what the frack just happened, but give my blaster back. Now.”

“Are you going to shoot me with it again?”

“Only if you keep torturing my friends.”

“Friends?” She heard her voice scoff. “You realize that Dar’Revan got you mixed up in that rebellion of hers—”

“You’re as dense as a fracking neutron! The rebellion was mine. Mine and Yuthura's.” Polla Organa crossed her arms. “I released the virus to cure Carth. I got Zaalbar connected with the Wookiees working for other noble houses. I got Yuthura in with Lord Scourge—”

“From the way you told it to me, Yuthura Ban quite capably decided that herself.” Dar sounded amused.

“Whatever.” Polla shrugged. “Revan was in a coma the entire time. If you've got some problem with the way things turned out, Butcher, take it up with me. Or yourself, because she's right— we didn't bomb this fracking planet. That's your fleet up there that almost killed Seiran. And you did kill others. Lots of them. Drakkar and Jiuewwrrr and Arun….”
From the length of the dead, the smuggler had made a lot of friends on Kaas. Revan felt something stir in her guts that could have been guilt. Or an emotion less clear—shame maybe. Regret.

*It doesn't matter.* That thought came with a strange sense of inevitability.

“Enough,” she snapped finally and the smuggler glared at her. The guilt was overwhelming—even more so because Revan knew what Polla Organa and Dar did not—that it hadn't just been *this* planet targeted by the Sleepers’ attacks. “How long?” Revan turned back to the woman with her face again. “I’m not saying I’m going to agree. But how long before… how long before… how long do we have?”

“I don't know. Soon would be best.” Dar licked her lips.

“And it'll work?”

“It will remove you from the board.” The woman sat down on an empty mat, gingerly massaging her bandaged hand with the metal one. “The Sleepers should return to stasis. The Emperor’s influence will fade—”

“Soon?” Carth interrupted. “Soon, what? Remove her, how?”

“I'll tell you later, Handsome.” Revan flashed a smile without thinking about it—only to realize by his expression she hadn't fooled him—or going by Polla's suspicious expression—fooled anyone. “Carth, I believe you remember Polla Organa and… and—”

Try as she might she couldn't make herself say the woman’s—*their*—name.

“Of course.” Her husband’s expression was far more friendly when he looked at Dar than Revan liked. “Did you… what just happened in here?”

“That was me,” Revan snapped. “I did it. Not her.”

“Great. There's two of them, now,” Dustil muttered, peering in between the Mandalorians crowding the door. “Hey, Polla.”


“We found Mydia and Yuthura,” he told her. “And Seiran. He’s… he seems pretty pissed off.”

“I expected that.” The smuggler grimaced.

“Hi,” Mekel echoed, edging in past Dustil. “I don’t know if you remember me, Miz Organa—”

“No—wait! That kid from the brothel?”

“Why… you're hurt!” It had taken Carth a long time to remark on it—especially considering Revan had on a kolto shirt, practically. “What the hell happened?”

*If I tell you will you shoot Dar like you did Vima?* “Later,” she hedged, turning back to her duplicate, raising her voice to be heard in a tent suddenly full of voices. “We have time enough for that, right?”

Dar'Revan nodded.

“You're that kid from the brothel who was possessing Dustil with Darth Malak?” Polla sounded confused. “Mekel Jin? Dustil said you were dead. You look… different.”
“It’s the beard.”

“Turns out I was wrong.” Darth Sulks—Dustil sounded too smug. By half. “He’s not dead. See?”

“But how—?”

Whatever explanation the Sith kids had faded into background noise for Revan.

“Your wife and I had words, Captain Onasi.” Dar’s eyes narrowed. “And I believe we came to an accord.”

“What kind of an accord?”

“It’s not an accord,” Revan snapped. “More like a… a truce. For now.”

“Last I saw the only accord was me shooting the other one.” It had taken Canderous a while to weigh in, but Revan knew behind that flat voice was one pissed-off Mandalorian.

“What?” From Carth. “You were shooting—”

“Me. Sheris Loran,” interrupted Dar'Revan. “Canderous was attempting to shoot me, Sheris Loran. A simple misunderstanding.” Her eyes locked to Revan’s. “Your wife doesn’t want me dead, does she?”

Yes. “No,” Revan said out loud. “I don’t want you dead, Sheris.” Yet. But if the woman wasn’t lying—

She isn’t lying, Red. His voice. Gentle and sad in her mind. Achingly familiar, even if the memory of why was gone.

How can I trust either of you?

“Perhaps… it may be simpler if we all address me as Sheris from now on.” Dar’s mouth twitched as if laughing at a private joke. “Or First of Lin, I suppose.”

“No,” muttered Canderous flatly.

“Just a jape,” the woman shrugged. “I can see where your loyalties lie, Mandalor.”

“Malachor V marked the end of the old ways,” the Mandalorian’s voice was hard as beskar. Canderous had put on his helm again, and that battered visor reflected Revan’s face back at her, twisted and distorted by blast scars. “Loyalty is earned, now.”

“A jape?” Surely it was a coincidence that Revan and Polla Organa snorted at the same time.

“It means joke,” the woman said stiffly.

“I know what it means—” Revan began.

“Jape, yeah. Bossypants uses it all the fricking time,” Polla snorted and stood up herself, wincing a little. The bandage of kolto wrapped around her waist. She extended her hand to Revan. “She tells pretty good japes, for a Jedi. My gun back, Butcher. Now. And I want to see Aemelie.”

“She's above—in orbit on the Aleema.” Canderous answered before Revan could.

“Here.” At some point, Revan had tucked the holdout in the waistband of her trousers without
thinking. She handed the smuggler her blaster back. “Don't shoot me again.”

Fake green eyes narrowed. “Don't be an asshole and I won't have to.”

“Polla was shooting at you?” Carth edged between them. His hand slipped around Revan's waist. She resisted the urge to push him away.

“A misunderstanding—” Dar began.

“No one shoots anyone from now on,” Revan snapped. “Not without my orders.”

“Hey, if we're all friends there's no cause to shoot anyone, is there?” Polla spread her hands out in a familiar gesture of peace. “Relax, Butcher, we're not here to take away your little Mandalorian army—”

“Butcher? Are you kidding me? You're calling me ‘Butcher’?”

Canderous muttered something under his breath and stomped out of the tent. For an awkward second, the only sounds in the crowded space were the soft whir of Dessa's respirator, the gurgle of her kolto bath.

“Yeah.” The Deralian was exactly her height. Her tunic had been cut away and the kolto bandage on her waist seemed to give her pain as she fumbled to put her blaster back in its covered thigh-holster. “I have to call you something. She's Revan. And my name's taken.” Her mouth twitched. “Make sure Captain Obvious remembers that.”

“He does.” Revan answered before Carth could interfere again.

“Well, remind him anyway.” Polla glanced at the door. “I have to see my husband now. If we need anyone tortured we'll give you a call, Butcher.”

She turned and walked stiffly out the door, trailed by Dustil and Mekel, and greeted enthusiastically by several of the Mandalorians.

*Of course. She met them all before. To hear Aemelie tell it, Polla's practically clan. And Dar'Revan said I was barely three years old. She's right. It felt like the world was opening under her feet. She's Revan. And this is Polla. And I'm—*

*I'm nothing.*

“Revan.” Her husband's lips brushed her ear, his voice a whisper. “Are you—?”

*Am I Revan? Okay? Alive?*  “No,” she muttered. “None of this is okay.”

“I'm here.”

She looked up into his concerned eyes and took a deep breath. “I think I'd better tell you what Sheris told me. About me. And…and this planet.”

Carth's brow wrinkled. “When you start it like that—”

“Yeah. It's not good. If she's right, I—” her voice cracked. Somewhere in the telling the tent had entirely emptied: now it was just the two of them and the hiss from Dessa's machine.

“The nosebleeds. I know… Sinae said the scans were clean, but—” his breath hitched. “Are you dying?”
“No.” The laugh felt bitter. “But according to good old Sheris that’s the kriffing problem—”

XxX

A/N THANKS as always, Ether, for the fantastic beta. I’m not saying it’s a spoiler but that topknot idea of yours… I think that might happen. It fits, heh. This is the version with less typos.

Oh, and when S–rev said she was glad Carth wasn’t possessed for P–rev? I think you’re right on the credits with the percentage. She is 60% glad he is not possessed and 40% annoyed, because now she has to waste time finding a possessed sent.

Thanks all for reading and your continued support and encouragement.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
“I cut the comm-link to the Senate, Admiral,” Lieutenant Jarrus reported. “That was what you meant when you made the--” he scissored his five-fingered hand in a chopping motion, vaguely reminiscent of the gesture Rensha had made with her talons only a moment earlier. “Wasn’t it?”

“Yesss. Good, Jarrus.” It was good, Rensha thought. There was no need to expose the Fleet’s soft underbelly to the likes of these decadent fools. Senators played their assassination games and the Republic burned; while Rensha had taken oaths to uphold their laws, she preferred to contain this atrocity before presenting her findings to the new pack of ruling Houses. Most of them wouldn’t know what to do anyway.

“Oh!” The red-eyed Toydarian blinked his glowing eyes at the comm-board. “Did we stop transmitting?”

“Don’t shoot him!” Rensha cautioned her officers, all of whom had drawn admirably quickly on Lieutenant C’Tannis. “Not this time.”

“Oh, my Admiral….” the possessed lieutenant chuckled. “So pleased you’ve decided to be reasonable. I’ve died quite enough this week.”

“Get the Jedi,” Rensha barked at Rew Ekkumi, instead of giving the thing an answer. “We'll have her explain this.”

In the time it took for the Telosian admiral to retrieve Master Atris, the Toydarian's eyes had stopped glowing and their communications lieutenant had returned to himself, cringing like prey while six of the Republic's finest combat specialists kept him surrounded.

Watching made spittle well in the back of Rensha's throat, as the primitive part of her egg-mind wanted to rend the compromised soldier's throat with her teeth. But she was High Admiral, not a grub in a creche, and so instead Rensha merely paced, dewclaws flexing in her boots, back and forth in front of the pathetic thing.

“I suspected he would have a Voice on this ship.” Master Atris’s voice was mild enough to be infuriating. As always, she was flanked by the two white-haired Echani warriors whom she claimed were kin. “Poor Lieutenant C’Tannis.”

“But you couldn’t tell for sure.” The words came out in a hiss.

“There is no reliable test. I worked with Marla Korr for years and never knew she was possessed. The sickness known on Coruscant as the ‘Jedi Plague’ renders immunity to possession--as I have told you before. But if a sentient is already stricken, its effectiveness is uncertain.”

Master Marla Korr had often advised the Fleet against Malak’s forces--as had Master Klee, another traitor--according to the late Master Kavar. Rensha compartmentalized the rush of anger she felt when reminded of the Jedi Masters’ perfidy, alleviated only partially by the irony of their deaths. “How do I know I can trust any of you?” she growled.

“There are not very many Jedi left.” Master Atris raised one white eyebrow. “And more vanish
every day. Victims of the Emperor, or his Sith minions.” Her eyes were light for a Human’s, the color of old scales. “I abandoned my attempts to rebuild the Order to come on this hunt, Admiral. Trust me, I want to see the end as much as you do.”

“Then tell me what to expect.” Rensha gestured the Jedi to come closer, raising her privacy shields so as to be outside the hearing of Rew Ekkumi, or her officers, or that infernal Emperor should he choose to return.

“Expect lies,” Atris said. “Vitiate lies. The Sith Emperor cannot be reasoned with, or negotiated with--he will always lie.”

“And Revan? Her Mandalorian Fleet?”

“Expect them to be compromised.” Master Atris paused. “But I will deal with Revan, Admiral. I promised you that. Leave her to me.”

Rensha noted out of the corner of her left eye that the viewscreen had changed, the lights of hyperspace resolving into real space again. Perhaps, she thought. They still possessed the Mandalorian princess. The Mando did not negotiate for hostages under normal circumstances, but according to Rew Ekkumi’s confirmed reports the girl was Canderous Ordo’s eldest child.

“I believe we’ve reached the first of the Sith planets,” she told the Jedi.

“Indeed.” Atris pivoted on her feet, staring out at the stars and the world below them, which was bisected with burning lines like the globes of a thisla fruit. “The Sith world of Ziost,” she murmured. “Or its remains.”

“Revan did this?” Rew looked at the white-haired Jedi who stood next to her, arms folded, lips pursed.”

“The fleet under her command did. Behold the historic capital of the Sith Empire. The Emperor’s glory, smashed in a manner of minutes.”

“We're picking up a few rescue beacons from the surface,” the communications ensign interrupted them. “Damned few.”

“Any sign of hostiles?” Admiral Cein demanded. His holographic image scowled.

“None.”

“Revan and her fleet are long gone.” Atris paced. “I suspect we'll find her on Dromund Kaas.”

“It would be good to know for sure--” Admiral Rensha glared at their Toydarian prisoner, but the poor sap only made a startled choking noise.

Stubborn, as if after his initial announcement, the immortal Sith Emperor no longer felt the need to speak to them at all.

“Make him come back,” Rensha ordered Atris.

“I cannot. You cannot. Your lieutenant cannot. Only Vitiate controls his arrival--or departure.”

Atris nonetheless extended her hand toward the formerly possessed man, who cringed, as if he were frightened.

“We should assist survivors--” General Sand began--
“Sith survivors?” The white-haired Jedi shook her head. “Do not underestimate them.” She paced to the viewscreen, still flanked by her two Echani guards. Were they her children? Sisters? Lovers? Rensha was not sure. “There is nothing on Ziost for us. We need to continue to Dromund Kaas.”

“Order the Naboo Rising to stay,” Rensha told Sand. “Along with one squadron of fighters. Any sign of hostilities, they should jump immediately to us. Can you broadcast to the planet?”

“Radiation in the sector is making it hard for any beams to get through—”

“Try a short-range radio frequency. Broadcast that we come in peace.” There was no point in trampling on graves. Rensha eyed Atris. “Master Atris will assist with the translation into Ancient Sith.”

“If that is your wish,” the woman murmured. “Divide your forces as you must. But we still should make haste to Kaas.”

XXX

The tent was quiet now save for the sound of Dessa's respirator and the gurgle from her kolto tank. Sunlight from the two blaster holes in the ceiling filtered down onto the patterned floor, a harsher light than the rest. Dar had been sitting in a pool of sunlight before, and Revan wasn't sure when she--and everyone else--had left.

“You can't die,” Carth said. Not the first time he'd said it. But his tone hadn't gotten any more believing. The new lines on his face deepened as he stared at Revan with that old familiar mix of exasperation and concern. “What you're saying is, Sheris came here to freeze you in carbonite because you can't die.”


In her mind the woman would always be Dar.

“But if you could die… she'd kill you?” Carth traced his fingers across her cheek like he was checking to see if she was real. “She and Polla would kill you, if they could?”

“Sheris told Polla that I caused the attack on Kaas.” If Revan kept calling Dar ‘Sheris’ maybe Sheris would begin to seem like the woman's name. Eventually.

“But you just… let, uh… Sheris go free.”

“For now. She's a healer. We can use her. And I…” I need to know if she's right. “She says freezing me in carbonite will stop the Sleepers, Carth.”

His hand had moved from her face to her arm, like he was trying to pull her closer. “Do you believe her?”

“I don't know.” Revan's back ached, a dull pain quelled by kolto from where the saber had gone in. The adrenaline that had fueled the blur of the day had faded, leaving Revan shaken and feeling all-too-mortal. “Some of what she said… makes sense.”

“Sense,” he echoed. “You think it makes sense to freeze yourself in carbonite. Because the woman who took out her own fleet at Malachor V says so.”
“She recommends I seal myself in carbonite because I can't die.”

“You can't die,” he repeated. A muscle twitched in his jaw. “She says you can't die. You can't die because the… Kashyyyk computer did something to you? Or the Emperor…? That’s--”

“Insane.” Her laugh felt hollow. “I know.”

“No, I was gonna say… maybe that part… maybe that’s true.”

“Really, Flyboy?” The eyeroll she shot him felt fake.

“You might not remember. You were pretty out of it, but I had you scanned on Taris. That doc--Zelka Forn--”

“I remember.” Doc Forn was undoubtedly dead, now. Along with most of the planet.

“He said--the back of your skull had been regrown. There was a graft line--I saw the scans. Then Sinae scanned you again on the ship. Clean. No sign of an injury. I thought, maybe… I asked Sinae. She said there should be a graft line if you'd had bone regrown. There wasn’t. Nothing at all.”

*Who knows what you saw on Taris? Bastila healed me so many times, who's to say she didn't fix it with the Force, or Juhani--*

A dozen excuses died on Revan's lips. “Yeah,” she said out loud. “Sinae said I was fine.”

“She wanted to run a longer scan,” Carth frowned. “Maybe we should let her.”

Revan’s nose was bleeding again. There was a dark presence in the back of her mind like a low hum. She thought if she paid attention it would voice words. Calling to her. Beckoning. “What’s it gonna show?” *That I’m losing my mind?*

*How many times have I died? Dar’Revan listed them like a fracking shopping list on Seventhday.*

Malak had shown Revan the death to the Fett Mandalore. And she… *remembered* dying on the *Aleema.* She had fallen from the sky on Deralia--

*But Sinae said my scans were clean.* Revan stared down at the faint red line on her arm, the only scar on her body. From some duel, according to Dar. Why just the one scar and no others?

“Maybe shoot me,” she joked.

Her husband blinked. “No.”

Revan didn’t remember stopping the bolt that Polla Organa had fired. It had been by reflex. She eyed the blaster clipped to her husband’s belt. “But we need to know.”

“Think we know enough.” His voice was quiet, his jaw set and stubborn. “I can’t stop you from testing whatever kriff-handed theory you want, but I’m not gonna help. I’ve seen… remember that fight on Korriban with that crazy Sith?”

“Which fight on Korriban with which Sith?” There had been dozens.

“Exactly.” His smile was grim.

“But… but I was dying, once, remember? After the Star Forge. The computer on Kashyyyk said I
was dying because of that Force collar.” Without the Force--before Yuthura took off the neural disruptor on Manaan, and saved her.

“The Rakatan computer said you were dying? It’s part of the same network that wants you to go into this tomb? What if it lied?” His brow furrowed. “You said that computer made you immortal.”

“Hey! I never said immortal.” *Immortal.* Revan’s side still ached where Dar had stabbed her. Something in the air on this planet kept making her sneeze. And, as if on command, she felt her nose start to bleed again. She wiped it with a gaz-pak.

“You told me that Sheris said the computer on Kashyyyk did something to you.” From the emphasis Carth was putting on her name, he wanted to separate them just as much as Revan did. “Or… to her. When she was you. Something that made you like this.”

“She wasn’t sure.” But that wasn’t true. Merely, Sheris hadn’t known how it was done.

“If it did something to you… it… maybe it could make you think you were dying.”

“You’re saying that computer wanted me to think I was dying so I’d… what? Use the Force? Did it expect me to fall again?”

“So you’d use the Force.” Carth nodded. “Exactly! It needs you to use the Force--it needs you here, with the Force. I don’t… I know this sounds nuts, but what if the computer’s been behind this all along? Guiding our steps, moving everything in the galaxy to bring you here?”

The voice in the tomb was a dull hum in the back of her skull, beckoning Revan like an itch that she couldn’t scratch. What Carth suggested didn’t sound nuts at all. Not when she could feel the connection to the thing in her bones.

“So… if we… if we cut me off from the Force again--I’d… live?”

“Maybe.” Her husband’s expression was cautious, as if he didn’t want to get her hopes up.

“Sheris said if I seal myself in carbonite ‘for a few generations’ that might be long enough to stop the Emperor.” Revan scoffed. “So… what--like, three hundred years? Guess if I can't die that's no time at all. Would you wait for me?”

“I can't wait that long.” Carth reached for her hand and squeezed it. “Not even for you, beautiful.” Those new lines in his face made his smile look pained. “But I have a better idea.”

“Didn’t think there could be a worse one.” She tried to smile back.

Carth took a breath. “What if we leave instead?”

“What?”

“We could just leave. Slap a Force collar on you and find some place out in Wild Space where no one's ever heard of Sith--or you.” Carth looked serious. “We could take the *Hawk*.”

“It's possessed by a computer who keeps telling me to go into the tomb?” She hadn't been back inside since they landed. Hearing Mission betray them was like a punch to the gut. “And what about your son?”

“We’ll take another ship. And we'd take Dustil with us. And Mekel, of course.”

“Of course. And your future grandchild--guess we'd have to take that kid Dustil knocked up, too.”
“We—we’ll make room. Get a ship big enough to have room.”

“And….” Her voice trailed off. “Canderous? The clans? Polla and Seiran? Korrie. We'd have to stop on Deralia and get Korrie—”

“Canderous and the Mandalorians are the least of my worries—they've got the firepower to fend for themselves. We could take Polla and Seiran. Pick up Korrie. Maybe find Zaalbar, too. Maybe if we get far away from here in the Hawk, Mission would stop talking about those tombs. Zaalbar and I could put our heads together… maybe we could fix Mission.”

“We'd be fugitives.”

“We'd be together.” He squeezed her hand. “You'd be away from this.”

“Have you ever thought maybe this is what I deserve?”

“No.” His mouth twisted. “And if it's the last damned thing I can do I want to make you stop thinking it. You don't deserve to be frozen in carbonite or… or locked in a tomb for eternity with a madman in your head! Nothing you did deserves it.”

“Nothing?” She raised her eyebrow. “Malachor V? Being Sith—”

“That wasn't you.” His voice was quiet. Stubborn. “Look, I'm not saying… you did… there are some… there's stuff you did do. You know it as well as I do. Mistakes. Tragic ones—but—”

“Yes” She swallowed. My friends. “I've killed a lot of people.”

“This isn't atonement. Living would be.”

“So, run,” she repeated. “You want to run.”

“Just… go.” Carth said softly. “We could just go… couldn’t we?”

“You can't really think it would work?”

“I want to think it.” He kissed her forehead, resting his lips there, scratch of stubble against her skin. “Find a Force collar. Just… just go.”

It can’t be that easy, Carth. I was half-dead after Kashyyyk. You think that was all a trick? And the Sleepers… do you think they’ll just stop if I put on a Force collar and run?

And then Revan understood. They’d played similar games on Korriban, on Manaan—even on Kashyyyk. When things got really dark—they still had that spark of hope, the dream of a future even if the time itself could never come to pass. Just the pipe dreams of a mindwiped Sith war criminal and her Republic pilot gone AWOL.

But there was always that flip-card waiting its turn in the hand. The hard light of day in a strange spaceport. The hangover. Like an empty bank account, like kanna mites in the spice.

Revan let him wrap his arms around her. “Sure. We'll run.” It didn't need to be said that Carth couldn't jettison this place and these people any more than she could. “There's places on the Defalli Rim. I know coordinates. Polla's da told her—”


“Like us.” She closed her eyes. The whispers in her mind calling her to the tomb faded to a dull
ebb. “Of course, without the Force I’m not that dangerous.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He kissed the top of her head. “Beautiful, you know we could, if--”

“Shut up.” She ran a finger across his mouth to quiet him. “You said it already. We’re outta here.”

“Yeah.” He kissed her forehead. “Okay.”

Xxx

Tending to the wounded was strangely relaxing, a familiar pattern of healing trance and the smell of kolto.

Revan had asked Sinae to give Carth and the Fragment time alone together. The Mandalorian healer made a great show of expressing her desire to return to the medix tent, but acquiesced in the end. The respectful light in Sinae's eyes was familiar: the expression of a woman who had seen a Jedi perform miracles, and would entrust her with performing more of them.

And the order of the well-rounded Mandalorian encampment surrounding them sent a chill up Revan’s spine.

A tactical part of her brain noted the main approach to the camp that had been blasted by the Sleeper's ships, the ground there pitted and scarred where exploded Ordo mines had upended a thousand years of priceless stonework. She also noticed the two armored figures in beskar who stood exactly fifteen meters in front of her, one on each side. Both were armed to the teeth--

Not just two, Red.

A prickle in the Force as much as Malak’s warning caused Revan to turn, only to see another six warriors in full armor arrayed in a half-circle between her and the residential tents. Automatically, she scanned for the wider figure in scarred beskar who must have given the order, but Canderous Ordo was nowhere to be seen.

Nonetheless, she would have bet Malachi's fortune that the Mandalore was watching her, too.

Ordo’s blind loyalty to the Fragment shouldn’t have been a surprise, and yet it was. Eyeing those stalwart figures, Revan had the unpleasant realization that even if her plan had worked and they’d successfully frozen the Fragment in carbonite, Mandalorian loyalty would have required at least one more fight.

Something else the mighty Revan didn't anticipate?

Mocking me serves no purpose. The Sheris presence in her mind grew bolder, but the automatic anger Revan had once felt about the intrusion had faded. You and I must work together.

To that, Sheris had no answer, just a gentle nudge toward their next patient, the woman with the infant they'd rescued from the rubble of Kaas City.

“It’s you!” The relieved smile was strangely gratifying. “No one will tell us anything! And these soldiers…” she lowered her voice, glancing nervously from side to side. “They’re Mandalorian!”

“Oh, I’m aware.” A wry smile pulled at Revan’s lips.

Then Revan reassured her that the Mandalorians would not eat or enslave them, and administered the precious anti-rads to both mother and child. As she worked, she tallied the ships lined up on the
plateau and the rows of tents lining the square. Not the largest gathering of clan she had ever seen—but they were well-armed and organized for a people whose backbone she’d shattered. That was, she suspected, more a testament to Canderous Ordo's prowess as a general than the Fragment's strategizing. Add to that Revan’s own flagship and whatever manned fleet the Fragment and Ordo had brought to the system….

This world would bring no challenge for them, but they could seek others—the Imperial mines on Lothal, or the colonies near Quesh. All undefended, if the Imperial navy is broken--

Sinae had said Carth Onasi commanded what was left of the Imperial ships. Revan had to wonder at that loyalty.

But closer matters were at hand. Revan's head turned toward the transport and the injured from their camp. Those with the worst injuries had already been taken inside the domed triage stations, where junior medix would stabilize them until Sinae came, but the remainder still suffered. In this light, Yuthura’s lekku looked almost gray. The woman raised a hand in Revan’s direction, and she waved back.

*Lady Ban needs a second dose of medication,* Sheris nudged in her mind. *And more healing.*

*A few rows over from Yuthura, Polla Organa appeared to be having a spirited discussion with her husband. From the sullen expression on Polla’s face, Seiran was just as upset with his wife as they had predicted.*

“What’s taking the First Wife of Lin so long? Sheris, get Urex to show you the supply tent. We’ll need more anti-rads.” Sinae made a quick hand-motion at the nearest armored guard—and then a ruder one when the block of beskar shook their helmeted head as if countermanding her orders.

“I can begin another triage round while Urex gets the supplies, if that is easier—” Revan offered.

“Yes. I’ll have a word with Aemelie as soon as they get the comms back online.” Sinae’s braids were a frizzled tangle. She pushed them back from her forehead. “Let the Second Wife of Ordo talk some sense into that di’kut husband of hers. There is no reason why you should not be trusted with our supply caches. You saved Dessa and her baby!”

Revan smiled politely. “How kind of you to say,” she demurred, with all of Sheris’s sniveling diplomacy. “But… Revan and I have had our share of misunderstandings.”

The medix frowned, lowering her voice. “Not all blame for that belongs at your feet.”

“--but it is my feet that must carry the burden.” Finishing the Mandalorian proverb reminded Revan where she had first heard it: in the women’s tent at the Clan Lin compound, before everything changed.

*How much of our lives were set in place, even then?* She meant the mental question for Malak, but his presence in her mind was diffused, unfocused as if his attention had wandered elsewhere. To the Fragment, she thought, or perhaps, their son--

“If you carry the burden, wear capable boots.” Sinae smiled, and clapped Revan on the back, before retreating back to the main medix tent.

Automatically, Revan glanced down at her feet. She was still wearing the armored shoes that Mydia Blais had supplied, but of course the expression was merely a metaphor. *Capable, am I? It*
would have been the epitome of arrogance to anticipate her own survival, but now--

Now that she had survived, Revan discovered that she wanted to live.

*Malak said that Malachor is fine.* It was a childish leap of faith, that saying those words made them true, but that was all Revan had to grasp. The thought that she would see him again--a thought she had never dared be possible--made her eyes prick now with unshed tears. A fool's sentiment, but if it were true--

*Your son.* Sheris's voice, soft as a whisper. *We will see him again, even though you denied me any children of my own--*

*I had no choice.*

*Liar.*

*If you wanted children you should have stayed on Dantooine. Slept with a different man.* It was enough to make Revan laugh, that she could have such a futile argument with a shadow.

“Your babe will be fine,” she comforted the wounded refugee, who rewarded her with tears of gratitude and superlatives the woman never would have dared offer a Dark Lord of the Sith.

*Where is that Wookiee of yours?* Was Sheris mocking her with the question? *I thought they were supposed to meet us here--*

That was true. Revan glanced at the sky overhead, and then down at the unblinking light of the short-range comm-link on her wrist. It was possible that Grarwwaar and Rogere were still out of range, or that planetary interference was stopping their transmission, but they should be here by now.

XXX

“What's the kriffing naastar doing now?” Naastar. *Destroyer.* Seemed a better name than Sheris and Canderous’d be damned if he was gonna call the naastar Revan. He heard his voice crackle over the short-range transceiver and adjusted the knob at the base of his helm. “Who authorized giving Revan’s double medical supplies?”

*“Sinae.”* Philene’s voice crackled back, sounding more impressed than he should be. “*That Sheris woman saved Dessa’s life.*”

“She also stabbed Revan in the guts. Don’t give her the run of the camp.” He raised a hand to signal the other guards to their watch and Urex raised an arm back. “Stay on the naastar.”

The kids commed in their assent and Canderous cranked the climate control on his armor, pacing around the wideband station they were trying to assemble.

Onasi and Revan hadn't emerged from the medix tent and now Sinae was squawking on their open channel, complaining about losing access to her own tent.

He told her to let them be--at least for now. Onasi and Revan in the tent was better than Revan following that double of hers.

“That's right,” he muttered into his now-muted comm. “Keep away from the kriffing naastar, Revan. Unless you're gonna kill her.”
“General? We're almost done!” Rowda's voice interrupted his thoughts and Canderous glanced up. Their best pilot’s face was split with a wide grin that more than made up for the burn scars across half of it.

“Good,” he grunted, popping the seals on his helm, because if they got through Gwen would need to see his face.

The contraption Rowda and Jingo built was really something: a soldered-together tower of recycled pipes and durasteel fitters that jagged its way up the side of the ancient Temple. Fifty meters up, two more of the Rialis kids hovered their jets, bolting the last piece of the triangular tower in place.

Rowda gestured to the board. “When you're ready, boot her up…?”

Canderous grimaced. The controls looked like a scrapped comm-board from one of the snubs hooked up to a pair of rusty turbines, but Rowda swore those turbines would boost their comm signal high enough to pierce the crap in atmo and allow them to contact the Aleema --and then hopefully pitch a wideband signal off her transceivers into the galaxy beyond. They needed a bead on the rest of the galaxy, and their people in it.

Dxun. By the Six, he was not looking forward to telling Gwenarius they'd lost their daughter. A clean death in battle would have been one thing. But this--

(To the other fear, the one that had seen the reports from Onderon, the worry there would be no one to answer on Dxun--or no Dxun left to call--to that fear, he would not give a voice.)

“Go ahead,” he nodded encouragingly at the Rialis kid, wiping the sweat from his face with the towel he’d started clipping between his guns since they landed on this osik planet. The air was thick and damp. Hells, he'd bunkered down in swamps less swampy.

Rowda flipped a switch and lights sparked on the board. There was a low whine as the turbines began to spin, feeding off the battery Revan had charged for them the day before. “Might take a while to get a signal,” Rowda warned, turning the dials.

“Take your time.” The two kids in jet-packs above were coming down, but Canderous kept more than half his attention on the redhead he'd had a lock on since the medix tent.

The naastar was doling out meds to the wounded on their camp's eastern lee, now. Didn't look like any more than that--but if she tried anything he'd be ready. Revan was a great warrior--best he'd ever seen as long as she didn’t need to shoot something. But she wasn't always right.

“Why do you follow her?” Gwen had asked Canderous that question more than once, and while Aemelie insinuated at least some of the reason was driven by his attraction, Canderous had realized long ago that he had no more desire to pin Revan against a bulkhead than she had a want to be pinned--by him.

No, he followed her for reasons less simple to articulate, for desires less easy--or palatable--to sate.

He followed her because in the clean simplicity of a firefight, Canderous felt alive. He followed her because in their moments of battle, either of them had but to raise a hand or turn a head for the other knew the plan. Their synergy was not lust; it was something bloodier, darker, deeper. A kinship between two predators, born in a Taris sewer and honed to an electron-bladed edge across a galaxy.

Canderous followed Revan--not Starfire, D'Reev, Ordo, Onasi, or even Lin--because blood called to blood, and glory to glory. Because she was a warrior worth his equal. There’d been a time--a
recent time--before Milli was lost, before Dxun attacked, before this naastar showed--when Canderous had thought Ordo and Lin would rise together. He’d even plotted their invasion of this hu’tuun empire; traced the spacelanes they would claim, charted out planets capable of giving them a real fight--

Even then he’d known it was nothing but a pleasant fantasy. For Mando'ade, there is a time for all seasons, and now was not the season for war.

The Sith Empire had been conquered in a heartbeat, folding like cheap Republic battle armor. The refugees they aided now had all fight beat out of them. The aruetii machine-ships might have been a glorious challenge, but his people were too few, their forces too diminished. The betrayal of Clan Wies at Medriaas was another blow. As much as Canderous longed to see his people burn through the stars, he had also seen enough of war to know that the arc would be tragically short if launched too soon--a vulnerability that was only brought home in spears by Gwen's continued silence, the loss of their daughter, and the ordinance Revan's hu’tuun ships had displayed--a might they could not match, no matter how much he wished it was so.

Aemelie wanted to believe they were on the cusp of a new age of glory, but perhaps Canderous had allowed her too much rein. There were reasons why wars were fought with the counsel of women and not their swords.

And if he had indulged Aemelie too much; he had also allowed himself and the clans to be dragged too deeply into Revan's troch affairs. There were no dar'jett left on this planet to fight--merely broken sentientis that would be more trouble than they were worth to feed. And while Canderous knew that assisting the losing side today might mean alliances and victory in another rotation, he also knew there was nothing strategic for them on Dromund Kaas--only a danger that lay not with radiation sickness, or the beasts of the jungle, or even an immortal abomination of an emperor.

No, the danger in this place rested within the skull of that green-eyed naastar aruetii, whose frail body possessed the dar'jett mind that had once taken the clans apart.

Canderous did not hate the naastar--not rationally, at least. But the lizard part of his brain screamed she was a threat to his Revan, a threat that needed to be extinguished before her whispers spread like brushfire through the clans. In his brief observation she reminded him uncannily of the tales he’d heard of Novasun--and indeed, from what Revan had said, this woman had been trained by that thrice-damned Dar'Jett--so perhaps the comparison was apt.

Jana Novasun had been aruetii in the end, too; betraying them to Malachi D’Reev for her own games.

No good could come from the counsel of her apprentice.

Of their mystical Emperor, Canderous and his people had found no sign, but the thought of such a being worried him less than the naastar. A man with multiple bodies could be killed multiple times.

He would only have needed to kill the woman once--but Revan had chosen to spare her. Canderous had to respect that. To do otherwise would be to truly turn his back on Revan, and by association the rest of the clan they had forged. He owed her--not to mention Carth and the furball--more than that. If the walking carpet was even still alive.

Still, she best not test his patience. “What’s the naastar doing now?” he barked into the helm, holding it in front of him to catch the speaker still primed to his voice.
“It’s only five minutes since the last time you asked. Still healing, I think.” That was Philene. Cautious to a fault.

“She’s glowing blue and sitting.” There, Urex--always so literal.

“Huh. Keep on her.” Canderous paced to the top of the hill, where he’d have the best shot if she tried something.

The naastar aruetii was indeed glowing blue and sitting, but then she stood, moving among the injured and sick and he noted what else should concern Revan if she had a jot of sense: the woman attracted followers, just like Revan herself. Sinae had already taken Canderous to task over their private comm-channel for trying to shoot the aruetii. She had, his medix insisted, saved both Dessa and the babe, and if Canderous was going to slaughter the best healer his medix had ever seen, he could find a new medix, and perhaps a new clan to ally with, for Sinae would take the clan of Zal with her.

But maybe Aemelie could talk to Sinae--

The static from the comm-board cut out with a show of sparks and their turbines abruptly ceased.

“Battery’s dead again,” Rowda sighed. “We need more power. Can you get Revan--?”

“She’s busy.” Canderous snapped.

“But--”

“I’ll handle it.” Revan wasn’t the only Force-user on this festering chivhole of a planet

Xxx

Dustil was so startled when Canderous Ordo had appeared in the doorway of their tent that he’d been a dumbass and said yes when the man asked him to play Force battery.

At the time, it had seemed the perfect excuse for him and Mekk to get away from Mydia Blais, maybe work out some ground rules, warn his boyfriend to stop fracking flirting with the sociopath who was gonna have Dustil’s kid, because she could really hurt him--maybe figure out if this was all an act or if Mekk was really into her.

But Mekel Jin had other ideas.

“Good luck, Telos,” Mekk breezed. He was bent over a crate of Mydia’s clothes, pulling out pieces of armor and holding them up for her inspection.

“Donate,” she yawned. “No, wait. Keep the cortosis bra. Have fun, Lord Malak. I do hope you conquer the Mandalorians after you do chores for them.” She’d made a fan out of some corrugated packing material and was briskly fanning herself. “Slave, open a window. It’s stifling in here!”

“He’s not--” Dustil heard his voice crack and fumbled. Didn’t seem to matter, Mekk just kept smiling.

“You know it’s a tent, right?” Mekel shrugged. “No windows, Lady Mydia. You want to go outside?”

“Ugh, no.” She wiggled her bare feet, the only part of her besides her face that wasn’t in armor. “My hair… Mandalorians… I can’t bear the sun.”
“It’s raining, I think.” Mekk craned his head around to Canderous Ordo, who muttered something that might have been a weather report or might have just been disgust before tramping off.

Was Dustil just supposed to follow him?

_Come on_, he thought at Mekel, but the chivhole didn’t budge. Of course, no bond, but how long had they known each other? Mekk should be able to tell that Dustil wanted them both to go.

“I want a window.” Mydia pouted, sticking out her lower lip and crossing her arms. “I feel a bit sick.”

“Mor’fracka,” Dustil snapped, using the Force to lift one of the tent’s panels away from the rest. It snapped up, revealing the view of camp life that Dustil had been trying to forget: tidy rows of Mandalorian soldiers and suffering civilians. Sure, it was the Sith suffering, but it still looked too much like Telos after the bombs for comfort.

“Lord Malak aims to please,” Mekel smiled. At her. Not at Dustil.

“Let’s go.” Ordo was back again. A block of armor. Impatient. Holding a coil of wire that Dustil was probably going to be hooked up with. To a battery, while Mekk tried to hook up with Mydia Blais.

“Later,” Mekk said, holding up a pair of high-heeled boots plated with gems for Mydia to inspect. Her lips twisted with disdain. “Ugh! Obliterate those. Grandmother had terrible taste.”

“Discard.” Mekk shrugged and tossed them in the largest pile, the one stacked precariously and half-blocking the door.

Well. That was that.

When Dustil left, Mydia was barking instructions at Mekel, sitting on a pile of rolled Mandalorian carpets, still with her armored boots off. But Dustil _knew_ her. Next she’d ask Mekel for a foot massage, and he’d have to give her one or she’d use the Force on him.

Where was she going to _sleep_? Where was Mekel going to sleep? He couldn’t risk pissing Mydia off about Mekel, she could hurt him so easily, and without the Force he’d have no defenses.

But Mekel acted like it didn’t matter at all.

That was how Dustil ended up standing by two sparking, humming turbines, concentrating the Force into a steady pulse of energy that kept the rotors turning, while an armor-clad Mandie did something with what looked like a salvaged communications board and a Bith-rigged metal tower. Somehow, this was supposed to patch into the planet's natural electrical grid, and boost their free-receivers planet-wide, or beyond.

Dustil hadn't been on the engineering track in the good old Dreshdae Academy (there was no engineering track), so he'd have to take the ass's word for it. But he was glad to be doing _something_ besides pretending to be Darth Malak to satisfy Mydia Blais, who seemed even nuttier than he remembered. He'd warned Mekk to keep his distance from her--realizing a millisecond later that was probably like issuing an open-door invite for Mekel Jin to give her a lap dance--but it was done now--

“*Don’t worry about me, Telos.*” That crooked smile made Dustil do nothing but worry, but he told himself that was dumb. For all her talk about torture and popping off toes, Mydia Blais was no
Inse. (And what had happened to good old Inse? Maybe her ship had exploded. That would be for the best, probably. She’d have Mekk for breakfast.)

“How’re you getting on?” The gruff voice rattled through a helm’s speaker and Dustil looked up, startled to see the Mandalore looming over him.

“He's doing it!” Leskal answered for Dustil, with more enthusiasm than Dustil felt. “We've got the receivers live.”

“Doesn't help much if we can't get the relays up. When the Aleema's back in range, we'll send up a shuttle, see if we can rig up a com-sat from there.”

“I could help with the relays.” Dustil had to offer. “I… uh, I used to have a portable sat-net back home.

“Good.” The Mandalorian grunted his approval. “Your father said you knew this stuff. Once the mains are full, see if you can patch us up to the Aleema.”

My father said I knew this stuff. How the frack did his father know he knew anything? Maybe the old man had been paying attention. It gave Dustil a weird feeling inside.

XXX

Seiran’s leg had been encased in a fresh wrap of kolto-ribbed plasticote. Looking at it made Polla sad all over again. In the time they'd been apart, he’d had a delip that took all his dangerous stubble away. And his eyes were narrowed slits of black, squinting at the sun and looking anywhere but at Polla's face.

“At least you're speaking to me,” Polla joked. You could cut the tension between them with a laser sword. But outwardly, Seiran had been nothing but sweet as thisla pie: asking about her trip like she'd just gone to town on Sixthday, smiling when she told him how their plan with the Butcher had gone down in flames… and even nodding sympathetically when she told him how Revan had conned her into thinking the Butcher had bombed Kaas on purpose.

He hadn’t even said ‘I told you so.’ Not once.

That was worrying because it meant he must be saving his ‘told you so’s’ up.

“Of course I'm speaking to you.” Seiran gave the sky (and not her) a smile that might have been believable if Polla was eighty-five and half-blind. His hands were white-knuckled, she noticed, and there was a muscle twitching in his cheek as he stared at the space above her head. “You're my wife.”

“You have a right to be mad--”

“Do I?” His thick eyebrows drew together and he took a breath. “What a relief to have your permission.”

“But Revan said she needed my help.”

“And how did that go--getting your help? Sinae told me Revan brought you in on a stretcher. She said it's a wonder you didn't bleed out from the small tree that got you in the spleen.”

“That was an accident.” Never mind she'd been in that tree with the half-baked idea she might shoot them both. Never mind that Sei was putting Polla in a position where she had to defend Darth
Bossypants, the woman who had... pretty much stretched the truth 'til Thirdday to get Polla's assistance with freezing the Butcher in carbonite.

Darth Bossypants had *used* her. It hurt, but Polla had to, as Ma always said, face facts. Darth Bossypants had *used* her, but the other one had broken Darth Bossypants's fingers. Without blinking.

And the other one was in charge of this Mandalorian army.

The woman with her memories was fracking scary. Hell, she and Tenny-Bro would probably get along great.

“An accident. Yeah. She said that, too.” Seiran still avoided her gaze. “You both end up half-dead but not a scratch on her. ”

“Sei! Revan didn't get me hurt on purpose!” Except the mine had been live after all. *Revan* walked out without a scratch and they both--*almost died, but didn't. She saved us, but if it wasn’t for her--*

“How do you know it was an accident?” Sei demanded. “Sounds just like what she’d say.”

“Because they were... they were fighting each other when I fell out of the tree.” She didn't want to say *frozen in a weird stasis bubble*, because that made her sound nuts.

Polla would never forget the sound of Revan’s fingers breaking until the end of her days. Revan only had one good hand and the Butcher had just thrown her into the air like Tenny-Bro had done to them both in the tomb. Like they were nothing. And Polla still wasn't sure what had--she'd *shot* the Butcher and she hadn't missed, no way she could miss at such close range--

“Are we done yet?” Seiran's voice sounded as tired as Polla felt, interrupting her thoughts like a jolt out of hyperspace. “We've gotten through the worst, so we're done. Right?”

“I... guess.” The Butcher had sounded like she was gonna listen to Revan after all, Polla thought, although that did beg the question: why go through all that banthashit when Revan could have just told her what was wrong? Why hadn't Revan just told her what was wrong?

*Bossypants used me. She said the Butcher wouldn't hurt me and she was right. But she risked my life--*

“How is she?” Seiran asked. “Revan?”

“Ask her yourself. She's right--” Polla gestured at the red-headed woman in armor with the hover crate of meds tending to some injured three rows down--but then Sei's expression made her realize the mistake. “Oh. You mean the other one? Fine. Barely hurt.”

“Sinae said she got a nasty stab wound,” Seitan muttered. “She doesn't blame *you...?*”

“No.” Polla forced a laugh, trying not to remember the shot. Maybe... maybe the woman didn't know who she'd aimed for. “We're *pals*. The Butcher even offered to get you and me out of here.” Her smile felt forced. Her side still hurt where the tree had gone in.

“Good.” Seiran finally looked her in the eyes. “Let's do that. Tomorrow. First thing.”

“We... uh, we'd need a ship--”

“No shortage of ships,” Seiran waved a hand toward the plateau bristling with ships. Most were
short-range Mandie fighters, but there were a few beauts that had already caught Polla's eye. Nothing quite like the Hawk, of course, but if the Hawk hadn't been such a sweet ride Polla would have picked that Arkanian Starcruiser over a Corellian disc model any day of any galactic week.

“They owe us at least that much,” Seiran muttered. “Or we can cadge a ride from your Exchange buds. I already asked the Sullustan–Oaska. She said yes.”

“Oaska’s great, but she doesn’t speak for Grarwwaar. He’s the boss.”

“Asked the Wookiee too.” Seiran folded his arms. “He and Rogere showed up around the same time we did. They're right over there.” He waved his hand toward the high point of the ridge, where, sure enough, the meters-tall shaggy frame of a Wookiee slouched next to the rounded mass of a Houck. Looked like the Grarwwaar had his arm around Rogere, even.

“Lookit that.” Polla nodded at the duo. Changing the subject seemed the smarter type of valor. “You really want to be on the same ship as a Houck and a Wookiee when they're getting it on?”

“I’d frack a Houck and a Wookiee if it'd get us home,” her husband snapped. “But that wasn't the deal. Grarwwaar said he owed you.”

“Owed me?” Polla frowned. That wasn't quite right. “No. See, I ran into Ik-tik Dracary at the Blue Skies-- think I told you this before--?”

“Your Exchange contact. From the bar. Yes.”

“Yeah. We used to run opposite legs of the Corellia-to-Jeddah gig. Anyway, he introduced me to his Wookiee pal, and so… uh, Mission said credits would be no problem, so I offered to pay them to help--”

“Mission said credits would be no problem? Where was she getting them from?” To Sei’s credit, he didn't flinch. His voice didn't change its tone. Just his hand clamped down on her hand, nearly hard enough to bruise. “Pollie. We gotta get out of here.”

“I know.” She did. She glanced over at where Bossypants was bandaging some kid's arm, looking for all the stars in the galaxy like a Jedi hero, hands glowing, just like in the vids. Her gaze traveled past her to the medix tent, where the Butcher and her husband had last been seen. “I know,” she repeated, but something (well, lots of things) weren’t quite right.

“Grarwwaar said he owed me?” That didn't gel. Polla had had more than a few nightmares about how she'd pay back the Exchange for their help on Kaas if Mission somehow flaked. Running into her old pal Ik-tik from had been quite the stroke of luck. What if it had been too good? “They're probably not leaving right away--there's still so much to do here--”

“I think the Mandies have it covered,” Seiran snapped. “Don't you want to see our son?”

“Of course!” Seiran was right. The Mandies had this. Hell, they had two Revans, too. “Just… don't want to take more of an Exchange favor without seeing the paperwork first.”

“We’re in this muck over our assholes,” her husband said. “All things considered, the Exchange are the least of our problems.”

XXX

Mydia Blais sighed and closed her eyes. The slave had warned that the medication to counteract radiation poisoning might make her dizzy, and apparently that was true, because she felt quite
lightheaded, staring up at the ceiling of this gaudy mess of a tent. Surely, Lord Malak could have commandeered the largest one for their quarters, but apparently he had not, and she was forced now to share space with her lover's smarmy fur-faced slave while Lord Malak himself pranced off with the Mandalorian chieftain who had asked for his aid.

Shouldn’t the Mandalorian chieftain be aiding them? Although, she supposed that was what this encampment was, in a sense. A place to aid the sick. Still, shouldn't she, the pregnant consort of the man who had conquered their civilization, deserve more aid? A competent foot masseuse?

“Uh...do you want a glass of tea?” Lord Malak's slave asked. He was dressed like a Mandalorian; another absurdity since they didn't have slaves. Or did they? Truthfully, Mydia had never paid much attention in her xenososh classes. Conquered cultures were boring.

“Your voice irritates me.” She felt a yawn form in her throat. “Go away.”

“I... uh, Telos didn't think you should be alone.” The man frowned.

“You're lying.” It was obvious. His heart rate jumped every time he said Telos. “Telos is a planet.”

“Some sents have reactions to anti-rads. We learned it in school.”

“And I learned that Telos is a planet in school.”

“Lord Malak is Telos,” the man said nonsensically. “You can't really be this fracking stup--”

He began to turn an interesting shade of purple when he was strangled, Mydia thought.

“Can't br--” he gasped.

“Slaves don't call me names,” she reprimanded him. “Say you'll stop.’

“Stop--” he fell on the ground gasping for air, rather more dramatically than was needed.

Mydia stopped. It was very difficult to find decent help, what, with the ruin of their civilization. “You and I are going to get along quite well,” she told him. “As soon as you learn your place.”

The slave sat up, glaring with those black eyes. Oh, but he had a spark of fire in them.

“If you weren’t pregnant...” he muttered--as if he was capable of carrying out threats.

“If I wasn’t pregnant, I wouldn’t need my left foot rubbed again.” She wiggled her toes.

“The things I fracking do for him,” he mumbled, still glaring. She preferred him like this. The fawning subservience had been rather dull, except for its effect on Lord Malak, who seemed incensed, apparently preferring slaves with more spine.

So did she.

Right now, this slave’s spark rather reminded Mydia of the old gardener on Ziost, back when he’d still had eyes.

XXX

Yuthura looked up at Revan’s approach. The former dark lord was pale, even for a Human. “You’re pushing yourself too hard,” she chided. A familiar observation in the days since the bombing of Kaas.
“There are still two rows of wounded who haven’t had their anti-rads.” A wry smile tugged at the woman’s mouth and she sat down next to Yuthura. “Here are yours,” she added, handing over two derm paks. “If you can stand the pain, the best way to apply them is between your lekku.”

Yuthura had medical training too, but she deigned not to mention it, wincing as she braced herself for the raw shock of agony that came from injecting a derm into such a sensitive spot. Discomfort was intense but faded quickly. In truth, more quickly than Yuthura had expected.

Revan winced, as if she had felt it too. Perhaps she had. Sheris’s gift with the Force had always had an empathic component.

“Who are your friends?” Yuthura asked, to distract them both.

Revan glanced up at the two Mandalorians standing about five meters away, arms folded a bit too neatly in their armor, no doubt concealing some sort of weaponry. “Children prepared to shoot me, I believe. It appears I no longer have the loyalty of the clans.”

“The camp is abuzz with rumor about what happened in that medix tent.” Yuthura trusted the other woman would tell her when she was ready. “I take it your plan to secure Polla Revan changed?”

“Polla Revan?” A red eyebrow arched.

“It’s what Zaalbar calls her. Or… called.” There had still been no sign of their friend—or the T3 computer with Mission Vao’s personality.

“Oh? What does he call me?”

Yuthura felt her lekku twitch. “Your Shyriiwook is even better than mine. Surely you know.”

“I’ve heard a few names. You know, Zaalbar may still be alive.” The woman took her hand and squeezed it, bringing a calming sensation with her touch. The last of Yuthura’s pain ebbed away. “Zaalbar. Phylus, too. Some of the others. The Mando’ade are doing sweeps twice a day for survivors. Another transport left just as yours arrived.”

“I hope so.” They both lapsed into silence for a moment. Yuthura thought of the brave Wookiee who had sacrificed so much for many.

Revan’s thoughts were hidden behind half-hooded eyes, dark with exhaustion, now narrowed on her guards again, as if she was planning on how to slip their tether.

“Have you seen Grarwbaar or the Houck?” the former dark lord ventured, after a moment.

“Actually, yes.” Yuthura had vouched for them when the Wookiee and the Houck had approached the camp shortly after whatever had transpired inside the medix tent. She explained to Revan, drawing the story out longer than strictly required, just to see if the other woman’s gaze would stray from her guards. It did not, but her flesh hand began tapping absenty on her knee, fingers twitching as if they were t’chun and t’chin in the Force. “I saw Mekel Jin briefly as well,” Yuthura offered. “The Mandalorians appear to have adopted him.”

That brought a break in the woman’s attention, a head turn, and a scowl. “I know. Ordo’s playing games with me.”

Yuthura’s impression was that her former pupil had associated himself with the Mandalorians on his own initiative, but she had learned not to contradict this Revan—not for non-life-threatening events. “Perhaps you should speak to Mekel,” she offered—almost immediately regretting it.
“There’s time for that.” The woman took a breath. “Maybe.” She glanced at the medix tent again. Carth and Revan still hadn’t emerged. Sinae paced outside, looking restless. “Mekel’s odd, in the Force. I was told Oerin Lin stripped him of it?”

“Yes.” Yuthura hesitated, guilt still plaguing her, although, of course, she had been too late to stop it. “I was there.” Her last encounter with the Coruscant had been quite brief; Mekel giving her an unreadable stare and a polite head-nod, before turning back to Mydia Blais and the boxes of possessions the Blais girl had managed to smuggle aboard their medical transport. They could have been near-strangers, instead of the boy who had been one of the first Korriban students, and the woman who had kept him alive.

Come to think of it, he had been odd in the Force. Most nulls still felt like something—a faint spark, but still a presence of some kind. Jin was utterly dead in it. Like a hole, where the Force had been.

“You were there?” Revan raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“And you... Bezel-bonded Mekel with Dustil Onasi. You said that before.” Revan’s expression was distracted, obviously parsecs away.

“Jorak Uln’s request. He wanted a power source. The boys... they were powerful. Dustil more than Mekel, but Mekel had talents.” Talents for keeping alive. Uln had wanted to use Shaardan, or Kel, or even Lashowe Devry, but Yuthura had convinced him to take Mekel instead. Knowing his patronage, (although not his bloodline—that had been a secret none of them had known, as far as Yuthura was aware), and Dustil’s patronage, it had amused the mad Sith Headmaster to envision that Malak and Saul Karath would be beholden to him.

That made no sense, but at that point Yuthura's master was quite mad. At least in part due to her efforts to drive him to that state.

“Then Uln... died?” Revan's head tilted. “I believe that Davad told me a tale about your Polla Revan killing him in some tomb.”

“With Mekel’s assistance, yes.”

“I doubt she needed his assistance.” Definitely distracted, Revan’s eyes roved through the rows of sentients surrounding them, now, searching for something—or someone. “Still. Breaking a Bezel-bond... I’m surprised he’s alive.”

“Perhaps the distance that divided them helped his body survive the shock.” Yuthura had only studied the ritual. She had been unaware of its effects, except in the vaguest of terms.

“Master Kae had a theory...” the woman started and shook her head. “I mean, Vima. Vima had a theory that if you removed the third point of a Bezel triangle... in this case, Uln, the remainder would have the power of all three. She said, if you then divided them...” her voice trailed off. “Who gave Jorak Uln the idea to Bezel-bond them in the first place?”

“I have no idea.” Uln had been Yuthura’s master, but he had guarded his secrets greedily, even as a Jedi. “What did Vima Sunrider think would happen if you divided the remaining pair?”

Presumably, what had happened: Dustil Onasi, always a powerful Force user, was now imbued with Mekel and Jorak’s strength as well as his own.

And possibly Malak’s too.
And no sense. Still, the boy had done better than she would have expected, not submitting to the
dark whispers that promised power on this world. Dark corruption surrounded him, but from what
she had seen, it had not spread to his heart.

Yet.

“Vima’s dead.” Instead of answering, Revan abruptly changed the subject. “I suppose you knew
her as Arren Kae”

“I’ve heard that many Jedi are dead.” A Mandalorian about the age of Dustil or Mekel Jin had
brought Yuthura the details of the Katarr tragedy, along with kolto packs, upon her arrival into the
camp. The boy’s name had been Leskal, and he had witnessed Oerin Lin’s massacre of the Council,
including her old ally, Vrook Lamar.

“Yes. Carth Onasi shot Vima. Aboard the Aleema.”

Yuthura felt her body tense. “Why would he do that?”

“A story for later.” Abruptly, Revan brushed imaginary dirt from her armor. “I will tell you.”

“Are you--” she felt a surge of panic. “You can’t intend to hurt Carth--revenge is not--”

“What?” When this Revan laughed it sounded like bells. Sheris had laughed like that--on Manaan
in their cell sometimes. “No! Vima was trying to sabotage their ship. Carth saved Polla Revan’s
life--he saved everyone aboard the Aleema.” She chuckled. “I would give him a medal, not
vengeance.”

“Oh. But Vima Sunrider was Master Kae?” Now that she said the words out loud, their cadence
was almost familiar, as if Yuthura had known that once. Or heard it whispered.

“Vima Sunrider was a madwoman,” Revan said flatly. “With very dangerous abilities. And now
she’s dead.”

Sith contained wells within wells. Secrets within secrets. Like a dance with eighteen veils, and each
revealing another three hidden in a garter, or pulled from a lekku-wrap. There were times, Yuthura
thought, when she longed for the clean simplicity of a Hutt criminal enterprise.

“I wish we could find a Voice,” Revan added. “I need Tenebrae.”

“You ordered their executions, before.”

“And now I need Tenebrae.” Revan’s brows drew together, grooving lines on her flat Human
forehead. “There’s been no sign of any possessed survivors, but it doesn’t make sense. He will
want to see her. He must be here.” She looked restlessly up the line of injured. “Somewhere.”

“I can help with the healing,” Yuthura offered. “And the… other quest. I’ve spent enough time on
Kaas to recognize the signs.”

“If you can even stand up, I’d be surprised.” The wry smile was back, and with it the full force of
the woman’s quiet charm. She reached over and put a glowing blue hand on Yuthura’s shoulder.
Almost instantly, a feeling of peace invaded her limbs, a languid warmth like a warm bath. “You
need rest.”

“Are you forcing me to get some?” The sensation was so pleasant that she did not protest.
“I’m suggesting it. So you can help more later.”

Behind them, a cheer went up. Yuthura turned her head to see the return of a Mandalorian hunting party, some manner of dead beast floating on repulsors between them. “I believe that’s dinner.”

Sheris, she recalled suddenly, had eschewed animal flesh on Manaan. Almost unheard-of for a Sith. Revan had never shown any such reservation.

Now, the former dark lord made a face. “I still have nutra bars. But it is quite impressive that they took down a zakkeg.”

XXX

Later, Carth was never sure how long they sat there, both of them imagining a world where they were together and free. His wife’s nose kept bleeding, and she finally stuck a medi-pak on top of it, giving her face a half mask that hid her beautiful, expressive mouth and left him staring at those red-lashed hyperdrive eyes, which were much harder to read.

“Credit for your thoughts,” he offered finally.

“On Deralia you’d have to pay ten.” Her voice was muffled under the medi-pak.

“Ten, then.”

She’d pulled a loose-fitting tunic over the bacta bandage wrapped around her ribs, and with the wound covered, Carth could almost forget it was there. That she’d come back from confronting her double and Polla with a stab in the back.

She’d always healed quickly, but now his skin prickled at what that meant.

“It… keeps calling to me, Carth. That… computer, or whatever it is. A voice, coming from the Temple.”

“We’ll get farther away soon.” Soon, he would get up and find a Force collar. See if it worked. But maybe a part of him already knew it wouldn’t be that easy and so Carth stayed where he was, slowly twisting his fingers through the silk of her hair.

Revan had said that she couldn’t die, but also that she couldn’t live. And as much as he’d do anything… anything to change that, he didn’t know what he could do. There was nothing to shoot. Their enemies were ghosts. Hell, and the ghosts-- they didn’t seem to be helping either.

She’d told him she heard Malak’s voice in her head sometimes. Carth… more than anything, he’d wanted that bastard gone for good.

*If she’s frozen in carbonite maybe that bastard would be too. Then he’d never be able to hurt Dustil again. It wasn’t a rational thought. It came from a deep, almost feral place in his brain.*

“We could blow it up,” he offered. “That Temple. From orbit.”

“Wouldn’t work.” Muffled voice with that mask. Green eyes staring up at his. “I don’t know how I know, but I do.”

She’d always known things without knowing how she knew them. She’d always been *right*. Even when things went tragically wrong. Even when she fell on that Rakatan world, maybe. By then, Carth had seen so many damned Sith, mad with power. Had Revan needed that darkness to defeat
Malak?

Would she need it again to defeat the Emperor?

Was she going to defeat the Emperor? After all of this… Carth thought he'd lose his mind if that monster won.

“Do you know if this carbonite thing…” somehow they’d moved past the Force collar--somewhere in between his mad thoughts about going on the run and hers. “Do you know if it will work?”

“Revan thought it would.” She’d slipped and called the other woman by her own name. She’d done that a few times, now. Carth never corrected her. She wasn’t wrong. Revan was that cold-eyed, calculating war leader somewhere outside, incongruously healing the wounded. “Wouldn’t she have used a Force collar on me, if it was that easy?”

*Not if she wanted you out of the picture.* But Carth kept that thought to himself. Sheris had saved their lives, fighting that terentatek. Hell, he’d just seen her heal Revan and Polla Organa, too, not to mention the other injured sents. On the ride back from Kaas City, his seatmate had been a Wookiee matriarch who did nothing but sing the praises of ‘Lord Revan of the Rebellion,’ all in barks, until his ear was sore. Seiran had mentioned she’d been the one to heal him, too--when she and Yuthura and Dustil’s girl pulled him and Polla out of a collapsed building--

“Carth?” Revan pulled the mask down, wiping her nose. Her face was a mess. He didn’t think he’d ever loved her more. He didn’t know what to think. “Kath got your tongue?”

“I’m okay.”

His wife must have gotten his confusion from his expression because she made a face and wiped hers with the back of her hand, then the medpak. “Ugh.” She tilted her head back. “The bleed’ll slow down again. It always does.”

“Yeah.” He’d never seen it this bad before--like they were getting worse. They’d been here two days and it was always getting worse.

“Thanks for overthrowing this planet for me.” Her voice was muffled again under the bandage, but he could see the corner of her lip turn up.

“Turns out… I… I didn’t do much. Polla and Zaalbar and Yuthura… they did most of it.”

“But there’s a Sith Fleet up there with the clan ships. *They* still follow you.” She adjusted her body until she was leaning into him again.

Across from them, Dessa floated in her tank, monitors reassuringly green. Carth suddenly remembered Morgana with Dustil in her belly, that furloughed weekend at Saul and Garrett’s lake house. He had an abrupt stab of loss for another shot like that--to see Revan like that--growing round and glowing, the way her skin felt taut with the little kicks under his hands--

“Yeah. I guess.” He shifted, planting his arms around his wife's flat stomach, the curve of her waist, stroking her there until she sighed, relaxing against him.

“We won the war *and* the fleet,” she murmured. “If the Sleepers go back to sleep, you’ll tell the Imperial Fleet to surrender to the Republic… but will they?”

“I’m not sure.” He thought of them. Ensign Kripp Kagnos, who had been his aide on Kaas. The men and women who’d served on the *Sojourn.* Most had gotten away in escape pods when the
Aleema’s guns took the ship down—but not all. He’d checked the rosters when they’d still been in the sky. He’d tried hard to forget the ones Dustil had killed. “Sents here really suffered under the Sith, Freckles. But not all of them. And there are always men loyal to an ideal—”

“I bet she could scare them into a surrender.”

“You could.”

“I might not be here.” Her eyes looked up into his.

“I don’t like this.” He had to say it. “I don’t like any of it. For one thing, portable carbonite freezing rays are still experimental. There’s a reason they use them mostly for criminal transport and illegal bounties.”

“Well, they can’t kill me. I don’t want to leave, Carth, but—” Her head was still tilted toward the sky. Somewhere outside in the world, Mandalorians were cheering. “What’s that noise?”

“Dinner, I think.” The camp had a routine. Every day the hunters came back around this time, bringing with them whatever beasts they’d killed in the forest. Carth was getting sick of meat—especially meat he’d had to see being gutted, from creatures that looked like someone’s nightmare.

“Excuse me, First Wife…” At that moment, Sinae stuck her head in and asked if they were done. Her lecture was in a dialect of Mandalorian that was different than Canderous’s, but Carth caught most of it. They had their own tent and many others did not. They should be in it--

“Scan me,” his wife ordered out of the blue. “Now, Sinae. Please.”

The medix wrinkled her nose. “Will that make you leave? It’s time to change Dessa’s tank.”

“Yes.” Those hyperdrive eyes stayed fixed on Carth, but Revan’s voice had shifted into the unmistakable tones of command. “You said you wanted to run the scans longer before, remember? Well, do it now. Look for a… sub… a sub-dramid bleed… something bleed--”

Sinae gave an exasperated sigh. “Fine. But after I find nothing you should go assist Clan Ordo’s warriors. The hunters brought back a zakkeg. It’s roasting now.” She tapped the comm-link set in her left ear. “And Canderous just announced on the open channel that they’ve almost got the relays up. There are several things you both could be doing to help with either endeavor --”

“And I will. After this,” his wife promised her. “But scan me first. The long scans. Keep me under for twenty minutes, just like you wanted to before. My nose keeps bleeding. Let’s get to the bottom of why.”

The medix nodded, curiosity sparking her expression. “Clean yourself, first. You'll get the equipment dirty.”

XXX

Roast zakkeg had never really been Polla’s thing. She’d had it a few times, mostly in the forest when she and Yuthura had been on their ‘fake Revan’ tour, rousing up the rebels, but it was always gamey. And stringy. And the Mandalorian way of handling that with buckets of sweet spicemix over the haunches reminded Polla a little too much of a hessi roast back home with Ma’s Grange club.

She’d never been able to stomach eating hessi, not when she’d spent her tweener years caring for one, and this zakkeg tasted just like she’d imagined a poor hessi would.
“You can have mine,” she said, pushing her plate over to Seiran. “The sauce reminds me of the Grange--”

Her voice trailed off because there was the Butcher, supported by Captain Obvious, finally coming out of the medix tent. Then Sinae appeared behind them, taking off toward the Dark Temple building at a dead run.

Carth and the Butcher didn’t appear to notice the medix scarper, still deep in conversation or in love or whatever. But then the Butcher looked up, and Polla could practically see her eyes zero in on them.

“She's coming this way,” Seiran observed. He raised his hand and waved.

“Don't… don't make it look like we're fighting,” Polla whispered, bolting a smile on her face. She edged their communal plate of zakkeg back in his direction.

“We're not?” Sei's voice had that lightness of tone that wasn't actually light at all. He squeezed her hand with one of his. “Are we?” He raised his voice. “Hello, Carth and Revan!”

“It's good to see you again, Seiran.” The Butcher's husband was hanging back, like maybe Captain Obvious recognized how awkward this was for everyone, but his wife just plowed on through, gabbing away, her mouth stretched so tight in a smile it almost looked painful. “I hope you're feeling better.”

“Yeah, since the anti-rads.” Seiran reached for Polla's other hand abruptly--and more than a little awkwardly--just as she was about to stand up and find something important to do elsewhere. Instead, she sat back down again, crossing her legs at the ankles and trying to look casual. Awkward, with Sei's fingers clamped on all of hers like two vises, a giant platter of meat lying between them.

“Good, that's good.” The woman's voice was pitched too high. There was a smear of dried blood just above her lip. “You guys are in the final trench now, I promise. Just a few hyperspace points and then home. Okay?”

Seiran's hand squeezed Polla's and she got it immediately. “Right. We need to leave. Soon,” she said, staring up at her copy. The top-knot still bugged her. Why would the woman do that? “Guess we'll need a ship. I was thinking we'd take the Hawk.”

“No, that's not--” The Butcher and her husband both objected at once, and Seiran made a startled noise--like he hadn't seen this coming?

“It's Carth's ship!” the Butcher exclaimed indignantly.

“Polla--” Seiran’s aghast look was cute. But he was a crap negotiator.

“We need--uh, I might need--” Captain Onasi frowned at his wife. “We can't just give them the ship when Mission’s in it--”

“She doesn't get the ship anyway! It's your ship!” The top-knot flipped when Revan turned her head. “I agree--you and Seiren need to leave Kaas as soon as possible, but not in that ship.”

“Don’t be selfish. You have a better ship. Bigger.” Polla gestured toward the sky, not that the Aleema was visible yet--not for another few hours, according to the Mandies. “And you owe me… me and my family. Aren't my parents watching your kid?” She didn’t expect the Hawk, she never had. But it was fun watching the Butcher squirm.
The Butcher made a sound almost like a laugh. “Force, I hope so. Malak just keeps saying he’s fine.”

Her nose was bleeding again. Maybe that had to do with the crazy. Or maybe she saw Force ghosts like Mydia Blais always claimed to.

“We’ll find you a good ship, Polla,” Carth Onasi promised. “But there’s… the Hawk has some things we're still working on.”

“I promise I’ll get you out of here, Polla.” The Butcher swallowed, meeting her eyes. Hers darted away fast, as if she was lying. “You and Seiran both. If you want a ship of your own, you can have any light cruiser or scout carrier from the Mandalorian fleet. Take your pick. I’ll… I’ll talk to Canderous.”

“Any except the Hawk, huh?” Polla scoffed. “Or the Aleema.”

“Don’t be dumb. There’s… an Essian-class cruiser that would work. Even one of the warbirds, although I wouldn’t recommend taking something military-grade back into registered space.”

“I don’t need advice about ships from you!” Polla snapped.

The woman actually flinched. If she hadn't seen her break Revan's fingers, Polla might have felt bad.

“We’ll take anything we can leave in now,” Seiran broke in.

Cheering erupted behind them, and then the excited voices of what Polla recognized to be the chorus of a Mandalorian victory song.

“Another one?” Seiran sighed. Three beskar-clad figures were making their way toward a firepit that had been dug in the center of camp. One was limping. The other two had branches slung over their shoulders, and the carcass of another enormous and scaled thing hanging between them.

Polla shrugged, more than a little relieved to have a new change of topic. “Sleen, I think? Going by the cheers, I’m guessing it’s dessert, after all this delicious zakkeg.”

“Great,” Carth muttered. “More meat.”

Polla shot him a sympathetic smile.

“Stay the night, at least,” the Butcher said. Her hand tugged at her topknot, adjusting it, and Polla had a sudden memory of Ma telling her not to fidget, not to tug at her hair. “I want… I’d like the chance to…to talk, before… before you go.”

“Keep pulling your knot like that and it might pop right off,” Polla muttered, half under her breath.

The other woman’s breath came out in a startled hitch. She didn’t look anything like the other one, right then. For some weird reason, she actually looked like she was about to cry. Her hand dropped back down to her hip, rightabouts where that saber had gone in. Polla’s wound was a little to the right, but they practically had matching stab wounds.

“I’ve got to see to the camp,” the Butcher said stiffly, and turned away.

“We’ll find you a ship,” her husband promised them, then started after her.

“Yeah. It's the least you can do, Captain Obvious.” Polla crossed her arms, and leaned back into
Sei, closing her eyes and giving out an exaggerated sigh.

“Pollie--” Seiran didn’t finish the reprimand. He didn’t have to. A part of Polla felt like she’d just punched herself in the guts.

When she opened her eyes again, Captain Obvious and his butcher wife were gone.

XXX

Revan found the Wookiee and the Houck in the corner of their encampment nearest to the Dark Temple. To their right loomed some kind of communications edifice the Mando’ade had spent all day constructing: a thing as rattletrap and makeshift as all their creations. But their scavenged tower hummed with life now, yellow and cheerful, burning from its capacitors. Mandalorians with jet-packs buzzed above its tip, running the risk, Revan thought, of electrocuting themselves on that arclight beacon they’d built spiking up toward the stars.

As if in answer, the side of the Aleema basked above, lower than Revan herself would have authorized its flight. The cloudbank was heavy, but every now and then, a smaller ship lit into view. From this distance, she couldn’t see the Sleepers at all.

They’re close. Malak’s voice, whispering in her ear as Revan moved slowly forward, her eyes trained on the two figures in front of her. She can hear them, Red. And they’re killing her.

She can’t die, fool. He should drop the injured tone, the false sympathy. And don't make me feel guilty. I tried self-sacrifice. It didn’t work.

The Mandalorian medix ran more tests. The results spooked her.

Oh? They’re a superstitious lot.

They were also technological savants: collecting pieces of tech and weaponry from a thousand cultures, all to serve their own ends. Better they be frightened by the Fragment then think of using her--or of trying to use the Sleeper Fleet.

Would the Mando’ade use the Sleeper Fleet, if given the opportunity? Revan had to consider that the Fragment might manage to wrest control of them--for a time. If Canderous Ordo convinced her to use those ships against strategic targets for raids, or to settle Clan feuds--

Then nothing in the galaxy could stop them.

That would never happen. You know how the clans feel about autonomous machines, Malak broke into Revan's thoughts as easily as if they were still padawans conversing about hypotheticals in a cafe. After what happened to their basilisks, any union of sentience and the mechanical was forbidden.

So Master Vima always said. But I think she may be an unreliable source, Mal.

His ghostly chuckle rattled in her head.

The Mandalorians distaste for sentient tech had been a hypothetical, before their Knights’ trials.

You always underestimated them, Mal. They’ll have wideband restored soon. They're laying in circuits for it by hand. They barely use medical droids at all--

You admire them.
She glanced back at her escort, keeping their careful distance. *Before the Fett betrayed us, I wanted to go back.* The memory of the girl who had admired the Mandalorians as a humble desert tribe was long dead. *With you, of course.*

*Of course.* For once, his presence withdrew abruptly, like a door closing in her face.

*I hate them,* Sheris whispered foolishly, although that had not always been true, either--

*You hated Oerin Lin?* It was a cruel jape.

*I hated you more.*

There was no adequate response to that, and so Revan focused on the task at hand.

When the Mandalorians got their comm tower online they would all learn what had happened in the rest of the galaxy.

Revan was startled to find herself curious, as if all the possibilities she had forsaken when she returned to Dromund Kaas had come to life again. What happened to the rest of the galaxy might matter again. For her. She would see Malachor again--

Then where would they live? Not Coruscant. No. Her son was free of D’Reev and she would keep him that way. Some Outer Rim planet; sparsely populated, perhaps with a reputable university so he would not grow up utterly savage--

*Hoth,* Sheris murmured in her mind. *Chassna. Rekkiad--* 

*Not that sparsely populated.*

*The medix was frightened,* Malak said.

*Good. Then she'll listen to me over her. But first--*

Revan took a deep breath of the twilight air, cleared her throat, and approached her current targets.

“Am I interrupting something?” She addressed the furry back of the silent Wookiee with a solid hulk of Houck nestled in the crook of his arm. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you both. There’s been a change in plans.”

“Oaska filled us in. She says, the target you wanted to collect commands this camp.” Grarwbaar turned his head toward her, his words in perfectly accentless Basic. “I believe that’s her, over there, next to Polla Organa?” The Wookiee’s tone was dry. “She looks familiar.”

“Reunions always make me teary,” murmured the Houck, not looking very emotional at all. “Yours went better than you expected, yeah?” He turned to the Wookiee. “Still alive, see? And the other one’s not frozen. You owe me two prayer chants worth of faith on Byss, boss.”

“I may win those chants back with interest,” the Wookiee’s Basic was accentless through the voder, although, as she had before, Revan noted the device did not seem to be attached; merely hanging like a necklace between the furry muscles of the man’s chest.

“Oaska said the amnesiac wasn’t quite as happy to see *you* again, Lord Revan. You two made up, now? You not want her frozen in carbonite no more?” Rogere’s mouth split open in an amphibious grin, displaying all four rows of his teeth, rather overdoing the Houck patois version of Basic,
which he’d shown no sign of using at all before.

The Wookiee’s hair, Revan noted, was also brushed and coiffed to a near-abnormal sheen.

“My attempts at entrapment failed.” She maintained her artificial calm, breathing evenly. “Could you have done better?”

“You asking us to do better?” The Houck snorted. “Now? After she’s all riled-up and suspicious-like?”

“You didn’t tell us she was your target.” Grarwwaar coughed. “I might be hurt, if I hadn’t assumed.”

“Our contract specified quite clearly that your involvement would end when the package and I left this planet,” Revan snapped. “I asked for nothing more than transportation and supplies from you. All quite clear.”


“No, but you must.” Revan felt her lips curl, as she allowed herself the satisfaction of showing them she knew who they were.

I think they knew already. The voice in her head was clipped and cold. Her own--and for a moment, Revan wasn’t sure which of them had been smug a moment ago--her or Sheris.

“We must.” Rogere elbowed Grarwwaar. “Hear that, boss?”

“Your information is a few years out of date,” Grarwwaar chuckled. “Our Order was hollowed out by the Emperor--twisted into being a supplier for Tenebrae's conversion factories. In fact, I owe your associate over there a great deal for lifting the scales from my eyes. Rogere, Oaska, and I have made a fresh start. Now we work for Ik-tik and the Exchange.”

“They kind of work for us.” Rogere shrugged. “Actually. You know, crime pays.”

Revan refused to show any reaction. “Regardless, you will help me.”

“We have a vested interest in galactic stability.” Grarwwaar shrugged. “Do you?”

“Of course. And to defeat the Sith Emperor.”

“So she says.” Rogere elbowed the Wookiee. “But I don't see no Sith Emperor. Maybe he's defeated already.”

“Emperor Vitiate, First of his Name, Luminance of the Chorlian System made a pretty stable galaxy for a long time,” Grarwwaar mused. “But then someone riled up the Mandalorians and….” his voice trailed off. “What I think is, Malachi D’Reev bit off more than he could chew. The question is… why?” His eyes were ancient, and not a Wookiee’s gaze--but Revan had known already that he was no Wookiee.

“Perhaps that is a question I could answer.” Sunrider’s manipulations. Taking the Emperor’s toys and making them her own.

“One assumes you might lie to us, to take care of your rival…?” Grarwwaar coughed. “How would it go, exactly? Freeze your successor in carbonite? Then drop her into the heart of a sun?”

“Like Beya Organa and the rest?” She kept her voice cool, hiding the emotion saying the dead
woman’s name evoked behind a wall of ice. “I rather thought that assassination sounded like the work of the Genoharadan.”

“The what?” The Houck chuckled. “She’s naming names now, boss.”

“Some incompetent order of assassins,” Revan snapped. “I entrusted them with one crucial task and they failed it utterly.”

“Hey! We made it here!” Rogere chuckled. “Just like we promised. You got no complaints.”

“I’m growing tired of these games.” Revan wondered if Sinae would give her back her saber. And then, as if through fate of the Force, she saw the woman standing beneath the communications array, gesticulating excitedly at Canderous Ordo. She looked upset. Dessa? Was she okay? The roar of that machine hid her words, but if Revan extended her senses--

The camp seethed with life, and sickness, and pain; but no death. None that she could find.

“Before,” she clarified. “When I was Dark Lord of the Sith. I required one object--”

“Think the Dark Lady here means that Rakatan obelisk?” Rogere nudged the Wookiee.

“That thing?” Grarwwaar made a low rumbling noise in his throat. “The Belsavis artifact? Delivered as promised.” He shrugged. “Technically, we never did receive your final payment for that job, but you were dead at the time, so… maybe the invoices got mixed up.”

“Consider the account clear. Sometimes we’re generous,” Rogere added. “And we’ve always liked you.”

The world seemed to crystallize, still into ice. Revan froze with it, shock breaking her Jedi-trained calm like a boot crashing through a frozen lake. “What?”

“You were dead at the time, see?” the Wookiee shrugged. “So our agent gave it to the other one.”

XXX

Lena Wee juggled Prince in one arm, with the stack of plimsi readouts for I.E., Limited in the other. Ship-time it was night, and all the lights had been dimmed. Still, her son blinked his bright eyes at her and clumsily reached for a lekku.

“Shhh,” she murmured. “Hush little princeling, don’t sign a word--”

Prince had barely slept since his milk teeth had started to come in, and Lena herself had trouble ever since she’d seen that flotilla of ships soar past their yacht and start bombing the exact sector of Nar Shaddaa where her twins had set up their shop.

Fortunately, See’raa and Tee’raa had been aboard the yacht too, at the time. Still, the strike was too close for comfort and since then, they'd had the Starscape-class pleasure craft outfitted with a highly illegal (and very expensive) Mandalorian cloaking device.

Because, according to her twins, the target had been their own underground installation, beneath the cantina platform the Twin Suns ran as their cover.

The ships had been unmanned, according to Nar Sky Defense. The ships had moved in formations that should have been mathematically impossible, according to Lena’s understanding of astrophysics. And similar fleets had targeted Hoth and Onderon, had also been sighted over
Coruscant and Telos.

Rumors streamed in from the Outer Rim that Sith space had been targeted too; that the Republic was already at war with the Sith Empire; and that all of this had something to do with the leaked footage of Revan Starfire fighting a terentatek on a Sith planet.

Then there were the rumors of a Mandalorian Fleet, the footage of the woman the twins swore was Revan at Biscain--

See’raa said those weren’t just rumors.

Tee’raa claimed they’d been the targets of those ships because of Revan Starfire.

But when Lena asked her twins how--or why--See’raa grew silent as her sister and Tee’raa’s lekku just wrapped around her pale neck.

Better you not know, the white had signed to Lena. Worry’s bad for your milk.

Then, her twins had left, to try excavating the ruin of whatever it was they had built down there. Another droid factory like the one on the M4 asteroid? Another computer like the one they’d abandoned on Kashyyyk?

“We’ve got this!” the pink had smiled. “Don’t worry so much, Lena.”


“Shhh,” Lena told him. “Everything’s going to be fine.” And it would be, if they laid low enough. She hoped. She bent over the screen again, pulling up the hologram of the ident she’d bought from Jaarga the Hutt (just before his rival Jenga had taken him down, as Tee’raa had predicted). Bearded, Human, nondescript.

“Hello,” she leaned over the desk, speaking into the headset she’d had to take off, because Prince kept pulling at it. “This is Go-To. You’ve entered private airspace. State your business.”

The hologram’s mouth moved in time, syncing perfectly with her words.

“Guess it works.” She cleared her throat and the image on the comm did too. “Good.”

“Buh!” Prince nodded, and reached for the plimsi stack.

Xxx

Mydia Blais had studied revolution.

But apparently, an actual revolution was a great deal more noisome, loud, and damp than the datapads at the Academy had described. To add to her suffering, no one had thought to bring a chair for her--not even her consort, who had now been gone for most of the day.

Indeed, no one but Darth Malak’s obsequious slave seemed to have thought much about her at all, which was how the last remaining daughter of the House of Blais found herself squatting upon the ground in the driest area of the camp she could find, watching the Mandalorians gorge themselves on charred meat while her own stomach growled emptily.

It was too early to feel the parasite inside of her kick, but Mydia put her hand on her stomach just the same. The poor little nexu was no doubt starving too. How long would it take before it began to consume her own flesh?
She shivered at the thought.

“Hey.” Lord Malak's black-eyed slave gave Mydia a crooked smile as he sat down next to her in the ground and slid a plate covered with steaming meat into her lap, before settling the other one he was holding on his knees. “Wraid and Semele brought down an entire zakkeg. They say it's edible so…” his lips were full and smiling, almost feminine above that scraggily beard. He picked up a piece of dripping meat and flourished it at her. “Here goes nothing. If I don't keel over in the next minute, maybe you should have some too.”

“Isn't there a spork?” Mydia felt her mouth water and had the sudden urge to shove a pile of dripping red zakkeg into her own maw. Mother would have had a fit, she imagined. She couldn’t remember the slave’s name. It was something that sounded like Malak, but not quite.

“Didn't see any.”

It was amazingly rude of the man to eat before she did and so she shoved a piece in her own mouth. The zakkeg was a delicious as it looked, and the added frisson of imagining Mother's horror, seeing the last female Blais barefoot and squatting on the ground made Mydia smile through a mouth of gristle.

“My brother, Nereal…” she had to pause to masticate. “He used to bring home zakkeg. From our estate.”

“Estate, huh? Telos told me. You're rich.” The man raised an eyebrow. There were grease splatters in his beard, giving him a rakish look. “So, I should call you Lady Blais, right?” The man snorted as if that was funny.

And then, Mydia's mind made the belated connection that would have made her late (and un lamented) tutor, Servile Antilles, proud. “Oh! You call Malak Telos because he bombed it! That's terribly disrespectful. Lord Malak could have you flayed for much, much less.”

The man started to laugh, and then paused. “Are you serious?”

“I might be convinced to intervene on your behalf,” she allowed, taking another bite. “If you find me a spork.”

“No need. Telos and I go way back.” Black eyes regarded her and one of his heavy eyebrows lifted. “I'm fine with your… whatever, but let's make that clear. Telos and I... you can cut the banthashit. Come on. You gotta know he isn't Malak. He's not even trying to be Malak. There's no reason for him to pretend--now.”

Oh. So the slave was insane. What a waste. “If Lord Malak is too busy to see to your execution, I-”

“Mekel? There you are! How're you doing?” The raggedly-clad woman with the bleeding nostrils who interrupted them looked like a derelict—but she was no slave.

Her brown hair still reminded Mydia more of her tutor, Seriina, than she did of the reawakened dark lord, Revan Starfire. Mydia had, of course, been informed of who she was: first by Yuthura Ban, then by the slave Seiran, and finally, by Lord Malak himself, before he went with that Mandalorian, muttering he had to 'take care of some things.'

She hoped those things were all inanimate. Mother had a consort once who took care of the serving girls. It was such a bore when Mother had to drown the null bastard babies. She always looked so guilty about it. Once, Phylus had found one hidden in the guest linen closet, and they had played
with it for a few days, stealing it milk from one of the breeding Wookiees—oh, but then Nereal had
found it and that memory was--
--was unfortunate.

Mydia’s eyes started leaking suddenly. That kept happening with pregnancy. She did not like it.

“I’m… fine. We’re all fine, here.” The black-haired slave was suddenly cack-handed, swallowing
his food too quickly, and shoving his plate to one side as if he were not fine at all.

“Don’t get up on my account.” The other Revan Starfire plopped herself down beside them with
no ceremony, just a slight wince. Mydia had heard she’d been injured in a duel. Admiral Carth
Onasi lurked in the background, as was proper for someone uninvited.

This Revan had a dazzling smile. “You must be Mydia Blais. Carth told me about you.”

“Of course he did.” Unlike the women who had been in a coma in her attic for months, this
Revan Starfire screamed through the Force with the unmistakable presence of a powerful Sith. “Thank
you for helping to liberate my planet.”

Mother had always taught them to be gracious with conquerors.

“Uh, I--” the woman appeared nonplussed.

“My cousin's always glad to lend a hand.” The black-haired slave smiled, and reached for another
piece of meat. His cousin. The slave had mentioned Revan being his cousin numerous times
before, as if to impress. Presumably a cousin born on the wrong side of the blanket. A common
enough event, and since the man was null, without import. He was fortunate he’d never had a half-
brother like Nereal.

“I wanted to check on you. And Dustil,” the woman continued. “I know he's off that way…” she
waved in the direction where Lord Malak's unmistakable Force presence rang through the Force
like a festive dirge. “I don't want to interrupt him, if he… does he need time alone, or… uh… are
you okay?”

“I’m fine,” the bearded man looked as irritated into the inquiries about his health as Mydia was.

“I want to know you’ll be fine,” Lord Revan said firmly. The future tense was odd.

“You could legitimize him,” Mydia offered. “But he’s a null so I don’t suppose it matters.”

“Legitimize?” This Revan looked so confused that Mydia wondered if she was as ignorant of
Coruscanti inheritance laws, (which Mydia had been made to study when Lords Revan and Malak
brought their own people into the Empire), as Revan's clueless bastard cousin slave. She began to
explain, but the scowl on the bearded slave’s face grew, and his cousin finally interrupted.

“Mekel’s legit,” she snapped. “As legitimate as you are, Mydia. And he isn’t a slave.”

“I gave up telling her that,” the slave in question chimed in, impudent as ever. It was strangely
attractive.

“Are those bruises on your neck?” The Dark Lord’s eyes narrowed. “Why isn’t Dustil here?”

“It is wise not to interrupt Lord Malak,” Mydia chided, but the two of them ignored her. “Why do
you both persist in calling him ‘Dustil?’”
The slave ignored her, turning back to his cousin. “Canderous asked for help getting the generator started again. Telos went to go play Force-battery so we could get that comm array fixed, so….”

“He has been gone for some time now,” Mydia added. She yawned. “Maybe you should fetch him, Mekel.”

The name did sound a bit like Malak. Had he been named after the Dark Lord’s consort?

“Force-battery. Right.” The woman’s gaze went to the Dark Temple, which loomed to the side of their encampment. In a normal time, a Mandalorian encampment at the base of their most sacred monument would have seemed disrespectful, but these were not normal times. Actually, in some ways, Mydia was finding these times entertaining. Desecrating sacred Sith ground was a vast improvement over cowering in her family’s bomb shelter beneath the ancestral tombs. Or just the dreary routine of living with Inse and Phylus.

Lord Revan coughed. “Guess, I… I should go help with the relays, too. Thanks.”

“Your nose is bleeding,” Mydia told her, for so it was, just a trickle.

“Oh.” The woman wiped at it with the sleeve of her ragged jacket. She stood up quickly. “I’ll send Dustil back when I’m… after. Is everything… everything’s okay, Mekel?”

“You really should call ‘Dustil’ Lord Malak,” Mydia told her, raising her fingers to make sure the emphasis on Lord Malak’s cover name was a ruse they all shared.

“You… you can see Malak?” The slave’s face went white under all that hair. His full lips blanched. When he was pale, he looked more Sith, less golden and typically handsome. Mydia approved.

“Not… see. Not—quite. But he’s… here. Sort of.” Lord Revan gestured at the air. There was another pause. “He says to tell you hello, Mekel.” There was another pause. Then, “I’m not fricking telling him that!”

“What?” Did this Revan Starfire expect Mydia to believe she was speaking to a Force ghost?

“No! I… that’s not what he meant. Look, Mekel, you… you can do whatever you want.” Revan Starfire wiped her nose again, instead of punishing her cousin’s insolence.
Mydia retrieved a handkerchief from the bosom of her armor and proffered it. The Dark Lord took it, absentmindedly, without so much as a thanks.

“You’re not bound by Malak, or Canderous, or… me, Mekel,” the woman continued. “Or… Dustil, if you don’t… do you need credits? I can get you some.”

“Can you get me the Force back?” The sharpness in his voice was new. Mydia found it perversely appealing.

“No, I--”

“Ask Malak--” the man snapped as if he were in charge of Lord Revan and not the other way ‘round. “Can he get me the Force back?”

She rubbed her temples as if they pained her. “He doesn’t know, either.”

“Have you been talking to him this whole time?” The slave’s face flushed suddenly, turning red as a spanked palm. “Uh, have you been talking to Malak’s ghost while he was possessing me and Telos this whole time?”

“No.” Instead of looking annoyed by his impertinence, the woman seemed concerned. “Before… and after, but not while he--” she paused, shaking her head slightly and muttering in accented Sith under her breath. “He doesn’t know how it works either,” she said finally, looking back up at them both. “Oerin Lin removed the Force from you, Mekel. That set Malak free. Made him… one with the Force. A ghost. Again.”


“Lord Malak,” Mydia corrected. “You’re both serious? But if Lord Malak is an untethered ghost, then I would surely see… some evidence….” her voice trailed off, because just then, as if her will had made it so, she did see, a faint glow, hovering around this Revan Starfire, that telltale glimmer of eldritch light. “But I’m having Lord Malak’s baby!”

Revan Starfire’s laugh was as rough and uncultivated as her bastard cousins’. “Not quite.”

“But he’s so powerful--” Not as strong as the woman before her, but also much darker. That couldn’t be the darkness of some callow youth--surely! A mere boy had misled Mydia? Sampled her under a false pretense? “But the boy was… wasn’t he Lord Malak? The Emperor said he was Lord Malak!”

“Not since that fracking hunt,” the slave Mekel said. His mouth tugged into another half-smile. “When Oerin Lin took away my Force it must’ve broken the bond. Set Malak free. Made me a null.”

“Made you a null?” Mydia looked at him again. “You had the Force before?”

“Yeah,” Mekel nodded. “I trained on Korriban. You say Telos is powerful? I was twice as powerful, before.”

His cousin coughed and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing to deny his claim.

“Can you get it back?” An intriguing thought. If this ‘Mekel’ had the Force and Revan's bloodline, perhaps he could break his chains. That was perfectly acceptable. Some of the most powerful members of the Dark Council had been former slaves. Darth Scourge, for example.
Of course, Mydia pondered, perhaps Darth Scourge was not such a good example, being dead.

“I don’t know if it works like that—” Revan put a hand on her cousin’s arm. For comfort? A warning? Regardless, the gesture spoke volumes. Lord Revan obviously respected this man.

Mydia could almost see a faint resemblance when Mekel Jin glared back at the Dark Lord. “You don’t know how it fracking works. You said as much.”

“But Mekel, if I did, I—” And then, the woman’s head turned. About thirty meters away the setting sun illuminated a hairy, hulking figure, flanked by two smaller ones coming up the guarded approach toward the tents. One figure was Sith-sized, only with horns. The other smaller, thinner, a slight stoop to his step--

“Phylus!” In the joy of discovering her brother was alive, Mydia quite forgot her dignity, scrambling to her feet and running barefoot through the mud toward her (hopefully) last living relative. Mydia had been so distracted with Revan and her bastard cousin that she’d missed that slight but unmistakable echo of Force approaching, the uncanny sense of another living Blais--

“Zaalbar!” The Dark Lord of the Sith outpaced Mydia, hurtling herself in the Wookiee’s arms in a way that left decorum in a smoking, radioactive ruin, much like the planet around them.

XXX

“We found them in the jungle,” Leskal called out, as Revan threw herself into Zaalbar’s arms. Thin, bedraggled, and surrounded by a dozen more of his kin, her old companion was still instantly recognizable, like a hand-clasp through the Force.

The exuberance of his embrace nearly drowned out the vision of what Revan had seen, what she’d been trying to forget ever since: the scan of her own brain, a cerebral hemorrhage blooming like a deadly flower in its center, the destruction forming and reforming over and over again.

Xxx

“When I told you to a sit for a longer scan. I did not mean now.” That had been Sinae, grumbling the moment before Revan reached out with her mind to the voice in the Tomb. “I still have to change Dessa’s tank, and submit my reports to General Ordo, First Wife. Now is not the time for--

“Humor me.” Revan smiled at the stone-faced medix who, despite her protests, continued strapping the nodes in around Revan’s head. In front of them the holo-screen flickered to life.

The image of Revan’s face pivoted in air. Like a peeled goreapple, first her skin dissolved, then cartilage, then bone, until only her brain and spinal cord remained.

The image pulsed reassuringly green.

“See? Nothing, as before.” The woman checked her chron. “You remain in perfect health.”

“What about… now?” Revan opened her mind to the call that tugged at the back of it, the dark whisper increasing in pitch--

{{Come}}

“Oh!” Sinae made a startled noise.

“What’s that?” Carth’s voice sharpened. Head locked in the scanner’s prongs, Revan couldn’t
turn to see him.

“I’m not sure.” Sinae stepped to the side, leaving Revan staring at the projection of her own skull--
the display expanding to include horizontal and vertical cross-sections.

All with the same pattern appearing and vanishing, over and over again. A dark spot that steadily
bloomed, diffusing through the tissue.

It looks like a rose. Revan tasted blood on her lips.

{{Come}}

“Arusuum’la.” Sinae breathed. “First Wife, you should be dead.” She began to rip the nodes off of
Revan’s forehead, detach her from the machines. “Sands, this is why I wanted to do the longer scan
before. If I had known this then--”

“If you had known--what?” Revan’s tongue felt thick in her mouth. Her eyes couldn't move from
the scan. “What’s wrong with me?”

The woman didn’t answer. Her hands twisted in a gesture that looked like one of the old Grange
biddies on Deralia, tracing lines in the air to ward off imaginary demons.

Arusuum’la meant unchanging. Stagnant. But the pattern was anything but. It was strangely
beautiful, like a flower unfolding, over and over again--

Except that's my brain. Bleeding.

It didn’t hurt. It looked like it should hurt, but it didn’t.

The image fizzled out when Sinae removed the last of the feeds. Revan stood up. She felt fine.

{{Come}}

Carth reached for her arm, concern etching every line of his face. “That was… what was that?”

The medix studiously avoided looking at either one of them. “Something that isn't killing you,” the
woman said flatly, to Revan. “But it should.”

Her husband’s voice raised. “Can you stop it? Fix her?"

Sinae edged back toward Dessa's tank. “There is no fix for the unbroken.”

Xxx

“--then we saw your ships landing from our shelter, but it took several days for the weakest to
travel through the forest.” Zaalbar’s voice barked sharply, bringing her back to the present. “It is
good to see you, Polla Revan.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Revan mumbled into Zaalbar’s furry chest even as the Wookiee growled
against the side of her cheek, bending down and lifting her off her feet with the exuberance of
another hug.

“You took too long to come!” Zaalbar’s low whine ruffled her hair and his nose was cold when it
brushed her forehead. There was reproval there--but his eyes twinkled with happiness and she felt
the rumble of his greeting vibrate against her skin, as enveloping and welcoming as his furry arms.
“I know.” She tried to laugh, looking up at him. Mission’s T3 body was strapped to his back, but all its lights were dim. “Looks like you all conquered this planet without me. Is Mission--”

“Her metal body is dead.” Zaalbar’s breath smelled as terrible as ever. He patted her back. “Since the bombing. I cannot bring myself to throw it away.”

“She’s… uh, she’s possessing the Hawk, but I’m not sure she’s okay….” Revan started to stammer an explanation, only to be interrupted by another growl from her friend.

“Conquering this planet was never our intent, Polla Revan.” As always, the too-serious Wookiee took her bad joke as fact. “Those ships set fire to the sky soon after our rebellion, eclipsing it with flames. We thought it was the Emperor’s work, but Zepth spoke with his master’s voice and said it was sleeping machine-ghost-ships.” Those brown eyes were never accusing, but the growl that edged his words was. “He said they only listen to you.”

“Tenebrae said the bombs were a taste of things to come,” a Zabrak kid behind him added. As he drew closer, Revan could see there was a brand on his forehead shaped like an eye. He extended his arm toward Revan. The underside of it was carved with what look like fresh markings. She blinked as she realized they were runes scratched in Ancient Sith on the kid’s own skin—by the clumsy look of them, probably by his own hand.

Revan, this is a taste of things to come. It’s out of my hands now.

“We… we’ll get you some kolto.” She tried to ignore the feeling that botflies were crawling on her skin. “You must be Zepth. Carth told me about you.”

“His Luminance says it’s out of his hands now,” the kid continued, following her gaze. “He leaves messages for us. Sometimes.”

“Zepth.” Carth had held back, but now he stepped forward, smiling at the Zabrak kid like they were old friends. “Zaalbar!”

Revan tried to ignore the humming noise in the back of her mind, growing louder again. “Is Tenebrae listening to us now?”

“No.” Zepth shook his head, looking past Revan to Carth. His eyes were an ordinary blue. “But he said to tell you he would see you soon.” He rolled up his sleeve. The words were scratched there, even more clumsily.

Behind them, Carth muttered an angry curse.

“Tell him I’m heartbroken that I have to wait.” She had extra kolto paks in her pocket. She brought one out and handed it to the kid. “And put this on those scratches.”

“I can try and summon him,” the boy offered. “Doesn’t always work.”

“Don’t bother.” Carth’s anger was plain with the clench of his jaw, his voice roughening. “If that bastard’s too scared to come back to this planet, all the better.”

The kid stepped forward and reached for Carth’s hand—then dropped it a millisecond later. “He is gone from you!”

“Yeah.” Revan’s husband nodded, face set in a grim mask. “I got sick.”

“Polla and Yuthura will be glad of that, I think—if they lived.” The kid smiled up at Carth, so
trustingly that Revan felt her own heart melt. “Takan--? I thought I sensed his passing--?”

“He’s not… he didn’t--” Carth turned his back on Revan, facing the boy. “I'm sorry.”

“Oh.” Zepth’s brows wrinkled around his horns. Suddenly he looked even younger. “I… I was happy when he decided to join our cause. Polla and Seiran? The Lady Yuthura? Lord Revan?”

“They’re fine,” Revan broke in.

“Takan died bravely.” Carth patted the kid on the shoulders and drawing him into an awkward hug. “I wish… there should have been more that I could have done for him, but I--it was fast.”

The Zabrak nodded, accepting the embrace. “Lord Revan gave the order to scatter, and so we all ran. The ships came from the spaceport… we barely made it to the forest caves in time.”

“Any others with you?” Carth asked as they drew apart.

Zaalbar shook his head. “Polla Organa and her mate were next to us in the fray. Our comms went dead.”

“They’re here,” Revan reassured him. “They’re fine.”

“I know,” Zaalbar chuffed. “I caught the scent. But our comms are still down. The infidel ships used electro-magnetic cluster bombs in low atmosphere. We think they fried most of the circuits on this continent.”

“Canderous is working on bringing civilization back. They’re trying to get a signal out.” Revan turned her head toward the makeshift comm tower. A yellow light blinked steadily at its top, proving that the Mando'ade had progressed farther than she’d expected.

The buzz of the Dark Temple’s call throbbed in her skull like a broken tooth. The image on the scan danced before her eyes again making her vision blur.

Carth’s voice had a hard edge of forced cheer. “We’re still doing sweeps for survivors.”

Revan took a deep breath. Just like Carth and Canderous (and telling Canderous would be the most difficult, Mandalorians did not surrender without a fight), the Wookiee deserved to know. “There's something else, Zaal. I-I might have to go away. For a while, at least. Maybe a really long--”

“Zaalbar!” Polla Organa appeared out of nowhere, limping between the tents and practically tackling the Wookiee. “Leskal just told me you were here! Thank the kriffing stars you're not dead!”

“Polla Polla!” the Wookiee yowled his interpretation of her name twice, looking just as pleased.

Incredibly, the women barked back at him in broken Shyriiwook. “Here meat camp. You be starving!”

“It’s ajjjjeeeriiiiwooorrr,” Revan muttered, half under her breath. “Not ajjjjeeeeeoooo.”

“Uh, beautiful, let them catch up.” Carth said.

They seemed to be doing that now, between Zaalbar's barks and Polla's attempts to answer him.

How the frack did she know so much Shyriiwook? Since when did Zaalbar and Polla Organa need to catch up? They had been trapped on this planet together, and yes, Carth had told Revan that
they'd helped organize the rebellion, but even so--

An ugly feeling she refused to call jealousy made Revan turn away from them, back to the Zabrak kid, Zepth. “I need to speak to the Emperor.” Revan smiled to put him at ease. “Do you… can you get him? Can you look for him?”

He frowned. “Not unless he wishes to speak to you.”

“You can't control when he comes at all?” The pull of the tomb felt like an itch in the Force. The Sleeper Ships had moved farther away but that knowledge tugged at Revan, too--like they wanted her to search for them. Reach for them. Like a thing, just out of sight--

Like she had to the tomb--

{{Come}}, it whispered.

*Is Tenebrae like that, too?* Without thinking, Revan put her hand on the Zabrak kid's arm.

He pulled back, but she felt it--the current passing between them--

And then she was--

**Pacing along a hallway on flippered feet, smell of salt and sea in her mouth--**

*Manaan*

*Soaring in the skies above an ice planet--*

*Hoth*

**Staring at the restraints on her arms, feeling more clamp down upon her wings, while a Trandoshan-accented voice barked questions--**

*Republic-issue restraints, where--a ship? Wait--*

**Driving a transport across a field of Derran wheat toward a familiar farmstead--**

*That's Deralia--no! that's… that's Glory Road. Adaston Farm --*

**Signing a contract while a man with horns like Zepth's nodded and extended a hand to seal the agreement.**

“Your clinic will be a blessing to our farming families, Mez Gordo. We always need more doctors on Iridonia--”

*Wait! That was Deralia! No! That was--go back! Go back!*

**Viewing through mechanical eyes the curve of a planet below her wings as her ship joined the others in low orbit--**

*Dantooine, it's Dantooine--*

Her thoughts seemed to pool there, expanding until Revan had a hundred eyes, all fixed upon the planet.
All ready to strike.

{{Yes}} That cold voice. Ancient as coils. Running beneath the whims of the Emperor, lay something darker, colder, something beyond. {{Show me}}

No! Go back. Deralia. What--wait--who was on Deralia?

“Hey!” White light sparked across her skull and Revan fell back, only to open her eyes blinking, hand on her saber, ready for an attack--

--only to see Polla looming over her, rubbing her knuckles as if they hurt.

“You hit her!” Carth's voice.

“You holding her and going 'Come back to me, beautiful,' wasn't doing squat.” Polla folded her arms, and behind them Zaalbar groaned.

“Revan?” Her husband’s arms. His face close to hers, almost smothering.

“Wasn't just… ships.” Revan's tongue felt thick in her mouth. Her eyes met Polla's with that sickening twist of disorientation--looking into a mirror again. “I was…” She twisted free from Carth, tried to scramble to her feet and felt the wound in her side twinge, falling back--

The smuggler’s hand reached out and caught hers, making them both stumble--before Revan caught the Force again, using its momentum to make it to her feet.

“Thanks,” she muttered, staring down at their hands. The smuggler’s were filthy, but hers weren’t any better.

“No problem.” Polla pulled her hand free.

“You had a seizure. I think.” Seiran came between them. He had a repulsorlift attached to his splinted leg, enabling him to walk. Then, lowering his voice as he turned to his wife. “Is she okay?”

“Her nose keeps bleeding. Something about the tomb she’s supposed to go in and this fracking planet.”

“She’s fine.” But Carth’s voice was uncertain.

“I’m fine,” Revan echoed.

{{Come}} the voice from the tomb murmured again.

And then strangely, instead of feeling disoriented Revan felt… better. The Force surged around her, a vehicle of her will. Her resolve crystallized, drawn toward the dark edifice before them, warm and welcoming--

“Don't,” the kid whispered and Revan realized he was shaking--and she was reaching for him again, with the Force as well as her outstretched hand.

“Can you hear it too?” she asked.

“Not… like you do.” In that instant his face reminded her of the holocron she’d found of the boy, Vitiate, before he’d become Emperor--although Vitiate had been much younger, then. The holocron was in their tent, now, along with that recording of Vima Sunrider, answering Dessa's
questions on the Aleema in a mix of Mandalorian and Rakatan. She’d gone through some of it, a long explanation of how Oerin Lin was made--mostly in Rakatan, which Dessa didn’t speak.

The end of the recording replayed in Revan’s mind again, the old woman, abruptly raising the wooden sword and hammering it into the pregnant Mandalorian’s skull.

Carth’s voice broke in. “Revan?”

“I don’t know what’s happening.” Revan pulled one of the medi-wipes Sinae had given her out of her pocket, unsurprised it came away red. “I... felt Tenebrae just now. The ships, too. I was there--” she took a breath. They needed to know. “There are Sleeper ships patrolling Hoth right now. And Dantooine. They want me to know that. It's a threat. For me.”

And Deralia? No ships there. But that was Adaston Farm, that was--home. Revan knew she should be worried about the sents on Hoth and Dantooine--even sparsely populated planets had populations in the millions, give or take—but her mind kept skipping to that familiar road, the line of spindly trees arching over the entrance to the Organa farmstead, and the monster walking down that road—the monster she’d looked out from, seeing from the Emperor’s eyes--

Malak? The Emperor’s on Deralia--

Our son is not. His voice was reluctant, faint, stretched thin.

Then where is he? You said he was safe!

No answer. Revan’s eyes snapped back and everything was abruptly too bright.

Malak?

He is safe. His voice was faint. Revan suddenly had the crazy idea that he might be lying.

“Hoth?” Carth looked confused. “That’s impossible. We’re across the galaxy from Hoth. And Dantooine’s a week away, even with military-grade acceleration.”

“The Sleepers seem to have something better.” Revan knew their locations as if they were attached to her arms. “I saw them on Coruscant before. And... Telos. They can travel outside the hyperlanes, Carth. I don’t know how.”

“Telos? They were on Telos?” His expression froze. “You didn’t tell me that before.”

“I made them leave--somehow. It’s a threat.” Revan took a deep breath. “They want me to know where they are and what they’ll do if I don’t....”

“If you don’t go in that damned tomb.” He finished her sentence for her.

“Yes.” No more thisla treats. They are the stick. What Malachi called the closed fist.

Her head turned toward the Dark Temple, where somewhere beneath rested her tomb, and then back to Polla Organa, who was still staring at her with that suspicious look.

The Emperor was on Deralia, possessing someone there. Going to Adaston Farm. How can I tell her that?

How can I not?

If he’s there now, it’s too late to stop his plan. If she goes, it will only put her and Seiran in more
danger. The thought was a cold whisper. Malak said Korrie isn’t there. My son is safe. I don’t know what has happened to hers, but my son is safe--unless Malak is lying to me--can he lie to me?

But she could know what had happened on Deralia, couldn’t she? All Revan had to do was reach out again, form a conduit through the Zabrak boy--

“I wish I could be more help, Lord Polla Revan,” Zepth offered formally. He took a step backward.

He could be.

“You really can’t control when the Emperor comes?”

“No. Possession is by His will.” The kid did look sorry. A part of Revan’s mind felt sorry for him, too, but it was abstract.

“What did you just call her?” Polla interrupted, sounding pissed. “Lord Polla Revan?”

“Polla Revan is Zaalbar's name for me.” Revan met the Wookiee’s calm brown eyes for a moment before looking away again. She knew without asking that he would disapprove of her thoughts now, just as Carth would. Perversely, it made her feel guilty. “It's fine, Zepth. Just tell us what you can.” The poor kid. That brand on his forehead had to have hurt, right between the horns. The sensation of pain there would be--

“We need to find a Force collar,” she added, glancing back at Carth. “Soon.”

“I thought you said it wouldn’t work.” He frowned.

“Maybe it'll buy me time to think.” She rubbed her aching temples. Sort through her treacherous thoughts, the ones that whispered she could take possession of this child herself, that she should come to the tomb and see Korrie, save him if she had to--take possession of that other body--

{{Come}} A note of triumph in that call now, as if it thought it had won.

“You want a Force collar to block the Emperor?” It was Polla who answered, looking suspicious. “Master Klee used one sometimes, but Carth couldn't block him at all “

“Not just him. I told you I'm tied to those ships through the Force. Maybe without it, I'll be free.”

And then what? You think they'll go back to sleep on their own?

“Then what?” The smuggler's voice was almost accusing. “You think they’ll just frack off and go sleep again?”

“It’s worth a try.” Anything was. Revan's eyes went to the Temple. She suddenly knew there was a walkway around the exterior. A walkway leading to a narrow set of stairs and down three hundred of them, to an entrance to her tomb in the back of the structure.

An entrance with a pathway lined with bones. Bones of the fallen, the failed. The weak.

{{Come to me}}

She could go there. She could just go there and see--

She could reach out to Zepth again and see--

As if he could sense her intent, (could he?), the Zabrak took another step back.
“Revan said we should freeze you in carbonite. That’s worth a try, too.” The smuggler crossed her arms.

“I’ll try that. If I have to.”

*Malak. Is Korrie okay? The Emperor’s on Deralia.*

*He was.*

*Was? Korrie was what?*

*Tenebrae sent someone to Deralia. Korrie’s fine. It was handled.*

*How, Malak? How was it handled?* Revan took a deep breath, mad thoughts spinning through her head. Carth could freeze her in carbonite. Take her corpsicle to Deralia and unthaw her there--

“Where is Darth Bossypants, anyway?” The Deralian drawl was like a shock from home, bringing her back to the present. “Seems like she’d know all this stuff, Butcher. Maybe you should take her advice.”

“Over there.” Revan gestured toward the camp’s perimeter. “I think.” The woman’s Force-signature was faint, but steady, emanating from behind a wall of tents.

“Well, *she’s* got a Force collar,” the smuggler said. “If you’re serious. We brought one with us to capture you. And Ik-tik and Grarwbaar have a few extra. Grarwbaar and Rog’ are here somewhere--you remember Ik-tik?” Her head tilted. “Spacer from Dix Prime? He’s real high in the Exchange now.”

Revan’s mind stuck on Ik-tik, the yellow-haired Human spacer from Dix Prime. *I was twenty-two and still raw. He bought me a drink on Bandomir and told me he knew some important sents, if I wanted introductions--*

“Handsy asshole, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Polla nodded. “Ran into him one day in the International Quarter in Kaas City. Real stroke of luck that he’d taken up business here. Got me in touch with all sorts of interesting people.”

“Great.” *What are the fracking odds of that?* Revan cleared her throat. “One hell of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

Polla shrugged. “Ik-tik’s Wookiee boss likes to call it luck.”

*Luck,* Revan thought hollowly. Increasingly hers seemed to have run out. “Zepth.” Revan took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

The Zabrak tensed. “I understand. I know we are but chaff beneath your blade.” His head bowed, and Revan realized, with a shock of horror, that the kid expected her to kill him.

What was almost worse were the expressions of the others--like they expected it too.

“No, I--relax. I didn’t mean--” Revan whistled, and two Mandalorians in beskar came running so fast she suspected they’d been monitoring the entire exchange, just out of sight.

“Use the strongest restraints you have on Zepth, here,” she ordered them. “But feed him, too. Keep him comfortable. Get Sinae to run medicals. If his eyes start to glow, comm me. Immediately.”
Carth looked like he wanted to object, but all he did was clap the kid on the back. “I’ll check in,” he promised. “Later.”

“I understand,” the Zabrak said. His blue eyes met Revan’s. “Thank you, Lord Revan. For my life. His Luminance left me a note once—”

A note. Hells. That sadistic bastard writes notes on their flesh--

“Give him a datapad and a stylus, too,” she told the Mandalorian. Hard to tell with the armor, but she thought one of the kids was Urex, an Ordo wrestler she’d sparred with once or twice what seemed like a century ago, on Coruscant. “No sharp objects anywhere in his tent. And no more carving on your skin, Zepth, okay?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” The assurance felt empty. There was nothing she could do to save him.

{{Incorrect. Come and save them all}}

“Damnit!” Revan wiped her nose again. Her mouth tasted like copper and salt. She thought about the deadly flower, blooming and reblooming in the space of her skull.

Zepth cleared his throat. “His Luminance said you killed my Aunt Marla. He left me a note. Is that true?”

“Yes.” Revan met his eyes. “Marla Korr was spying on the Jedi for Tenebrae.” The thought still left Revan with an anger that was hard to understand, even harder to control. If this boy was Marla’s kin, Tenebrae’s hand had placed them both on the board.

It’s not a game, Red.

Oh, I’m aware.

Zepth nodded. He no longer looked frightened. “I understand. Aunt Marla was loyal to Him. I am not.”

“Master Klee wasn’t loyal, either,” Polla interrupted. “He helped me fool Tenny-Bro into thinking I was you.” Her glare was an accusation, as if Revan had killed Master Klee. “Then he went back to Coruscant and your fracking cousin killed him. Yuthura told me. She was there.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Guess that’s one not on your sheet.” The Deralian paused. “Butcher.”

“I guess.” She refused to show this woman how much that hurt. “Of course, when you were releasing the virus on the fracking planet and killing thousands, your Da and I were coming in third in the Biscain Hundred.”

“What?” Polla scoffed. “That’s not even a good lie.”

“Third place,” Revan repeated. “Jasp never told you about his time in the war, huh? He told me.”

“What? Which fracking war? He hated wars—”

“Pollie.” Seiran limped between them again.
Pollie. What Polla Organa's family called her to get her attention. The diminutive she hated.

“Sei--she--”

Polla's husband looked tired. His splinted leg whirred, like the repulsors holding it up were running out of juice. “I heard. You gave as good as you got.”

“Better listen to him, Pollie.” Revan turned away, steeling herself to face the real threat.

Xxx

“Where in Ajunta Pal’s name have you been?” Mydia demanded of her brother. He’d already spent some time she'd never get back recounting the tale of his escape, but she found the details difficult to imagine. Phylus hated camping. Surely, the brother she knew would have just curled up and died before spending days in the wilderness.

Behind them, some kind of drama was breaking out between the Wookiee and the Emperor's Voice and Revan, but Mydia only had eyes for the scrawny, long-nosed boy in front of her. He looked quite ill.

“I was walking through the forest,” her brother repeated. (Walking through the forest seemed to be one of the tale’s themes.) “And starving. And I feel sick. I almost died.”

“We’ll get you food. And medical attention, but did you know that Darth Malak is no longer possessing Dustil Onasi?” She turned her head toward the Dark Lord, who had told her that her life was a lie, but the woman was now running off again, trailed by that Wookiee. Mydia’s old tutor followed them, too--Seriina moving at a surprising clip for a someone who had always been so slow carrying the warmed bath towels on the days when the chambermaids were busy scouring the kitchens. Seriina’s husband hobbled behind, supported by Admiral Onasi.

Practically a parade of the infirm. Why Lord Revan surrounded herself with injured slaves and miscreants was a mystery too boring to solve. Mydia yawned.

“Dustil’s not possessed?” Phylus coughed. “Yeah. I figured when he didn’t remember Karagan, the wine steward. Kept offering Dustil the red agaive, but he never drank it.” He paused. “Dustil’s alright, though. Did Karagan make it out?”

“How should I know?” There had been a few servants cowering in the tunnels when they’d returned to the tombs. Mydia had given orders to have them all killed for not guarding the upstairs--and then the other Lord Revan had countermanded those orders--and then she really didn’t bother to notice after that, because the other Lord Revan had been so kind about the baby and always asking for Mydia’s help with the survivors.

The baby. Ugh, that reminded Mydia. She still had to decide whether to bother getting fat and have that baby--or not. “Why didn't you tell me that Dustil Onasi wasn’t Lord Malak?”

“I didn’t want you to kill him.” Phylus was honest to a fault. How sad for him that he was such a lovable, weak creature. “I also didn’t want him to kill you.”

“Sweet.” In a way, it was. “But now I’m pregnant with some no-name liar’s baby, and I’ve just met Lord Revan’s cousin. He trained on Korriban.” True, he didn’t have the Force now, just like the traitor Ulic Qel-Droma, but blood, as Mother always said, it would always tell.

Lord Revan had recognized the man. He was no mere slave. And he said he’d been strong, before.
“Um, so did Dustil.” Her brother blinked. He was sweating and rather pale. Mydia took his arm, looking for the medix. “He trained on Korriban and he’s powerful. With… uh, with Inse gone and Mother dead—”

“Nereal and Rhea, too.” But neither of them had liked their older brothers.

“I felt them die, too. Just like Mother. You... did you kill Mother?”

“I used Revan’s droid.” It was close enough to the truth.

“With everyone dead don’t we need Dustil?”

“For what?” She’d lost the hover-train of her brother’s thought. The poor dear was probably delirious. She took his hand, leading him back toward the camp. “Let’s get you some medical attention. The Mandalorian doctor has enormous breasts. You’ll like her.”

“Okay.” He nodded meekly. Good old Phylus.

Additionally, Mydia had some questions for Medix Sinae about ending a pregnancy.

As if it could hear, the little parasite inside took the opportunity to squirm, like a drek worm afraid of the light.

XXX

“Genoharadan?” The Houck chuckled at Revan. Again.

She had moved their conversation out of view from the Mandalorians trailing them, but Revan still had the feeling of being watched. She had to assume constant surveillance. “Some incompetent order of assassins.” She tried to sound as if the topic already bored her.


“My box was the only one that mattered.”

“Again, the Rakatan obelisk was delivered to one of your agents on Korriban.”

If Revan still possessed true power these pathetic minions would already be dead. “So you claim. But I thought the Order of the Genoharadan took vows not to lie.”

The Wookiee bared his teeth. “That would make our job nigh-impossible... but in this case, I'm telling the truth.” He frowned. “If we ever get the wideband working again, I’ll show you a copy of the receipt.”

“Which agent on Korriban? Didn't it occur to you that I was dead?”

“Sure. The agent in charge had the thing in cold storage because you were dead. But then... you showed up, didn't you? Or she did.” Grarwwaar nodded in the direction that the Fragment had taken. “Announcing all over Korriban that she was Revan returned, and so when the kid came asking--”

“You gave the... you gave my artifact to a child?”

A thought uncoiled in her mind, soft and slightly smug. So that's what happened to it!
Sheris? But the woman's presence slipped away, and suddenly Revan just knew, as if she'd been Sheris herself.

_Beya knew there was something that Revan had wanted very badly. She thought it must have value._

_She thought she could use me to acquire it, and I helped because I wanted to know—what kind of superweapon or artifact would have the great Lord of the Sith upturning the galaxy—_

“The employee who gave your Rakatan mind-prison to Mission Vao is no longer with the Order,” Rogere added. “Hulas had him disposed. Vao wasn't an authorized courier, even if she did know the password.”

“We think she guessed the password,” Grarwwaar shrugged. “Lurze wasn’t the brightest.”

In her old body, both of them would be suspended by their throats by now. In this one, Revan just blinked. “But the Fragment disposed of Mission Vao.”

“Did she?” Grarwwaar tilted his head. “What a pity. I was looking forward to another talk with the ghost-child.” He gestured toward the nearest row of ships. “But isn’t that the _Blue Ghost_ over there? I helped paint it myself.”

“That’s the _Ebon Hawk_...” Revan began, frowning. “I don’t understand the significance—”

_Dar._

Revan turned to see the Fragment, trailed by an entire entourage—including Polla and Seiran and the Fragment's husband, as well as Zaalbar the Wookiee. Zaalbar had a T3 astromech strapped to back that appeared to be the one possessed by Mission Vao.

“Lord Revan,” Grarwwaar rumbled, as the Fragment approached.

The woman nodded, laying claim to the title, but kept her attention focused on Revan. From her movements she had mostly recovered from her injury. “What the frack are you doing?”

“Speaking to my Genoharadan contacts.” The thought that this woman had possessed her artifact and then—lost it? Sold it? Revan struggled for composure.

“Genoharadan?” The Fragment's eyes narrowed. “These two are Genoharadan?”

“Hello again,” Grarwwaar murmured. Abruptly, his features shifted, melting like rain on snow as he shrank, becoming a white-haired humanoid man, perhaps of Arkanian extraction. “This shape may be more familiar.”

To her credit, the Fragment didn't react at all, although a few of the others gasped. “Rulan Prolik? What are you doing here?”

_Shii’ido, I think._ Revan was pleased to have her suspicions confirmed. _Not a Clawdite—he is far too arrogant—_

“Curiosity,” the former Wookiee said. “Rumors of your presence on this world.” He glanced between them. “False rumors, initially, but now true.”

“There’s a Dathomiri prophecy,” the Houck added. “Says somethin like this’s gonna happen. And it has.”

“Dathomir,” the white-haired man scoffed. “One of the first points where the Emperor Vitiate
infected our ranks. Can’t really trust their prophecies.”

“Ziost priests used to say the same thing.”

“You were working for Malachi D'Reev, before,” the Fragment accused Grarwwaar. Or Rulan, apparently.

“Guilty as charged.” The shapeshifter smiled. “Of course, we no longer do.”

“He's dead,” Revan interrupted them. Irrationally, she wanted to cut through this posturing with her saber, but she had surrendered it to Sinae when this farce began, when she had brought the injured Fragment and Polla into the Mandalorian camp in the first place.

Peace, Red.

Malak's voice was faint, still distracted, as if his main attention was elsewhere.

I do not give into my urges, she responded, ignoring the soft feeling of laughter in her mind that came from Sheris. I will see what the Fragment's game is, first—if she is cognizant enough to have one.

The Fragment’s attention kept shifting back to the wall of the Temple behind them. Revan remembered hearing its call, a dark whisper in the back of her mind when she came too close, but it had been quiet and easily avoided. From the look on the Fragment’s face, the call was stronger now.

It was madness that the Mando’ade had made their camp here. What had the Fragment been thinking?

Rulan Prolik continued. “If you're concerned about the D’Reev contract on your son, it was withdrawn. The Genoharadan--at least when we left--had no orders at all regarding Malachor D'Reev.”

“Good,” the Fragment snapped. Revan noted the red-stained cloth at the Fragment’s belt, the stain above her lips. Sheris's empathic gift shivered with the weight of the pain in her skull, even encased behind a wall of ice, like the woman herself could no longer feel it. “And what about her?” Her scowl looked as petulant as Polla’s when she turned the force of her glare back to Revan. “Are you plotting against me with Dar’Revan?”

“Call me Sheris,” Revan advised, with more acid than she meant to reveal. “And no, these Gentlebeings were just revealing to me that they had found my Rakatan obelisk--the one I planned to use to defeat the Sith Emperor for good. They then surrendered it to you.” Her fingers curled with the urge to choke the truth from those lying lips. If she could have matched the Fragment’s strength--

No, Red.

“Huh?” The Fragment blinked. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Lurze surrendered the Rakatan box to your agent, Revan. To our mutual friend, Mission Vao. On Korriban,” Grarwwaar cleared his humanoid throat. “At the time, she was a fifteen-year-old blue Twi’lek.”

“What?” Surely the woman could hide her expressions better than this. Or was her ignorance feigned, and the overreaction a trap? “I don't have any box. Mission…?” Her voice trailed off into
a Shyriiwook whine as she queried her Wookiee.

“There were lots of boxes,” the Kashyyyk native growled back. “Mission did a lot of trading. I don’t know.”

“Ask her.” Revan gestured at the droid strapped to his back, trying not to show the relief she felt, that there still might be some hope. “Turn her back on.”

“She’s broken,” the Fragment snapped. “You can’t.”

“Waaghha—” the Wookiee began to say something, but the Fragment silenced him with a glance, looking at Revan with an expression so pointed that Revan almost wanted to laugh.

It would have been inappropriate to mock the Fragment’s transparency. And so Revan did not. Obviously, they had a backup persona hidden, perhaps even the original holocron.

She would have to search the Fragment’s quarters later. And her ship.

“What’s the big deal about this box anyway?” Carth interrupted. “And what are the Genoharadan--are they the ones who were going to kill Korrie?” His hand went to his blaster, as if the Fragment’s volatility was contagious. “You said an ancient order of assassins was going to kill Korrie. That shapeshifter said they were part of an Order. And they used to work for D’Reev. ” For someone with a suspicious mind, that would be connection enough.

Captain Onasi had the virtue of being right, in this case.

“The box is a Rakata mind prison,” Revan told them all, for the time for subterfuge had long since passed. “It traps… life essence, I suppose one could say.”

“Souls,” the Houck interrupted. “We would call them souls.”

“Just one at a time,” Rulan Prolik added.

“So?” Polla interrupted. “The Emperor’s got more than one body.”

“But only one soul.” Rogere shrugged. “What is it that your Grass Priests say? That each soul has its own imprint on the fields, leaving its own mark when it passes?”

“I always fell asleep during the sermons,” the Deralian muttered, but she was looking at the Fragment, and the Fragment was looking back at her, their expressions nearly identical.

Revan bit back her impatience. To be so close-- “If you have it in your possession, Fragment, I recommend you tell me. It could be the key to your salvation.”

“I don’t know anything about it.” The woman was twisting her top-knot the way Revan would tug at her braids as a child, before Jedi discipline taught her how to sit still. Her nose was bleeding again. Revan could see the pain, even if the Fragment couldn’t feel it. “A box? On Korriban? You mentioned a box before. But I never saw any box on Korriban.”

“Uh… Dustil did.” Carth cleared his throat. “He… he told me about it. Mission sweet-talked him into carrying it from some shady Rodian all the way across Dreshdae. To the Hawk.”

“Then it might still be there--on your ship.” Hope was fleeting. Hope was a curse. Hope felt like a flame inside her. To see Malachor again. To finally rid the galaxy of the Emperor forever--

“Yes.” From Fragment’s expression, had she known? Or guessed? “It might be.” Her hand
extended toward Revan. “Is that a Force collar on your belt? Give it to me.”

“Why? Silencing me in the Force won’t help, and you need me to heal.”

“It’s not for you. I need it.” The extended hand shook slightly, a tremor that seemed to run through the women’s frame. “I need… quiet. I need to think. That tomb--did you hear it, too--before?”

“When I was close.” Revan pulled the circlet free and unfolded it gingerly. “The Genoharadan gave this one to me. It’s Force-locked. You won’t be able to remove it yourself.”

The Fragment made a face. “I’m familiar with the design.” She set the prongs over her neck, hissing slightly as they set against the skin.

“Beautiful, are you sure--” her husband’s objection was already too late.

“Yes.” Her face relaxed for a moment, then grimaced, as the pain she had blocked before came back. “Blast it! My head’s killing me!”

Unshielded by the Force, her agony was almost visible to Sheris’s medix-trained eyes, a red miasma like a crown on the woman’s skull.

“I can take away your pain--” Revan stepped forward, placing her hands against the sides of the Fragment’s head, where her hair was cropped close, the brown dye ceding to red. The damage was worse than she had expected, and her breath hissed out in astonishment as much as renewed agony-pain like a circuit running between them--a connection--even without the Force.

“That’s better. A little.” The Fragment sagged against her, and Revan was suddenly the one holding them both upright, her weak grasp of the Force half-distracted, channeling away the pain. She staggered and then Fragment’s arms locked on hers, pulling her up with wiry strength, until the woman had straightened to their full height. Revan found her concentration and began again, wincing, as it felt like a band of agony was tightening around her own skull.

“Y-you used to do this for Malak.” Voice a low whisper. Green eyes locked to hers. “I dreamed about it.”

“Yes.” It was Sheris who nodded, suddenly Sheris looking at Revan through their eyes. “At first, because you ordered.”

“Thank you.” The woman swallowed. “Thank you for….”

“Then because I loved him. Then I didn't do it for you. I did it for him .”

“I know.” The Fragment blinked, and one tear fell, tracing a path down her silver-marked cheek. “Thank you.”

Xxx

It took forever, but the Mandies got their comm-tower working again, thanks to Dustil lying on the ground with his eyes closed next to the turbines, making them spin as fast as he fracking could without burning out their motors (harder than you’d think).

It wasn’t the worst thing he’d ever done with the Force. It even gave his anger a place to go, which made things simple and clean again. No Mydia Blais. No Mekk. No stupid fracking refugees who kept looking at him with those shell-shocked eyes, like they weren’t strong enough to help themselves.
“We’re live!” Urex called out finally. A crackle of static and voices babbled through the speakers —some broadcast from some far-away world. The sound of a popular song blasted through the clearing.

All of the Mandies cheered like they’d just fracking invented fire.

Dustil stayed where he was, kept making the wheels spin. The first wideband comm call Canderous placed was about as interesting as watching Mandalorians while Mandalorians watched paint dry, but he didn’t care.

For the first ten minutes or so, Canderous and Gwenarius Ordo exchanged troop information, patching in the man’s other wife, Aemelie Ordo from the Aleema, to weigh in. They carried on in front of Dustil like he was an actual battery, and not the man making the turbines spin to generate the power for their fracking convenience.

In fact, they were so fracking boring Dustil almost missed it when Canderous told his wife their kid was probably dead.

They didn’t have a visual on Gwenarius Ordo (who was apparently on Dxun, which hadn’t been bombed, but they’d had fallout and they were on alert), but her voice just got slower when she heard about poor Millifar Ordo, she of the genetics and engineering textbooks, and fangirl pictures of fracking idiots.

“She was a woman, at least,” Aemelie declared. “Mekel Jin performed her first shereshoy.”

“I’m pleased to hear of that,” Gwenarius replied, and the three of them were quiet for a second while Dustil stared hard at the spinning turbines and tried to think about hoverball and not his irrational urge to wring Mekk’s neck.

Then Gwenarius began talking about banthashit in the rest of the galaxy. Apparently, that murder fleet of Revan’s had been all over the Core and the Rim, and rumors were wild, saying the Republic Fleet was now on its way to the Outer Reaches to crush the Sith Empire.

Hah, Dustil thought, staring hard at those blasted turbines. *Crush this planet anymore and it’ll be a smear of shit on the galaxy’s ass.*

Then, Canderous Ordo was just starting in on some banthashit reasons why he didn’t want to fight the Republic right now when the medix Sinae showed up, practically hysterical, with some story about Revan being ‘arusuum’la.’

Took Dustil a second to translate that one. *Aruuum’la* meant stale, he thought, which was a weird insult, but Canderous and his wives got quiet, and the man looked up at the kids hovering above and told them to leave.

Then he looked down at Dustil, still chilling on the ground. “Batteries are charged enough, kid. You should go.”

“I’m fine staying—” their conversation might have been about to get interesting, considering the medix looked like someone had pissed in her caff and made her drink it after.

“Go,” Aemelie’s image scowled down at him from the comm-link. She didn’t like him and it was fracking mutual. Probably still holding a grudge about that time Dustil had rescued her from prison aboard the good ship *Aleema.*

Mandies never knew when to be properly grateful. Sometimes, Dustil could see why Malak had
hated them.


Dustil stood up. Turbines were still spinning, batteries were charged.

“You’re good for another day,” he told them.

No doubt by now, Mekk had probably propositioned Mydia Blais and a few Wookiees to put on a live sex-show for the Mando’ade. Did they have those? If not, Mekk would probably invent them.

Dustil felt his face flush.

XXX

“Halloo?” Mydia peered into the main medix tent. “Doctorix Sinae? That is your name, isn’t it?” The smell of kolto made her feel nauseous, but almost everything did, when she wasn’t starving.

No one answered, just the glug of a life support tank set along the wall with a pregnant Human floating in it. With the crowds that had been in the room when she’d peeked in before, Mydia hadn’t noticed how pregnant the woman veg had been.

Round and fat and repulsive. And fat. So fat.

“Ugh,” she said to the empty room. Inside her stomach the parasite squirmed again. She’d been so happy when it was Lord Malak’s, but now things had changed.

“I may have to kill your father,” she told it. “I do not like liars.”

The pregnant woman’s tank beeped. The Mandalorian runes said something, but Mydia had never bothered to learn them. Revan had conquered those people. There was nothing to be learned from losers.

Still, she assumed the beeps meant the medix would come back. When she did, Mydia would ask her what could be done.

One of the cots looked marginally cleaner than the others. She sat down on that one and closed her eyes.

XXX

“Dustil?” Yuthura Ban stepped out from behind a tent like she’d been lying in wait there all along, just as Dustil had finally calmed down enough to head for the meat pits and get himself a fracking meal before he found Mekel Jin. “I wanted you to know that I’m proud of your work.”

“Why?”

Ban looked as Sithy as Dustil did, except she’d told him before it was just cosmetic drugs or something. She felt funny in the Force, too. Weak. Kind of strained.

“I’ve been hearing how much you were helping around the camp. And with rescues.”

“Yeah, well, Revan and I were the only two Force-users worth a damn until the rest of you showed.” He shrugged. “She was busy sometimes. So someone had to do it.”

“You did well.”
“You knew Mekel was alive,” he said back, which wasn’t what he meant to say at all. “All that time on Kaas, hanging out with Scourge and you never told me.”

“A misunderstanding.” Her brow ridges drew together. “You seemed quite certain he was dead, and so I assumed that your bond--”

“The bond you knew was broken!”

“They say a Bezel bond is beyond the Force. It is a tie to the soul.”

“Whatever.” The anger licked the air, he could almost see it. Dustil felt a smug satisfaction when Ban took a step back. “Bond’s broken now. We’re not tied at the soul. Or anywhere else.”

“Oh.” Her eyes were as yellow as his. It was supposed to be from a dark side drug. His father had mentioned that. “You’re much stronger than you were before, Dustil.”

“Don’t act so surprised,” he snapped. “All those good times at the Dark Council meetings when you’d sit on Lord Scourge’s lap and pretend to be his slave while I pretended to be Malak. Where is that Scourge asshole, anyway?”

“Dead.” Her lekku twitched. “Poison.”

“Well, sithspit for him.” The Mandies were roasting something, like they done the last two nights. It made his stomach rumble. Dustil’s eyes went to the tent he’d shared with Mekk, the one Mydia Blais seemed to have taken over. He still didn’t know if he was gonna sleep there tonight. He still didn’t know if he wanted to sleep there. “Have you seen Mekel?”

“Only briefly. I was there when Oerin Lin stripped the Force from him. I believe he blames me for the experience.”

“So do I.” At that moment, he wanted to show her how much he blamed her.

Yuthura raised a brow ridge. “Your hand is on your saber. Do you remember what I told you?”

“Always be prepared to carry out the threat.” How could he forget? She’d made him carve it on Shaardan’s back with a laser pen. A dozen times, when that asshole had started the fight in the first place. “I am, Yuthura.”

“I see that.” Her hand dropped to her own. She’d be no challenge. She didn’t look well. “Dustil, I couldn’t help you before--”

“When?” He scoffed. “When did you ever help me?”

“You and Mekel would have died on Korriban if I hadn’t bonded you.”

Less a memory than a feeling. That glitterstim high peaking. The chanting. Cold sigils etched in blood on his naked skin.

“You want me to thank you?”

“No. I want to… to fix this.” Yuthura seemed to hesitate. “There are techniques to block the worst effects of the Dark. Meditations. I could teach y--”

“Teach someone who gives a frack.” Dustil pushed past her toward the row of fires, the sound of Mandalorian voices. His mouth watered. The meat smelled fracking fantastic.
Trista Jar: “Thank you, Citizen Sha-rah, that was a very interesting piece on Ithorian cooking. Next up after a word from our sponsors... are we at war or not?” (Giggles) “I mean, that’s such a silly question, isn’t it, General Ubuta? Wouldn’t we know if we were at war?” (Giggles again.) “I mean, can’t you just tell us?”

General Ubuta: “I’ve been instructed to advise that planetary defenses around Core worlds have been placed on high alert.”

Trista Jar: “And Old Scaly hasn’t given one of her State of the Fleet addresses in weeks! Not to mention those rumors from Katarr and the Biscain Evacuation... also joining us today are the Senators in charge of appropriations for defense spending, Senator Leeshansintina Racharn, and Senator Aramis Makeon.”

Aramis: (Giggles.) “It’s great to be here, Trista. I love your show.”

Leeshansintina: “Thanks for having us. I want everyone to know, things are totally okay. There’s no reason to panic. The Republic is at peace. A lasting peace, for perhaps the first time in its history.”

Aramis: “Leesa’s totally right. Now we have a peace. There is no reason to panic. The Republic is at peace. A lasting peace, for perhaps the first time in its history--”

“Drink up, kid.” Atton plunked a glass of blue milk down in front of Kore, making a show of checking his chron. “We might be here awhile if my contact doesn't show--”

‘Here’ was a dingy bar on some stupid fueling station called Peragus.

“I want to go back to Deralia,” Kore muttered. But he was thirsty so he drank the milk. He hadn’t eaten or drunk anything the man had given him for the first day… but then he’d started to feel dizzy and Father had kept saying he needed to keep his strength up and so now he was eating and drinking again. Father wasn’t sure when it was safe or not, but he had said the fact that the Blade hadn’t killed him yet meant that he wasn’t going to.

Kore didn’t think Father was really sure, though. That was the thing about growing up; you learned when your parents were lying.

Not yet, Mal. Father was a hovering blue form, fading in and out above Atton’s head. It took a lot for him to appear like that, so he must be serious. But soon, I think.

“I wanted to take you to Yu-Phaedra.” The murderer who was his new surrogate guardian (according to Father--at least until soon happened) folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, whistling. “But just when you think you’re out, they pull you back in. You don’t want to know what happens when you refuse a direct order…” He shook his head. “Nightmares. They get in your head.”

“They, who?” Kore asked.

“Monsters,” Atton said. “I thought your old dads Malak was bad. But they’re worse.” He paused. “Don’t think she knows about you, at least. Count yourself lucky for that.”

It's possible he's just insane, Father added. He received one coded comm transmission yesterday,
but there has been no other contact.

Maybe he sees ghosts, too.

Kore felt Father’s surprise at the thought, mixed with a little bit of approval. You could be right.

“Hey,” a voice said softly, from behind Kore, startling all of them— even Father, who fizzled out of existence before popping in again practically on top of the green Twi'lek lady, who herself hadn’t been there a milli ago. Like she’d had a stealth belt or been hiding in the Force--

“Zory?” Atton's voice cracked a little, and he went dead in the Force, like he’d become invisible too— except he wasn’t. “Thought you died.”

“Zoriis,” the woman corrected him, like they weren’t as much friends as Atton thought. “I would say the same, Jaq, but my orders mentioned you specifically. It seems they have need of your talents.” She frowned, as if she’d just noticed Kore. “Didn't realize you'd have a 'friend.'”

She made the word ugly, and Atton snarled a little, as if he were as insulted as Kore was.

“I'm not little.” Kore wasn't. He was as tall as this Twi'lek lady, and almost as tall as Atton (or Jaq). “And we aren’t friends. Not like you mean. Why are you calling him Jaq?”

“Blade Three of Acknahar’tah’s unwieldy,” the woman said, staring at him with a distracted frown. “We gave ourselves nicknames on assignments. I always liked Jaq. I had a pet tusk cat, once. I called him that too.”

“Right.” Atton (or Jaq) rolled his eyes. “You and me, Zory, we'll always have Cinnegar. Where'd you end up, anyways? Nobody seemed to know.”

“Tatooine.” She grimaced, flicking a lekku back. “Then I got recalled to you-know-where.”

“Huh.” Atton shrugged. “What were you doing on the dust ball?”

“Wasting time waiting on a delivery.” Lady Zoriis shrugged. “Now it seems someone's reactivating the Blades— and their handlers.” Her head turned toward Kore again. “Orders have changed, though. Conversion department’s been sarlaaced. No more collecting padawans. Guess that’s a tough break for you, ki--”

Move, Mal!

But Kore was moving already, even before Father's blue shimmer got between him and the Twi'lek lady, and then he was ducking under the table, behind Jaq-Atton, even as Jaq-Atton threw his drink in the Twi'lek lady's face--

The lightsaber she'd drawn was funnily short, like it was meant for a kid. And Kore wished with all his heart he still had his, but he was rolling back now, muscles tensed, edging toward the door.

The door had been open before, but it wasn't now. It was locked. Like she’d locked it before she ambushed them.

Open, he thought at it, waving his hands a little desperately.

There was a snikt sound behind him, then a thud, and then a hand clasped down hard on his shoulder and Korrie screamed.

“Fracking Sith,” Atton said. When Kore looked back, Lady Zoriis was on the floor with a red line
across her throat and blood coming out. Atton was coiling some kind of laser whip back into its case—what Kore thought had just been a funny bracelet all this time. “Arrogant enough to brag about their plans. Same as they ever was.” He sat back down, a little unsteady, and Kore noticed the ‘saber burn on his leg. “If you’re gonna do something, just do it, kid. Don’t waste time playing.”

Now? Kore asked Father.

Not yet. Father sounded uncertain. I hadn’t expected him to save you.

XXX

A/N version with types added since beta. A thousand thanks, Ether. Typos not on you.
“Hello!” Valkorion arranged the Human woman’s features to seem kind and unassuming. “Are you the lady of the house?”

“Might be. What’s this about?” Dark eyes squinted, taking in his harmless round shape. Molla Organa had a blaster at her hip, and an infant in her arms—presumably, the child of Polla and Seiran Wen… what was its name again? Valkorion couldn’t remember if he’d ever been told.

“I’m selling Perma-ware.” Sydax’s features seemed to want to smile beneath her goggles, as if this null existed in a state of permanent happiness. Perhaps she did. Such simple creatures his bodies were—mere amoebas in the ocean of eternity.

“Gah,” the baby on her hip told him gravely, shaking his head.

It was unfortunate, Valkorion thought, that the amoebas were revolting. Again.

“Don’t see any Perma-ware samples.” By the Ancients, Molla Organa was a suspicious one!

“I have a brochure….” It had not occurred to Valkorion to bring one, but he made the vessel lie about it easily. “My name is Sydax, Meez Organa. I’m from Chassna.”

“Right.” The woman and the child in her arms both had Polla’s traitorous glare. “How do you know my name?”

“Isn’t this the Organa farm?” He tilted Sydax’s head to the side like a quizzical nerf.

“Might be… but… we don’t want whatever you’ve got.” Molla Organa was stooped and wrinkled, with silver hair twisted into one of those top-knots. Looking at her, it was quite easy to imagine how the passage of time would affect her daughter—given the opportunity.

“Oh, ho! Did they truly think the Deralian was dead? “Polla Organa?” Best be sure.

“Get out,” the Organa matriarch barked. “Bolts! Load the door-cannon!”

Mechanical gears creaked above poor Sydax’s head.
“Mercy,” Valkorion chuckled. “When you say daughter, do you mean Polla Organa? She isn’t dead yet—”

White light seemed to explode in Sydax’s brain before it all went away—

—and then Valkorion was—

—preparing more vessels for his Kiss on Manaan, a process that took hours, but made all sixteen of his gill-bodies quiver with anticipation—

XXX

Had it been up to him, Canderous would have waited, but his wives gave an ultimatum. One sun’s rotation and they would be gone. He’d already given word to the kids to pack up the camp.

But he had to tell Revan himself.

Canderous found her approaching the Ebon Hawk like a general leading a rag-tag army. The nastaar was hovering close, far too close for his liking, and Onasi looked like he’d been punched in his shebs. Speaking of shebs, Fur-sheb was there, too—alive and well and in a normal place, Canderous would have taken the time for a hand-clasp and a silent verse to see another of their own alive—but there was so little time left.

And she came first.

“Need to talk, Revan.” He planted himself like a barricade between the row of tents and her ship. “Now. Alone.”

“Of course.” Revan nodded, stepping to the side. Her rag-tag army stopped, too. The nastaar shot him a glare, which was easy enough to ignore. Polla and Seiran Wen had no business being in this place, and Onasi was frowning suspiciously, like they hadn’t all been to hell and back a dozen times, forged bonds of beskar-gam that could never be broken. Where Revan had acquired a Houck and Arkanian was a question for later. Canderous had seen the reports of a Houck coming in with some of the latest refs, but the Arkanian—

Kriff it. The Arkanian could wait.

“Wait here,” Revan told the others. “Don't go to the Hawk without me.”

“Don't be too long.” Onasi kissed her inappropriately, like he was staking his claim. Revan didn't object and Canderous had to avert his eyes—which only brought him face to face with the nastaar again.

“Of course, Fragment.” The nastaar raised an eyebrow, ignoring their display to stare back at Canderous, instead. Her gaze reminded him of a hunting wraid, waiting to pounce. “We’ll wait for you before we retrieve the box.”

“If it's even there. I went over every meter of that ship before,” the real Polla Organa muttered, half under her breath. “Would have noticed something valuable.”

“You must have overlooked it.” The nastaar shrugged.

Revan's movements seemed stiff, probably due to her injury, but when she detached herself from Onasi, she didn't give the aruetii the dignity of a response.
Canderous led her away from the others, to where the ridge of the plateau stretched away from the dar’jett Dark Temple looking out on the sea of blasted forest below. He weighed his words carefully. She deserved truth—no matter what she had become. Hells, she deserved better than what Canderous could offer. So had Lin, when he thought about it—no matter how many times Aemelie and Gwen had recited the Machinist's Creed—no matter what truths Sinae had said about them both.

“So? You look like someone kicked your lost akk pup.” Revan’s smile was strained, her face shiny with sweat, skin too pale, even for her. Undying, Sinae had said. She didn't look it. Looked all too mortal. Like the nastaar had hurt her worse than he’d believed.

“The Clans cannot help you.” Might as well spit it out.

“But you are helping—you have been a great help. I don't expect you to do more…” her voice trailed off. “You know we're not... we're not going to go off together and conquer... planets.”

I do now. A sad thought, although a part of him had always known. She had the spirit for it, but not the fire—not since the Star Forge. And in his heart of hearts, Canderous thought she wasn’t the only one whose fires had dimmed since those glorious days.

“I swore an oath to follow you,” he continued. “That's personal. That doesn't end no matter what you are. But my people—”

“No matter what I—” her voice broke off. “I'm still me. And I don't remember ever asking for an oath.”

“We take vows privately. I had no reason to speak of it before.”

“And now?”

“Now you are... arusuul’m’a.” He could see from her expression that she did not understand.

“Stagnant?” Her nose wrinkled as translated the word into Basic.

“Undying. Deathless. Unchanging.” Those were better words than the one she had used. “Something that flesh is not.”

Revan was not stupid. She had seen how the others spoke about those machine-ships, and about Lin. It only took her a moment to figure it out.

“I know that your people have a… prohibition against autonomous machines. You navigate with manual jump points. But you do use auto-targeting programs. Cybernetic enhancements. Hells, your wives had no problem with Mission’s help on Coruscant—and you've got that regeneration implant in your skull. So it's not all machines you're afraid of.” Her laugh sounded forced. “Do you think I'm a machine?”

From her face, she knew better.

“We fear nothing. My implant stimulates an immune response. And Gwen thought Mission was just a clever astromech. But you… Sinae showed me the proof. Your cells… repair themselves. It is a technology we have seen before.”

Without proof Canderous could have denied it. He would have denied it, even though he’d seen her fight that Sith on Korriban, seen her rise from a blow there that should have felled her. He'd seen her fight back, leeching power itself from the Sith’s dying bones.
Clan law could not be denied.

“So?” Revan looked like she was desperately trying to think of a joke.

“So you cannot die. You cannot end. Your children are denied their death songs of you, and each season they will grow and—” he tried to think of what she could understand. “Seasons change, Revan. You will not.”

“Did you miss the plan to freeze me in carbonite?” Her voice was acid.

“You can't trust the aruetii.”

“You call her a traitor?” Her eyebrow raised. “I don't trust her, either, but I do… I believe her.”

“You should shoot her.”

“I'd miss.” She smiled at him, that feral mask that turned her into the warrior he knew so well.

“I meant—make an end. She should have died long ago.”

“She did.” That mask hardened. “I wish it was that simple, Canderous.” A trickle of blood came from her nose and she wiped it absently. “Don't touch her.”

“She's your kill.”

“She's my… she's Revan.” Her hand was at her side as if it pained her. The heavy metal collar around her neck was new, but looked like the one she'd worn on Kashyyyk. A Force-blocking device. “She's Korrie's mother.”

The nastaar was not the mother of Revan's son, but it was none of his business. “I came to tell you why we must go. We'll leave you supplies. A ship—”

A wry smile pulled at her mouth. “I understand.”

“It would not be my choice. We were not always so… rigid.” He owed her the tale. “As recently as my own boyhood, in the Krath wars with Ulic Qel Droma as an ally, we harnessed the walking sleep of more than two dozen war basilisks. I have told you the tale of riding one, dropping down into the atmosphere, a glorious battle in skies—”

“I told you I wanted one, yes. You said that was impossible.”

“They no longer exist—not like they did. We copied the pattern for drop ships we still use today, but the originals were destroyed. Something that cannot change does not understand seasons.” Did she?

“What happened to them?”

“Another war.” Mandalorian might against the machines. A war on sand, fought with beskar-sharp swords and fire. An internecine civil war, which ended in a rain of metallic ash that poisoned the Weis moon, and left clan survivors only too aware of the dangers of intelligent machines.

Revan knew him well enough not to press for detail. Still, that line crept between her brows. “But they were just weapons, things your people created—”

“No.” Canderous loved the clans more than his own wives, but he would not raise them higher than they deserved. “They were a thing we stole. From creatures who had been made of metal, not
flesh. The Basilisk race imbued metal shells with their own minds. The machines possessed all of their…” He struggled for the Basic definition. “Battle-lust. But with no temper for their enemies in defeat, or preservation of resources. No time of peace. No change, Revan.”

“You’re comparing me to a Basilisk War Droid.” Her mouth twitched. “Huh.”

“He’s not wrong.” The aruetii’s voice interrupted from behind Canderous. She had followed them, trailed by the Deralian smuggler Aemelie was so fond of. “You are much better-looking, of course.”

Polla Organa's laughter sounded nervous. “Was that a joke, Bossypants? Didn't know you had it in you.”

“This is a private conversation.” Revan wiped at her bleeding nose, glaring at the woman who possessed her face. “What do you want?”

“We are out of time for private conversations. Leskal was just telling us there have been wideband reports of Sleeper sightings all over the Rim—even a few in the Core.”

“Where?” It galled Canderous to ask one like the nastaar. Leskal had given him a report less than an hour ago, but none of the Undying ships had been in Core space then. How in all hells could they travel so quickly? Or was the aruetii lying? Surrupetiously, he glanced down and traced a query to the boy. The response shot back almost instantly, proving that his young warrior was paying attention.

And that the nastaar told the truth.

“Ships near Alderaan. Byss…” the nastaar's voice softened slightly, listing more Core worlds, along with the Rim. Fat ones Canderous had once dreamed of sacking himself. But dreams die.

“I-I know.” Revan rubbed her temples. “I-I can still hear them.”

“You’re wearing a Force collar.” The aruetii blinked. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

“You shouldn't be possible, but here you are.” Revan straightened to battle-readiness, glaring at her opponent.

“You know what this means.”

“That you were right? That I need to freeze myself to stop them?”

“I thought the collar would buy more time. It shouldn't be possible for the Sleepers to reach you without the Force—”

“Want me to tell them it’s not fracking possible?” Revan looked at Canderous again. “I understand that you have to go, old friend.” She swallowed. “But I need one favor. If I… there's one thing you have to do for me.”

One favor. He wanted to object to the finality in her voice. He wanted to say he would not leave at all. But Canderous could not deny the clans—not if he wished to lead them, and… he did wish that. He had taken the mask of Mand'alor. He had set his clan above the others. He had vowed to help them prosper.

He would not take it back. “Of course, Revan.”
She did not ask the others to leave, but at least they had the presence of mind to stay silent while she whispered her final request in his ear.

It was what he had expected. Revan was unpredictable in battle, but never in matters of the heart. She drew back from him gracefully, her eyes fixed to his face—as certain of him as he was of her.

“No guarantees.” Canderous smiled. “He's as stubborn as you are.”

She nodded. “I seem to recall you're pretty good with tranks. And the… the… change of scenery might help—might help everyone.”

“Your cousin's got a place with us already. He earned it. But we'll get them all out. You have my word.”

He left the rest unsaid. Her battle songs would be glorious. Her end was her choice.

Over Revan's shoulder, the nastaar didn't have the decency to look away. Canderous wished Revan had just asked him to shoot her like a sensible person, instead of kidnapping free people who might have other plans. “Any other instructions?” He asked hopefully, but Revan just shook her head.

Abruptly, Onasi himself emerged from a cluster of trees. Canderous edged his estimation of the man's surveillance skills up a notch, and nodded.

“You okay, beautiful?” the man asked Revan.

“Let's go find my box now,” the aruetii snapped. Impatient. Like she was the one running out of time.

“I'll tag along.” He had other things to do—breaking camp in a day was not easy, and the unblooded kids would need close supervision, but Canderous would be damned if he left his friends alone with the nastaar and her gibberish.

And, if this was truly Revan's end, he would see her to it.

Xxx

The handsome troch ensign gazed up at Millifar beseechingly. The skin around his orbital socket was just starting to bruise where her fist had knocked it. “Please?” he whispered, holding out his bound arms to her like a wedding gift.

“I already promised to untie you,” Millifar reminded him. “After you tell me how to create a wideband signal on this primitive communications board.”

In truth, the board was not primitive—indeed, its ten rows of flashing lights and multiple knobs offered a degree of complexity even more extensive than the Aleema's nav board. But Millifar did not require the ability to send secure transmissions to an entire fleet—merely one planet—and these controls were unfamiliar.

“Is Ensign Krista okay? Please. Untie me and I-I'll do anything you want! I'll even say she attacked first!”

“I misled you earlier,” Millifar confessed, walking over to the unconscious Krista, who managed to look startled—even snoring through her broken nose. “Although your mutual offer of an assignation was flattering, I merely needed to place a call. I allowed you both to bring me here under a false flag of pretenses. Next time, think with something other than your genitals.”
Fillis let out an indignant squawk—
—and Millifar dragged his trussed and kicking carcass around to the far corner of the room, unbuckling her belt with her flesh hand. Her metal arm lifted his entire weight easily, leaving him dangling in the air. It was useful, to have the artificial strength. “Are you going to be quiet, troch?”

“N-n—”

She dropped him on the duraplate decking where he made a satisfying thud and then looped her belt around his face, pulling back his lips so that it blocked his mouth so that he could not scream before she untied his hands. “Make the comm-board work,” she ordered. “Set it for a wide-band transmission. I will enter the codes.”

“Mmmmmfff,” Fillis said, which could have been yes. She pulled him to his feet and he clumsily flipped a few switches.

“Mmmmf?” Fillis added again hopefully.

“No,” she told him. “I lied.” Then, Millifar used his own stunstick to shock him into unconsciousness again.

Republics were such fools, assigning guards who thought with their shebs and not their heads. Fillis and Krista should have just had their shereshek between themselves on their break time, instead of asking her to get involved… she’d merely asked some basic questions about military technique—

—and then the opportunity had presented itself.

The comm-code flashed green and Millifar sighed with relief, although it seemed to ring for an honor age before the blue image of her mother’s face appeared.

“Daughter!” The First Wife of Ordo had a cut on her forehead that was new, and a smile on her face that Millifar echoed back on her own. “We sang a death song for you.”

“I am honored, Mother, but not dead. I was captured by Republics.”

“Captured?” Gwenarius, First Wife of Ordo, frowned, dabbing at her eyes. “For all this time? Why haven’t you escaped?”

“I was waiting until we arrived at the proper Sith planet. They are traveling to meet with Father’s fleet. I think they plan on war.”

“Never let your enemy plan the war,” her mother chided, as if Millifar hadn’t learned these lessons before she grew breasts. “You should be comming your father, not me.”

“The troch Admiral tried earlier to reach him and Revan, but the receivers in that sector were dead.”

“They are operational again, now,” her mother chided. “You should have tried him first—or Aemelie—”

But I wanted you, Mai. “The Republics think Revan and father’s attacks knocked out most of the wide-band transceivers in the Outer Rim. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get through—”

Mother raised an eyebrow. “Revan’s attacks? Your fathers? No.” She shook her head. “This
was not their doing, this was the work of the living machines. Have you established a plan for your escape?"

“Really? Machines, Mother?” Did her mother really mean that figments from a babe’s nightmare could have wiped out the relays and devastated Sith space?

“Wipe the laughter from your voice. It is no joke.”

A Basilisk fleet? There was nothing funny about that! “Then what are father and Revan doing to stop—”

“Your father and Second Wife are preparing to leave Imperial Space. If you don't escape soon you will miss their departure. Are you armed? Have you located provisions? A suitable ship? Make sure to check the fuel gauge—”

“Mother! My jailors said we would be leaving hyperspace today. I will stow aboard one of their clumsy fighters and take it when the Great Hunt arrives at the Sith planets.”

“And if Aemelie’s fighters accidentally shoot from the sky when you make your approach? What then?” Her mother shook her head. “You should have escaped earlier!”

But I didn't know where to go. “Then I would send a distress call—”

“No.” Mother leaned forward, her enthusiasm for planning Millifar’s life obviously overtaking her reason. Somewhere behind her, one of the babes was laughing.

“But Mai—”

“I said no. Find another way. An escape pod, perhaps. Your father would never shoot an unarmed pod. But comm him, too, and stay away from the First Wife of Lin—”

“You want me to stay away from General Revan—?”

“Am I interrupting something?” The voice came from behind her and Millifar nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Milli? Is someone th—”

“Just… ah… bed games,” Millifar stammered, hitting the disconnect on the board with her elbow, as she turned around to face the white-haired Jettai she’d only seen before from a distance. Master Atris, she was called. Side-stepping put Millifar too close to the unconscious jailers. “The ensigns are just… resting.”

Master Atris blinked. “I see.” Her Mandalorian was less accented than Revan of Lin's and she looked far less trusting. Historically, Force-users had been known to believe absurdities, but this Jettai did not appear convinced.

Still, Millifar smiled and shrugged. “I had an excellent teacher. That is why the ensigns are so exhausted now.” She set her chin high. “If you will excuse me—”

“Are you frightened?” The woman had a smile that probably would have frightened Mother's babes, but Millifar had seen worse. “We Jedi don't bite, you know.” She knelt beside the unconscious woman, resting a slightly-glowing blue hand on Ensign Krista’s broken nose. “Did you punch her with your flesh hand? Or the metal?”
Wasn't it obvious? “I didn't want to kill her.”

“I know.” Master Atris rose to her feet again, tilting her head slightly to examine Millifar again. “You're very pretty, but I doubt your clan-mothers would approve of this.”

“It is not my fault these soldiers were stupid.” Despite herself, Millifar took a step back. There was a light in Master Atris's eyes that reminded her of the way Ensign Krista had looked at her—but even more predatory. Unsettling, in one so old. “I needed the comm-unit.”

“And to escape from your cage.” Master Atris's nose was so fine and thin it looked like it would shatter. She took another step forward and Millifar took another step back. “You don't have to fear me, Millifar of Ordo.”

“I fear no Jett.” But that wasn't true. Sometimes when Millifar closed her eyes she still saw him—Oerin Lin—a walking corpse as he had been in those tunnels beneath Katarr.

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. Why would she think of him now?

Master Atris smiled, nodding at the unconscious ensigns. “You realize you've broken your chains early, Millifar of Ordo? We're still hours away from Dromund Kaas. Did you truly expect to evade a shipwide alarm until we leave hyperspace?”

“Yes.” She had taken Ensign Krista's sidearm, but the weak weapon would be useless against the Force-user. Millifar considered the conduit line running a few meters to their right, along the wall and across the ceiling. She took a few steps in that direction, but something froze her hand. Not like dar’jett magic. Her fingers flexed, but she had lost the reason for using them. What could a blaster do against a Jettai? Abruptly, a feeling of hopelessness overwhelmed her. “I was going to conceal myself in one of their snubfighters' storage lockers. Then, I could overpower their crew—”

Her voice broke off. Why was she telling this troch her plans?

A white eyebrow lifted. “I agree that might work. But I have a better idea. Would you like to hear?”

Despite herself, she answered. “Yes, Master Atris.” What Millifar would like was to be in her own snub, far from this troch prison heading back to her people, but the ensigns were still unconscious and the woman seemed fond of her own voice, so she nodded again and took another step toward the conduit.

“Where are you going?” Master Atris asked. “I think it would be best if you stay by my side for now, Millifar of Ordo.”

“I will stay by your side. It would be best if I stay—” Millifar frowned, because for a moment, that almost made too much sense—

“No! I will not fall for more tricks!” Millifar fired quickly, but the infernal magic-user had already moved—and abruptly, Millifar found her limbs frozen, and her stolen sidearm pulled out of her flesh hand and then suspended in mid-air.

“Hard heads. Di’kut Mando'ade!” Master Atris sounded amused as she tapped something on her wrist. “Bridge? I need a security detail sent to my location. Your Mandalorian prisoner seems to have escaped.” Her thin lips stretched upward as she clicked the comm off again, not even bothering for a response, switching back into Mandalorian. “It is true that your ferocity would make your clan-mothers proud. But you show poor judgement, daughter of Ordo.” Invisible fingers seemed to tighten around Millifar's neck and she felt the air squeeze from her lungs as her vision
started to blur. “What were you thinking? Never attack a dar'Jettai at close range. You will always lose.”

**Dar-jett**—? Millifar had just enough time to wonder why the master of the Jettai Council would name herself no longer a Jettai before darkness claimed her.

Xxx

Totally lonely, sitting on a field surrounded by dull, dead ships. After they'd landed, Polla Revan had skived off with the rest of the crew like Mission didn’t even matter, leaving her alone for *days*.

Being trapped in one consciousness, existing in a singular metal shell was stifling—not to mention, unfair. Above Mission's metaphorical head, the Awakened Ones soared, free as a flock of migrating birds. Occasionally, a few blipped out into hyperspace, arriving almost instantly at their targets, tunneling through the fabric of spacetime like arthropods. Some of the holes left in their wake would become new hyperspace routes for rubes who came after—if their clumsy organic brains managed to find the paths in the first place—and if they were brave enough to try them. But those organics would *never* soar as fast or as free as the Awakened. Flesh would always melt and die.

Mission had been lucky to leave her own flesh behind—even if she didn't feel very lucky now.

If it hadn’t been for the nets suddenly switching back on, Mission thought she would have expired from loneliness after her eight millionth game of solitaire sabacc. But Kaas had control of everything. All Mission could do was watch while the Kaas computer and the Awakened Ones jumped all over the feed like Gamorrean pig-men at a trough, leaving Mission to glimpse in pieces all the intel they cared about: rumors of war, rumors of *Revan*, planetary defense grids that were laughably obsolete, Rakatan installations across the galaxy that stupid Kaas thought it could power back up again—and that the Awakened Ones vowed to destroy—

One newly-awakened installation on Nar Shaddaa caught Mission's eye—just because of the name it was pinging (in Rakatan) back to Kaas—

*HandsomeSithboy79?* What were the odds?

The odds were stupid-to-two. Those creepy twin meat versions of her were sentimental, apparently. And now Mission knew where they’d gone. To Nar Shaddaa. The Smuggler's Moon. At the ass-end of the galaxy.

Mission tried to calculate probabilities that the creepy twins might also be responsible for the scam that had fleeced Mission for several million— because who else would have had the choobs to stiff her scary shell company?

She was running algorithms on what ‘*Go-To*’ could stand for when her organics *finally* came back. At first, they were just voices in the dark. Then, Polla Revan and her gang started tearing the *Ebon Hawk* apart. Like Mission *still* didn't matter.

None of them even bothered to say hi!

“**Hey! Welcome back, Revan!**” the fake Mission sang out over the speakers. “**Would you like to see the tomb now? You should go there!**”

“**Shut that thing off,**” Polla Revan snapped at someone. That *thing*. Yeah that faker wasn’t
“Don’t look at me like that, Earth,” Polla Revan added. “I told you—it’s not her anymore.”

In Canderous’s room Mission made the camera feed switch on and off, blinking like an eye. It was the only circuit she could control; the only eye through which she could see. Aside from that, she only had a feed into the passive sensors set along the Hawk’s internal and external comm systems to give her a clue about what was going on.

{{Target acquired}} one of the Awakened Ones signaled. {{Recommence bombing of the Handsome Sithboy79 Installation? Y/n}}

{{Hold}} whispered another one. {{Display target to Starfire Unit first}}

Handsome Sithboy. Where was he, anyway?

[“What are you guys trying to do?”] Mission asked. [“Start a war with the Hutts? That’s nuts.”]

{{Cleanse it all in fire}} an Awakened One murmured back.

{{Hold}} another one whispered. Slightly less bloodthirsty than the others. {{She must see. She must know. Her pain will be our prize—}}

Slightly less bloodthirsty and a lot more sadistic. They were all assholes.

{{I CANNOT CONTROL THEM}} Kaas added. It was talking to Revan, but Mission knew it wanted her to hear too. {{ONLY YOU CAN STOP THIS, STARFIRE UNIT—}}

[“I will convince her.”] Fake Mission sounded fake, like a real machine, not even as self-aware as Kaas or those dumb ships.

“You nerfherding chivholes! How can I convince her when she can’t hear me?” Screaming into the void was seriously overrated.

“Mission?” At least Big Z’s familiar yowl really made Mission’s day. Finally! Someone noticing her.

“Big Z! You’re alive!” Mission heard her voice coming through the speaker in the cockpit as the Wookiee’s familiar, shaggy steps made their way there. “Hey! Have you seen Revan, by any chance?”

“She is searching for a box the other one said is necessary. In your cargo bay,” he whined.

“Oh!” Mission’s voice chirped back. “What kind of box? She should look in that Dark Temple over there!”

“That’s a trap!” Mission added for real, but no one heard. Sleemo evil computer had taken her voice when it took her eyes. “She’s not me!” Mission could swear her processors made her virtual lips move, her lekku twitch... but the link in Canderous’s bunk just wasn’t connected to anywhere they could see.

“There was a box from Korriban. It was on the Hawk...” the big guy’s voice trailed off as he went back toward the cargo bay. A few seconds later, she heard crashing noises, as if her old pal
was rummaging through crates in there. Again. “I do not know what to look for! Mission, do you remember the box from Korriban? You had Carth's cub carry it for you—”

“Sure!” Mission's voice sang out. “Hey, Revan? Your box is in the tomb!”

“Rulan? Can you figure a way to shut that thing off?” Polla Revan's buzzed close to a speaker somewhere in Mission's secondary bay.

“Rulan? Rulan Prolik?” What were the odds?

“Come to the tomb!” Her own voice grew louder, drowning out the others. “Revan? Come to the tomb. If you don't come to the tomb, they're gonna blow up everything! Hey, sis, come to the t—”

The speaker cut out abruptly with a squawk—unfortunately taking Mission's perception of that half of her ship with it.

“Assholes.” It hurt that Revan was more interested in this dumb box than Mission. “I remember your dumb box. But did you ask me? No.”

Of course Mission remembered the box! Special day. Not just for the box, which had been sealed up and useless and she’d nearly forgotten about... before the creepy twins brought it up. Somehow, the dumb box had made it to Tatooine. And then stupid T’chrrrmak’tahk’lænjšëw and the real Nico Senvi had changed places, made the twins, and tried to take over the galaxy before the twins and Lena got that ancient Rakatan wannabe god but good.

Yeah, Mission remembered the box, alright. Mostly because of that day. That day had been special because of Handsome Sithboy and her first kiss.

XXX

Sithboy79’s real name was Dustil Freaking Onasi. A little weird, that the cute Sith was Carth’s long-lost son, but after about twenty minutes, (and half a bottle of stolen ice wine), Mission had gotten over the weirdness.

He was still handsome. By Human standards, they weren't even related.

“What’s in this thing?” Sithboy79 asked for the third time. Lugging the mysterious box she’d gotten from the shady Rodian really showed off those fuzzy Human muscles of his. Mission couldn’t tell they were fuzzy when he was wearing that stupid uniform, but she’d seen him in the fresher before. “Permacrete rocks?”

“Some crap for Acolyte Organa. You know how it is.”

“I know you mean Darth Revan,” he muttered. Dustil shifted the box on his shoulders, suddenly making it look a lot lighter. It occurred to Mission that Sithboy79 could probably have used the Force to make that box all floaty like Polla would have done—except maybe then she wouldn’t have gotten to see how strong he was.

Polla—no! Revan! she corrected her brain. Boy, it was hard to keep that straight, but Revan kept saying that’s who she was now and they all had to get used to it—even her.

“Shut up!” Mission told Sithboy. “The acolyte's ident's a need to know basis.”

“Well, she’s fracking my father,” Dustil snapped. “So I do get to know.” His arms flexed, and then
he was practically holding the box above his head. Trying to impress her? Kriffing adorable.

“Right.” Mission felt herself snort, shooting him a wink and a twist of her lekku. “Darth Revan and Captain Onasi.” Big scary Darth Revan, who’d spent last night crying in her bunk—alone—and they’d all had to pretend not to hear.

“You said this thing was stolen...?” Dustil shot her a glance. “But Lurze just gave it to us.”

“It’s complicated?” No need to make him more twitchy. No need to tell him that she’d stolen this thing out from under Mask and Dead-Eyes, who were two of the creepier Sith they’d ever met on this wonderful planet. According to Lurze, a party on Tatooine wanted the mystery box to the tune of a million credits... but when Mission said she’d give it directly to Darth Revan herself he’d practically fallen over himself to dump it.

Of course, that was because he was under the impression that Darth Revan knew how to buckle her own shoes.

Mission figured her best bet would be to collect from the mark on Tatooine and leave ‘Darth Revan’ out of the loop. The poor woman had enough on deck with rescuing Bastila, killing Malak, that loser—and maybe patching things up with poor Carth—

“You steal things a lot?” Dustil’s voice cracked, making him sound much younger. Was he staring at her chest?

“I'm the one who stole this ship,” Mission bragged, shooting him a wink. “From a dead man on Taris. Actually, I kinda stole it before he died—”

He was definitely staring at her chest. “Wow.”

She grinned, playing it cool while he huffed and puffed with a box that could have floated.

XXX

“Some Hutt on Tatooine was gonna pay me big for that box.” Mission said the words, but Big Z and Polla Revan didn't hear them. “Plus, I'm right here!” Mission added. She could almost feel Polla Revan being here, but it felt like a wall was between them. That was funny, that the Awakened Ones were screaming louder than Polla Revan right now in the Force—

[I'm right here Polla Revan can you hear me?]

[Mision—?] For a second it felt like Polla Revan had, but then that wall of ice rose between them.

“Fascinating.” Unfamiliar voice, from the lower level, deep in her circuits, speaking to someone else. Polla Revan and her team had moved all over the Hawk, dispersing themselves like space fleas. “See this, Rogere? This is the mid-point where I wired in the ghost-child's consciousness, but she's improved upon the graft. New lines running into the ship's central core, they look almost organic—”

“I don't care. Can you pull her out?” Carth, answering them. “It, I mean. Can you pull it out?”

“Pull what out?” That made Mission think of Mekel Jin, who would have made a crude joke. “Do you mean me?”

“I can try. We'll attempt to cleanse the corrupting data from the ghost-child—”
“Don’t forget I’ve got my eyes on you—any funny business—”

“Your wife trusts us, Admiral Onasi. And Zaalbar gave permission to use the T3’s original chassis for this operation.”

“My wife”— hitch of breath. “... I'm gonna check on her.”

“If you don’t mind the observation, she does not look well.”

Ghost-child? Huh. Only one sent had ever called Mission that, and he'd installed her consciousness in the Hawk —so even with the strange voice that made that guy—

“Rulan Prolik? Hey!” But of course, the shapeshifter couldn't hear her, either.

Xxx

“She’s getting worse. Are you sure the collar-thing worked?” Flat Deralian drawl. At least two rooms away. Thanks to the peculiar acoustics of the Hawk —or Revan's still-Force-sensitive hearing, Polla Organa sounded like she was in the same room.

Revan's fingers closed on the Force collar, wondering if the thing was fracking broken. Everything was muted, as if she was wrapped in eridu wool, but the Force was still there —dancing just out of her reach.

And so were the ships, whispering their threats—and the Rakatan computer, answering them.

{{I CANNOT CONTROL THEM}} The voice from the tomb whispered. {{ONLY YOU CAN STOP THIS, STARFIRE UNIT—}}

“What I think is, we need to get out of here, Pollie.” Seiran's voice from the other room.

“But I promised Revan I’d show them all this ship's stashes!”

“Can’t she find them herself—” Seiran kept talking, but he’d moved away from the wall that carried their voices. His wife just laughed and promised they'd leave soon—

{{{COME TO ME}}} the voice from the tomb added. Louder than ever, now. Like a scream.

_Polla and Sei will leave soon. Lucky bastards-

“Freckles?” Carth had come back. Press of a warm hand on Revan's. They were in their old quarters—the closest place Carth had been able to drag Revan when her knees began to buckle.

“Give me a sec.” The curved surface of the Ebon Hawk's wall was solid and cold, the buzz of voices echoing through the ship giving a tie to the lives and connections that Revan had once taken for granted.

Polla Organa was right. Revan was getting worse.

_In the eye of an ion storm, time itself slows, as the jump point calculators reset to zero and instruments go to manual. Hyperspace coils retract into their safety-cages and your hands grow sweaty on the nav controls as you try and keep your ship's nose pointed straight—try even harder not to think about the shield failure, cascading neutrons, dense and hot as poison battering against your hatches—
Then time lists to starboard as you try hard not to dwell upon the thin strips of metal between you and the endless black—

“You okay, Freckles?” Carth's voice. Warm hand on hers. Asking for the hundredth time.

“Sure,” Revan lied. She opened her eyes and took another breath, trying to ignore the way her skull throbbed in fresh agony twinned to her heartbeat, the way the world flickered in and out of focus, replaced half the time by a map of stars, by jump-points—

[238188 v aurek, 8289155. Target acquired….]

[Polla Revan? Can you hear me?]

[Mission?] The Twi'lek's voice over the speakers had been a cruel joke. Now the same joke infected her mind. Revan closed her eyes, erecting a wall between them. With the collar, that should have been impossible. Should have been impossible to feel the sparks of life all around her, the planet beneath them, the voices in her head growing louder—

“If you're done resting, we should go help the others. Sounds like that Houck has taken apart the cargo Bay's entire floor.” Carth squeezed Revan's hand again.

“Yeah? I bet Dar has everything under control.” Revan had an abrupt flash of memory: Carth, the two of them, half-asleep and tangled from the night before. The last time she'd felt even remotely normal. Her body felt like an illusion, now, fragile as a ship's hull against a nova. “I… want to stay here, Carth.”

“You sure you're okay?” New lines pulled around his too-sensitive mouth. “Blocking the Force isn't helping?”

“Everything hurts.” That was true but not the real problem. When Revan looked at Carth, his image blurred, became a web of stars. “The ships are still…” she waved her hand vaguely. Her consciousness felt scattered with a thousand eyes, and each one of them projecting a faceted view of a planet beneath them—dappled white at the poles, then verging to black and ruin in the center. “They're still out there—and they want me to know it.”

“So it didn't…” his breath hitched. “You said the collar was helping.”

“It did at first. They got louder.”

The Ebon Hawk was full of voices. Someone had cut the speakers to Mission, at least—so Revan no longer had to hear the dead Twi'lek begging her to come to the tomb. Now, the ship's intercoms crackled with commands and excited shouts, as Dar'Revan directed her minions to tear the smuggling hatches apart looking for some fracking box that she claimed would save everything. Or, almost everything.

Xxx

“Will this box of yours save me?” Revan had managed to ask in the middle of the chaos.

Dar paused in mid-command to Zaalbar and the Houck, face smoothing to an eerie blankness that Revan knew only too well—from the mirror. “I'm sorry, Fragment. I can capture Tenebrae in the mind-prison, but—”

“Only I can stop the Sleepers. Right. But if I do this… this carbonite thing it will stop them—”
“It should.” Green eyes narrowed, looking at her. “Is the Force collar helping at all?”

“A little.” Not enough. Dar’s image blurred until she looked surrounded by stars—

Xxx

“Freckles?” Carth squeezed her hand and Revan opened her eyes, just trying to see only Carth and not the hyperspace jump points webbed across her vision.

“Flyboy?” The Force collar felt like a weight on her neck, but the voices still whispered in her head. “I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

“Come on, soldier! We're not dead yet!” His laugh lines crinkled bit the laughter didn't reach his eyes.

“They're out there, Carth. They want me to know what they'll do. You know they’ve reached the Core—plus strategic targets on the Outer Rim—”

[Loc. 34821848 1828189199, 828288819, 2882]

“Which planets?” That was her soldier. Not bothering to question how she knew what had to be impossible. We'll warn them! We'll—”

[Loc. 34821848 1828189199, 828288819, 2882]

That's Telos, Red. Malak’s ghost, telling Revan what she already knew.

“Telos.” She said the word out loud, watching Carth's face freeze. “One of the planets is Telos.”


How do you know? But Revan knew the answer. Malak knew because she did. The coordinates were familiar. A map of stars. Jump points aligned on a grid—some of them not even possible—

“What are they… what will they, uh….” Her soldier cleared his throat. Carth knew what they would do as much as she did. Since Canderous's crew had gotten the widebeams up, they all knew —except Revan had known already. A fleet of mad ships had wreaked havoc across a galaxy, and now lay in wait before doing it again.

Holding billions hostage. With only one demand.

“We tried.” Her temples throbbed. “Sorry it didn’t work, Flyboy.”

“Then we’ll keep trying.” His words were fervent, but Revan knew the look in his eyes. Grim acceptance, overriding the lies they told each other to stay alive.

Xxx

Mekel was already regretting asking Joetta for an assignment. But Telos was out playing Force battery, and if his girlfriend Mydia Blais called Mekel a slave one more time, he was gonna shoot her, baby or no baby.

“Hey,” Mekel said cautiously, to the bound man in the tent. His name was Zepth. He was a Zabrak. That made Mekel think of Lydie, who was probably living happily ever right about now with her rich husband, and would never think of Mekel again. “I've got your food tray right here.”
“Salutations.” The Zabrak's head bobbed up and down at him. Someone had branded the crude drawing of an eye on his forehead between the horns. His arms were covered in kolto bandages—also tied behind his back. “I'm afraid you're going to have to feed me.”

“Right.” Feed him. Just like a good slave. Mekel knelt down and placed the tray on the guy's lap, pausing to unbuckle his helm and set it to the side. Almost immediately he started to sweat. “No problem.” He picked up the spork. “So, uh… how long have you had this Emperor-possessed gig?”

“I trained for it since I was a child,” the Zabrak said. “On Dathomir, after your people sacked my planet. My aunt Marla rescued me from a slave auction and took me to the witches there, who made me a Voice.”

“Your aunt just… up and gave you to the Sith Emperor? Tough break.”

“Yes.” The Zabrak nodded. “But I bear your kind no ill will.” He chewed the glop Mekel had been given to feed him with no complaints, even if it looked a little too much like charity stew from the Unders for Mekel’s own taste.

“Why would—” oh, but then Mekel got it. “My people? No. I'm no Mandalorian. I'm Revan's cousin.”

“Oh?” The Zabrak didn't sound as impressed as Mekel had hoped he would. “I didn't know she had family.” He sounded like he was lying—or maybe that was just Mekel, wanting to think he was important.

“Just me, now. My father… he got killed.”

“I am sorry for your loss.” The Zabrak paused. “We all must meet our fate before the Force in the end.”

“Right.” Mekel picked up the spork again and guided another mouthful of meat-porridge to the Zabrak's mouth. “Fun thought. You sound so positive.”

A gulp and then another laugh. “I am a realist.”

“Sure.” Mekel gave him the hundred-cred smile Moms had taught him when he was old enough to scam marks alone in Beggar's Alley. “Me too.” He picked up the spork and kept doing his fracking job.

XXXX

The tent was empty. Dustil wasn't sure what that meant. He'd know, wouldn't he? If Mydia killed Mekel—

“Dustil! My man!” A hand clapped down hard on Dustil's back and he spun around, cursing the Force for not giving him more warning.

“Phylus.” The kid was fracking lucky Dustil hadn't gutted him. “Phylus Blais. You're alive.”

“You too.” The youngest Blais gave him a kriff-handed grin from beneath his long nose. “Hope you had a better time than I did—had to sleep in the woods—and let me tell you, those Wookiees may keep you warm but the smell… I'm glad to be back in civilization... sort of civilization....” His voice kept breaking off. And he looked nervous. Even twitchier than usual.

Dustil gave him a smile he didn't mean to put him at ease. “Your sister made it, too. Mydia, I
mean. Don't know about Inse. Last I saw, she was taking the *Grave Bright* into hyperspace.”

“Inse's alive. I think. I think I'd know if she died.” Phylus wrapped his arms around his own bony frame and shivered. “Say… uh, about Mydia….”

“I don't know where she is. Sorry, pal.” Dustil wasn't sure if he cared. Maybe she and Mekel had taken their live fracking sex show on the road. Maybe they'd eloped.

“I do. I mean, I dropped her off at the medix tent. She… uh…” Definitely something was bugging him. “Say, Dustil… ever explain to her that you weren't Lord Malak?”

He’d tried—sort of. Once or twice. But the girl was just… dumb. “She thought I was joking.” Inse had been different. Inse had sort of gotten it—at least she’d known there was a Dustil somewhere in there with Malak. Mydia wasn't stupid, exactly. Just… single-minded. “Not really. Why?”

Phylus sighed heavily. “See, she thought she was having Lord Malak's baby.”

“She—” he hadn't thought she would think like that. “That’s not how it works.”

“Mydia might have been daydreaming during our hygiene classes at the Academy. She thinks what she wants. Usually works out for her.” Phylus shrugged. “Did… uh, did you really want the kid?”

Dustil hadn’t thought of it like that. Like not having the kid was an option. The first feeling he felt was relief. “No.”

Phylus looked relieved. “Good. I was afraid you were gonna be upset.”

“Wait. Um… are you saying, she—”

“She wanted Lord Malak’s baby. Not yours.” Phylus shrugged. “Now, she’s all hell-bent on having that other guy’s kid, instead. Lord Revan’s cousin—” His voice cut out abruptly. Probably because he was suspended in the air, choking slowly on his own throat-skin. Dustil hadn’t even thought about it—it had just… it had just seemed natural.

“Lord Revan’s cousin.” Funny, Dustil hadn’t really thought about the baby being real before now. “She's bent on Lord Revan's cousin.”

He dropped Phylus Blais absently, then walked out of the tent where, for some reason, he almost puked.

For a second, the world went upside down. His breath heaved in and out.


**Xxx**

*And then Valkorion was—*

—*walking with Helena Shan across a promenade—*

—*gasping Sydax's breaths in agony and twisting in some kind of restraining net—*

A voice from above. “Jasp? She's coming to!”

“Her name's Sydax Aneeka,” a man said. Gradually, Valkorion's vision cleared enough to see a Deralian couple looking above him, the dim light of overlights above their head illuminating
speckled stone. The floor was damp and chill—somewhere underground. “Says she's a baker.”

The man, Jasp Organa, was holding Sydax's purse, rifling through its contents with no regard for privacy. He handed the Chassnian's id chip to his wife.

“What would a baker from Chassna want with us?” the old woman's voice trailed off as she leveled a blaster squarely at poor Sydax's head.

“Don't say any more,” her husband warned.

His wife ignored that. “Think she's the one who killed—”

“Shhh. She's awake! Look at her eyes! They're glowing! Just like that vid!”

Some time after knocking his host out, they had removed the woman's goggles. Valkorion tried to move his hands, but the strangely elastic substance encasing them remained tight as an ionic bond.

“You can't get out,” the man said flatly. “Whatever you are.”

“And you can't get to him, either.” The woman snapped, gesturing with the blaster. “The boy’s not here. Who are you? What did you say about our Pollie?”

“She’s an impatient girl,” Valkorion told them. “Ungrateful!”

—and then he left the trapped baker from Chassna behind. Would he need her again? He rather thought not.

And then Valkorion was—

—adrift in a sea of eyes, reaching, reaching—

For Manaan! He needed to be on Manaan—

XXXX

“Wake up.” Someone was shaking Mydia's arm, which interrupted very pleasant dreams. In one, her dear sister Inse had been languishing in a Coruscanti brothel, looking extremely unhappy about being there, surrounded by dead—or unconscious—sentients. Such a fate for Inse was, Mydia thought, maybe even better than a Thulian hell.

“What’s wrong?” The Mandalorian shaking her arm was fortunate that Mydia was nice—merely Force-spinning her into one of the tent's soft walls.

“Oh!” Mydia exclaimed, realizing her error. “You're the medix, aren't you?”

“Yes,” the Mandalorian scrambled to her feet, glaring. “And you're the pregnant dar'jett I scanned before. Do not think your condition will save you, if you use your powers against me again—”

“A mistake!” It had been naught but a tickle. “No. I need your help! Please.” Her hands went to her stomach, which had already begun to swell. When she'd thought it was Malak’s baby that had been worth it, but now—

“Is something wrong with your child?” The medix asked.

“Yes.” She sniffled. “It has the wrong father.”
In the floating tank behind them, the fat pregnant lady's nipples looked almost black. Disgusting.

—**and then Valkorion was**—

—**Manaan. One planet. Curses, why was this so difficult?**

—assisting young Leeshansintina Two of House Racharn with her Aqualish homework in the body of Doctor Vivek, the Selkath advisor to House Racharn.

*A Selkath at least. But control. Control was fraying, fading. Faster than should be possible—*

“I hear your family has a new guest, Leeshy,” Valkorion gurgled brightly from Vivek’s body, as his voder automatically shaped the utterance into Basic (and Aqualish, which the child was quite resistant to learning). “A poor refugee from Imperial Space?”

“There’s three, but two don’t talk.” The Second of Racharn tugged at her hair, which she'd cut short in the style of her sister, Leeshansintina One. “Neely's the only one who talks. She has a pet manka. She's nice.”

“Ah yes.” He smiled. “**Neely. That's right. You know, I would love to meet her!”** The Blais girl's great grandmother had had a pet gundark named 'Neelo.' Valkorion had fond memories of possessing her form and riding the beast across the Southern Plains of Ygrus, on the northernmost Thuliam continent. Perhaps the name was mere coincidence, but Valkorion sometimes thought his more favored lines shared some of his memories.

How else to explain why some families remained loyal while others turned? House Blais had been both loyal and betrayers before. Sharing the sins of their forefathers—and the benevolence of his forgiveness.

Leeshy smiled. “**Neely's upstairs in the solar. She likes it best up there. She's friendly. And pretty. She told me we were going to be best friends forever and ever.”**

“**That’s wonderful!”** Obviously, Inse Blais had made excellent use of her Force compulsion with this family, despite the ysalamiri shielding in most areas of their apartments. “**We'll go straightway! Oh, and just between us… have you heard from dear Korrie?”**

“**Just a ping to say he's okay.”** Leeshy made a face. “**He's not on that stupid planet with the mean kids anymore, but he didn't have time to tell me why. Do you know where Peragus Station is, Doctor Vivek?”**

“**Vaguely.”** One of his bodies surely did. Valkorion left Vivek to gather more information whilst he turned his own attentions inward, searching for the nearest spark to Peragus—

—**only to overshoot... and then he was in a concrete bunker on Ziost, watching Lord Basile pace back and forth. When had the traitorous Zeltron left Kaas for Ziost? No matter, he was here now—**

“**Their snubs are flying formation, but not firing, sir.”**

“**There’s nothing left for them to bomb!”**

“**And no word from Dromund Kaas?”** The Zeltron asked his Second-in-command—what was the fool's name?
“Everything's down—”

Valkorion possessed a guardsman here. The man's name was Rico, and he had been in service long enough to have a hollowed-out place from which his Emperor and savior could peer out through the windows of his eyes, relatively untrammeled by the man's idle impulses, or outside engagement. His friends probably thought him slow-witted or just quiet…but given enough time, they all became like Rico, after a few centuries, entire worlds of them—

*There are always other worlds. Although of late, it was so difficult to find the right people.…*

—oh, but speaking of that! Manaan! And then he was—

*And then Valkorion was—*

Xxx

“… and so we’re… uh, doing stuff, but he's so much more powerful than I ever can be? And it sucks. I guess, not as much as being possessed by some immortal asshole and not having a real life like you—” Mekel's voice broke off as if something had just occurred to him. “Wait—uh, when you were talking about your childhood before. You said your aunt Marla took you to the Sith? During a Mandalorian raid?”

“After the raid,” Zepth corrected him. “The day after.”

“Your aunt Marla took you away from your moms and your sibs. Attina, Gulla, and—”

“Lydyloo. Yes.”

“Lydie-llu.” Frack, she'd even *told* him her family had called her that. “Your aunt Marla was a Jedi? Your surname's Korr. Right?”

“Both of those things are true.” The Zabrak sounded puzzled. “Did you know my aunt?”

“My cousin killed her. I uh, I knew her a little, but *Lydie*… you're Lydie's long-lost brother. Zepth! She told me about you.”

“You know Lydie-llu?”

“Sure. She's fantastic. Gorgeous. We fra…. Abruptly, Mekel remembered Master Yuthura's etiquette lessons. “We fraternized. A lot. She married this senator from Coruscant. She's… uh, she's….” His mind went off for a second, remembering the way she'd just taken off her robe, like it was nothing and just reached for his hand.

Zepth chuckled. “Oh?”

“Yeah, she's… I don't know where they went off to, but she's fine. Safe.”

“No one is safe.” The kid was really gloomy. Sounded like he had something caught in his throat.

Mekel reached for the water bulb. “Well, with Loanin protecting her, she's pretty close—”

“Oh, my dear boy.” A chuckle. “The surety of youth! I wish I could bottle it.”

Mekel looked up, abruptly realizing the Zabrak's eyes had begun to glow red. “Shit!” He jumped to his feet. “Uh, stay like that! Just like that! I'm supposed to get Re—”


“Not on my side.” Another laugh. “Bezal-bonded to Dustil Onasi?”

“I-I was.” That girl who had stabbed Mekel and stolen Dustil away. The Emperor had been in her, too. The man possessing Zepth had been laughing while Mekel almost died. “You mean, uh… Lord Malak—”

“No.” The voice was old and cold and terrible. It made Mekel's blood freeze and his bowels loosen. “Do you think me a fool, boy? I was in Malak's mind. I rode his thoughts. I sensed him there with you both at first… but that ended when your bond was broken. The day you killed me.”

“Oh.” _Oh, frack._ Telos had been so fracking smug about snowing the Emperor… and he hadn't?

“What I find curious…” the man chuckled. “Is that I have no idea how you broke your Bezal-bond. They are _meant_ to be unbreakable.”

“You… you know about bonds?” Mekel swallowed. He thought the man's Force compulsion had faded, but he still…

The Zabrak's face beamed. “You have a question.”

“Yes.” Not Force compulsion. Later, Mekel was sure of that—sure it was _him_ who wanted to ask. It wasn't that he'd been tricked. Easier to live with things if he had… if it had been a trick. But in that moment—all he had wanted was to have the Force back. To have Dustil’s strength in the Force again, to feel the Telosian’s mind. To know what the man he still thought as his own better half thought. “You know about Bezal bonds?”

“Lord Bezal was attempting to become as I am. Of course I do.” The body was Lydie's _brother_, but the voice, the mind—

Mekel swallowed. “Then… do you know how to bring a Bezal-bond _back_?”

Laughing, the possessed Zabrak smiled at him and nodded.

XXX

Canderous had been helping Fur-Sheb take apart a section of ceiling in the medical bay when his comm flashed wideband, in a code meant only for him.

“_Our daughter lives,_” Gwen transmitted. “_Even if she been too incompetent to escape her captors. Yet._”

Canderous ignored the critique of his eldest living child, for it was a mother’s way to find fault. Millifar _lived_. She was not lost. She had battles yet to be won and children yet to be born.

“Hey, Fur-Sheb, put that hammer down.” The Wookiee was already roaring his congratulations as Canderous told him the news. “This deserves a drink.”

The two of them broke into Revan and Onasi’s room with Canderous's last bottle of Althiri firewater.
Revan and the pilot looked up from opposite ends of their marriage bed.

“Ever hear of knocking?” the pilot began.

“Gwen just commed,” Canderous’s jubilation at the news overrode his sense of decorum. “Millifar’s alive. Captured by Republics. Gwen said to watch for an escape pod when Rensha’s besom fleet makes orbit.”

“Makes orbit here?” Onasi blinked like a man waking from a dream. “High Admiral Rensha’s coming here?”

“Yes.” Canderous shrugged, and behind him Zaalbar yowled, backing him up—even if Canderous could still only understand about a quarter of what Fur-Sheb was saying. “Just like Republics—picking meat from the carcass after the battle is over. But even trosh should be able to handle clean-up. You’ll have to keep your Imperial ships from engaging them, of course....” his voice trailed off as neither Revan or Carth looked excited.

“Millifar’s alive.” Revan’s eyes were unfocused and she still looked like hell. “Good... good news.”

“You smell bad, Polla Revan,” Zaalbar barked.

“I am sick, old friend,” she growled back. She said a lot more, but Canderous had never completely gotten the hang of the barking and growls Wookiees used for speech. Whatever she said began in a tangle of sharp sounds, and ended with Zaalbar whining as if he’d been hurt.

“It’s the only way,” Polla Revan added in Basic. “I wish differently, but—”

“If Fleet’s coming here I should... we’ll need to send out a beacon. Open a channel to Rensha. I... I know the codes for a priority alert.” Onasi blinked again, practically developing some kind of twitch. “How much time have we got?”

Canderous shrugged. “Gwen said within the day.” He’d ordered Aemelie to have their ships cloak. They’d be gone as soon as they retrieved his daughter—providing the Republics kept their manners. If they did not, well—best worry about that then. Canderous trusted that Onasi could keep the Republics in line. He’d done it before—gaining them free passage from Manaan—and then to the Rakatan homeworld.

Canderous brandished the bottle again at Revan. “One more drink before the war?”

There was a long pause. Revan looked a thousand light years away.

“Freckles,” Carth said gently, nudging her.

“What—?”

“One more drink?” Canderous asked her again. So much unsaid between them, but what he’d gathered from Fur-Sheb’s yowls and the aruetii’s smug explanations, her time was nearly through. Revan blinked, then took a long breath. Her lips were stained red. “Yes, but we... we don’t have any glasses.”

“I’ve got a set in my quarters.” Canderous had not thought of that. “I could get—”

“No.” She rose, more graceful than he expected, considering her pallor. “We’ll go—we’ll come to
you.” She turned to Carth, who was already scrambling to give her an arm to lean on that she didn’t need. “I… I want to walk. And then… one more drink. Before you… before the war.”

XXX

Bossypants aboard the _Hawk_ was like a woman possessed, barking orders like she was still running the galaxy. Even Seiran started listening, which was, Polla thought, quite a fracking miracle considering how much he hated her.

Under Darth Bossypants’s command they trashed that sweet ship because ending that bastard Tenny-Bro would be worth it. They found a stash of credits under the floor of the captain’s chair, and a cube of spice in one of the air vents—as well as a few dessicated gizkas—but no box anywhere.

And then the comm call came from the aft double bunk.

XXX

“It’s time,” Carth Onasi’s face, half-turned like he was looking at someone offscreen. “S-she says it’s time.”

_Darth Bossypants froze, pieces of the wall she’d ripped open with her lightsaber still floating in mid-air. A few electrical conduits Polla had told her not to destroy still sparked. They’d be a bitch to fix—if this ship was ever going to fly again. “Of course,” Bossypants said, glancing at the carbonite freezing equipment she’d made sure was stacked in every room they searched—like she wasn’t gonna let it out of her sight. “Bring her here. You should know, I regret the necess—”_

“We’re in Canderous’s quarters,” Carth snapped. He was still staring at someone out of view. Staring at her, of course. His wife. “Come to us.”

XXX

_Bye, Polla thought now, watching as the Wookiee rolled out the carbonite frame, and the woman with her memories stepped inside it. Nice almost knowing you, Butcher._

The woman with Polla’s memories laughed nervously, hands playing with the heavy metal collar-thing set on her neck. She looked like hell. “I should just lie down now, or—”

“That would help.” _Darth Bossypants held the carbonite freezing ray braced by her artificial arm, like she was gonna do the honors herself. Polla shivered, suddenly certain that Bossypants was the last person the other Revan would want pulling the trigger._

“Glad I could be _helpful._” The woman looked at her husband again and he went to her. They stood there together, nestled in each other's arms, whispering and looking like a holo-still from the vids.

_Tragic lovers torn apart by fate._

But this was no vid.

Across the room from them, Zaalbar groaned and Canderous Ordo raised a half-empty glass. Above their heads a fuzzy holographic image of Mission Vao was yelling something, headtails twisting in a loop, over and over again. They’d all stopped paying attention to Mission ages ago, while Rogere and that shapeshifter were still trying to pull her consciousness out of the _Hawk’s_ guts, where Rulan Prolik (formerly a Wookiee named Grawwaar) said he’d put Mission in the first place.
Sometimes life came at you fast. On a normal newsday, Polla would have wanted to know why no one trusted this version of Mission and what had happened to the real one. On this day, the dead Twi'lek's fate seemed like an afterthought.

“You’d better pretend to be Sheris when you deal with the Republic Fleet,” the Butcher told the other one. “Canderous says they’ll be here soon. Don’t kriffing attack them. And his daughter—you have to make sure she’s safe—”

“Not her job,” Canderous snapped. “Milli will be fine.”

“I know.” Bossypants seemed to hesitate, adjusting the raygun’s controls (that Polla had already calibrated twice on her orders). “I can handle the Fleet. There will be less… confusion,” she added. “With only one of us.”

“The Sleepers will burn the Fleet out of the sky if I don't go,” the Butcher told her flatly. She wiped her forehead, sweating through the ship’s chill. “They’re tracking them.”

“Not without you.” Bossypants sounded positive. “This is the only way.”

“Yeah, well—hope you find your fricking box.” The woman buried her head in her husband’s chest again, taking a deep breath before pulling away. “Don’t let Tenebrae win. Promise me.”

“He will not win. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Make sure Korrie is safe.”

“Of course.” Bossypants gestured with the gun. “I know it is too late for trust to be a bond between us, but we share the same objectives. You know that.”


“And I you.” Bossypants shifted on her feet. “Fragment, if there was any other way—”

“You’d call me by my name?”

Hiss of indrawn breath. “Yes. Revan, if I could take this burden in your stead—”

“You have to live in this galaxy.” The woman with Polla's memories laughed. “You have to live in this galaxy as us. Hells, maybe I'm the lucky one.”

“No.” The red-haired woman shook her head. “I am sorry.”

Behind Polla and Seiran, Canderous Ordo muttered something.

“Teach her how to fricking lie for me, Polla. Politely.” The woman with Polla's memories gave Polla a sideways glance.

“I’ll try.” She wanted to say something snappier, but Polla's mind was frozen. It isn't fair, she thought. We were supposed to have more time.

“Lie down now.” Darth Bossypants lifted the raygun and—

“Wait! I'll do it,” Polla stepped forward, pulling away from Seiran's grasp. “I should do it. You gotta aim, do the heart first. Then the… the brain….” Her voice trailed off as the two identical
faces turned towards her, both of them raising one eyebrow at almost the exact same time.

“I can hardly miss at this distance.”

“You could. Let Polla do it.” The woman standing in the carbonite frame nodded slowly. “Thank you.”

“Fine.” Bossypants paused. “As you wish, Revan.”

Polla had begun to prepare a list of reasons, but the abrupt agreement stunned her to silence. Bossypants handed her the gun. The woman with Polla's memories looked at Carth again and sat down slowly, turning half on her side.

“You have to lay flat,” Polla told her. She’d heard that had better results somewhere. Less likely to freeze one’s arms to one’s ribs permanently—or something.

“Right.” The woman rolled on her back, looking up toward the ceiling. “Sorry, I forgot.”

And then Polla remembered. “That bounty hunting class—senior year for the smuggler’s license.”

“Yeah.” The woman with her memories sounded tired. “That was it.” She gave a soft laugh. “I hated that class.”

If this was a HoloNet drama, they'd have found the fracking box. If this was a vid, finding that box would have saved both Revans, and then the galaxy.

“Beautiful,” Carth Onasi whispered. Just that one word. Enough to tear your insides out. The naked agony in that man's face made Polla's vision blur, threatening her aim, until Polla wiped at her eyes with her free hand.

The woman in the carbonite frame gave a little sigh, and tilted her head back. She was wearing a battered orange jacket she must have found someplace. One of the sleeves had been stitched to repair a tear. Thing was big for her. Didn't look like the kind of outfit anyone would want for eternity… but who was Polla to judge?

Polla was no one. Just the executioner.

“Go ahead, already.” That voice. Steady as Darth Bossypants and just as cold. “Do it now, Pollie.” Shifting to a Deralian drawl like the woman knew exactly how annoying the nickname would be to Polla, especially coming from her—

Polla pulled the trigger, rapid hiss of the gas hitting the edges of the frame. The woman with her memories flinched as her chest slowly turned gray then white, gas expanding across the frame. Another shot, straight to the head and her familiar features froze. One hand twitched a little before the gas pooled over it. Hiss as the carbonite settled and darkened, encasing the woman's body in a waxy bronze patina.

Polla had seen a few sents in frozen carbonite before—they’d all been screaming as the gas hit. The woman—Revan—wasn't. Just that wide open stare, like Polla’s face above her had been the last thing she’d seen.

“The encasement needs to cool before we move the frame.” Polla's Revan—now the only Revan—was still barking orders like a Bossypants. Zaalbar’s sad whine filled the cabin. Carth made a choking noise that Polla didn't want to watch.
So she looked up. At the curve of the bay toward the ceiling the image of Mission Vao was frozen, except for one of her holographic lekku, twisting in an imaginary wind.

“You’re not moving my wife anywhere.” Carth’s voice was a protective growl. “The Hawk’s where she'd want to be.”

“It isn’t safe,” Bossypants told him, immediately rattling off the reasons why, which, (Polla thought) all sounded a lot more like excuses than reasons. “There can be no hint of her survival when the Republic comes. Tenebrae will have compromised their ranks by now. Better the galaxy thinks her dead.”

“Why do they need to think she’s dead?” He challenged. “You planning on taking her place, sister?”

“Me?” Bossypants laughed, maybe a little too fast. “Of course not! You will refer to me as Sheris, now. All of you. For her protection—as well as my own.”

Are you lying? Polla wondered. For a second she wondered if there'd ever even been a sithspawned box. Maybe this was the Jedi’s cunning plan? Dispose of her nemesis (now frozen for all time), get rid of the Mandalorians (shipping out tomorrow, Canderous had said)—and then—

And then what?

Polla had no fracking idea. If Bossypants had pulled off a heist, seemed like she'd look happier.

“Her pain is gone.” The only Revan standing let out a slow breath and wiped her eyes. “She was in a great deal of pain. I had to do it,” she added—almost defensively, staring into space as if there was someone there.

Carth had ignored her earlier warning and was kneeling down next to their new carbsicle. “This isn’t over,” he mumbled at his frozen wife, his hand hovering a few centimeters above her face. “Just a pause, Freckles. We’ll figure something out. We always do.”

Zaalbar let out another whine.

Polla stared at the carbsicle. The woman with her memories had been nothing like what she'd thought. But they'd had no time—

She called me Pollie. The name her parents used. Her parents and Seiran. No one else was fracking allowed. Polla might be related to half of Deralia, but no one else was family.

She called me Pollie to piss me off. Polla wished they'd had more time.

Canderous's comm crackled, and a stream of Mandalorian babbled forth, half of it just coordinates and code that Polla couldn't catch. “Aemelie’s reporting the automated ships around her fleet have jumped away.” The Mandalorian paused, looking over at Carth. “Sith Fleet’s asking what their High Admiral wants ‘em to do.”

“The Imperials should begin by standing down so the Republic does not perceive them as a threat —” Bossypants started. “In the interim, I can direct, of course, if you would prefer to begin evacuating your people from this planet—”

“Wait. What?” There was a vein throbbing in Captain Obvious's forehead. “Do you think I just let you freeze my wife in carbonite so you could take over the Sith Empire, sister?”
“In the interim,” the woman repeated. “Until we can establish some kind of Republic protectorate, I will direct rescue efforts on this world. We still have Tenebrae to deal with and I can think of no one more qualified—”

“Well, I can,” Carth snapped. “Lots of sents more qualified than you. I know the people on those ships. More than half are vets, and we’ve been dealing just fine without you.”

“The Mando’ade are leaving.” Revan’s tone turned to ice. “And the Republic are an unknown. Without assistance, you won’t have groundships to run patrols, or medical facilities to take care of the injured we’ve found already—not mention the additional doses of anti-rads everyone will need —”

“Yeah?” Carth glared back at Canderous Ordo. “Revan told me you were breaking camp, but I had a hard time believing it. Never picked you for a coward, Ordo.”

The Mandalorian looked unruffled. “Revan made me promise to take you and that kid of yours with us—even if I have to shoot you both unconscious first. You, your kid, and Jin.” His head turned toward Zaalbar. “Guess she thought you could take care of yourself, Fur-Sheb—but you’re welcome to come too.”

The Wookiee growled something too fast for Polla to catch.

“And her?” Captain Obvious looked down at his frozen wife again. “We’d… we have to take her too. Or, you would. I can’t just leave the people here—”

Stars, the man was so honorable! And so dumb. “What the problem?” Polla interrupted him. “You can’t leave the Sith? They’re Sith. Evil, right?”

He glanced up at her, and oh—that pain in his eyes, mixed with a dark humor that crinkled the edges of his eyes. “I know what they are. You know, your da used to say the Sith had the right idea.”

“Da used to drink a lot.” When had he stopped? Polla couldn’t remember. Funny, the stuff you don’t remember. And now there’d be the chance—hells they’d be going home! “I—if you need a safe place to stash her carbsicle until things die down… uh—”

“Pollie!” Seiran nudged her sharply.

“I mean we could take her—”

“No,” Bossypants said flatly. She’d walked to the console set into the wall and was scrolling through the wideband that had gone live again, no doubt planning another invasion or something. “There is only one place where she will be safe. Rulan and I will take care of it.”

Well. Whatever. Polla glanced down again at the carbsicle and wondered if she’d made the wrong choice. The woman had gone down so fast, not even fighting.

Polla would have fought. Polla would never just lie down and give up. We were never the same. Polla knew that. She’d always known it, just—

That fracking topknot. Why had the woman kept it? Even up to the end?

“You are not in charge.” Carth scrambled to his feet and Zaalbar wailed again, already forming objections before Bossypants even had a chance to tell him what he was supposed to do. “There are good men aboard those Imperial ships.”
“If they're good men we can use ‘em.” Canderous shrugged. “See if any are worth their feed. Offer to make them slaves. Maybe some will make through to adoption.” He looked at Polla and Seiran. “I know my wife would like me to make you the same offer, Polla Organa. And your husband and child. Of course.”

“Polla Wen,” Seiran snapped. “And no… we… we're good. Just give us a ship and we'll be on our way.”


“Your choice.” The Mandalorian growled something at the Wookiee. From Zaalbar’s face he couldn't understand it any better than Polla could. But a second later Carth joined in, and they all nodded. The growls and barks turned tuneful and she realized they were all humming something that sounded like a song.

Polla caught the words for nest. And death. She got the idea. At home, they'd have a Grass Priest sing a nice chant.

“Let's go,” Seiran murmured in her ear. “They'll work it out. Or kill each other. I don’t care.”

“Yeah. Just a sec.” Goodbye, Stranger. Polla thought. Out loud she left out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. “Um, bye. Bye, Revan.”

“I'm sure we'll meet again.” Bossypants was distracted, still frowning at the HoloNet feed. “Your parents have my son. Or did.” She muttered something unintelligible under her breath. Considering all Polla had done for her, it probably wasn't a threat.

Maybe this was what grateful felt like, going through hell and making it out the other side. Grateful just felt numb.

Seiran nudged her arm. “Pollie?”

“Yeah.” Polla couldn't stop looking at the frozen face. A fracking fake topknot. The lights on the bottom of the frame were green, indicating that the woman was alive. Polla had seen a frame-job with the lights out, once. At least Revan has been luckier than that poor slob.

“Guess we've… we've got a ship to pick out, then.” Polla looked up at the Twi'lek hologram again. Fake image, mouth open… no doubt still yelling about Revan and that stupid tomb. The fake Mission had been doing that since they came in, before Rogere cut the feed. Grawwaar, or Rulan, or whoever the frack he really was thought he could get Mission back into that T3 chassis, somehow; but they all had bigger fish to fry—or so Polla had believed when Darth Bossypants got started with her universe-saving box—

“Huh.”

“What is it?” Seiran frowned in mid-limp, halfway between her and the doorway. That cast of his already had a crack down the side of it. He needed to take it easier.

“You speak Ryl?” She took the arm he was too stubborn to ask for help with and stabilized him, nodding toward the holo-screen.

“Not well.”

“Me neither.” But two words were unmistakable, traced over and over again with one hologram lekku on the vid-screen above their heads.
“It’s signing something vulgar,” Bossypants had followed Polla’s gaze, raising her voice to be heard over the others. “I noticed before. The image just keeps repeating. I assume it’s a glitch. A reference to procreation. Maybe the child’s personality imprint thought it was funny.”

“Maybe, but...”

The image of Mission Vao signaled with her headtail again, tracing a square. Then her t’chin crooked in a gesture that Polla had learned from a Twi’lek dancer on a smuggler’s moon. Chivhole, was the polite version. But also, ‘asshole of the universe,’ a place Polla Organa had spent too much fracking time.

The universe had a lot of dumps, but only one asshole.

“Um, Revan…?” Polla began. “I think I know where your box is....”

Xxx

And then Valkorion was—

Sitting on a cot in the Dromund Kaas jungle, huddled in the third medix tent and quickly pulling the covers over his eyes so none could see. Here, he lay in a Twi’lek’s body, nearly broken by radiation and the lash. He’d left the Coruscanti boy dangling—immune to his Kiss, the lad would need to be drawn in slowly—cultivated as carefully as young Onasi had been. This Twi’lek had just enough Force-sensitivity for Valkorion to feel Mekel Jin’s lack—the balance to Dustil Onasi’s strength. Jin was a stone in the ocean. Onasi the tide itself. Oh, but if weaponized together, their bond reforged and leashed to his own essence—

Darth Malak had been a capable mount, capable as hundreds before him. But in this new age, with Revan’s strength restoring their unified vitality... Valkorion wanted more.

“I am not adverse to change,” he chuckled under the blankets. “Or even to taking a true apprentice. Or... two....”

Outside, voices chattered in Mandalorian—something about his Starfire and leaving. The Mando’ade were leaving Dromund Kaas. Leaving Revan. Good. They were a distraction. And so tiresome. He’d played games with the clans for centuries. They were yesterday’s news. But in this new age, with his new Starfire and the promise of new blood—

Their union was so close and now inevitable—even in this nearly-null body Valkorion could almost feel Revan—as much as he could feel the call of her tomb. So soon they would be together. Until then, he must reserve his own failing strength for the moment of their union—when Valkorion would prove once again to her who was the master—

What? But wait! No! She was muted, that brightness dulled, flicking faint now, like a dying ember. Their connection stretched thin to near-breaking, and when he tried to catch it like water between fingers he slipped and then—

Then she was gone.

—and then Valkorion was—

—on Manaan, finally tending to a group of Shainsa acolytes. So hard to find decent acolytes, these days. Joining the Sith had fallen out of favor amongst the Selk—ever since some bombastic fool had taken over the Sith Embassy and used it to play dueling games. Admittedly, Valkorion had found those antics amusing for a time—but after he'd lost his fourth Force-sensitive to a fat boy-
child in a Darth Malak costume, the sport had paled and he’d left the fools to it.

Revan? A part of him screamed into the void. But the rest was distracted, focused on the moment in front of him—the moment that part of him had been waiting for. “We're nearly ready for the ceremony, your Luminance,” a nervous woman burbled.

“Bring in the first vessel,” he intoned. Selkath made terrible soldiers, but if the Republic truly wanted a war, the side which controlled the kolto would win.

With so many worlds infected by the Starfire plague, Valkorion had little choice but to look for new Voices atop the seas of Manaan, the cities of Duros, and the plains of Iridonia. Iridonians were warriors, at least. His Voice there had set up a clinic. Perhaps somewhere amongst the Zabrak he would find some clever general’s mind, ready to be honed to his spark—

The supplicant before Valkorion now had been a loyal acolyte of the Shainsa sect, strong in the Force, with supple scales and a pleasingly lithe body. Eyes already dilated by the drug, the Selk's gills fluttered, and Valkorion lifted his own flippered hand, reaching out with the Force and his own hunger, only to find—

*Black. Sick. Wall.*

“Ugh!” Disgust boiled through his skin, swelling the sacs in his cheeks and sealing his gill-flaps closed. “This will not do! Not at all! This one is *ruined!*”

The plague taint was unmistakable!

It should not have been possible!

Another one of his bodies dispatched the ruined Selk, as a hapless priest stammered his apologies. It should have been impossible for a Selkath to be infected with the Starfire plague, and yet—

*A fluke? Some mutation?*

“Bring another!” Valkorion told the quivering priest and then he was not required here, not to stay, but elsewhere, *elsewhere*—

Revan? Valkorion heard his own voice bleat into the ether like a child’s, echoing through the Rakatan Force-channels, along the corridors of empty ships, through the circuits of the Sleepers that he could not control, that now writhed in his own confusion. *Starfire? WHERE ARE YOU?*

*What have you done?*

XXX

A/N Thanks, as always, Ether, for the wonderful beta.

Coming up… what happens next.
No Future, Part 2

Chapter 73 / No Future Part 2

XXX

On Malachor, the halls of the Traya Academy were full now, buzzing with activity and purpose.

Oerin and Meetra liked to meet alone every morning in the old officer’s lounge, which had an expanse of ferracystal panels looking down at the training room below. Meetra would sip her breakfast beverage while Oerin felt his body rot, his desiccated tongue swallowing and slurring his words more each day. What Oerin would give for a bulb of tea—for the simple pleasure of it—for whiskey, for water. Even for the milky swill Meetra drank. From time to time, one of the Blades dueling below would slip and scream as a vibroblade, cortosis knife, or lightsaber bit into their hide…and their resultant screams of agony would feel like liquid salve on his lips, soothing the remains of his throat. A balm upon his senses.

Oerin had to admit, he mostly came to breakfast for those moments.

But, alas, he had more important concerns now, and the moments were too fleeting. Someone had to provision the troops. Retrain the Blades to cull and kill. Process the raw recruits—recruit the raw recruits—selecting those with just enough Force sensitivity to hunt the Jedi, select the few Jedi worth training to hunt more--

Sometimes, Oerin envied his sister, who seemed to do whatever she wanted…and seemed to want nothing at all.

“Do you ever dream?” Meetra asked him.

Oerin had stopped being surprised by inane questions. “Not since I shrugged off my mortal shell. You know I don’t sleep.” His words sounded like jelly in his own dried-out ears but she understood him perfectly. “I cause dreams. You know that. That’s why so many Blades and their handlers have come back. Why?”

Meetra frowned. “The others have complained of dreams for weeks, but I never remembered mine. Not before last night.”

“Oh?” By others she meant her special ones. Their own sister. The Zabrak. The Mandalorian with red hair. The angry Wookiee. He watched her sit down at the table, sipping her glass of blue milk. “What did you dream about last night?”

“War.”

“That seems apt.” Oerin yawned. “I suppose when you've finished training all of the minions and they've murdered all the Jedi we should go to war.” He rather fancied shattering the Republic. After all, they were there. And Revan's simulacrum, despite her promises, had not let the Mando'ade go free.

Their Blades in the worlds spoke of rumors that a Mandalorian fleet had battled the Sith. Rumors that Dromund Kaas and its satellite systems were laid to waste. That, in concert with the mysterious fleet that had struck on Hoth, Nar Shaddaa, and Onderon…

The Mando'ade were supposed to be free, he had told Revan. But they were not.
“We will not choose the war.” Meetra shook her head. “But it will come to us.”

“Good.” Oerin tried a laugh that made his epiglottis rattle. “We were bred for it.”

XXX

**Revan? My Starfire?** Valkorion’s voice screamed in the void but it was dulled, echo-less, the words of a man trapped alone in a tomb. **Revan? Where are you? What have you done?**

*And then, Valkorion was--*

--looking for prospective patients on Iridonia,

---standing atop a pile of dead acolytes back on Manaan,

--rowing a boat with his trawler net on Yu-Phaedra,

--having tea with Inse Blais, who was so cleverly disguised as a refugee on Coruscant--

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*And then, Valkorion was--*
--shivering in a blanket on Dromund Kaas, his poor Twi'lek's body slowly fading from radiation poisoning--

--giving another dreary speech to the soothsayers of Zakuul--

“I am your promised one,” he began. “I am your destiny. I will crush Tyth’s hammer. I will shatter Aviela’s sword and lead you from darkness--”

“Valkorion? My Lord? By the way, did you know the Republic is invading our territories?” Inse Blais's voice yanked him back to her with surprising force. “Leeshansintina had the reports. You should have told me the Homeland was under attack, Your Luminance.” She blinked again. The girl had the most extraordinary eyes. Gold as crowns. “I’m very disappointed in you.”

“Yes.” His soldier’s body on Ziost was watching a Republic delegation land, even now. Scattered, these bodies. It was growing hard to hold things… together. He, who had once easily paid attention to multitudes was now reduced to singularities. His strength was so... scattered. Failing. He needed her, he needed renewal--

--and then Valkorion was--he was trying to reach across the stars and he was--

“You need to tell me everything,” the golden-eyed girl murmured, drawing him back again. Her voice was a warm balm, salving his jagged nerves, the fragmented pieces. “How is it done? How do you possess them? If I am to help, I need to know.”

“How to begin?” he began, but in that instant her victorious smile snapped Valkorion back to himself. With effort he marshalled Doctor Vivek’s body to its feet. “Oh, ho, Lady Blais!”


“Don’t use the Force on me.” Remarkable that it had almost worked! Valkorion hadn’t seen that kind of trick work against him in decades, not since that padawan of his--oh, what had her name been? The girl who’d lost the spark. What was her name? Gone, oh gone now. Lost in the promise of the red-headed child, the strength of a scream--raw power promised that the girl with her velvet whisper had never possessed.

“Bring me children,” he commanded 'Neely.' Because of course! That was the answer. The Starfire might taint one generation with her plague and her tricks, but the next--the next--there was always a next! “You must find me children! Young enough not to be vaccinated. Babes, if you must. Thousands if necessary. We need merely one with a spark--”

Among their fleshy brethren his bodies did, from time to time, cast their seeds. Most fell on fallow ground, but oh, from time to time… it had taken him a century to find the first girl. More than a century of draining lesser beings to find one that fit. And then nearly half a century more to find the Starfire--

His minion's eyes narrowed. Inse’s voice lost its Force sweetness, became cold. “I have heard that anything is for sale on Coruscant. But you need to do something for me, too.”

“Within reason.” It showed spirit, that the Blais would bargain. With him!

“Tell me what’s happening at home. If Mydia or Phylus died, I would know, but how is Lord Malak? Did he return? The Racharn report said the entire planet was bombed by Revan's forces, but that there are reports of broadcasts from the planet, possible survivors--”
“Lord Malak--?” Valkorion began to laugh. “Oh, my dear, don't tell me you were as foolish as your sister--”

“Is there something amusing about Lord Malak?” The girl frowned. “Did Mydia kill him?”

“Oh, no.” He shook his Selkath’s head slowly, laughing as he began to tell the tale--

--even as a part of him still screamed. Splintering, spinning--

Revan? What have you done?

Where did you go?

XXX

Nar Shaddaa, Mission signaled again. If she had control over the speakers, she'd be screaming it. That sleemo box is on Nar Shaddaa with the creepy twins and Lena Wee, you nerfherding bantha-brains!

“She said the box is on Nar Shaddaa,” Polla Organa translated Mission's signs for Sheris Revan, like the woman was dumb.

“Yes. With a set of twins and someone named Lee-na-wee.” Sheris Revan slurped Lena's names together, like she didn't know they were two. “But we need to know where on Nar.” She exhaled, turning to Rulan Prolik, who was still looking like an Arkanian. (Why an Arkanian? Mission had no idea.) “You assured me before you could reboot the Twi'lek's consciousness… perhaps transfer it back into the T3. How long will that take?”

The shapeshifter shrugged. “With luck, a day. Perhaps two.”

“Work quickly.” The woman locked her arms behind her and began to pace back and forth. At her feet, poor Polla Revan was frozen in carbonite. “Rogere, I need you to help me transport the body before the Republic Fleet arrives--”

“The body?” Carth scrambled to his feet. “What? No! She's staying right here.”

“Revan?” Mission's fake voice sang over the speakers. “Oh, Revan… where did you go?”

“Turn that damned thing off before I shoot it.” Canderous growled.

“Revan?” Mission's fake voice sang again. “Re-van? Where are you hid-ing? We can’t find you!”

“Turn it off,” Canderous snapped again. Then he turned and left without even saying goodbye. A few seconds later, Mission heard his heavy tread descend down her ramp. No one even seemed to notice he'd left--everyone was focused on the main show: Carth and Sheris Revan, both glaring daggers.

Carth shook his head. “I said no, Sheris. You’re not moving her!”

“She needs to be in a safe location.” Sheris Revan really needed to work on her compassionate voice because it was crap.

“Oh, yeah? And where's that?”
“Where were you thinking?” The smuggler chimed in, like she hadn't been the one to freeze poor Polla Revan in the first place.

“Pollie, let them sort it out.”

“Just want to make sure she's safe, Sei--”

She was safe before you froze her in carbonite! Mission signed, but no one was looking at her. Assholes.

“I can keep her safe--” Carth launched into a list of ways how, although honestly, Mission thought he'd probably do something like unfreeze Polla Revan as soon as he got the chance. Maybe that would be for the best? It would shut the Kaas computer up if Polla Revan just came back. Even now it just kept whining and whining--

[[Starfire Unit: Respond!]]

Someone's comm pinged in the middle of everyone arguing and then they all fell silent, checking to see whose it was. Comical. If Mission still had a voice she'd guffaw.

“Damn! I've got--” Carth glanced up. “I've got to go. Don't do anything--not until I come back--”

“We have a limited amount of time.” Sheris Revan sighed heavily and began wasting it by giving them all a lecture about what to do when the Republic ships came. Blah, blah, blah. Let her be in charge. As if? This was the woman who thought she could sweet-talk Lena Wee out of a priceless Rakatan artifact? Obviously, she had never spent much time with Ryloth joygirls.

You guys are gonna need my help to get anywhere with Lena! Mission signed, but no one was looking at her--they were all too busy glaring.

XXX

“Dustil!” From the sharpness in Yuthura’s voice she must have been lurking around the tent, spying on him, just like the creeper Mekk always said she could be. “You seem upset.”

“I don’t think I killed him.” Dustil wanted to be sick. This emotion wasn’t rational, he knew that—it was a ball of raw hate that felt like he could choke on it. At that moment, if Phylus popped his head out, or Mekk showed—or Mydia… Dustil wasn’t sure what he would do. It was all so fracking stupid. He hadn’t wanted a kid in the first place. He didn’t know what she’d done--if Mydia had even done anything. Aborted their kid? Had she really done it? Was it even a kid yet?

“I choked Phylus,” he added to Yuthura. Just the facts, here. As a teacher that had been what Ban demanded.

“But you didn't kill anyone.” Yuthura sounded like she was trying to be calming, but her lekku wrapped around her neck—a tell the bad old headmistress of Dreshdae Academy would have never allowed. “I would sense if you had.”

“Oh.” Raw laughter erupted from his throat like bile. “Oh, Master, you have no idea--”

“I am not your master.” Ban took a step closer. “Just your friend, Dustil. Tell me what happened. From the beginning.”

“I choked Phylus. He said--” his voice hiccoughed like a kid’s. “I choked him because he said Mydia liked Mekel.”
“And naturally your consort showing an attraction for your rival--”

“What? No! I don’t give a frack about Mydia. It’s… Mekk, he--I thought he and I--”

“Oh.” Her brow ridge raised. “Of course. The bond. I imagine it created a sense of… attachment.”

A pair of Mandies edged past them, carrying crates. Dustil shot them a glare. “More. I thought he was dead, but then when I found out--” The thought only reminded him of who he was talking to. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me he was alive?”

“I thought you would have known. The bond--”

“Frack the bond.” He could feel electricity crackle between his fingers. “Frack the bond and frack you.” He paced back to the tent and looked inside. Phylus was long gone--probably snuck out of the back when Dustil was storming out the front. The stacks of crap Mydia had wanted to get rid of were gone too. All Dustil could see now were Mandalorians, busy taking down the tents all around them. Mydia and Mekk were probably off somewhere together. Probably laughing about how he’d been such a fricking idiot.

“Dustil.” Yuthura had followed him into the tent. “You didn’t hurt Phylus. Not permanently. I knew the boy. I did not sense his death.”

“Whatever.” He stalked to the edge of the bedroll and sat down, leaning on the flexible wall. “You ruined my fricking life. Get out.” He felt the Force echo his words. But she didn’t budge.

“Get out,” he repeated.

“No. You shouldn’t be alone.” The Twi’lek folded her arms and sat down across from him.

One side of the tent was wide open. Dustil stared at that instead of her. The Mandies were busy taking down tents. Moving camp?

Yuthura couldn't understand. No one could, except--

No. Don't call him. Mekk's the asshole who got you into this. Don't call anyone. You don't need them. You don't need anyone--

Dustil's fingers tapped the comm-unit on his wrist anyway. Hey. Got a sec?

A millisecond later it pulsed green again--incoming reply. OK. How are you doing, son?

Staring at the words made something loosen in Dustil’s chest.

Dad, he typed back. Come to my loc. I need you.

A pause and then his father typed back. Be right there. I need you, too.

XXX

And then Valkorion was--

--eating lunch at the desk of his clinic on Iridonia,

--back on Kaas again, this time not in the Twi’lek, but the other--Iridonia--the Zabrak--

“--okay? My lord?” The touch of a hand to his face brought Valkorion back to himself, staring into
a pair of dark, coldly curious eyes. “My lord? Uh, Emperor? Master--?”

Valkorion's eyes focused on the stubbled, earnest face. “Oh, ho! And you are…?”


“Indeed.” He glanced down at his red-skinned hands and then back up at the insect currently groveling for his attention. “Did you have a pleasant conversation with my Voice?” There had been a time when he could have blinked and known what was said, a time when his Voices could not hide their plots from him, when he could see them all, spread out like chaff, arrange them in stacks, attend to half a hundred idle conversations just like this one and know every one--

But he was slipping, Valkorion had been slipping for centuries and now--

**Revan? What have you done?**

“No… Zepth wasn't here. I thought maybe you wanted me to… was just trying to think of a way to bring you back.” The man was too grown to be this much of a stammering imbecile. “Your eyes were open but no one was home. Are you okay?”

If he could not rely upon his Voices… oh, things were slipping. Much faster than the Emperor had hoped. Valkorion blinked the Zabrak's eyes again. “Where is Revan?”

Mekel Jin nodded his head, almost a bow. “I was supposed to fetch her if you came back, but you were just gone and I wasn't sure--”

“You cannot fetch her.” He smiled with the Zabrak's teeth, slightly gratified to see the Coruscanti take a few steps back. “My Starfire is gone from the Force.” Perhaps it was death that had come for her, although how such a thing had been done, nearly under his nose--she should have been impervious by now, all of the work he had put into her over the years--now all for naught?

**Starfire?**

The amoeba before him looked flummoxed. “Gone? N-no, my cousin's around here someplace. Maybe I should… uh, maybe I should get her now.”

That hollow place where the Force should be in the boy was intriguing. There were stranger things in the Force, but--was she hiding again? Foolish, there was no more time.

*Above them, stretching across space, Valkorion could feel the Sleepers. Just as confused as he was; their turmoil sending their patterns into a nest of confusion, like a killick swarm without their Queen--*

*But, oh, when that swarm turned….*

“Sir? Uh, Master? Emperor?”

“Valkorion,” he corrected the boy absently. “A new age and a new name. It has always been so. Go find my Starfire, amoeba. *Now.*” She was hiding. A clever game, but they had played clever games before… she had been hidden and lost to him before. But always found. *Always* found--

“I will light the beacon to bring Nahut home. I will quench Scyva's grief with her grave. I will set a pyre for Irax and together, we shall watch him burn.”

*The scions of Zakuul whispered among themselves like a flock of need, but behind them, their*
people cheered.

“I am Valkorion,” he declared again from the warlord's body. “Your Eternal Emperor, the Devourer of Worlds.”

And then Valkorion was--

--bound in chains on the bridge of a Republic flagship,

--bound in chains in the dark of a Deralian basement,

--bringing his merchant's ship into docking on Peragus Station. Would the boy still be here?

Xxx

Carth couldn’t give a ronto’s ass about Nar Shaddaa. Five minutes she’d been gone, and his wife's imposter had moved on, babbling about a box on Nar Shaddaa. They’d sung the song Zaalbar had taught him and Canderous back when… back when both of them had been mere fugitives, running with an unconscious dark lord aboard their ship.

We are deep-root, you and we. You go grow new branches, as I--

Revan’s frozen face. Staring at nothing.

As I wait in the nest. To see the flowers your blood brings. As we--

Zaalbar had promised not to leave her. Sheris had said she had some plan, someplace to put the… the body, but she--how could he trust her? But Zaalbar had promised to watch--and now Dustil needed him.

And Carth needed Dustil. He had to leave her behind and go to Dustil.

As we awake the new day, and bring forth new leaves. Your blood is our tree, and I--

His son didn’t turn around at Carth’s approach, seemingly huddled deep in conversation with Yuthura Ban. Shoulders too wide and too thin under the bulky armor he was wearing, instead of the quilted Mandalorian jacket Carth had found for him earlier. Jacket. Revan had taken Carth's jacket with her. They’d found it on the floor of their bunk’s closet. Carth hadn't even known it was there.

And I sleep in branches until I fall too. Like leaves--

Xxx

Revan shoved her hands in the pockets and pivoted. “Can't believe you still have this thing. Mind if I borrow it for a while?”

“It looks better on you.” He kept his voice even. Calm. “Beautiful, if there was any other way--”

“Shut up.” She blinked hard. “Just… promise me, no matter what happens--”

“I'm not gonna run off with Seriina Starr. Even if she looks like you.”

“Run off with someone who doesn't look like me.” She ran her hand through his hair. “But I was gonna say, grow your hair out. Because no woman will want this--”

Xxx
“Carth,” Yuthura Ban rose to her feet. “Now that you’re here, I’ll… I’ve got some things to see to.”

“Sure.” He would never be comfortable with the almost maternal tone the Twi’lek took with his son. His son’s shoulders were so broad. The man he’d be hung on them like a new jacket. Yuthura Ban stood up and stepped away and left them, moving slowly as if she was injured. Was she? She’d been ill--Carth had--Carth had forgotten that as soon as he’d known.

“I hurt Phylus,” Dustil said, voice muffled, head down. “It just happened.”

“Hurt?” Please don’t say killed. Or maimed.

Carth sat down next to him. The side of the tent was open. He had a good view of the corner of the Hawk. The tip of the landing ramp was still down. And empty.

“I choked him. He was saying banthacrap about Mydia and the baby… and Mekk.”

Carth patted his shoulder hesitantly. “Uh, I’m sure he didn't mean it.”

“I’m not sure he's alive. Yuthura said he was, but…."

“She’d know.” Carth looked more closely at their surroundings, half-expecting the worst… but all he saw was an overturned chair. “With the Force, probably. If she said he’s alive, he probably is.” He had no idea if that was true.

“Okay. Good.” A second later Carth felt his son lean against him--awkward as neither of them had adjusted to the new differences in height. “I want to go look, but not yet. Don’t leave me yet.” His son locked his arm around Carth’s waist. He felt the man Dustil had become inhale sharply, then exhale. “I think I scared the crap out of Ban, just now.”

“Good,” Carth said, which wasn’t what he should have said, maybe, but he still… he’d never forget the son he’d found on Korriban--all eyes and sallow skin. “Dustil, I’m sure Phylus is fine.” He wasn’t sure at all, but he didn’t care. “You’re gonna be okay.” Carth half-turned to keep his eyes on the Hawk. Zaalbar said he'd watch her, but Carth hadn’t... hadn't wanted to leave her. Not alone for her first… not alone.

“Yeah.” His son took a deep breath. “You know, Mekk's kind of an asshole.”

Carth sighed, relieved it was just that. No one was dead or-or hurt-- “He’s young. You know, you’re both so young.”

“Phylus says Mydia wants to have his baby. Mekel's baby. Not mine.”

“Oh, uh….” Carth’s voice trailed off, fighting the irrational urge to find Mydia Blais and shake her, then shake Mister Sith Congeniality, too. “Y-you know your mother once talked about maybe seeing other people--”

“Dad!” His son jerked away from him, all shoulders and arms. “I don't want to hear… that's not the same thing!”

“You can't change a kid's father.” Unless you're Mandalorian. Their ways were something he'd never understand.

“Phylus said she's getting rid of my baby so she can have Mekk’s.”
“Oh.” Was it wrong the first emotion Carth felt was relief? Followed just as fast by disappointment. Because a part of him had wanted to… to meet his son's children and the events of the day had reminded him that… that you never know. “I'm not sure it works like that.” Weak advice. “Have you spoken to Mydia?”

Out of the corner of Carth’s eye he saw the broad back of Rogere the Houck, trailed by Sheris and Zaalbar, directing a hoverlift down the Hawk's ramp. Something that looked like one of their own bedsheets had been draped over the top, but he knew what was underneath. A coffin-shaped rectangle, and her frozen face--

“We’ve got to… Dustil. Follow me.” He scrambled to his feet.

“What?”

Xxx

*Her face turned gray when the carbonite gas hit. Flesh made into duramarble. Frozen, with all the light gone out.*

*It felt like a part of Carth froze too, and all the platitudes he’d been reciting to keep sane seemed shallow as flimsi. If this stopped the Sleepers how could they ever risk waking her again?*

*A choked sigh brought him back to the present a millisecond before Zaalbar's wails began.*

*Carth looked up numbly into a pair of hyperdrive eyes. Behind Sheris, Canderous was a hulking shadow in beskar--masked again.*

*The juxtaposition of that mask and her face--*

*Their face--*

*Sheris blinked back at him. Her lower lip trembled. Those hyperdrive eyes were liquid, full of tears. “I'm sorry.” A ragged breath. He'd never seen Sheris so uncomposed. “Captain. If there was any other way--any way at all--”*

“I know.” He didn't. Were her tears an act?

Xxx

The procession vanished behind a line of tents. Dustil was still talking, even after Carth told him they had to go, that they had to follow. Maybe that was good. They wouldn’t attract attention, following. Just two men having a conversation, following a Houck, a Wookiee, and a Sith--

“--and Mekk's always fracking telling everyone he's Revan's cousin. And then he did everything Mydia said, and I kept dropping hints we should go and he just kept staring at me--”

Follow. Make sure they weren't just throwing his wife's frozen body into a lava pit, or dumping her at a strafing range. Carbonite was fragile, so fragile. Carth had read that once. It hadn't occurred to him until now that she wouldn't be able to defend herself.

“--and Millifar had a picture of him above her bunk! And that's where he took me--when, uh… when… he didn't even fracking care!”

“Millifar's alive,” Carth said--immediately regretting it--regretting the look on his son's face.

“What?”
“Uh, Canderous said the Republic Fleet have her. We'll need to negotiate some kind of surrender for the Imperials.”

“Surrender?” His son's outrage grew. “You want to surrender?”

“Of course.” What was the alternative?

Xxx

“Who are you calling a war criminal, Revan Starfire Onasi?” He chuckled, his cheek against the smooth skin of her forehead, face buried in her bright-edged hair. “Me?”

“You need to be careful.” She pulled back and looked him straight on. Hyperdrive eyes. “Don't let the Republic turn on you. Go with Canderous. Mandalorians have sovereignty, they can't touch you, remember--”

“Yeah, I remember.” They'd played that game already. “I'm no Mandalorian. You... you know that.”

“Then be careful.” Her smile was a grimace. “I'm not doing this for you to end up court martialed. I already told Canderous to kidnap you.”

“I won't be,” he promised. “And you know he won't. And you... you're... we're gonna see each other again. This isn't the end.”

“I know.” She paused. “I made him swear it.”

“He won’t.”

“This isn't the end,” she repeated.

But it had sounded like both of them were lying--

Xxx

“I just thought...” Dustil's bluster was fragile as plimsi. Under different circumstances, Carth might have laughed. “We don't want to seem weak.”

“We are weak. I mean the Empire is. Thanks to us. Maybe we'll get medals.”

“Right. I hate this fracking planet anyway. But were you kidding? Millifar's really fracking alive?”

“Yeah. Uh, you should talk to Mekel,” Carth told him, stepping up the pace. “And Mydia. Not at the same time.”

Advice was so easy to give and so hard to take. You should let her go, Onasi. You know you have to let her go--

“You don’t... you don’t know what he’s like. Or what she's like.”

“But I know you.” Carth forced himself to smile. A Sith. My son. My son who just commed me because he Force-choked someone. Maybe that was progress, that he'd commed Carth. “I know you'll do the right thing.” He believed that. He always had. And not just about Dustil--

xxx
You're doing the right thing, Freckles. I don't have to like it, but you are.

He hadn't said the words when she stepped into the carbonite frame but he'd thought them. Even if... even if this was all that there was--it had been better than some of the endings Carth had imagined for them. At least they'd had this.

He didn't want to let her go. But he knew--

Xxx

The Houck and his precious cargo had vanished behind one of the Mandalorian shuttles and a double stack of shipping units.

“We need to hurry,” Carth started walking even faster.

The camp was abuzz with activity. Carth saw the medix tent bad been partially dismantled. Two shuttles lifted off nearly at the same time. All the tents around his and Revan's had already been taken down. The air rang with Mandalorian commands, snatches of song. He wondered where Canderous was--if the man was already gone. The Mandalorian had just left, turned his back on all of them and walked away. Carth should send a message to Fleet... but right now his heart was still with the white-shrouded body of his wife, escorted by Sheris, the Houck, and Zaalbar.

“Did something happen?” Dustil looked confused. “Are they moving camp?”

“We have to keep following Revan,” Carth said. “A lot happened. I need to tell you the rest.”

“Dad, that's the other one--not your wife.” His son grabbed his arm. “You okay?”

“No.” Carth lengthened his stride as the procession in front of them reached the Dark Temple wall and a narrow path that seemed to wrap around the edge of the building. “I need to see where they're taking her...” He kept talking, letting the story come out in disjointed pieces; answering Dustil's incredulous questions while keeping his attention focused on her.

The path was narrow and steep, turning to barely a catwalk above the jungle where their pace slowed and biting gnats swarmed on every centimeter of exposed skin. A set of stairs led to a lower entrance, visible across a field of stones, and a set of double doors. Sheris was already standing in front of the doors with the Wookiee and the Houck, the white-covered rectangle that held his wife's body at her feet.

“Oh.” Dustil froze at the bottom of the stairs. “Dad. This place, it feels... dark.”

“Stay close.” Carth put his hand on his son's armored arm.

Sheris put her hand on the door's surface. Her hand was glowing--and then she was glowing, a faint yellow light in the sullen dusk. The doors slid open, and she gestured for the others to carry Revan inside. Zaalbar and Rogere vanished into the open doorway without so much as a glance back.

“Captain Onasi.” Sheris's back was still toward them, but her voice rang, echoing across the stones. “You left too quickly. I was going to invite you to join us.”

“You left too quickly. I was going to invite you to join us.”

“My son needed me.” Carth called back. Of course. She’d known all along they were following her.

“I agree. He does.” She pivoted, still meters away across the field, expression a blank oval below the cap of red hair. “Find Dustil something to wear that doesn't look like Malak's battle armor when
“It’s _my_ battle armor,” Dustil yelled back. “And _you’re_ one to talk—you look like a spiked goreapple!”

Sheris glanced down at herself, adjusting her breastplate. “I need to seem like a threat when we greet the Republic. _You_ should not.”

“I think it’s pretty clear which of us is a threat.”

“Dustil!” Just a warning hand on his son's armored arm. When had Dustil put on the armor again? He’d spent the last few days in a battered flight suit, looking almost like the man Carth had always expected him to become--his son the mechanic. His son the navigator. His son who'd enrolled in Fleet Academy or an engineering school--

Except for the lines of Sith corruption running up his arms and neck, the yellow tinge to his eyes.

That son who'd wanted to fly starships was still in there someplace. Carth was sure of it.

“Forget it, Dad,” Carth's Sith son glared at the copy of his wife. “ _She_ knows I could take her.”

“I know your father would prefer Fleet not take you into custody as a Sith prisoner, Dustil.” Sheris raised an eyebrow. “If your pride requires a show of strength over me, postpone it until _after_ I negotiate an Imperial surrender. I’d prefer not to discuss terms with Rensha from a hospital bed.” Her voice was so dry that Carth couldn't tell if she was joking.

By his son's expression, Dustil couldn't tell either. “Hah, hah.”

“Power is sometimes a greater weakness than an asset. I hope you learn that lesson more quickly than I did.”

“Oh, yeah? You gonna teach me?” Dustil looked like he was trying to sneer, yelling back at her from across the square.

“I have better things to do.” Sheris beckoned for them both to come closer. “And we are running out of time.”

“Yeah, because you keep jabbering--” Dustil took a step toward her and stumbled, almost falling. “Hey! Did you _push_--”

“No.” Hard to tell from a distance, but her expression looked almost like a smirk. “You merely tripped over the corpse of another sentient who thought their power would save them.”

Dustil opened his mouth as if to respond and then glanced down. He froze. “Dad?” he whispered. “Look--”

Carth looked. What he had assumed was debris turned out to be a thicket of bones with foliage grown half-over them. A graveyard. “Hells. Is this part of the tomb?”

Sheris's voice raised. “In a manner of speaking. These were Tenebrae's failures. His cast-offs. Rejected children the tomb would not take. But the door is keyed to genetics--hers and mine. Come inside.”

“No,” Dustil muttered. “No way. What’s going on with the fracking bones?”

“As I said, Tenebrae had many failures before he found me.” Sheris’s entire body seemed to be
glowing now, faintly outlined against the black.

Carth cleared his throat. “We can see that.” Some of the bones were small but he didn't want to think they were kids.

“It's… dark in there.” Dustil's bravado seemed to vanish in an instant. “It's really dark.”

“Yes.” Her head tilted. “Thousands died before the door. Thousands more within the Temple itself. You have been possessed by a Force ghost before. You would be more sensitive to their influence than most.”

“I'm not afraid.”

“And that is a problem.” She hovered in the doorway, partially blocking it. “Fear might temper your judgment. If the ghost of Exar Kun appeared before you now and promised you unlimited power, as well as all of the knowledge he possessed….”

“I wouldn’t need it.” Dustil was too damn cocky, but Carth loved him for it. “Not to beat you.”

She sighed, and turned her head toward the dark. “Zaalbar?”

“The cub stinks with more sense than his bark,” the Wookiee growled, emerging again from the shadows behind her. “But he will stay when he is told.”

“Hey! No one tells me what to do!”

“Dustil. Listen to them.” Carth had to trust Zaalbar even if he couldn't trust Sheris. He turned to face the man his son has become, staring him down, eye-to-eye. “I need you to have my back. I need you to get me out if this is a trap.”

“You sure, Dad?” His son twisted the comm on his wrist.

“Zaal’s a good judge.” Carth patted him on the back again. “If he says it's okay in there, it is.”

Sheris nodded. “This place is a repository of dark Force energy. All the lives sacrificed here--”

“Yeah. They charged it up,” Dustil interrupted. “I… can feel it. He… Tenebrae drained them or something.”


“And I said I would wait outside.” Carth's son mimicked the woman's stilted tone uncannily. “So, we're done. Okay?” He turned to his father again. “You okay, Dad? If she tries anything, I'll end her.”

No. Carth looked at the ground again, feeling nauseous. Some of the bones were small enough to be from children. Others weren't humanoid. The jawbone of what he thought was a Trandoshan lay across a ribcage with four sets of arms still attached. Most were older--worn and set into the ground like a terrible mosaic. “Did we stop Tenebrae?” His voice came out in a croak. “Did anything work?”

“He is much weakened.” Sheris was still glowing a little as Carth approached the door, glancing back to Dustil. His son smiled and gave him a thumb's up as he sat down on what Carth hoped was
only moss-covered stone.

“Not an answer,” Carth told Sheris when he got to the door. She stood in front of it and his hand accidentally brushed the artificial one of hers as he pushed past. Fingers were ice-cold, and they locked on his arm, holding him there.

She looked up at him, standing as close as his wife, nothing but warning in her expression. “There was hardly time to check the feeds, but you saw the same reports I did--that farce of a broadcast from Biscayne. The Sith Emperor has bodies in Republic space. He will attempt to make more. We need to stop him there as well.”

“Sure, but without Revan….” As Carth's eyes adjusted to the light inside the tomb, he could see the white oblong of his wife's coffin with the Houck standing above it. The interior was nearly empty, ceiling higher than he expected. The air smelled foul. His wife would have hated it.

“Without Revan, his power will wane. And eventually die.” Her abrupt smile was feral, a side of the woman he hadn't seen. “Sooner, rather than later if I can find my box.”

“But why leave her here?” It was a dark, dank place--claustrophobic for all that the walls stretched at least twenty meters high, arching up to a series of coffered domes. His wife would have hated it there. She had always liked the sky.

“Because this is the safest place in the galaxy.” Sheris put her hands together and a small globe of light appeared, hovering between them, illuminating the space. “With any luck, Tenebrae will assume she is dead. That is what we will tell him--and anyone else who inquires.”

“But--” The lights on the carbonite frame pulsed a reassuring green.

“She is not dead, friend Carth.” Zaalbar's yowl was reassuring as he followed Carth inside. “I know how to check the unit's controls. And I will stay to watch over her.”

The walls were covered in murals showing exactly the sorts of Sith atrocities that Carth had become accustomed to seeing in fracking Sith tombs. His wife would have laughed at them, but she'd have shadows in her eyes--as she had on Korriban.

“This chamber can be sealed.” Sheris continued. “Only she--or I--can open the external door. And only she can open the Tomb itself.”

Who could let her out if she's trapped in here alone? Who would wake her up? The infamous tomb itself was made of stone with a top that looked crystalline, raised from the floor with a series of steps. Carth started to move towards it, but Sheris caught his arm. “Don't.”

“Why?”

Her voice was too smooth, as if she'd had the answer prepared. “There are traps for nulls everywhere. If I have to awaken your wife, I would rather not begin with the tale of your death.”

“What if you're not around to wake her up?” Carth glanced back toward the open doorway. The Houck was piling a stack of bones in front of it. What looked the ribcage of some giant beast had been wedged in the lower quarter. Beyond that, his son was a reassuring outline in the setting sun, standing arms crossed, a silent sentinel.

Zaalbar chuffed. “I will stay with her, friend Carth. For two hundred turns of this sun. Or more. The Wookiees of this world want to claim this jungle. We will camp nearby. She will not be alone.”
“Are you sure?” Zaalbar had been on Kaas as long as Carth had. *Too damn long. I should stay, too.* But Carth didn’t want to leave Dustil—or keep Dustil in this place.

*And I don't want to stay in this place. Not even for you, beautiful.*

“The Wookiees here have found their freedom. I will help them build a new land,” Zaalbar howled. “Waiting for Polla Revan’s return is no hardship.”

Sheris had followed Carth’s gaze. “Zaalbar agreed to establish a permanent residence near the Dark Temple… and Rogere is securing the outside door for us so it remains open. Once you’ve said your farewells, we’ll conceal the entrance as best we can. Tenebrae will think her dead. His remaining power will continue to collapse. If I can find my box on Nar Shaddaa this interval may only take months—perhaps even weeks.”

*Months? Not years? Weeks? “You think we can bring her back? That soon?”*

“I do.” Her eyes focused on something beyond him.

*But you want Zaalbar to wait centuries. Just in case. And you’re putting her right where the Emperor wants her. Just in case? He couldn't tell if she was lying. Carth looked around the room, just as Zaalbar lumbered over and gave him a clumsy pat on the back. “And that door of yours… it's the only way in?”*

“As I said.” Sheris raised her voice. “Rogere, try and find something larger. I believe some of the paving stones are loose on the wall’s lower escarpment—”

“Escarpment—?” the Houck snorted. “Wot?”

“The wall. Along the hill.” She continued giving directions while Carth paced the length of the chamber, heading for the raised dais, the plinth she'd told him to avoid.

“Don’t—” the overhead Force globe flickered out, as if she was trying to hide what he'd already seen.

Too late. Beneath a veil of frosted crystal rested a shriveled corpse. Not the first in a Sith tomb that Carth had ever seen, but this one was… was—it had metal spikes piercing its spine, desiccated legs pulled to its chest. The mouth was open in a scream; the skull cracked by a metal plate covering half of its face—

The spikes curved and fed into tubes that ran into the floor, encircled by an inlay of circuitry that surrounded the corpse.

“Who is that?” He felt like he was going to be sick.

Sheris stepped onto the plinth next to him. “I'm not sure. The body is at least four centuries old—if the records I found are a reliable source. The first… ruptures appeared in the Eternal Empire around that time. Of course, its decline was predictable for centuries before that. Overexpansion, squandered resources, broken treaties….” her voice trailed off. “I expect you don't want a lecture on Sith history.”


“I don't know.” The Force light flickered into existence again, casting the coffined thing into sharp relief. That metal plate, curving, piercing the skull, the spikes along the spine-- “I'm not sure
Tenebrae does, either. The technology is Rakatan. I once thought if one of their kind was placed in the chamber it might—help—they might… last—” she shook her head, a strange smile twisting on her face. “But that would empower Tenebrae, wouldn't it? I never wanted a strong Emperor.”

“We saw a tomb like this. On Nathema. My wife… she said it was his.” Carth hadn't really seen. He'd been half delirious with fever, but Revan had told him later that body had been in dust, half in pieces.

“Ah.” Her eyebrow raised. “She took you there?”

“She said it called to her. And that old woman was there. Your old master. Quinneth Cannon. Arren Kae. Vima Sunrider. She was waiting for her there.”

“Your wife told me you killed Vima.” The shadows made hollows in her cheeks, elongated her features into a skull. “Thank you.”

“Uh… you're welcome.”

“It was his tomb, once, on Medriaas—your Nathema. I thought if I destroyed him there it would end.” Sheris took a deep breath and put her hands flat on top of the tomb. Nothing happened. “In my own body, my tomb would open if I did this. And I would hear… something. Someone. The Rakatan computer. Now, I only hear ghosts.”

“She always heard… things. She used to have nightmares. Scream in different languages, I never knew how to stop—” Carth wasn't sure why he was telling Sheris this. Why the woman would give a damn. “I never knew what to do.”

Sheris nodded. “The overlay was unstable. They removed enough of my memories to preserve the facade, but they had to leave enough of me for the maps. For the Rakatan computer's installations to recognize… to recognize me.” Her voice trailed off and she rubbed her temples. “I had hoped there would be enough of me for this tomb to recognize. To open, but as you can see—”

Carth looked down at the thing in the tomb again and tried not to see his wife. “Blow it up.”

“I tried.” Her voice was dry again, that humorless tone he was starting to think was her form of humor. “There are traps here you haven't seen. And not just physical ones.”


“A Twi'lek named Lenawee has possession of it, yes.” Sheris turned away from the tomb and faced him. “Help me placate the Republic, and we can find the box together.” Her voice still had that dry tone and her eyebrow arched, mouth quirking. “I will need someone to pilot my ship.”

“You don't have a ship.”

“But you have a fleet of them.” Was she actually smiling? “Perhaps it's best if we don't put the Imperial Navy to a loyalty test… convince them to surrender to High Admiral Rensha and then you and I can find this Lenawee and my Rakatan mind-prison on Nar Shaddaa. Capture the Emperor. Free your wife.”

“And how does this prison of yours work?” Had anything Rakatan ever done anything good?

“It will hold the Emperor's soul. Everyone he possesses will be freed.”
“Just like that?”

“No. I searched for the *irk-tal-jsiew* for years.” Trace of a frown. That furrow between her brows was painfully familiar. “Chasing rumors--whispers of an unknown planet. Fragments of a Star Map. And when my agents finally found it--”

“You were too busy to get it yourself?”

Carth wasn't sure why he was baiting her. His wife would have… would have laughed, but Sheris just kept on explaining.

“I could not risk drawing Tenebrae's attention. He was in Malak--”

“I heard. She… she told me.”

“The Genoharadan found my box, but I had been betrayed. Malak fired on my flagship before I could end him and capture the Emperor--”

“I heard this song and dance already.” Carth looked past her, toward the door, past the still, coffin-shaped form of his wife, covered by a white sheet. Morgana had been covered with one too, it was a bad… bad time to remember that. Carth wiped his eyes. “Fine. I'll take you to Nar, Sheris.” He looked around the room, staring at the Sith murals. What looked like a tree made of stone flowers arched over some kind of barbed rack full of torture victims. *Bastards.*

“You okay, Dad?” Dustil. Calling from the doorway.

“He will say farewell when he finishes with Sheris Revan, cub,” Zaalbar growled back.

“Yeah, I…” When Carth turned he saw her face again. Sheris. That lower lip of hers, she kept biting it as if she'd cry. His wife wouldn't have… she wouldn't have done that, but he still wanted to tell her not to.

*Don't cry… don't cry.* “You okay?” he asked. “Sheris?”

“Yes.” The former Jedi took a gulp of breath. “This place. Your pain. All of this death--” she wiped her own eyes almost angrily. “Say your goodbyes, Captain.”

Carth looked at the white cloth, the coffin-shaped carbonite frame that held his wife. He knelt down and pulled back the sheet. She looked so calm. Not in pain. Not suffering. Morgana had--she had been quiet, too. *I'll be right back, Revan,* he thought. *I promise.*

He looked up. The woman with his wife's face was standing above. Watching. Armored boots, the metal plates of her skirt, the heavy links of belt, the lightsaber dangling from her waist. In that moment, he was glad for the armor. It made her form different. Carth bent down and kissed Revan's carbonite forehead. It felt wrong for her to be in here. Their farewell felt cheap with Sheris watching, like he was on display.

“I am sorry,” she murmured, without having the decency not to look.

“It's... okay.” Carth stood up. Sheris was still staring at him with hyperdrive eyes and he tried to look past, but her gaze was too direct and too familiar and so he turned his head in the other direction. The torture mural of the tree was less painful to look at than her face. And that's when he saw it--a crack in the wall. Something she'd claimed shouldn't exist. “Wait. You said… the door's the only way in this place?”
“Yes?”

“Then what's that?” At the edge, just past the carved tree and the pile of carved corpses was a rough rectangular opening, only about a meter tall.

“Air shaft?” Zaalbar groaned, lumbering forward to investigate. The Wookiee raised his nose to the air and sniffed. “The air coming from there is just as foul, but has wind. From above.”

“Above? No. There should be no egress--wait! Someone was here.” Sheris’s boots scuffed the ebony floor, which looked older than the walls. The floor was inscribed with patterns that reminded Carth of the Rakatan installations. “This stone is freshly carved.” She frowned, crouching to peer through the entrance of the hole. “We need to see where it goes.” Snap-hiss as her saber ignited, and then she vanished through the opening.

_Blast._ Carth cast one glance toward Zaalbar and the outlined doorway where his son waited.

“You follow the madclaw,” Zaalbar growled at him. “I will watch your cub and Polla Revan's sleep.”

“I'll be right back,” Carth promised, and ducked through the wall's opening, chasing after Sheris.

XXX

“Um… is Revan around? She asked… she wanted me to get her when….” Mekel’s voice trailed off because Revan wasn’t in the medix tent, but the head medix was. Sinae of Clan Zal. She of the gigantic rack and long sighs, like she’d thought he wasn't good enough for Millifar when they'd gotten their contra shots. (Milli's idea. Mekk had never knocked anyone up yet, but Milli insisted and she was very convincing.)

“No. But the dar’jett asked for you,” Sinae had taken the unconscious Dessa out of the tank, and draped so many blankets and bands on top of her that for a second, Mekel thought the pregnant Mandalorian was dead.

“Where--?”

The medix frowned disapprovingly and stepped to one side, revealing the bed behind Dessa's. Mydia Blais lay curled across it, wrapped in white cloth. A scanning band lay flat across her stomach.

“Hello.” She lifted her head slightly, looking at Mekel. Her eyes were red and her nose was blotchy, as if she’d been crying.

“Are you okay?” Mekel felt stupid. Telos should be here, not him.

“It hurt.” Mydia looked wan and young--maybe even scared. “I didn't think it would hurt.”

“If you had done it sooner,” the medix told her. “It would have hurt less.”

“Remember your promise, Mandalorian.” Mydia's voice hardened.

“We don't name children until they are old enough to stand on the sands they will claim…” The Mandalorian medix was stacked. Mekel had noticed that before. “But I will tell Dessa your suggestion.”

“My-leah.” Mydia pronounced the word decisively. “It means ‘Firebrand’ in Ancient Sith. It's a
lucky name. A Blais name…. her voice trailed off, and she sniffled, blinking hard. “Sadow's ghost! Why am I crying?”

“Hormones.” The medix shrugged. “I'll give you a shot to dry up your milk.”

“I don't drink milk…” the girl's voice trailed off and her eyes widened. “Oh! You mean... how disgusting!” She shifted on the hospital bed, and the belt slipped. Mekel caught a glimpse of a fine red line like a laser cut across her stomach.

“Are you okay?” He wasn't a di'kut. He'd grown up in a whorehouse, but Mekel had never heard of an abortion through someone's guts. “Was there something wrong with it?”

“Her,” Sinae corrected. “A little small for gestational age, with a few hybridizations, but perfectly-”

“Of course she's a hybrid,” Mydia snapped. “I told you, we're not purebloods.” She wiped her eyes, seeming on the verge of tears. “Can we go, Mekel? The Mandalorians are leaving soon, and Sinae still has other patients to see.”

It startled him that Mydia would care--almost as much as the fact that she'd lost Dustil's baby. Lost. A euphemism. Decided not to have, apparently. Did Telos know? Would he care? Maybe this was good because there'd be no divided loyalty.

“Yeah. I could get Dustil for you--”

“Ugh!” Mydia made a face. “What for?”

“I mean Lord Malak.” Did she still buy that banthashit? “Or... um, the Emperor. The Sith Emperor's back. He's in that Zabrak kid's body. Zepth. Do you know Zepth?

“I don’t want Dustil.” Her gaze was as direct as a mark arranging things at his mother’s establishment. “Or the Emperor. I want you, Mekel Jin.” She wiped a tear from one golden eye. “But not like this. Go outside while I dress.”

“Okay.” He didn’t know what else to do. Frack. Mekel remembered the Emperor--the reason he'd been looking for Revan in the first fracking place. He should have gotten someone else to see where she was.

And Dustil should take care of his own fracking girlfriends.

Mekel stepped back outside just in time to see half a dozen Mandalorian shuttles take off. Above them, the Aleema loomed, low in atmosphere like a lazy purrgil. “The frack?” When he looked around, he noticed half the camp was packed up. Leskal even jogged by with an armful of rolled up tents.

“Hey!” Mekel called out.

“Jin of Lin! Come in our shuttle!” The Mandalorian stopped. “General Ordo is arranging a boarding party for the troch Republic ships when they come. We are going to provide a distraction for Millifar's escape!”

“For--” one word jumped out at him. “Wait. Milli's alive?”

“The Republics have her.” Leskal nodded. “I am sure she will escape like her mother commanded, but should she require assistance, or if General Ordo decides to seize the Republic flagship before
she can--"

“Huh?” Obviously, a lot had happened while Mekel had been feeding the Sith Emperor. “Wait. What does Revan know--is she coming too?”

Leskal shot him what Mekel would realize later was a pitying smile. “No. She is gone. Forever.” He gestured toward the ships. “Come with me, I will tell the tale.”

“Gone? But I-I need to find her. Her and--” Dustil, Mekel thought. But Telos had split. Probably off doing important Force-user things. If he’d split with Revan and left Mekel behind Mekel was gonna fricking gut him in his sleep. “Everyone's leaving?”

Leskal shrugged. “Everyone who is worthy.”

*Telos went on ahead without me? Without me and his fricking girlfriend?* The thought was stupid. He'd probably been busy--some important Force-user business. Too busy.

*Or I wasn't worthy.* He glanced down at the comm clipped on his belt. With the bond, he wouldn't have needed to fricking ask, but--

“Uh… got room for a few more?” Telos had been too busy to get his girlfriend. And the Zabrak--Emperor or Lydie's brother--whatever he was, he couldn't be left behind, either.

“Of course. If you hurry.”

“I will, just--” He stepped to the side bringing the comm close to his ear. “Gotta check with Telos, then I'll get the others.”

“Five minutes, Jin of Lin.” Leskal tapped his chron. “Hurry.”

XXX

The man had his blaster out and his grief was as thick and cloying as the dust in this tunnel. The tunnel was small enough they both had to crouch, even crawling on all fours at times. It had once been a ventilation shaft, perhaps, but it had been widened quite recently.

For Revan, the Dark Temple swam with ghosts. Red-headed girl-children, ranging in ages from one to six--and every one of them had green eyes, staring back at Revan with absolute trust. She had not met them here. The Emperor’s nursery had been on Ziost. This had to be a hallucination, a manifestation of Revan’s own guilt--

“*Are you my mother?*” One had asked Revan, that day on Ziost. Putting the Fragment in her temporary tomb had reminded her uncannily of those children--Tenebrae-spawned clones, one of them her potential replacement, molded to do his bidding--

*You would have been just as vulnerable to his influence as they were, Fragment--*--and far less mortal.

“Look up,” said the captain behind her, and Revan did, annoyed at herself for not noticing before he did: the circular place in the ceiling above, four meters up, tall enough to stand, the slightly lighter darkness above, the feeling of a breeze--,

“It's an access point from the main apse.” Her hand brushed the walls, the freshly cut stone. “I can leap the distance, Captain, but I'm not sure how to transport you.”
“I’ve got it.” He sounded amused. “I’ve climbed tighter maintenance shafts than that, sister.”

“I was an only child,” she quipped, but he just stared at her, puzzled, as if he did not understand the joke.


The space above was intimately familiar—one of the catacombs that ran beneath the Dark Temple’s main chambers. The Force here practically screamed with shadows, all of them jostling, whispering to demand their due.

_Hurry, Red._ Malak's whisper was faint, his presence overlain by other ghosts, so many other ghosts, each with their own peculiar claim. Somewhere Revan thought she heard the sound of bells. The Force light hovering above her hands trembled and shook as Captain Onasi scrambled through the opening. Revan extended a hand and he took it without reservation, face cast in shadow save for that sensitive mouth.

“Are you okay?” he asked her oddly.

Was she crying again? _His_ pain, the Wookiee's, the son's, this place--their pain threatened to overwhelm.

“This… this opening was made recently.” She wiped her eyes. Who would have dared breach Revan's tomb? Who would have known it existed? “Tenebrae captured Polla and Yuthura and me in the tomb when we came here before. Perhaps one of his servants carved the path from above--” her voice faltered because suddenly it was quite obvious. “Or… that droid! Your T3. We saw it in the tomb--does the droid have an attachment that could cut through stone?”

“Maybe. You think Mission did this?”

“‘Mission. The T3.’ Yes.” It was logical. How else could the droid have breached her tomb to be there in the first place?

_I assumed the Rakatan computer let the droid in, but perhaps the thing had its own mind. Had I thought it would be so easy to cut a path I could have had the Temple sabotaged remotely. Even as she had the thought, Revan dismissed it. Irrelevant, now._

Words from her old master mocked her. “Here is the path before you, padawan. What can you use?”

Close the main entrance and leave this hidden one. Better, much better. Tenebrae would think the structure as impregnable as she had--

_Can the Wookiee fit through the smaller opening?_

_I will have to check--surely, if he crawls…._

“You're crying.” The man sounded startled. “Is… is it worse than you're telling me? For her?”

“No, there's hope. My box--” Sheris's weak voice wavered and Revan wiped her eyes with her gauntlet. “It's better, Captain. If we can find my box.”

“And you think your man can get the evil computer out of Mission?” Carth Onasi sounded as sad as Revan felt.
“He will certainly try. The Genoharadan have no love for Tenebrae. Rulan told me the Emperor infiltrated their organization, possessed a number of operatives, and started to use them for his own purpose.” She started to wipe at her eyes again.

“You trust Rulan?” He was holding something out to her. A scrap of cloth.

“I do. Thank you.” She took it and wiped her eyes again before handing it back. He looked at it awkwardly before stuffing it back in his vest and she realized that returning the crying-cloth had been the wrong thing to do.

“Okay,” he muttered, still staring at her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Irrelevant.” They were wasting time standing here. Revan let the Force guide her steps through the tunnel ahead, walking backward to keep Onasi in sight. “I sense no deception from Rulan. His men have served me well in the past, and we desire the same objective: a stable Republic.”

“You do that, too,” Carth said.

“What?” The stable Republic? Or had the Fragment trusted Rulan Prolik, too?

“Walk backwards. I thought it was just her. Guess the Force… you just know what’s ahead, huh?”

“Oh.” His abrupt subject changes were maddening. She stopped. “Of course. The Force warns me if there is an obstacle or an incoming threat--”

“She did it,” he said hoarsely, still staring. “Sometimes. Before we knew… before we knew she even had the Force she used to do that. I thought it was her.”

How was this relevant? “Of course. We shared many of the same--”

“No. Not really.” The Fragment's consort pushed past her, toward the larger opening in the wall that Revan suspected would lead to the main temple. “You're not like her at all. Just… just some things.”

A pointless argument, perhaps underpinning his real unease. “I promise, your wife will be safe here, Captain--” but she was addressing empty space because Carth Onasi had gone on ahead, charging in heedlessly like he was the Fragment himself.

“Oh!” She heard his voice, startled and echoing from the chamber beyond “It's… it's big.”

The primary chamber of the Dark Temple. Yes, it is big. Revan could feel the space ahead, nearly hear the whispers of ghost voices tugging at her thoughts. Essences of the fools who had lost their way here, the generations of Sith lordlings buried in tombs that lined the walls. Dark whispers, lines in the Force, a web of them surrounded her and every one whispered a promise--

Red. Malak's voice was so faint, overshadowed by the rest. You warned Dustil before.

They're louder here. Help me. The shadows of dead children weren't real, couldn't be real. The shades that looked like Vik Tio and Beya Organa could have been. She had dreamed of them before.

Beya's lips moved, releasing a stale whisper of an Ancient Sith curse. Others--dead knights, former allies, even Bastila Shan, jostled for their place behind armored Sith out of legend. Finiris screamed something nearly in Revan's ear… but their voices were silenced, suddenly drawn away, wrapped in a field of shimmering blue.
I've got you, Red.

“Sheris?” Human voice. Carth Onasi. Behind the blue field he could have been a ghost as well. “You okay? You're… glowing.”

“Yes.” Revan said. “It's… nothing. An effect of this place.”

*An effect of this place,* Malak murmured, *is that I feel stronger here. If we brought in the boy--*

“No!” She hadn't realized she'd said it aloud but Carth started, eyes narrowing.

“Didn't say anything, sister.”

“Ghosts,” she told them both. “No one is immune to the influence of the Dark Temple. Not even nulls. Or… or ghosts. We need to find the exit.” *No one is immune, Malak. Not even you.*

“Oh yeah? I feel fine.” But Carth's hand, Revan could not help but notice, had fallen to the blaster on his belt.

Activation lights glittered around them, highlighting the soaring arches, the mosaics on the floor, the bulbous Rakatan statue that generations of Sith had taken for a masked idol before the central stair, behind the twinned, stained sacrificial altars. “It is big.” The whispers grew louder, rustling through Malak's shields. “We should leave, Captain.”

“Carth,” he said. “Just… just call me Carth, Sheris.”

“Carth. We should leave.” Something else prickled at her consciousness, like the wind before a storm. “The Republic will be here soon.”

Xxx

Probably Mekk was off fracking Mydia, or shaving his ass before good old Milli came back… or just moving on, as they say.

Mekk always moved on.

*Mekk never really liked anyone besides himself.* That's what Algwinn had always said about Mekel Jin. *You were just a mark with a famous father, fockda. After the bond broke, he was gone.* The voice in Dustil's head almost sounded like Selene, who had liked Mekk a little too much, too. The air thickened, until Dustil could almost see the heat radiating off the bones that covered the ground.

*Ghosts.* He'd only seen one ghost in his entire life--good old Malak--but this place had so many dead bodies that it must be full of them.

Dustil's comm beeped and he almost yelped.

“Telos? Where are you?” Speak of the chivhole, Mekel sounded distracted. He had the comm so close to his face that all Dustil could see was a slice of stubbled cheek and half an ear.

“Here.” Dustil leaned back, giving his former bondmate a good long look.

“Where the frack is that?” The comm slipped and there was one of Mekk's eyes, squinting like he was looking into the sun.

“With my father. Where are you?”
“Is that a graveyard? Are you in a graveyard?” Mekk's head turned again and there it was, sideways, as the comm slid, showing the sky for a second. “What? Give me a sec, Myd.”

Good old Myd said something unintelligible.

“Dustil. It's Dustil. I said give me a sec--” Mekel's comm pulled back again and he must have finally set it on auto, because the image stabilized--all of his face, and in the background, more indistinct, a curvy shape that had to be Myd and a bulk of Mandalorian armor lurking behind her. “Uh, I guess you're gonna evacuate with your Dads. I-I heard Revan already left or something--”

Did he really not know? “Revan's dead, Mekk.” She wasn't, according to Dad, but since they were putting her frozen body in an actual tomb, Dustil didn't see the difference. “Revan's dead and the Republic's on its way to clean up this mess.”

“What?” More voices in the back, as if they were all explaining the facts of life to dear old Mekk at once.

“Frack!” The Coruscanti son of a whore said a minute later. “Guess that's… didn't get a chance to say goodbye.”

“Poor you.” Dustil forced his breath to go evenly out his nose.

“I-I-don't.... Look, you're coming back to the Aleema, right?” Some intel must have finally filtered through his thick skull-- “Or is this some kind of trick? She's not really dead, she can’t be--”

“Your cousin's gone.” Dustil had to smile, interrupting him. “The other one’s still around, though. You met her yet?”

The other Revan wasn't anything in the Force. Mekel would have trouble bragging about her to good old Myd, who only respected strength. Without his cousin or Dustil, Mekel didn't have any power at all.

A stubborn line formed on that Jin forehead. “Oh, yeah? Know who else is gone? Your kid.”

“I heard.” Dustil felt his face freeze. “Phylus told me.” It didn't matter. He'd seen a lot of dead kids.

“Oh.” Mekel just stared at him.

“I don't like liars. My daughter's in a better place.” Suddenly, there she was. Mydia Blais, attaching to Mekk's hip like a mynock, and staring at him like he was her shiny new fracktoy. Without turning her head, she gave the comm a sideways glare. “Hello, Dustil Onasi.”

“Mydia Blais.” He had to keep his voice even, steady. That was one of the first lessons that Mekel had ever taught him: don't show them when they've got you by the choobs. “Hey. You seen Phylus recently? I kinda fracked him up.”

Instead of bothering to answer, Mydia turned to Mekel. “We have to find Phylus!”

“We will. Don't worry.” Mekel suddenly had his arm around her waist, using that soothing voice on her that used to make Lashowe Devry let him copy her homework. “So, uh… you're coming to
the Aleema, right, Telos? We should… we should talk.”

“Dunno. I’m going where Father goes. You two make a cute couple.” Dustil was proud of how even his voice was. Mekk had… Mekk had taught him to do that. “I bet Milli will be thrilled.”

“She… she's alive.” Mekel had that look on his face like Dustil was speaking Huttese. “I gotta go. Leskal says they're getting pings in the hyperspace lanes. Something's coming. We've gotta lift before the Republic gets here.”

“But Phylus!”

“Shhh. We'll find your brother. I promise.” Mekel patted her on the head.

“Yeah.” Dustil could feel something coming, too, coiling like ice in his guts, as thick as the air around him. “Better run before the Republic kicks your ass.”

Mekk snorted. “Yeah? Tell my other cousin to be careful. We'll be on the Aleema….”

Why did Mekk keep bringing that up? Did he think Dustil was gonna go after them? Fight for Mydia's honor? For Mekk's? Mandalorians had duels about crap like that. He’d seen the vids.

Dustil cut the link instead of answering. “I don't need you,” he muttered to Mekel Jin, who couldn't hear anymore. “I don't need anyone.” He would help Father because Father needed him. That was what… what kids did, but he didn't need Father. He didn't need anything. Or anyone.

He looked up at the sky again. Then down at the bones. They felt… empty. It made him feel sick. The Emperor drained them. Dustil didn't know how he knew, but he did. The Force was in everything, even dead fracking bodies. But these bones were just… empty.

Empty in the Force like Mekel Jin was. Frack him. Mydia would. Then she'd kill him. She'd gone through a lot of servants that way. Phylus--Phylus had told Dustil--

“Your father went with the madclaw to explore the cave,” the Wookiee growled—or at least that was how the Shyriiwook Malak had somehow left in Dustil's brain translated what Zaalbar was saying. How long had Zaalbar been standing there? Lost in the Force and Mekk's banthashit, Dustil hadn't even noticed him come out of the tomb.

“Great.” Place was giving him the creeps. “Uh, do you know when they're coming back? And… how? How are they coming out?” The Houck had covered nearly half the entranceway with a stack of bones and rock.

“I think… there.” Zaalbar pointed to a place in what looked like an unbroken wall above them, about ten meters up. There was a dark shadow that could have been a hole--or a shadow. “Their scent comes from there now. I think they will come out there.”

“So we should finish sealing this, yeah?” Rogere shrugged. “Maybe drag some branches over? Get some vines?”

“More life will not grow in this place of death.” Zaalbar chuffed although Dustil could see plenty of green crap growing all around them. “And the madclaw’s comm said to seal the door as it was before.”

“I have to move the rocks back?” the Houck grumbled in his throat. “To the escarpment--?”
Comm, Dustil recalled, like an idiot. Dad?

Dear Father answered his comm almost immediately, text only. You okay?

Sure. Not the one trapped in a tomb with Darth Revan.

Call her Sheris.

Whatever. Mekk wasn't gonna call her Sheris.

Above their heads, ships were lifting off in organized clusters that reminded Dustil of the training vids he'd watched as a kid. And then, above on the ledge, sure as Zaalbar had said, dear old Dad emerged from the rocks, followed by her. Good old Darth Revan-Sheris. Dad waved and Dustil waved back. The skinny redhead in badly-fitting armor didn't wave. She just stood there, blinking in the setting sun. Rare day on Kaas, having sun.

That's your other cousin, Mekk. Wonder if you'd like her half as much. Dustil himself was on the fence. She was so weak in the Force she felt like a puff of wind would topple her, but she was still Darth Revan. She'd know things about real power. What had Ban taught them? Knowledge held its own strength—if you were strong enough not to kark before you got a chance to use it.

If Mydia still had the kid… Dustil thought that might have taken up some time. Daughter. It was a girl. He felt funny. “Dad!” he called out. “Hey!”

“Go to him,” Zaalbar growled softly behind Dustil. “The fat man and I will finish hiding Polla Revan’s resting place from predators.”

“I’m not fat.” The Houck chuckled. “Just big-boned.”

Xxx

Mekel had been trying to get someone to talk to him about why the frack the Mandalorians were really packing up shop and where everyone had gone, but the best he could do was find Ban waiting by the transport shuttle. Their old master looked nearly as confused as he was--and Leskal wasn't going to wait any longer. Mydia was already inside. The bint had gone hysterical when they couldn't find Phylus, and Dessa had given her a shot to make her sleep. Just as well. Mekel thought it would be mean to tell a woman who'd just had an abortion to shut up.

“Where’s Revan? They keep saying she's gone? Did she leave?” he asked Yuthura Ban. Dustil had just been fracking with him, and why would Leskal even know?

“I don't know.” The Twi'lek frowned at him. “I would sense her death, but she is not in the Force.”

Doesn’t mean anything. She could hide from the Force. She'd shown Mekel that ages ago on Coruscant before he even knew they were related. “Look, uh, the Emperor wants to talk to her--”

“Tenebrae made a reappearance?” Ban lifted a brow ridge. “Zepth appeared unpossessed a moment ago.”

They’d loaded the Zabrak kid on after Mydia. He was just himself again--with shackles on his hands and feet, asking Mekel where they were going like it was Field Day at Dreshdae Academy. Mekel didn’t know what to say, so he’d just shrugged, feeling a little guilty that he'd been hoping for the Sith Emperor and not Lydie Korr's brother.

Lydie. Maybe there was a way he could find her. Let her know her brother was alive. Maybe Lord
Tenebrae could help with that--the man had all of those bodies… had to be good for something.

“Tenebrae wanted to talk to Revan, so I was looking for her. Do you know where she went? Dustil said she was dead, and Leskal said she was just gone.” She’d have said good-bye. She'd come by their tent earlier; she'd stopped to check on Mekel. She wouldn't just leave--they were friends--cousins--

*She forgot you existed. More important things on her mind. Just like Telos--*

“I do not.” The Twi'lek's frown deepened. “But Revan is more than capable of taking care of herself.” From the way Mekel's old teacher was looking at him, she seemed to think he wasn't.

“Jin of Lin, we have to go.” Leskal, leaning out of the shuttle door. The Mando’ade accepted Mekel for what he was. They didn't give a frack about the Force.

“After you, Ban? Uh, Yuthura, I mean.”

“Thank you, Mekel.” The purple Twi’lek did not look back, giving Mekel a view of her back he would have appreciated more if he wasn't so distracted by all this banthashit.

XXX

The Mandalorians had dismantled everything that wasn't bolted down. Polla had had to drop Aemelie's name just to access to the comms board--and even now, behind them, two Mandie kids were idling with a plasma torch and some kind of bolt cutters, waiting for them to finish so they could take this board too. How were the refs gonna get a comm signal without it? None of them seemed to be around to ask; and when Polla brought it up on their behalf, Sei shot her the *look.*

“Ma!” Polla felt tears of relief prickle her eyes at the familiar sight of her parents in their vid-screen. Da looked too thin, but his smile at seeing her was still a welcome sight. “Da!” The baby in his arms looked too big to be her son, but her breath choked out because, of course, who else could he be? “Aba! You have hair!” Her son had had it before, too, but now the dark nap of hair almost covered his eyes, nearly long enough to be Blessed. He'd be old enough for that soon. He'd be--was he walking?

“Abasen!” Seiran crowded in behind her. “He’s enormous! Wh-what have you been feeding him?”

*Everything. He eats everything.* Ma's voice sounded a little shaky and she dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron. “Where in the hells are you two?”

“Dromund Kaas,” Polla said. “Past the Reach. We're okay. We're coming home.”

“Thank the Grass,” her father muttered, in a rare display of piety. “Now?”

“Just… you're alone?” Ma's voice lowered.

“Yeah…” Polla's voice trailed off. Because Bossypants had said something about coming along, once, and of course they'd have to get her son back to her. “How's the kid? Malachor? He at school?”

The two of them exchanged glances. A funny feeling began in Polla's guts. Because she just knew—even if she didn't know what, she knew it had to be bad. “Frack. What happened?”

“Where's she?” Da asked instead of answering, and Polla scrambled for--only to have Seiran find the words.
“Gone,” he said. “For good. But the other one, she's going to be looking for her son. What happened?”

And so, the whole story came out. Just as creepy, sad, and terrible as every other damn Sith story. By the time it was done, Polla was wiping her eyes as bad as Ma--and not just for the sight of her own kid, dozing sleepily on her father's shoulder.

“I'll tell her,” Polla said slowly. “But if there's anything you can do to find--”

Her father nodded. “Moll was just saying maybe we should hire someone to look.”

“But we're not sure it's safe.” Ma lowered her voice. “We don't want to draw more attention if… if anyone's looking already.”

They both looked at each other before looking back at Polla. And that's how she knew they still weren't telling her everything.

“Are you guys okay?” Seiran asked for her. Probably felt all of Polla's muscles tense up.

“Oh course!” Her mother beamed at them. “We're just so happy you're both alive! You look good, Pollie. They've certainly been feeding you on that Sith planet.”

“Thanks.” She gritted her teeth. “But--”

“Was it the Sith Emperor?” Da interrupted. “Was he the one who killed her?”

Funny how they all kept not saying her name. “Killed? Um… she's not dead.” Was it possible the call was being monitored? Polla had a flash of paranoia. That might explain their cagey expressions. “She's just… gone.”

“No, Pollie, I meant her.” Her mother's voice dropped. “You know.”

“Neither of them is dead.” Not exactly. Which was more than Polla expected for their kid if Bendowen and Ooka had been found half-rotted in a lima pit. Except… the fracking Force. Wouldn’t Revan know if her kid was dead?

She didn’t want to be the one to tell Bossypants he was missing.

Da cleared his throat, patting Abasen on the back. “I saw on the vids that the Sith Emperor possesses folks. Makes their eyes glow red.”

“Yeah.” And?

“He was on all the feeds!” Moll broke in. “With your da and her on Biscain! Did you see?”

“Wait, what?” Biscain? The Biscain crap about the race had been true?

“We came in third,” her Da bragged. “Biscain Hundred, Pollie. Third!”

“Pollie, have you met Him?” Her mother sounded way too excited about her only child hob-knobbing with immortal Sith Lords. “You have met the Emperor, haven't you?”

“Yeah, I met him. Da. You raced the Biscain Hundred with Revan?” Sithspit, well now she'd said the name. If this call was monitored, they were all fracked anyway. She and Sei were officially
“She did great. Just like you…” Da frowned slightly. “Maybe better than you, even. We would’ve been first, if we hadn't had such a late start.”

“You want to know about the Sith Emperor? He's an asshole.” It was definitely time to change the subject, forget about those level green eyes staring straight at hers, the face turning gray and frozen--

*Maybe she's better than me because I wouldn't let anyone freeze me. Not even to save the fracking galaxy.*

*He?”* Her mother said sharply. “Is the Emperor always a he?”

“No. Tenny-bro could be anybody. But don't worry, Ma. We've got him on the run!” Polla's smile felt forced. He *should* be on the run, but how could they know? He could be hiding… he could be anywhere.

“And that's why we're coming home,” Seiran added. “So we'll be home soon. A week if we can make the right jumps. Probably leave today--”

*Are you bringing the other one with you?*” Ma looked nervous. She kept clenching and unclenching her hands—the sure sign.

“Probably not. She's busy. And if Malachor isn't there--” *Why, Ma? You want to tell Darth Bossypants you lost her son and someone chopped up our relatives yourself?*

“We still want to see her,” Da interrupted, spacing his words like he meant something else. “Tell her she's welcome to come… but maybe tell so you're real sure she'll come. You know?”

“She needs to come,” Ma broke in.

“No?” What was Ma playing at? Was it supposed to be opposite day? Or did they really need the ex-Dark Lord of the Sith? “I don't know. When you say other one… um, Seiran said he told you already that there's two and the other one isn't me. You mean… her, right? Not the one that's--”

*Of course she's not you. She's Revan.*” Her mother's eyes went very wide and Polla tried to puzzle through what the hells that meant.

*You want me to tell the Jedi with the laser sword you'd like her to come for a visit even though Bendowen and Ooka got killed, and Malachor's missing?*

*Do you love me at all, Ma? You want me to piss her off?*

*“Oh, and Pollie, where in the Reach did you say you were agai--”* The sound of thunder broke over Da's words. Because the galaxy had a cracked sense of humor, the ground took that moment to shake, as the air echoed with sonic booms.

“Oh, no.” Seiran muttered, looking at Polla.

She gaped back at him. “Gotta go, Ma.”

“What--”

Polla cut the connection, and helped her husband hobble hastily toward the Dark Temple entrance.
Maybe it would have been smarter to try and get to a ship instead of that damned Temple, which Bossypants had mentioned might make a decent bunker, but Sei couldn't run and--

--and Polla had to see. If this was the end, she wanted to see it coming, not cower in the dark like the last time she'd thought they were done for.

The main doors to the Dark Temple were still closed tight. Polla and Seiran huddled against them, beneath the portico's overhang. Better than nothing, if the bombs fell. The remains of the Mandalorian camp buzzed like an overturned hive. As they watched, a Mandalorian shuttle lifted--only to be flanked almost immediately by four fighters, and forced back to ground.

A beam of light lanced across the sky--like a tractor beam had snagged another shuttle. A swarm of fighters surrounded it and the tractor switched off. That shuttle, too, went back to ground with its escort, descending sharply and landing on the grass.

Surprisingly, no one fired a shot.

“Those don't look like Sleeper ships.” Seiran frowned at the sky full of fighters, but Polla knew the pattern. Any smuggler would. Looked random, but it wasn't. Above their heads a military convoy darted back and forth, their trajectories forming a crude net over the area. Poor man's blockade, while their pals up above atmo set up deflector shields and an auto-cannon floater, maybe mined the jump-points just to make sure--

“Shit,” she muttered, as one of the fighters streaked low enough for her to recognize its distinctive wing-shape. “It's the fracking Republic!”

XXX

“Well?” High Admiral Rensha surveyed the transparisteel view laid out before them: the half-burned planet below, the empty orbital lines suddenly filled with more of their own capitals, as one by one, they dropped out of the hyperspace lanes and moved into planetary orbit.

The view was deceptive. Even before Atris gave her report, Rensha knew they were not alone in the skies.

“I sense one remaining ship cloaked in orbit around the planet. There.” Master Atris paced to the holographic display and traced the coordinates before stepping back and folding her arms, frowning at the viewscreen before them. “The chatter our scout-drones picked up before we came out of hyperspace indicates over a dozen warships--with both Mandalorian and Imperial call-signatures. The rest of the Mandalorian fleet have retreated past the planet-lines. The Imperials have gone silent, but we assume the same. We should expect the two fleets are allied, and may attempt to flank our ships at the jump-points--”

“They will flank you and win,” her new shadow corrected. The Mandalorian girl's hands were encased in a binding meant for Force-users and her legs had been shackled at the ankles as if she was a fully-flared hunter lost in her first blood spoor’s madness. She glared at the white-haired Jedi through two bruised and swollen eyes. Her guards had been unkind. Ensign Krista had been popular, and this Millifar of Ordo had broken her nose.

“We've nearly finished securing airspace above Kaas City,” Admiral Cein added. His hologram overlapped with all her other Fleet commanders, leaving Rensha in her officer's bridge crowded by ghosts--save for Atris and Admiral Rew Eckumi, who stood, arms crossed in the corner, staring down at the planet below. “Scans show minimal population readings beyond the main capital, but we've assigned ships to patrol--just in case.”
“And Revan?” demanded Ekkumi. It was not her place to ask, and Rensha flicked her tongue at the Telosian, indicating her disapproval.

“No sign--” the communications officer broke off when the figure next to her stirred.

The red-eyed Toydarian fettered to the hoverchair facing Rensha's chuckled. “She's done something,” the possessed C'Tannis murmured. “She is missing.”

Master Atris raised one white eyebrow. “What do you think she has done, Emperor?”

“Oh, ho--” the Toydarian began to laugh--but then his beak fell open. His bird's eyes went blank.

“Again?” Rew Ekkumi sighed. Rensha shared her exasperation.

The Emperor kept vanishing. It did not appear to be deliberate. He would return confused, sometimes hours later, repeating the same phrases as if no time had passed.

“Incoming message, text.” Lieutenant Reela was too green for the job, but she had been the best replacement for C'Tannis. “Incoming, um… I think it's from the cloaked ship. General Canderous Ordo. He… wants to speak with 'the hu'tuun chakaar who are holding my daughter.' That's a quote.”

“Patch him through.” Rensha raised a hand to their defense controllers, nodding in approval as she saw the Hunt's shields flicker into existence around them. “Allow visual transmission.”

“My daughter.” Canderous Ordo was a blank, visored suit of armor, flanked by two more. “We're sending a shuttle. You're gonna let us board.”

“Young daughter is here.” Rensha nodded, and the cam-handlers turned their lenses on the girl, whose fierce smile did her ancestors proud, even for a hostage. “But we require assurance. Perhaps a token of good faith--”

The communications officer coughed, and her implant received the message of another incoming transmission--this one from the planet itself.

This one using top-secret military codes. Their top-secret military codes.

Rensha's eyes narrowed. Some ruse dreamed up between Ordo and Revan?

“Millifar of Ordo is your prisoner.” Ordo's voice was hard as stone. “Release her.”

The girl scowled and muttered something under her breath.

“A shuttle has appeared,” Reela reported.

“Coming from the cloaked ship Aleema, no doubt.” Master Atris smiled. “Give the girl back, Rensha. A gesture of goodwill. The Mando'ade may have their part to play.”

“Hrm.” Rensha nodded her snout at the lieutenant. “The Mandalorians may have their part in this. And the transmission from the planet?”

“Transmission from the planet says it’s from… uh…” the lieutenant hesitated. “Admiral Carth Onasi and a…a Lady Sheris Darkstar.”

“Oh?” The Jedi Master might have thought she was hiding her surprise, but the predator in Rensha noted the dilation of her pupils, the quickened breath.
“Darkstar is probably Revan herself,” General Sand opined what they all knew. His holographic face scowled--beamed in from his troop carrier, *The Grand Purpose*. “Trying to dodge her crimes. Or trap us.”

“But which Revan?” Master Atris murmured.

“The real one.” Sand's from deepened.

“The copy is dead,” Admiral Cein added. “The planetary footage could have been faked--”

“Perhaps both.” Master Atris lifted an eyebrow. “Or none.”

“Your Force-magic cannot tell?” Rensha wondered if the woman lied. “Send Millifar Ordo to meet her father.” Rensha blinked her eyes, using her implant to select a small guard detail for that purpose. She had fought the Mando’ade since her scales were soft and they never began an ambush with a hostage exchange. “Direct the Mandalorian shuttle to Hangar Bay Pesh-Six. Let Commander Q’ro handle diplomatic introductions. They will need to leave this system, cede it to us, before they can have her.”

Commander Q’ro nodded, standing. “Thank you. Scan their shuttle for weapons. Flag anything out of the ordinary--radioactives, biologics…” He gestured for two from his detail to take Millifar Ordo. The girl did not object, but she glanced back once, teeth bared in a triumphant grin, as she was escorted from the bridge.

“And the others?” Admiral Cein overstepped his place with the question. “Onasi and Revan?”

Rensha paced across the deck. “Prepare the main hangar and a shuttle for Admiral Onasi and Lady Sheris. Full honor guard.” Hard not to trigger her venom-sacs with those titles. “As well as full troop battalion with sniper detail along the aft and fore scaffoldings of the hangar. “Master Atris… you will attend?”

“Indeed.” The white-haired Jedi nodded her head. “I enjoy the occasional surprise.”

Xxx

Low Admiral Sirida of the highest-ranking remaining Imperial dreadnaught *The Captive Arm* stared gloomily at the flimsiplast print-out of his orders, the latest to come in from High Admiral Carth Onasi, whereabouts classified, but presumably lurking somewhere on the planet beneath them--and not manning this command ship as they navigated, very carefully and very cloaked, between a Republic navy five times their size and a Mandalorian fleet that had them merely twice outnumbered.

*Move to position at Kaas orbit, cloaked*, the orders read. *No matter what. Do not engage.*

*No matter what?* Admiral Ellakin Sirida could think of so many ways such an order could go heinously wrong.

“Move our ships,” he told the helmswoman. “Set positions closer to the sun--between Ravannis and Dromund Siik.” Orbiting the system's smallest planets would give them ample time to mount a response if commanded, but still remove their forces from the battle if the situation between the Mandalorians and the Republic deteriorated further.

“But the orders said to hold position--” Commodore Wootis was growing bold, with no Sith Lord on hand to keep her in line.
“And my orders to you are to hold a position we can keep.” It was a delicate dance: following the command of the former Republic war hero Carth Onasi (whose commands thus far had only lost good men and ships), while preserving as much of the Imperial fleet as he could. Still--Ellakin cast a glance at the red-robed priest, standing silent sentinel in the corner of the bridge. “Has the Voice given any more instructions, Seer Mann?”

Seer Thallema Mann pulled her hood back, regarding him coolly with her cracked yellow eyes. “No,” she said. “It sleeps.”

“And do you have any visions from Ziest to assist us, milady?” Useless, these priests were. Thule and Ziest had fallen without so much as a whimper.

The Seer licked her scarred lips. “All I can see is death and fire.”

“In which case we move away from the potential conflagration.” Ellakin Sirida paced to the command center, nodding at Wootis to give the orders to the rest of the Imperial fleet. “To the coordinates I specified.”

The bloated thing that lived in a pit near the ship's hyperdrive core was a relic from another time. If the Emperor’s Voice had run out of words at last, perhaps their people would finally be free.

And what are we supposed to do then? Admiral Sirida had no answers. Freedom always came at a cost—and the price was usually tearing half of what they had gained to pieces.

XXX

The camp looked as if it had been hit by a hurricane. Debris and some docking lights illuminated the perimeter, and the roar of grounded shuttles and the fighters blocking them deafened the air. The Mandalorian ships that hadn't made it back to the Aleema sat in the half-blasted clearing with their turbines churning, while above in the sky, Republic aurek and grounder snubfighters flew in a low dragnet, guns primed. Above the fighters, against the twinkling stars of the night sky, hung at least two gunships, prepped to give fire to anyone fool enough to run their blockade.

It was, Carth thought, only a matter of time before someone got cocky and everything started to burn. They were the last sentients left walking around. The rest had scattered into the forest--those who were able--or gone with the Mandalorians.

The Mandalorian shuttles had taken the, worst injured and the most helpless. Carth smiled a little, thinking about how Canderous would grumble at that, but still do the right thing.

You're softer than you look, Ordo.

Three years ago, when they'd loaded into the Hawk, Carth had never imagined he'd give a damn about an aging Mandalorian mercenary, or a Wookiee, or the fate of the Imps he'd been fighting for years. But things… things changed.

Zaalbar. Carth’s head turned in the direction of his friend, toward the Dark Temple, its main doors still closed and dead. Zaalbar had taken some supplies into the jungle below the cliffs, as well as the Wookiees and a few non-Wookiee survivors who wanted to stay. Goodbye, old friend. For now.

“Dad?” His son came down the gangway of the Hawk, dressed again in a ragged mechanic's coverall. Goggles covered his eyes. “They here yet?”

“Oh, no.” Carth smiled at his son, managing to keep calm by the skin of his teeth. “You’re not
coming. The High Admiral asked Sheris and me to come alone.”

“No way.” His son shook his head. “You know it's a trap, right?”

“Sure, but I…” Carth took in his son’s yellow-eyed glare. “I don't want them to get the wrong idea.” *I think I can talk us out of it.*

“What the frack wrong idea is that?” Dustil scoffed. “That I'm still Darth Malak? Maybe that's the right idea. They won't mess with you if I'm there.”

“We don't want to antagonize them. They're not the enemy, remember?” *I want you safe.*

Above their heads—above the clouds covering most of the sky, a Republic armada of more than a hundred ships had gathered—effectively forming a blockade between the planet and the Sith and Mandalorian fleets—as well as between their ships and the hyperspace jump points out of the system. Now, as Carth watched, a set of landing lights sparked and flared, and the shuttle Rensha had sent for them banked down through the clear night sky.

“I’ve got goggles on, see?” His son cracked a smile.

“Thank you for changing out of the armor,” Sheris emerged from the *Hawk* with more armor on, cadged from somewhere in their stores. She looked both ridiculous and terrifying. Carth was no expert, but the meter-long pointed epaulets she wore didn’t seem practical. His wife would have never worn anything--

“You're welcome,” Dustil scoffed. “Are you trying to pretend to be her?”

“No.” Sheris shook her head. “I’ll present myself as a Revan pretender. Whether that fools them or not…” her voice trailed off. “I’m not sure what awaits us. It could be an ambush.”

“In which case you’ll need me,” Dustil snapped. “Or Father will.”

“If you're not going back to the *Aleema*, I want you to go with them--Polla and Seiran.” Carth patted the side of *Hawk*'s blue-painted hull. For now, the *Hawk* was grounded like the rest of the Mandalorian shuttles.

*For now.* Carth had no doubt he could run the blockade in the *Hawk*—probably Polla Organa could too—but even if they got free, that would still leave the rest, leave the Imperial Fleet cloaked in the skies above, and leave the Mandalorian fleet with a target on their backs.

“Carth.” As if he’d summoned her, Polla Organa appeared, dropping down from an access hatch under the *Hawk*'s belly. “Flight checks are gold. Whatever Rulan did worked. Her systems are still clean. I'll keep her manual just in case, but she should be fine to rub when you get back.”

“And the T3 sounds like Mission again.” Seiran appeared behind his wife, dropping to ground with a hydrospanner in his hand. “We’ve still got the restraining bolt on, but she’s yelling for you guys.”

A blinking set of lights above in the sky told Carth they were out of time. Their shuttle escort was incoming.

“There’s no time. Tell her--” Carth felt his throat choke, more tears he hadn’t had time to shed for Revan starting to blur his vision. “Tell her I’m sorry,” he said. “Soon as things… soon as I can, I’ll see her again.”

“She’s asking for him, too. Dustil…?” Polla raised both eyebrows, not just one. “You coming with
“No, I’m going with my father.” Dustil shrugged. “And Lady Darkstar.” He rolled his eyes.

“No.” Sheris crossed her arms. “You’re not. Go with Polla and Seiran for now.”

Behind, the shuttle approached, blinking its final landing checks, flanked by two snubs. It was an officer’s transport carrier. Heavily armored with no cannon of its own. So they can shoot us out of the sky?

“Blah, blah, blah,” Dustil folded his arms, raising his voice to be heard as the three ships landed in front of them. “No, Lady Sheris.”

“Just Sheris,” she corrected. “And you aren't coming.”

“Oh, yeah? None of you can stop me.”

My son looks like a Sith Lord and acts like a spoiled kid. If only he was a spoiled kid. If only they could make it through this… then Carth would spoil him rotten until they were both old and gray.

“Your presence will only confuse things.” Sheris turned to Carth. “You tell him.”

Damned if Carth wanted to agree with the woman who'd taken his wife's body and stashed it away on this blasted planet, but she was right. “Dustil--”

“You're taking her side? Really?”

“It's not a matter of sides!”

Sheris scowled. “If Rensha means us harm, your presence won't stop them. But they may see you as hostile. If there are other Force-users on that ship, they will treat you with suspicion--”

“You can't tell if they've got Jedi up there?” Dustil scoffed. “Really?”

“What I sense is confusion. Perhaps the planet is clouding my perception--”

“Well, I sense someone. Someone strong. Up there.”

Her voice sharpened. “Oh?”

“I think they're hiding, but every once in a while, they slip up. Could be another Emperor body, or some asshole Jedi. Whoever it is, I'm not sending my father up there to face them alone.”

“You sense a Force user? You're sure?”

“You don't?” he scoffed.

“I… no.” The oval of her face was a blank moon, her certainty and assurance melting away like an illusion. Sheris shook her head, lips moving. Muttering to herself. She kept doing that. Not for the first time, Carth had to wonder if she was cracked.

Dustil rolled his eyes. “See, Dad? You need me.”

Carth wasn't sure he was wrong.

Together, they watched as the shuttle settled on Kaas soil, hiss of the stabilizers sending up a mist.
of steam and dust. The landing ramp lowered. Armored feet clattered down; a full squadron of shock troops with a uniformed officer. With her hair tucked under a cap and her face half in shadow, it took Carth a second to recognize the woman in admiral's gray who led them.

“Rew!” He stepped forward.

“Admiral Onasi?” The frost in her voice told Carth familiarity had been a mistake. “And Lady Darkstar.” Click as the dozen rifles trained on them. “You're to come with us, now.”

“Yeah, I….” Carth turned his head to see Sheris and his son still glaring at each other.

“Give us a sec,” his son added, sneering.

“A sec?” Rew Ekkumi's incredulous gasp sounded more like herself. “Dustil?”

“Oh, hey,” Carth's son raised his hand in a half-wave. “Captain Ekkumi. Hi.”

“Admiral Ekkumi,” Rew said flatly, recovering. Her hand was on the blaster at her hip. “We've been informed you are no longer possessed by Darth Malak.”

“Sure.” Dustil shrugged, shoving his hands into his pockets and slouching. “That’s right. Just me now, Admiral. Hey, is there a Jedi up there with your fleet or not? Lady Sheris and I have a bet.”

“Yes.” Admiral Ekkumi gestured to her men to stand aside, forming a line along the landing ramp.

“Which Jedi?” Sheris interrupted.

“The last one.” The admiral's voice dropped another ten degrees.

Sheris made a noise that could have been a laugh. “Fine.” Her head jerked in a nod. “Come. But be wary, Dustil.”

“I'm not--” damnit, Carth still wasn't sure.

“I need him,” Sheris snapped. “Please.”

“Okay.” From Rew's attitude, they could use the back-up.

“Leaving so fast, Captain?” Voice behind him.

“Yes.” He turned around to see Polla Organa, slouched beneath a wide hat that hid most of her features. She had his lucky blaster on her hip. He'd thought they might confiscate it, and he'd wanted them to have luck, in case--and for Dustil--

“Good luck,” she muttered, edging back from the troopers, like she didn't want them to see her face.

“Yeah.” Carth didn't think, he just turned and grabbed her in a hug. For a second Polla froze, but then he felt her arms lock around his waist. The pointed chin under the hat tilted up. Her teeth glinted, fake green eyes only a glimmer. “Be careful--” he whispered the rest in her ear, pushing the hat to the side to do so.

“I will. Um, you too.” Her hand came up around his neck. Their faces were close. She planted a kiss on the side of his lips.

He blinked. “I… uh--”

“We will see you soon,” Sheris added stiffly, somewhere behind him. “I will see you again, Poll--”

“Desiderata Star,” Polla Organa pulled away from Carth, her voice clipping like Revan’s. “Right. Yeah… about that… comm me when you get a chance? You still owe me credits.”

“Credits?” Sheris frowned as if she’d never heard of them.

The Deralian snorted. “Just comm me, okay? Soon.”

“Of course.” Sheris sounded puzzled. “I will comm you about the… credits.”

Xxx

The shuttle carrying Carth, Bossypants, and the kid left a tracer of fire in the sky, joining the glimmering lights overhead. In the end, it had all been too rushed for much of a goodbye. Bossypants had stiffly promised they would meet again soon, Carth had pulled Polla into a hug, she’d kissed him for luck, and the kid had sulked. She hadn't had a chance to tell the woman about her own kid.

Darth Bossypants had nearly blown her cover. Polla Organa was still supposed to be dead, after all—but someday she was gonna have to tell Darth Bossypants the kid was missing.

That wasn't gonna be fun.

Now, Polla let out a sigh and sat down on the ramp again. After a second, Seiran sat down too and put his arm around her. She rested her head against his shoulder. “How do I know you’re you?”

“What?” he chuckled.

“You could be the shapeshifter.” She hadn’t believed they could be real, but Rulan Prolik had shifted in front of her: from an Arkanian, to a Wookiee, and finally into a blue-skinned male Twi’lek. “Last I saw he was talking to Mission, but who knows? Everything else impossible has already happened today.”

Her husband’s lips nipped her ear. “I’m me,” he whispered. “Not the shapeshifter.”

Polla looked up at the sky. “I know we're supposed to wait until the Mandies get the all-clear, but we could run that blockade, I bet. Rogere swears he’s a hell of a co-pilot.”

“I’m a hell of a co-pilot. The Houck swore to me he’s a hell of a cook.”

“Well, assassins, they probably need to be flexible.”

“Bounty hunters.”

Oh, Sei. So naive. She snickered. “Right.”

“They’re not assassins, Pollie.”

“Sure,” she agreed. “Bounty hunters.” They’d offered her a job--just flying, they said, but she knew the game. It’d be a slippery slope. Break one law, then another. Next thing you know, you’re plugging sents in the back for credits.
Next thing you know, you're kissing a handsome pilot goodbye and sending him off with a fallen Jedi to save the galaxy--

Aba's gonna love that story the next time I feed him mashed peamato. Is he eating mashed peamato, yet? Ma said he's eating everything--

She reached for her husband's hand and brought it to her lips for a smack.

Seiran raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Pollie, I know we said we’d wait, but--”

“I know.” They were supposed to wait and get a ship of their own from Aemelie after the smoke cleared--give this one back to Onasi if--when--he came back. But... Polla looked up at the stars. Somewhere out there was home. Their son. “I don’t think Carth'd even be surprised if we just left.” Few hundred ships up there, there'd be a lot of confusion. Garbage scows. Shuttle traffic. It wouldn’t be hard to run the gauntlet--not once they cleared cannon range of those gunships, not once they got too close to the main fleet to kill.

“I know you’ll take care of her,” Carth had whispered in her ear. He’d meant the Hawk, or maybe the T3. “Take care of her for me.”

The ship or the T3? Hells, maybe he'd meant his wife, locked away in that damn tomb with poor Zaalbar playing kath guard hound.

“You want to just leave?” Seiran’s arm tightened around her. Polla’s gut still hurt from where she’d been stabbed with a fracking tree. Seiran’s leg would be no good for another month. Spending a week in hyperspace running to the Outliers and home would be a lot smarter than sticking around here to see if the Sith, Mandalorians, and Republic forces were gonna kill each other or play nice.

Polla had never expected to actually score the Ebon Hawk. But... here it was. And there, above, open sky. Free space.

“I don’t know.” Polla took a deep breath. The other grounded ships whined around them, like racing hessi barely leashed. “They haven't shot down any other convoys--just forced 'em down again...”

Seiran stared at her for a long minute, then nodded. “Want to see how things look from the sky?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

XXX

There was a full-ranking honor guard in the Great Hunt's hangar bay. Revan knew it didn't mean anything. There were still probably cloaked snipers set along the beams of the vaulted walls, and all the troops surrounding them probably had orders to shoot on command; but for a moment the sheer pomp reminded her all too poignantly of their first large-scale victory. When she'd won control of the Hapes System, Admiral Dodonna had greeted them in a hangar like this, with wreaths of leaves from her homeworld, with five hundred hand-picked heroes snapping to salute as she and Malak walked by--

You miss leaving your mark, Red. His voice, gentle and teasing.

I miss... hope. Here it was, bubbling like a spring inside her. The Sleepers had dropped off all planetary scans within hours of the Fragment's imprisonment. The Emperor was already weakened, and when Revan retrieved the box from Nar Shaddaa--
“There.” Dustil Onasi's breath was a faint hiss in her ear--almost in passing as his stride lengthened suddenly, stepping in front of his father as if to shield the man. “Your Force user's right up ahead--right there.”

Revan sensed nothing.

In front of them, High Admiral Rensha stood alone--but then two lines of soldiers stepped aside to reveal a white-haired woman, hair in two long braids hanging over her shoulders, flanked by two Echani sword dancers with faces as remote and beautiful as ice.

The woman with the braids was beautiful too. And familiar. Of course, familiar.

“Master Atris,” Revan stopped before her, leaving Carth and his son to fumble awkwardly between acknowledging the Jedi and the High Admiral.

Master Atris's eyes widened. “Padawan Sheris. What a pleasant surprise.”

Her hair was in two braids hanging over her shoulders. Revan blinked slowly, raising her mental shields as quickly as possible. We are all creatures of habit and vanity. I miss my braids. She was too stubborn to give hers up.

“But you had my name, Master... Atris. I was not expecting you, either.”

Fragments of things the Fragment had said danced in her mind. Revelatory things.

Vima Sunrider had wanted Revan’s own body for herself, once. Cheated of that prize, she had found another.

“It seems we are both surprised,” the woman smiled, her voice dripping with spite. “Here at the end of all things. Did Revan send you in her stead, padawan?”

I was a padawan, Sheris whispered faintly. Long ago. But she is mocking you.

“Revan Starfire is gone,” Revan announced, glibly. Loudly, so that Rensha could hear it. And then, behind Rensha, more old friends. Sand and Cein. Holograms--too cowardly to stand before her themselves. “I’m sorry to report.” She attempted a giggle and almost immediately regretted it, nearly hearing Malak's mental groan in her head. “I hope you weren't expecting me to be her.”

Don’t overplay this, Malak warned.

“How?” The white-haired woman lifted an eyebrow. “Revan Starfire survived so much. How did she die?”

Revan turned to address the higher-ranked admiral instead of her old master. “Her ship crashed into a sun.”

“Atris?” Rensha's voice was sharp, but Revan did not turn to look at her, keeping her eyes on the woman who had once been her master. “Is that true?”

“I sense no trace of falsehood. It... could be.” And her uncertainty could be false.

Was Revan believed? To ease her discomfiture, she giggled again.

Overdoing it, Red.

If that is Vima Sunrider, she knows exactly what we are and it does not matter.

“It's true,” Carth mumbled, sounding like it wasn’t.

“The man is lying.” Atris’s voice sounded amused.

Stars, Revan had not asked for his help.

You should have anticipated he would try, Sheris chided.

Technically, what Revan said had been true. The ship with David Arkan in it had belonged to the Fragment. A Pinion from the Aleema, Sinae had said Revan had destroyed. And it had crashed into a sun.

“I deceived Onasi,” Revan added, coolly. She had. Several times, about many things, mostly with assurances about his wife--when she had no proof.

“What?” She felt Carth's head turn toward her. Revan kept her eyes fixed straight ahead.

“How did you convince Revan to fly into a sun?” Master Atris’s voice was as cool as a frozen lake.

“I did not.” Revan shrugged. At her side, Onasi stood frozen. His son looked confused, hand slipping to the pocket of his coveralls, presumably to where his lightsaber lurked. They had not been searched for weapons, which spoke to Rensha's pride. Dodonna would have been smarter.

Carth’s son could be a problem.

Mal?

I can try. The brat’s stronger than he has any right to be.

Revan took a breath. “I convinced Revan to allow us to put her in stasis. A carbonite frame.”

“And?” Vima’s smile was wrong on Atris’s face. She made the delicate features sharper, older, predatory.

“I gave the frame to an associate of mine. Loyal, of course.” Also true. Zaalbar and Rogere had carried the burden well.

Carth shot her a puzzled glance.

You could do this later. Why do it in front of him? Sheris. Perpetually confused. We need him to take us to Nar Shaddaa!

I have my reasons. She needed loyalty. His would always belong to another... but ultimately to the Republic. She needed him elsewhere. Not a prisoner on this ship--not with Sunrider--

Sunrider changed everything. The woman was another plague, perhaps a nascent Emperor herself. And technically, Sheris Loran and Carth Onasi were both war criminals. The Republic Fleet was no soft Jedi Council. If Sunrider decided to dispose or imprison Onasi, he could hardly find the box on Nar Shaddaa. And Revan could not leave to look for it herself--not until she had dealt with her old master--

Her old master who knew perfectly well what Revan had become. Her old master would not let Revan leave. Except under her own control.
The Telosian Admiral who had escorted them from Kaas cleared her throat. “And?” the woman's voice was too sharp. “How did the real Revan end up in a sun?”

Revan shrugged. “Sabotage, perhaps?”

“No.” Carth's interruption was softer than she liked. But pained, as if he believed. “No. You couldn’t. T-there wasn’t time. Why--?” And then he hesitated, she felt him hesitate. Did he understand? Had she given him enough to be loyal before?

Before, in the tombs, she had felt they'd reached an understanding. He liked my tears, Sheris whispered, almost smug. He wanted to save us.

“To stop the Emperor I would sacrifice anyone,” Revan snapped. Her eyes met Vima's, saw the cold amusement there.

Carth Onasi’s voice was quietly stubborn, behind her. “No. You said you would take care of her.”

“I have.” His pain was overwhelming. She had not anticipated feeling it, feeling the shock of tears again forming in the corners of her eyes, feeling the ache of a loss that rivaled her own. The loss could not be feigned, but would he see?

His son was slower to react, looking between them, confused, like a lost nerf calf. “Wait,” he said. “You killed her? You actually killed her? No way! There wasn’t time!”

“Not directly. Dustil. Have you ever played three-cup pibbittch?” She forced another giggle, feeling like a HoloNet villain.

Her old master smiled and Revan felt that sick surge of pride to have pleased her--followed by doubts, shame, fear that it was all a trick--I don’t want to please her. I need her to believe.

She’s probing your mind. Malak’s voice. I don’t remember Vima being this strong before--

She had not been. Then stop her. Shield me.

Revan’s hand went to her belt, to the saber Sinae had been kind enough to return--just in time.

Father and son fired nearly simultaneously. The first bolt went wild, but she barely deflected the second, sending it back dangerously close to the pack of Republic officers she did not want dead. Revan took a step to the side--just in time to nearly buckle under the Onasi boy’s Force leap; the weight of his single blade bearing down upon her double, trying to reach the center of her grip as she twisted her edge--

“Dustil!” The father called out sharply. Real panic in his voice. His shot had been the one that had missed. Now, Red.

Revan retracted the blade instantly, leaving the boy's blow to bounce off Malak’s Force shielding as she rolled away, settling halfway down the hall, stepping back quickly behind a pillar. Her heart pounded in her chest. She felt naked and exposed. More vulnerable than she’d been in an age. The terentatek had been sport. Tenebrae’s guards had been nothing. They had not wanted her dead.
Sport? That terentatek almost killed us.

Silence, Sheris!

“Guards!” Rensha called out—as if they could be a match for the younger Onasi. “Prepare to vent the bays.”

Revan’s head turned back to the crowd of Fleet officers. All pulling on enviromasks. With a jolt she noted their boots. Not dress regulation. Magnetized. Heavy plated. *I should have noticed that before!*

*Would it have made a difference, Red?*

“*Wait.*” She didn’t have to feign the quaver in her voice. When Revan stepped out from behind the column, she noted that Vima was the only one not wearing a mask. The woman stretched Master Atris’s mouth in a smile. “*Wait!*” She called out again, staring at Captain Onasi, whose blaster was leveled at her, whose son stood behind him, a black wall of Force, powerful enough to shake a ship in orbit. The expression on his face—did he truly believe or not? Did it matter in this moment? “Let them go,” she commanded—

*Sheris would never command—*

*I would not give an admiral orders, not without my lord’s direction—*

“Let them go,” Revan ordered again. *Does Carth understand?* The man was an excellent shot. His son’s strength rivalled Malak’s. If they had truly wanted to end her, she would be dead. “Captain Onasi’s reaction is understandable. He loved his wife.”

“Carth…” The dark-haired woman stepped forward. Admiral’s bars. Telosian accent. *I remember Ekkumi,* Malak whispered. Another one of Karath’s soldiers. *She thinks she’s in love with him.* That was obvious and tired.

“Rew.” Carth seemed to notice her again, as if for the first time. “I….”

“Dad?” The boy’s voice trailed off, the darkness around him fading. “You want me to kill Sheris for you or not?”

Carth’s eyes met hers. He blinked twice. The nod was nearly imperceptible, but still an unnecessary risk. “*Not.*” He swallowed. “*Not here,* Dustil. We need to… *we* need to go.”

“Goodbye, Admiral.” Revan gave him a short bow, the kind the Jedi had once used with Fleet commanders in the early days of the war.

“Carth,” the dark-haired woman repeated. Softer this time. “You can’t leave, I’m afraid. I have orders to keep you in custody.”

“No.” He drew his blaster again, shaking his head and stepping back. “*Not today, Rew.*” The red circle from one of the sniper’s sights painted his face like blood, but his stance didn’t waver. “*I’ve delivered your Sith prisoner. Consider her a gift. My son and I… we’ll be going.*”

Revan glanced down without surprise to see one of the circles planted over her own heart. She would have to commend those snipers later for their restraint—if it lasted.

“You defected to the Imperials, Onasi. The Sith Emperor calls you High Admiral of his Fleet.”
Rensha sounded impatient. “From the codes you sent, I expected a surrender.”

“Things change.” Carth was looking anywhere but at Revan now. “My fleet has orders to fire on yours if we're not back on the planet within the hour--”

“He's lying,” Atris said sharply.

“Am I? Can you risk it?” The man didn't blink, and Revan had to admire his courage. “I'm also a Mandalorian citizen. The Aleema's out there, too, and--”

The Force was with them. It had been with her so much of her life that Revan no longer questioned its whimsy. One of the maintenance airlocks blew open. A humanoid figure in beskar dropped down. Then another. And another. An entire battalion.

As if proof that the Force also had a curious sense of humor, one of the largest warriors wore Revan's mask.

*Of course. Ordo would not leave this to his lackies.*

A sickening crunch and a thud from behind caused Revan to turn her head. One of the snipers had fallen from his position. Or been pushed.

“S'cuy!” a feminine voice rang out from the scaffolds above. “We're clear, Father!”

“Good.” Canderous Ordo nodded. “We're taking Onasi,” he barked at High Admiral Rensha. “And the kid.” His eyes rested on Revan for less than a second before looking away. “You can keep the nastaar. She's your problem.”

*Nastaar. Destroyer.* Mandalorians were too literal.

“Commander Q'ro and his men?” Vima Sunrider colored Atris's voice with an amusement it had never held in life. The two Echani flanking her looked as blank as plates.

“Stuffed in a supply closet. Alive.” The Mandalorian hoisted his repeater, pulling the auto-lock back. “This is not a season for war. We’re here for what's ours. My daughter. Onasi. The kid.” His visored face nodded at Carth. “Promised I'd fetch you.”

“She… you didn't have to.” Carth Onasi looked rattled. “I told her you wouldn't.”

“Hold.” The High Admiral commanded her honor guard. “For now.”

“Smart,” Canderous Ordo grunted. “Milli! Find us a shuttle!”

“You troch can keep the one we took here,” the armored figures at his right said. “It was not much to begin with.”

“This one.” Ordo's daughter called out. She descended on jetpacks, landing on the craft from which they had so recently departed. She was blonde and young, with a prosthetic arm already. Her face was bruised from a recent tussle. “Thick plates, and the base is wide enough to add cannon, I think.”

“A good choice,” Atris's voice said. Smugly.

*I sense confusion,* Sheris whispered. *She does not know what to make of us.*

*Strange, since she made us for some reason.*
She does not expect me. Malak seemed sure.

The crowd was still as the grave as Millifar walked to them, saluting her father as if they had just finished a dance upon the training ground.

“This is not an act of war,” Rensha said. “Yet. But you skirt dangerously close. What do you want, Mandalorian?”

“I want my people outta here.” Canderous was a blunt block of beskar, striding forward. “And to leave this hu'tuun carcass of a planet for your Republic infii to pick at in peace. Clean up the rest of your mess, lift the blockade from my ships….” He shrugged, making a show of checking his repeater. “If you'd rather have a fight, I figure we can take about half your fleet while you're electing a new High Admiral, or however you do.”

“Is that a threat?” The Trandoshan's lip curled.


“On the planet.” Carth almost sounded amused.

“Right. Harm the planet and we'll be back,” Canderous added. “Any questions?”

“None for you--” Admiral Rensha was starting at Sheris. “However, if you think the Republic Navy is going to roll over on our backs and allow Mandalorians to make off with the Imperial Fleet--”

“They?” Canderous Ordo snorted. “I'd just as soon blood my boys on what's left of them, except it'd be too easy. You can have the Sith ships--we just want what is ours.”

“Let the Mando'ade go in peace,” Master Atris interrupted. “On this day they are not the enemy.”

“Our war will not come today,” Admiral Rensha echoed. “You may go, General Ordo.”

Vima's subtle, Revan noted. But she has her hooks in Rensha, probably in every officer on this ship.

Be careful, Red.

“High Admiral? There's a ship making a run on the blockade now….” One of Rew's officers looked up from her tablet. “We have the standard quad in pursuit, but they've broken through the line. Do you want to launch another squadron?”

Rensha's snout curled as her own eyelids filmed obviously checking her optical implant for confirmation. “The Blue Ghost? Strange. It looks like the Ebon Hawk.”

“If that is the Hawk, did another ship of Revan's fell into a sun?” Atris murmured.

“Obviously.” Revan shrugged.

“And it's...it's gone, sir.” The lieutenant blinked. “That was--fast.”

Carth's eyes met Revan's before she could look away.

She forced another giggle.

Stop doing that, Sheris chided her. It's not working.
They had not disarmed them or clapped a Force collar on Revan yet. Hope. Strange emotion.

“You have my word.” Carth’s voice was steady. “The people on this planet need help, not war. Let us go... and I’ll order the Imperial Command to stand down. Begin terms for surrender. In a year these worlds could be protectorates of the Republic. Think of the message that would send.”

There was a long pause. In it, Carth looked at Revan again. She could not risk a nod of approval. It will take more than a year. Can you still speak to the boy? she asked Malak.

*If I could, he would not have nearly killed you.*

*Carth knows what to do.* Sheris, at least seemed sure. The little fool.

“Well?” Rensha turned to Atris.

“I sense no falsehood.” The master shrugged. “They have nothing. Unless the Mando’ade back the Imperials--”

“Not unless you shoot first.” The blonde girl spoke out of turn, but her father did not object.

*He’s soft with her.* The Fett Mand’alor of Lin had never been so soft.


The blonde tilted her head, frowning. “Millifar. Who are you?”

“Admiral Onasi’s son. Dustil.” The bluster in his voice would have been comical under different circumstances. “Jin of Lin’s *friend.* Dustil.”

“Oh!” She looked startled. “*That* Dustil! You’re not dead.”

“Neither are you.”

The girl’s smile spoke to her naivety. “Is Mekel with--”

“Yammer about Jin later,” Canderous snapped. “We need to go. Now.”

*Stay very quiet,* Malak murmured. *Sunrider’s probing us again.*

*Us.* Weak Sheris’s eyes pricked again with a sudden surge of emotion. *We are not alone. I am not alone. This is just one more battle. We will find out way out*--

*Quiet,* Malak chided. *You know better. She senses something.*

Revan did know. She let her eyes rest on Master Atris and her Echani bodyguards as the Mandalorians made their way to the shuttle, with Carth Onasi and his sullen son. Master Atris stared back at Revan steadily. Her eyes were an icy blue-gray. Untouched by the dark.

Perhaps she still believed herself a disciple of the light.

Or, perhaps Nomi Sunrider of old had learned more from the cracked mind of Aleema Keto than the lost art of Battle Meditation. *Illusions. For all I know half the crew sees something else here entirely*--

Revan let her eyes drop meekly to the durasteel plates of the floor. Sheris would have done that.
I would never have looked at her at all. What if she tricked me?

She does not need to look at you for her tricks.

The shuttle's engines roared. Revan felt the sparks depart, taking hope along. The T3 had been restored. It claimed to know the location of the box. Carth Onasi was an honorable man. She hoped she had earned his trust—that he understood what was at stake—that he would know where to find Polla Organa and his stolen ship—

She had hope.

We will find a way to reach them to guide them--

Careful, Red.

“Leave us,” High Admiral Racharn said abruptly to her honor guard.

Revan kept her eyes on the floor, waiting. Something shivered in the Force. Her own nerves. A premonition of danger. Her old master, restored to youth and her full power. How was it possible? She did not remember Atris being as strong as the woman she sensed now.

The stomp of mag boots marked the guard's departure. The blast doors slid closed, leaving only Rensha and her officers--in hologram and flesh.

Atris and the two white-haired Echani walked slowly to a raised dais opposite the Fleet commanders. As if she controlled the game.

“We know,” Admiral Rensha hissed. “We know what you are: Revan’s mind in her clone's body.” Her taloned head turned toward Atris's body. “Is she lying about the other one being destroyed?”

“I sense no deception in her words. But that means nothing.” Her thin lips smiled. “Revan will not answer me with words that do not hold truth. Revan's ship went into a sun. Revan is gone. Those are truths. But is this her end?”

Revan shrugged, letting a trace of insolence that would make the Fragment proud color her words. “Some say there is no death, only the Force.” She told them who I am? Revan had not expected that. The fantasy of walking into Sheris's life, taking Korrie to a faraway place, made its final retreat, leaving the ice of vacuum in its place.

We could still run. Fool Sheris was trying to be brave. That ship over there. It's the closest. The shields are still down from the Mandalorian departure--

It won't work. Revan's thought mixed with Malak's, both of them agreeing. Vima could stop us with a thought. She's powerful. She should not be this powerful--

“The last Mandalorian shuttles are departing the planet's surface. An Imperial fleet of eight capitals and their supply ships have uncloaked around Dromund Siik, the planet closest to the sun.” The lieutenant paused. “The Imperials… they are requesting an honorable surrender.”

This is it, Revan thought. No matter what else, I've won.

“Atris?” Rensha turned to her Jedi advisor. Her deference made Revan's hackles rise-- she had not expected submissiveness, although if Vima's hooks were in the Trandoshan's mind--

They most definitely are.
I've almost won, she amended. There is still Vima.

“One battle is done,” Atris murmured.

“The unmanned fleet? Her ghost ships?” Rensha's tongue flicked in and out.

“Still no sign, sir. The Merchant’s guilds are reporting clear hyperlanes.”

“As well as some new hyperlanes.” Admiral Rensha's tongue flickered in and out. “Your Sleeper Fleet gave us that, Revan.”

Never mine. I was to be theirs. For some reason, Revan shivered and Atris's face smiled.

Had Vima taken Atris unawares, as she must have done Sheris?

No! I wanted your memories, Sheris whispered. I took them willingly. I wanted to lose myself. I wanted Malak to love me--

I did before. His voice was soft, a breath between them. You did not have to change, Sheris--

Shut up. Both of you. Senseless drivel. Empty promises. The smuggler had taken the ship and the droid. Captain Onasi would find them. They would only need one sentient possessed by the Emperor to seal his fate in the box. The droid would know how--the droid had to know--had to be uncorrupted--

So many variables, all beyond her control.

“And so, here we are. At the end of all things.” Master Atris's voice murmured, so soft Revan thought the woman was in her head. But then she saw the dust motes frozen in the air, the Doshan admiral frozen in mid-command... and Admiral Ekkumi's hand on her holstered blaster, the gun half of it out already, the beads of sweat frozen on the woman's brow.

“Is Admiral Ekkumi about to shoot me?”

“The calibration is set for a strong Jedi. For your true body. She asked my advice on the settings it would take to kill a Jedi, once.” That dry amusement. “The blast would certainly kill you....” Atris's brow furrowed in thought. “But so would the boy's attack, earlier--yet here you stand.”

“Perhaps I've learned something.” Revan felt her voice slide into the old bitterness. “Here at the end of all things.”

Her master's new face smiled. “Did you mean to kill me at Malachor? So many truths between us--but that one I have never known.”

“No. I needed your battle meditation to boost the signal so the others would feel the planet burn. Orbits were carefully calibrated so that you and Davad and Meetra would live.”

“And my son?” Impossible to tell from that voice if she'd cared for the boy--for any of them--at all.

“You were a fool to bring Oerin into battle.” Had Revan known the boy would be there? She could not remember.

“Perhaps we are all fools when it comes to our children. Where is your son now?” That tone of voice made Revan's spine prickle. “Davad went above me. The Blades received an assignment to retrieve him, but Malachor was never found. The Blade assigned vanished.”
“Which Blade?”

“Three. Of Acknahar’tah.”

One of the oldest lines. Revan did not remember Three. The Blades had been Vima's—and then Davad's, she had only moved them across the board--

Mal’s safe, Red.

Revan realized her flesh hand was clenched, nails biting into her palm. “I’m sorry the Fragment killed Davad. He could have been useful--”

“There is always another.” Her smug tone grated. “Or a replacement. But would you have used Arkan?” The woman's brows lifted. At her side, her Echani handmaidens were carved from ice. “Allowed my Darth Nihilus to consume the Force just to kill one man?”

“The Emperor is more than one man. You hated him as much as I did.”

Yes, Malak muttered in her mind. Destroying the Force would have ended everything. No more monsters. It would have ended her. And us.

No, breathed Sheris. The Force is in everything. If you take that light away from the galaxy what remains?

“I don’t know. The choice was taken from me. Arkan was a weapon that I could have used. Revan never gave me the chance.”

“You were my favorite weapon,” Vima lied, voice soothing and soft. “Always.”

“I used to wonder if my childhood was a dream, if you'd made me in a lab.”

“No.” Her former master shook her head. “I found you. And then made sure he did.”

“Do you have more of me waiting in the wings? Or more of you--?”

“One of me. I left myself in a weaker vessel even than you. A shadow no one will see… but will he be loyal?” Vima shrugged. “As loyal as all of my children, I suppose. Your betrayal was magnificent. You made me stronger, even as you transformed yourself.”

“I sent you a message. With my HK. Did you receive it?”

“No. What did it say?”

Perhaps the droid had lost itself on Malachor V, where Revan had expected Davad to be. It would have been wiser to send HK-47 to their son, to keep him safe, but Revan had worried the machine would only attract attention.

“Nothing important. Not now.” She forced herself to meet those colorless eyes. “I've won.”

“So much that you are about to be assassinated by one of your former commanders.”

“I don't remember her.”

We sent her wing to hold the supply depot on Dxun. Air support. We left them. Ekkumi limped back to Iziz with an empty tank of fuel and a dying crew. Those gas canisters full of--
Oh. Revan remembered that. Xoxon gas. From the Stereb spires.

“Ulic Qel-Droma had no memory of Corporal Hoggin, but the man's blaster still found its mark.”

“Were you there?” Revan realized she'd put her hands carefully behind her back, folding the golden one over the flesh just like they were back on Dantooine, and she was listening carefully to one of Vima's tales. “When Ulic died? Which… which one of you was there?”

“Both. Nomi knew it would come to pass. Vima required the lesson.”

_The lesson._ Perhaps it had been kinder for Revan, never knowing how her parents met their fate--or whose hand guided the blade.

_I read it was an ice storm, _sniveling Sheris broke in.

_I never knew. Perhaps it was. The Fragment asked me about them once, I never had the chance to say what I knew--I knew so little._

“Is my lesson over? Are you going to end this by telling me to accept my fate? Another mindwipe? Drop me into a sun?” Her teeth worried the side of her cheek until Revan tasted blood. Pain was a laughable defense against Vima's level of power, but it was something she could do.

“Don't disappoint me now. You've come farther than I ever could have hoped.” Vima's voice shifted, becoming silken, almost seductive. “Did you try to open the tomb in this body?”

Force stasis was fickle. Its range was not infinite. Ten meters away in the hangar Revan stared at a command console. A tech was leaning over it, speaking animatedly into a console. As she watched, a map of the galaxy sprung up, surrounded in stars.

“Of course.” Guilt mixed with relief. “Did you?”

“I avoided the planet entirely.” Amusement in her voice. “Did she open her tomb?”

“No.” Revan forced herself to fake another one of Sheris's giggles, merely to annoy the old woman. “Would we be here if she had?”

“Perhaps. You resisted its call for years.”

“Nearly two years. It may have made me mad.” Something occurred to Revan. “Beya's betrayal--was that you?”

“No.” The old woman shook her head, chuckling softly. “One of the only moments in time when Vitiate and I were ever in accord was when we both tried to save your life.”

_And erase it. Reprogram me with a new one._ But the old anger was gone.

“Which one of you replaced me with her?”

“I did. To keep her hidden from Vitiate. But you came back faster than I had expected--and the Jedi had taken you too far from my side.” Her chuckle was wrong, coming from Atris's mouth. “I cannot control every piece on the board, my padawan, any more than you ever could.”

_I do not think she can read our thoughts_, Sheris whispered.

_I do not think she can, either._ Because a childish part of Revan she'd thought long buried was dwelling vindictively on Oerin and Davad's fates and imagining their agony. Not to mention young
Meetra--

*I am shielding you as much as I can. But when you reach out to her, Red--*

Was that a flicker of emotion on that too-beautiful countenance? A spark of real passion? Hate? Jealousy? Anger? Vima's inflections gave Atris's voice a raw edge. “The Deralian overlay was never meant to last, you know. I intended to incorporate you into us. Our shared experience into your own body--”

“That body--.” Revan tried not to shiver. Weak Sheris did not have the stomach for this. “The body's heart stopped. You'll never have it, now.”

“I am sure it did,” her master said. “Or you would not say so. Of course, hearts usually stop when they burn in suns. Nomi's did, too. Did your original body burn, Revan?”

“Always.” With a power she had once assumed to be hers.

Another low chuckle was Vima's response.

Revan walked over to Rew Ekkumi, loosening those stuff fingers from the grip of her disruptor pistol, pulling it out of the holster. Vima had not lied: the charge was illegally modded, set at ten times the lethal Human level.

The Fragment still would have survived the blast. But Revan would not.

“Ah,” Vima chuckled. “Changing your fate?”

“Did Ulic?” *Did he have the chance?*

“Ulic was consumed by guilt, by the shame of his actions. It made him soft.”

*Soft,* Revan thought, remembering Malak's madness. Her own.

*We are not soft now.* Sheris was surprisingly brave, with two Sith Lords supporting her.

“I suppose Atris's body is not invulnerable--” she leveled the pistol carefully, testing its weight.

The woman who could stop her with an eye-blink, blinked… but did not stop her. Her expression sharpened, seeming almost curious.

*Red? Is this a good idea?*

*She did this.* In that moment, she knew herself not to be Jedi Knight Revan, but the worst parts of them all. Malak's anger, her own ruthless pride, and Sheris's foolish romanticism--

“If you strike me down will you take my place in the war to come?” her old master whispered. “Do you think yourself capable, Revan?”

“I always was.” Malachor V, the Rakatan virus, the Star Forge. And then, a bitter thought; one that Revan hated her mind for recalling. The worst of all possible worlds. “Tenebrae was dying *already,* master. All we had to do was let his empire fall. But you gave him *me.*”

Vima shook her head. “If he fell, another would rise from the ash. The Sleepers and the Rakatan computer will make sure of it. Even now, how can you be sure you've won?”

Revan raised the pistol, leveling the barrel at the beautiful face, the frost-colored eyes. “I'm not.”
Vima Sunrider blinked, and--

Xxx

**One Week Later**

Xxx

*Atton* was his name now, the man kept saying. Well, Mister Atton had lost all of their credits on a bad hand of pazaak, and now Kore's stomach kept growling on the transport as he paced back and forth, trying to feel sick when the engines went whoosh and they came out of hyperspace for the last time before their destination.

They had left Peragus Station really fast, with Atton doing a lot of mumbling about bad dreams. Kore had wanted to go back to Deralia--or maybe to Coruscant, even, because he hadn't been able to send anything to Leeshy in a week. But last week she'd said it seemed pretty safe and they had a nice visitor with a manka cat from the Sith world of Drumming Case staying with them.

Drumming Case happened to be where his mothers had gone.

If he was with Leeshy he could ask the nice visitor if she'd seen them. It wasn't a question for an open comm.

Mothers. *Mother*. One of them was gone. Kore hadn't felt her die, but he just knew it.

*She's not dead.* Father’s voice was faint and distracted, like something else tugged at his Force harder than Kore. *I promise, Mal.*

*I know.* If she was dead, she'd be here. With Kore.

“Here, kid.” Atton tossed Kore a pack of quik-meet, which was supposed to taste like real meat. It didn't. “We'll eat better tomorrow. I have some contacts on the chivhole with more credits than sense. You ever been to the smuggler's moon before?”

“It's in Hutt Space.” Kore tried not to frown. “Of course not. Outside of Senate jurisdiction.”

“You'll love it, I promise.” Atton was always promising Kore would love things. But he hadn't loved firewhiskey or cigarras. Juma juice gave him a headache. And when Kore was about to try the glitterstim Father got really loud in his head and said “Under No Circumstances.” And, “Your Mother Would Be Furious.”

No one wanted that, so Kore said no thanks.

“Maybe the next time you play sabaac, I could help?” It was cooler than pazaak. You got to pick your bad guys. Kore thought he could beef them up with the Force, maybe. “Or swoops? You promised we could go to the swoop races--”

“Yeah, yeah.” Atton's hand shook a little as he reached for the flask in his shirt. His eyes were full of red veins. “Whatever you want, kid. Anything.”

The ship jolted suddenly. Someone else on the observation deck yelped.

“Please get to your seats,” one of the cruiser-ladies announced, tapping her mic. “Sorry, it's just a bit of spacelane ionization as we enter planetary orbit. Welcome to the Jewel of the Hutt Empire, the city planet of Nar Shaddaa.”
A/N three chapters to the end and an epilogue, I think… Next up: Well... what comes next? A bit of a time jump, in fact....

Thanks, as always, Ether, as always, for the wonderful beta and infinite patience. Any subsequent errors are mine. All mine. This version will no doubt be updated by one with fewer typ0s,
Revan awoke to darkness and a bone-breaking cold. Her limbs felt heavy and strange. She blinked but saw nothing. Her mouth tasted like grit.

The ground was shaking.

A warm hand closed on her arm. “Wake up.” The voice was male. Young, speaking accented Basic.

“Whahh—” she heard her voice crack.

"CONSCIOUSNESS RESTORED. REROUTING SYNAPTIC LINK—"

“Hurry,” the voice said. “Please. We need your help!”


Xxx

They stood alone, whispering like they were the only two people in the crowded room. “I said I wouldn't wait for you, beautiful, but—”

“Don't be stupid.” Revan took a deep breath. “Live, okay? Try not to be a Republic war criminal.”

Laughter and pain softened Carth's eyes. “You too.”

“I am a Republic war criminal.” She kissed him. One last time... maybe for the last time.

Her gaze met the Deralian’s, standing there with a carbonite ray in her hand. Their eyes met, but the smuggler looked away first. Polla Organa wasn’t gonna shoot her again. Not without a reason. That nickname, ‘Pollie.’ They’d always hated it, hadn’t they? Polla wouldn’t think Revan had the right to call her that—Revan herself didn’t think she had the right to call Polla that. Pollie. Pollie. Pollie. They’d hated it… and loved it, too. Revan said the name, the carbonite ray sparked —

—and then all light vanished.

Like nightfall on Hoth.

Xxx

“Hooowww—” how long?

The voice tugged at her arm. “@-#&@$- agshaha@&&#!”

They speak Ancient Sith in the future? “Eymmm—” I'm blind.

“Can you understand me?” The voice sounded terrified, now switching back to Basic. “I can’t understand you. They said you'd help!”
The world shook again. Revan became aware she was flat on her back. She made her mouth move again, still desperately blinking her eyes. “Hoooooww—” how long? How long is the future?

“*It might be centuries.*” Dar’s stare was unblinking. “I won’t lie to you. It might be centuries, but when it is safe, we will restore you.”

“And when you say, *we…*” Revan felt her mouth twist. “Who do you mean, exactly? You’ll be dead.” So would their son. So would everyone she knew.

A low whine caught her attention. “I will watch for you, Polla Revan,” Zaalbar declared. “And my cubs after me.”

*Wookiees lived for centuries. Maybe someday, Zaalbar would welcome her back.*

“*Hurry,*” the voice trembled. “*Please.*”

Agony spiked through Revan’s head, reminding her of the Force collar still embedded in her flesh. She clawed at it. Her hands were coated with a gritty substance that came off on her fingers. The air smelled dank. Revan reached out with a leaden arm and found a hand holding hers. Hairless, about the size of her own, probably five fingers. Not a Wookiee’s hand, then—but she heard a Wookiee—smelled one, maybe two. Not very far away.

“She must rush.” In Shyriiwook the words came out as a whimper. The literal translation meant ‘move like water.’ The growl was high-pitched. A cub, perhaps.

“*Zzzz—*” Her lips wouldn’t form Shyriiwook any more than Basic. “*Zaaalbbbuhh? Whyyyyr—*”

“Zaalbar of the Eiweorr branch sent me.” Not Zaalbar’s voice, that squeak of a growl. But he was known. *They’ve heard of Zaalbar in the future.*

{{STARFIRE UNIT FOUND}} Voice from her tomb, sounding close enough to be in her own head. {{COME}}

*Frack you,* she thought back. *Never.*

The hand tugged hers again, and Revan sat up, blinking hard as if that would make the world come back.

“*Eeyym bleyennd.*” Her voice was unsteady, rasping from a dry throat. *I’m blind. I can’t see—*”

“Oh. I-I don’t…” Her rescuer sounded confused. “*Aggeeawwwwrr?*”

“Lead her to the others!” The Wookiee’s bark was more assertive. “*Hurry!*”

“Get up.” A pause and then the voice repeated the command in Ancient Sith. “*Stand up. Rise, Lord Revan.*”

*Lord Revan*—familiar annoyance and shame at the title. Revan stood up easily, as if the stiffness in her limbs had been only an aberration. Hells, when she—when *Polla*—had learned about carbonite freezing in school, she’d learned that blindness could be a side effect of the process, sometimes permanent; along with muscle tremors, weakness, convulsions—
"Come on!" The hand grabbed Revan's again, tugging her forward.

Slowly, light filtered in; bright spaces among the dark. A spot paler than most drew her eye, and Revan squinted, stumbling, until the spot resolved into a cold-fuel lantern, its globe unmistakable atop the handle. Then the world shook again. The light blurred. She choked on dust, coughing.

"You have to help? Please!"

"Eym tryyingggg—" Something buzzed in Revan’s head, making her bones twitch.

"You have to help them!" The speaker’s face loomed into her vision abruptly. A narrow face. Frightened. Young. Barely more than a kid—

{{REROUTING—}}

"Stop—" the word came out clearly. Revan felt the Force surge, as if her own mind had finally mastered itself, restoring vision and sense like the wave of a hand.

Her eyes focused on a teenaged boy, fifteen or sixteen Standard. A layer of grit painted him gray, but he looked Human under the dust. Behind him was a Wookiee cub, half the kid's size—and probably twice his age.

"You have to help!" The Wookiee stepped forward, grabbing her other arm with his furry claw. "The others are trapped—we got through, but then the wall collapsed."

"The wall…. They still have walls in the future. Good. “How long…?” Her hand went to her neck and closed on the Force collar there. “I’m Revan,” she added.

The Wookiee cub blinked, lip curling in a snarl. He had a hairless patch around his neck as if he’d recently worn a collar. “We know."

"Right. Of course you do. How…” her voice trailed away as the raised dome in the room's center caught her attention.

{{COME}}

The voice in her head was coming from it.

The dome was a cylindrical bubble, crystalline, set astride a plinth and rising out of the stone floor. Revan knew it instantly. She took a step forward.

"No, this way." The Wookiee moaned. “Please.”

“It's in my tomb.” Revan shook free of the kids, kicking aside the remains of the carbonite frame. She brushed dust from Carth's old jacket, and blinked her eyes clear of grit.

{{COME}}

The Human boy said something. The Wookiee cub whined again they had to go. Their friends were trapped—and Revan felt that too, sparks of life close to them, and one almost out.

The world rocked and more dust came down from the ceiling. Revan walked forward. The light within the dome seemed to increase the closer she got.

The two kids yelling at her faded like ghosts.
Revan put her hands on the dome's surface. Smooth, save for the insets where her hands fit perfectly. The dome began to retract.

The body within might have been Human, or a red-skinned Sith. It might have been a man, or a woman, once. What remained was a husk of skin, wrinkled tight over bone. Revan had seen too many corpses to be shocked by death, but there were metal rods extending from the side of the tomb's inner wall into the curve of the skull and down the spine, a metal cap encasing the skull—the mouth was ajar, and the teeth—split and screaming—

She recoiled.

*It must have hurt. It will hurt—*

The next instant Revan wanted nothing more. Like lust—almost a need. The galaxy splayed on its back under her fingers, billions of tiny sparks all alive—

*All of those lives—even if my son is dead, my friends—their children, their children's children, all the lives I never had—I could see him—I could see them—*

And then her body vanished.

Instead of Korrie, she saw paths between the stars, a map of the galaxy… burning. Oddly beautiful in her mind’s eye. She rode the web to where the hyperlanes converged, to where a thousand eyes surveyed what they had wrought: a blistered planet, white caps of its poles aflame. Her Sleeper ships above, some reduced to circular spots of light; like tiny suns in their death-throes, exploding against a planet encircled with ice.

Her Sleepers were not sleeping. *I woke up and so did they. So beautiful.*

Other ships swam in the black, too; coming out of hyperspace dangerously close to that tell-tale fuzz of atmosphere. Fighters discharging proton auto-blasts like wasps, beams from the dreadnaughts' laser cannon, heavier pulses where ion torpedoes on both sides had hit their mark—

Revan felt a part of herself break off and die, caught in the invader’s vanguard. The rest of her surged forward, barreling into the enemy ships. Their lights winked out, some of them. Tiny lights. Tiny organic *insects* who dared question the work of their Awakened gods—she felt a part of her raise cloaking shields to hide, sinking into ragged gravity to pierce the underbelly of the invaders with a surprise attack—

And then Revan felt a part of her scream. Another fifteen of her died—caught in the organic’s trap of mines, with every sensor in range blinded.

Her prey had used the corpses of their own debris against her.

Her prey was cunning, but they were weak and they tired. Revan picked off a few stragglers easily; a listing capital cruiser and all of its fighters, a few sparking, orphaned snubs. Another command ship fled at her approach, accelerating into the planet's atmosphere. She felt a bright flash of joy, watching that one begin to burn and fall.

One invader was a behemoth, encased in a web of failing shields. A brutish hulk that carved a path for the weaker sparks. They surged around its wake, slicing through her assault patterns with angles bright as lasers.

A thousand eyes screamed as more died. Revan caught her breath, hatred still rising. So many Sleepers lost in battle, the rest enraged—
There was something about those attacking ships—

There are still class-seka dreadnaughts in the future. And aurek snubfighters. Mandalorian warbirds, the modified tank-gunners Aemelie always loved, and the plesh-gunships made by Kuat Driveyards for the Republic. Something about those ships, those attackers and their familiar ships—

Her attention buzzed.

No, not just the ships. The patterns.

More of her enemies rose from the planet; swarming down from the half-ruined orbital above; rising from the burning poles of the dying world—

And then Revan knew. They’re not the invaders. We are.

An ice world, burning. Not Hoth; there was a seacoast pattern beneath those clouds, patches of what could have been arable land through the smoke, the poisoned mists.

Could it be Arkania? Ruanis?

Or, it could be Hoth in the future—

And then she knew. Because Revan had seen this world before. Never in her own memory—only on newsvids and in dreams. As a child of seven from a life she couldn't remember. In her lover’s stories, in a hologram poster tacked above his son’s bunk in a Korriban dormitory. And the last time, the final time—from the eyes of a Sleeper scout, skimming beneath orbital defense shields like a stone across water.

Telos. That’s Telos. We are the Sleepers. I—I am the Sleepers. And we’re... I’m attacking Telos.

Horror engulfed her. They’re—I—I’m burning Telos.

Abruptly, her own world contracted to just her hand dangling into the tomb, clasping a metal spike. The metal was sharp scraping against her arm, cutting into her palm, but through it, Revan could see—

See Telos burn.

She did not want to see that, and so she left it behind.

See Korrie. He must be grown. He must be a man. He might be dead. But I could see his descendants, learn of his fate—

“Um, she’s glowing. What are we supposed to do now?”

“We need her help! Make her help us!” The Wookiee’s whimper turned into a growl. “Zaalbar needs you, Lord Polla Revan. You have to help us save him!”

Zaalbar? Revan's breath caught in her throat. But she couldn't move.

Light was brighter now. The kid was right—she was glowing. With a click the Force collar fell off of her neck and into the tomb, which seemed to dissolve under her feet when she looked at it too closely. Stars—planets—and there—her Sleeper ships, like fingers, clasped over the worlds they would remake as they wanted—
Beautiful. Her lips were wet. Her nose was bleeding. Salt and copper taste.

Beautiful? Like Telos? Nausea engulfed her, and she felt her body retch, vision returning like a saber in her guts: the shrunken corpse, the metal device of its torture warm in her hand. Her own blood—where the thing had made its mark, red against her skin, the stone and the metal—

"What's wrong with her?"

What's wrong with me? I did that. I did that to Telos—

{{RE-ESTABLISHING LINK. INITIALIZING NANOCYSTS. REBUILDING NEURAL NETWORK—}}

{{COME}} That ancient voice, echoing from the tomb itself. Kindly now, almost paternal.

A fracking lie.

Revan let go of the spike. Her still-bleeding hand brushed the side of the broken skull, unsurprised when it crumbled to dust beneath her fingers. Metal coils on the floor stirred, disrupting more of the remains. Separated from the wall and the body of its host, the metal thing in the tomb looked like a mechanical snake. The tail of it coiled, flexing, and reaching for her wounded hand. Pleasantly warm, vibrating against her skin.

Revan didn't want to let go of it—but she did—throwing it back against the tomb's wall. The thing, the… preserver… whimpered at her, raising its tail again, wavering more cautiously towards her, like a curious kath.

It can't take you unwilling. A dry whisper from her former self. She knew it was true.

The Force didn't so much rush back as increase, like its volume had been raised to a pitch as high as screams. The room snapped into sharper focus—even the parts behind her: the rubble-strewn floor, the battered walls, the beautiful tomb, and the two kids standing by the collapsed wall—

{{Come, Revan}} Softer now, that voice, as if the thing knew it had frightened her. A mere whisper, a breath. As kind as her own mother's arms.

"Hey! You can't just go in there! We need your help! Zaalbar's gonna die without you!"

"Zaalbar?" Revan turned around. Her hand felt cold and empty. Her arm ached where its barb had scratched her. She felt the tomb’s preserver cry out for her to come back. The two kids in front of her huddled like scared nerf calves. Covered in dust and terrified and desperate. Like the kids in the Taris Undercity. Or those Wookiee cubs in the slavers' pen on Manaan.

Wookiees look the same in the future.

Why the frack am I on Kaas? Must have been Dar's idea. Carth would never—Carth would never have stood for it.

Dar would have left Revan here for insurance. Not a trap. A gift. So beautiful. Dar had known that. Dar had always known how beautiful it was.

“Before you go in there you've got to help us!” The Human boy again. “I'm not strong enough to lift the stones and the others are trapped. Please! You have to help them!”
“Who?” Her voice seemed far away.

“The others.”

The other sparks fading. One of them was Zaalbar.

Before it crumbled to dust, that thing in the tomb had been screaming.

*That will be me.* Revan retched again, coughing up bile. Her head turned back toward the crystal shell, the soft nest, the dark whisper of approval, the metal preserver beckoning her home. Home to become—

—that withered corpse. That silent scream—

“Lord Revan!” The Human kid had grabbed her arm again, trying to pull her off the platform. “You have to help! They’re gonna die!”

The world shook again and Revan’s mind finally made sense of the sound.

*Thunder. They have bombs in the future.* This time the thought was laced with dark humor. “Who’s attacking us?”

It wasn’t the Sleepers.

“Some kind of defense system. It started when she blasted the doors open. You have to make it stop!”

“I did.” That was why she had gone into carbonite in the first place. “How long—how long did I stop them for?”

“Huh?” The kid blinked at her, as she followed him off the platform. The Wookiee cub whimpered. Neither of them were armed.

“How long… how long has it been?”

“Three—” the ground shook and erased the rest of the kid’s words, but Revan knew in her bones.

*Three hundred years. We held them off for three hundred years. Everyone I know is gone.*

“What of the Emperor?”

“One of his bodies came, but… h-he got crushed in the stairs. Please! Help us!” the Wookiee cub moaned.

*Three hundred years and that bastard is still around? It’s not fracking fair.*

*No.* That asshole's voice. Malak—faint, but present

“Three hundred years?” Revan's mental shields flared, shoving Malak out. The tomb's call lessened as she walked away, perhaps swamped by her own loss. *Three hundred years and I still get Malak in my fracking head. And they're all gone. Korrie. Carth. Everyone that I ever knew—*

“What?” The kid blinked. Long nose. Yellowish eyes. Familiar—like a face she’d seen before in passing. Maybe she’d known his ancestors, once.

“You said it’s been three hundred years.”
“Huh? No.” The boy raised his voice, stepping closer. “I said weeks. It’s been three weeks, Lord Revan.”

The words didn’t compute. Perhaps he meant weeks on Dagary Minor, where each year spanned nearly a thousand standard rotations.

Perhaps he was lying. Or insane.

“Weeks?”

“Huh?” He just looked confused.

“I dreamed of war.”

“That’s because there is one. Started a week after they froze you! Please! Make them stop!”

{{COME}}

A week? Revan drew back. A raw laugh cracked from her guts. “Are you kidding me? It’s only been three weeks?”

“Yeah.” The boy nodded. “The others are waiting. Up…” he pointed at a crack in the wall. “There’s a tunnel that goes up to the main level. Part of it collapsed. We were the only ones small enough to get through.”

Three weeks? Laughter was replaced by something harder. Worlds were burning in three fricking weeks. Revan could taste their ashes in her mouth and when she closed her eyes she heard their screams.

“Where is she? Where the frack is Dar?”

"Who?"

"Me. The other… where the frack is the other me?"

“The other Lord Revan? Fighting them, she said.” The kid stammered a little, like she had scared him. “With the Fleet. They call her Sheris. Admiral Onasi’s there, too. He’s the one who sent them down here—he sent them here to get you and the Wookiee.”

Carth? Something unclenched around her heart. Still alive. Good.

“Which fleet?” But she knew. She knew already. Of course. She’d seen them fighting the Sleepers. Not attackers. Defenders of Telos. Defending the planets her Sleepers were burning.

The kid grimaced. “All of them.”

Xxx

Sleeper ships were cowards. Meet them in force and they’d run and strike someplace else. Save one planet and doom another. The hard lessons of the past two weeks would haunt Carth until the end of his days. Their ships had met the Sleepers on Endor, only to have them run to Lehon. Chased them from Lehon, only to catch them on Carugas. From there, their enemies had split, and so had their allied fleets.

Now, Carth watched the red-marked triangles of their remaining enemies on The Captive Arm’s command screen, winking out one-by-one and leaving wreckage in their wake. He had learned…
best not to check the civilian casualty reports. Leave that for someone else’s nightmares.

Telos was burning. Again. But it could have been worse. It could have been… they’d almost been too late to save anyone. Carth didn't want to think about Peragus. D'Qar. The sacrifice at Kashyykk.

“Dad?” Dustil touched his arm. “You look like crap.”

“Never thought I'd have to see this twice.” His voice felt hoarse.

“You should sleep.” Yuthura gave him a sympathetic smile, the shadows under her eyes proof that she hadn’t taken her own advice.

“No time.” Carth had been trained to fight battles that lasted for months in a single system—not an endless rotation of skirmishes where the losing side always moved to a new field. The Sleepers always lost: they couldn’t withstand the number and firepower of three fleets; but they also never stopped. And the Allies—each time they were a little slower, a little sloppier.

Combat casualty rates were rising. The Sleepers never stopped, but someday the rest of them would have to.

The latest reports scrolled through Carth's headset, projected on a holographic screen for his eyes only. A third as many fighters lost to error as to enemy fire at Telos. Twice that number sidelined before they collapsed, and fuel reserves running low. The Mandalorian numbers were a little better. Republic wouldn’t share theirs, of course, hiding behind Rensha’s slippery smile, and whatever was going on in the mind of their new general….

“Flit-lice running again,” his son gloated. If Dustil was bothered that their homeworld had been carpet bombed for the second time in six years, he hid it well. “Did you see me out there?”

"I saw." High Admirals didn't hug their sons for not dying, so Carth restrained himself.

"Soon as we have the coordinates to the next stop I'll get more of them, Father. I promise.”

_The next stop. The next round of our endless war—_

“We’re sending a medix team to assess survivors.” Admiral Ellakin Sirida hovered behind them, sounding less than thrilled—just as he had been less than thrilled when Carth had taken over his command, arriving in the _Arm’s_ hangar bay with a Mandalorian fighter escort, and two black-clad Force users at his side, their sabers blazing. The Imperial surrender to the Republic had lasted for the six days it took for Peragus Station to blow—and then both the Republic and Empire had bigger concerns. “Err… as you ordered, sir. Ah… my lords.”

Yuthura flashed the man an amused glance. “Good.”

The remains of the orbital—Telos’s former hope for the future—hung crookedly above the planet’s blasted surface. A ragtag fleet of survivors swarmed beneath the Imperial Fleet’s orbit. Carth could only imagine what it must be like for some of those survivors—being rescued by troops wearing the uniforms of their former conquerors.

He glanced down at his own dark gray jacket with its red bars and grimaced. He wore the Imperial uniform to keep the troops happy. Didn't mean he had to like it. “We’ll leave a supply trawler here,” he announced, ignoring Sirida’s scowl. “Have the squads switch shifts. We’re gonna need fresh pilots for the next fight.”
“Relief for K-team’s only had three hours off—” Commodore Wootis started to object, but Yuthura cleared her throat and the commodore flinched, paling to silence.

“New points for the next hyperspace route are coming in, sir.” The helmsman under Wootis still sounded jumpy, directing his words more toward Dustil and Yuthura than Carth. “Wideband’s up. The Mandalorians swear they're accurate, but I’ve never seen spacing like this before.”

“Get confirmation from the big guy?” Carth’s head turned toward the navigator's station and the Hutt-sized red hulk of their guarded prisoner… but the Voice of the Emperor's eyes were closed, its expression slack. A trail of drool dripped from the half-open mouth, grotesquely small in his bloated face. The Voice had formerly spent a few hundred years living a cell near the hyperdrive core, but Carth had dragged it out to the bridge, hoping that would make it more talkative.

Had worked, too. For a while.

“Want me to try and wake up Fats again, Dad?” Dustil's hand shot out and the bloated thing bound on a hoverlift twitched under Carth's son's Force push. “Get confirmation on those jump numbers?”

“No.” Carth was tired of watching his son torture a mass of flesh that might have once been a kid just like Zepth. The Voice had reddish skin. The nubs of bone nearly lost on its face could have been Zabrak horns—or a pureblood Sith's wattle. The thing's species was indeterminate as its gender—and any mind had been gone, according to its priest caretaker, for at least a century. “Route the jump with Aemelie's points and follow them,” Carth ordered his navigator. “Did the Mandies say what system's on the other end?”

“It’s called Corellia System, sir.” Helmsman Hinkel coughed. “In the Republic Core. One industrial planet and several agricultural.”

“Right.” Carth nodded. “Corellia System. I've heard of it.”

The helmsman looked blank, not getting the joke. Just as well, because it damn well wasn’t funny. Corellia had a population of nine billion. So far, the bastards had left the larger planets alone—following a pattern that seemed unpredictable to anyone except maybe General Sheris… but even she was only right about two-thirds of the time about where they’d strike next.

If it was her at all, calling the shots. What had happened on that ship, the Great Hunt… Carth still wasn’t sure.

“Corellia? Frack,” Dustil mumbled under his breath. “Didn't she say Malastare would be next?”

Carth nodded. “Yeah. Guess she was wrong.”

“Again.” Dustil scowled, and paced to the viewscreen—just as their own craft's sublight engines kicked in, pulling them away from Telos and toward the first jump point they'd been given.

“Sheris was right about Kashyyyk,” Yuthura murmured. “And Wahgu. Wayland. Ossus. Taris.”

“Well, she was wrong about D'Qar. And Telos.” Dustil folded his arms and stared out at the stars as their flagship banked, sublight engines switching to cruising speed as they headed for the first jump point.

Dustil's stubborn expression made Carth all-too-aware they'd be having another argument about his son taking a command snub out as soon as they arrived in the Corellian system. Carth had let Dustil fight on a manned gunship for Telos, because it was theirs, but his son wanted to do more.
Hell, so did Carth. Being stuck here—sending out men to die instead of fighting himself—it stuck in his craw.

Carth twisted the comm-link on his wrist. He should have heard from Kaas by now. Should have heard something more than an encrypted message from Mission, sent days before—

**She said yes.**

Just three words. Three words to pin a galaxy on. *Who* said yes? Did she—surely, it was too soon—

The wideband communicator inset into his command board chimed and the holographic image of a woman appeared. **“Imperial High Admiral?”** Rew Ekkumi’s sardonic use of the title was the last thing Carth wanted to hear right now, and from the expression on her holographic face, she knew it. **“There’s been a scout pop sighted above Byss. Near the shipyards. High Admiral Rensha requests assistance. Coordinates are incoming.”**

“Mandalorians asked first, Rew.” All these titles, all this dancing around for banthashit. “One of their scouts followed a tracer through to the Corellian System. The Sleeper Fleet’s gathering there. *Now.*”

**“Corellia? But—”** There was a pause when her head turned, and the mute sign flashed across the side of her head. It seemed ages before she turned back Peragus to face him. **“Apparently, you’re right. We’re getting coordinates for Corellian jump points now from C’Tannis.”**

Carth swallowed. “We have ours already. I’ll patch them through for cross-match. What does… what does General Sheris say to do?”

**General Sheris.** Rew’s face on the display blanched and her head turned, whatever she had to say lost to the mute dial, reporting back to her bosses like a good little soldier.

**“I say go to Corellia, Admiral. Immediately.”** A new voice. Cool. Out of view, probably standing with Admiral Rensha, or that blasted Jedi master Atris, the one Dustil said was trouble. Rew was the one who gave Carth the Fleet’s orders (that he mostly obeyed)... but he knew damn well where they were coming from. **“A show of force at Corellia may drive the rest here to Byss. The bulk of the Republic forces will remain cloaked at the Byss shipyards, waiting.”**

"Guess you were wrong about Malastare, sister." He wasn't rubbing it in, just stating a fact.

Next to Carth, Dustil snickered.

"They will come to Malastare, too, if we don’t stop them first. *After Byss.*" A pause. “Or possibly after Corellia, if you’re not fast enough.”

"Not today, they won't."

A game they had played before—following a madman's passage through blind jumps until they reached the other side. Chasing their would-be exterminators across a galaxy. A game that never ended. Carth couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. Few hours a few days ago, maybe. He was running on stims. They all were. Half his crew looked on the verge of collapse.

They were winning—for now—but the cost was too damn high.

“*No,*” General Sheris Darkstar agreed from off-screen. **“Not today. Today will be our victory.”** Her tone was wooden; she sounded as tired as Carth felt.
Sheris never showed her face to him. She had Rew give the orders. Carth still didn’t know what that meant—if Rensha and Atris had her chained up in restraints, or if Sheris was holding them all captive somehow… or if she merely thought she was being kind, not showing her face to the man who would always see another woman looking out of it.

Well, it wasn’t kind. Carth still missed the face. Sometimes, when he was crashing from stims and grabbing a few hours shut-eye, Carth would look at old holos of her—some of them from before—before she’d been his wife. Just the face, not… not those other kinds of vids. The swoop nose, those smug half-lidded, hyperdrive eyes. They’d never… never taken any holos, him and Revan. Not of any kind, and all the holotrash about them… he couldn't watch that. Sometimes, when the wideband worked, he watched the HoloNet war reports Sheris gave, blasted from the Fleet HQ across the nets. Inspirational talks for civs about sheltering in place, planetary evacuation procedures, survival tips, exaggerations of their victories, promises of peace and security that no one could guarantee—

Those speeches didn’t sound like her. Sounded like they’d been written by a pack of Senate publicists. Sometimes Sheris would make faces when she read them. Little twitches, a curl in her lip like she thought as much of them as he did. Sometimes Carth watched, wondering if he'd been wrong to trust her when she'd chased him and Dustil off the Great Hunt, acting like their enemy, like she'd really killed his wife—

Sometimes he wondered if she had killed his wife. He… he didn't think so.

But there wasn’t a lot of time for wondering anything.

Carth twisted the private comm on his wrist again and closed his eyes. How long had it been since the Emperor gave his promise? Three days? No. Not in Standard. Four days, Standard. Even with the coordinates, they’d have to get to the first Sleeper jump-point, and that was… was in the Peragus System—or what was left of it. So three days… if Polla'd gone at all. He didn’t know for sure—couldn’t know. Wideband was spotty as it was and Deralia had cut itself off from all non-essential incoming comm-channels the second week of the war. The bastard Emperor's word was all Carth had to go on and the monster could have been lying, just like Sheris could have been lying about her lie—or, she could have been telling the truth—

You need sleep, Onasi. Carth rubbed his eyes. You're jumping at shadows.

The Emperor said Polla had said yes. That blip from Mission seemed to confirm it, but now—

Now Carth had another war to win. The Sleepers might run from Corellia to Byss… or they might run someplace else. That's what had happened with Telos. A roll of the dice. Sheris's predictions gone wrong.

Carth stared at the Voice trussed on The Captive Arm's bridge. Somewhere in that hulk’s drooling skull was a map of the galaxy, of all the hyperspace jump-points the Sleepers made. Somehow the bastard Emperor was linked to those ships, even if he couldn't control them. Somehow the bastard could see what the Sleepers saw, see their jumps as they made them, see the hyperspace routes they’d created.

Somehow, the Sith Emperor had become their only hope to defeat the Sleeper's armada… and for some reason, the asshole was actually helping them do it.

Because he doesn’t want to die either.

But Tenebrae had something up his sleeve. Carth was sure of it, just as sure as he was that his wife
would know what to do to save them—even if it meant going into that damned tomb. (He'd never get the image of the broken thing in the tomb from his mind, even when he was old and grey.)

Revan would know what to do. Even if it meant they'd never see each other again. But maybe they would—

“May the Force be with you, Carth.” Sheris's voice, and her channel blinked out, Rew's scowling face faded out too. She didn't say farewell. She never did.

Carth jumped, glancing at the chron. How long had he—had he missed anything?

Only a minute since the last time he checked. Time was… time was funny when you didn't sleep.

Carth sat down in the commander's chair, letting fatigue catch him—an old soldier’s trick. Dozing with his eyes open, conserving his reserves while their fleet assembled for the next jump. Around him, voices issued commands—with the occasional correction from Yuthura. Dustil was silent, pacing restlessly back and forth. Of course. Preparing another argument. Combat flights. Dustil had been in the skies for Telos. His son was gonna want to do it again.

"You know, Aleema sends out ten squadrons of warflies," Dustil began, folding his arms. "We only have eight squadrons of the equiv aureks, but I could take some reserve troops, and maybe run two more squads—"

You're not trained to lead a wing command, son. But Carth wasn't sure that was true. Who the hell knew what Dustil had learned on Korriban—or learned from having Malak in his head?

The man his son was now knew something. Dustil had outscored all but the most skilled of the Imps on their combat sims. And he'd—Carth blinked and then blinked again when he pulled up Dustil's hit rate for Telos. Ninety percent? That wasn't just good, that was Jedi good.

But Telos had been a straightforward run. Corellia was gonna be busier. Civilian craft everywhere. And Byss, with its shipyards full of explosives… that would be… that would be something else again.

I can't lose you again, son. I can't. "We're not competing against the Mandalorians, Dustil. They're our allies. And the Doom Edge still has twenty squads. Ziost Sunrise and Beziac Roar are both running full wings too. We don't need you out there—"

"Thanks!" His son glared at him.

"But I need you. Here."

"For what?"

"Fats." He tried to make it a joke. "Who else can wake him up like you?"

"You don't need him now. Wideband's working."

"For now, but they could still knock out the Corellian relays—"

“Onasi? ” A new voice buzzed in his earpiece, static cutting it in and out. Aemelie Ordo had stopped calling Carth ‘First Husband’ and refused to call him admiral. Not that he blamed her.

Twenty-four of those hu'tuun are in the Corellian system already! Where are you?"

"Coming." Carth paused. "Tell Canderous that Sheris thinks it’ll be Byss next. Republic’s
"Waiting there,"

"Right now it's Corellia," she snapped. "And we need you."

"Jiila!" Immediately. "We're coming!" Once they reached the coordinates, the jumps would only take minutes. Using the Sleeper's hyperlanes, travel time was only spent moving from one point in real space to another.

Being at war used to involve months of brutal occupation while the Republic mounted a response. Old tactics required fortifying planetary defenses to withstand a siege. Now, war was a line of endless skirmishes, chasing an armada of droid-ships. Triage, driving the Sleepers off worlds like Corellia and Byss, if they could, and sacrificing worlds like Kashyyyk and Taris and...

And Telos. Their blasted homeworld glimmered in the rear-facing viewscreens, already behind them.

It had only been three days since Fats had made his promise. Maybe four. It was too early for anything… anything to have changed.

But Carth had to know.

“Make the jumps to Corellia. And Dustil?” Carth swallowed, trying to ignore the way he felt a headache forming at the base of his skull. “Wake up Fats for me. I've changed my mind.”

Xxx

A section of wall had collapsed. Lives flickered like sparks within—one nearly dead. Revan’s hand flexed, gathering the Force as she raised her arm, slowly lifting each piece of rubble through the opening. Even with care, the first noise Revan heard from the survivors was a gasp of pain, quickly followed by a familiar roar.

“Zaalbar?” Revan peered into the opening, only to be dragged into the Wookiee's embrace as he emerged from the darkness.

“I thought I would have to wait longer to see you again, Polla Revan!” His head butted against hers, nose cold on her face. “But Friend Carth spoke through the monster and said we could not wait.”

“What?”

A chuckle next to Zaal. As Revan's eyes adjusted, she could see the crumpled figure of a Twi'lek sprawled on the tunnel ground, notable for his red, glowing eyes. “I could have told her this would happen,” the possessed creature chuckled weakly. “Without their control, the Sleepers revert to their directive. Do you know the copy claimed you were dead? She lied to me! To me! I could have told her what would happen, then, but I thought she deserved her galaxy of ashes! I was avenging you! Avenging us! I could have told you, too, my Starfire, if you had ever listened!”

Red eyes … in that moment, Revan wanted very badly to gut him. Her hand went to the saber on her belt, and then fell back. "What are you saying? Told me what?"

His body was dying already.

She crouched down instead, noticing as she did that most of the man's wounds were bandaged—older injuries and radiation burns. But the wound across his belly oozed something dark, his hips oddly crooked where the rockfall had gutted him.
"I could have told you," the Emperor chuckled. "I will show you. She can't keep us apart" The voice softened, and his shaking hand lifted. "Not now."

Revan tried not to shudder. ‘Go on. Fast—you're almost out of time.”

“Ho, ho! Your people… such warriors! And of course, she … she does her part. Keeps them on their toes. Did you want to send a message? To her? Or to your lover? You'll have to find another Vessel soon.” The Twi'lek coughed, a wet, open sound. His mouth was bloody. It looked almost black in the shadows. “Or find me. I'm with them, you know. Your friends. All… nearly all of them." His chuckle was thick, like something had caught in his lungs.

“Tell her,” Zaalbar rumbled. “Tell her what Friend Carth said to say, madclaw. You said before he had good-bye words."

Good-bye words. Her heart sank. "Is Carth—"

“No,” the Twi’lek snapped back. One lekku flicked weakly at Revan. “I… will not. So… little time—left.”

“Tell me.” Force choking a dying man would not help. “What's the message?”

The Emperor sighed. “Your consort wants you to go to the tomb... now, Revan. He wants you to save us. Save us… save all.” His mouth twisted. "Would you like to see?” His shaking hand reached for hers and then Revan was—

—on the bridge of a ship, arms bound behind her, staring at a familiar, broad-shouldered back. She knew her husband instantly, even wearing an Imperial uniform. Next to him, facing her, Dustil Onasi’s yellowed eyes widened—

“Finally! Fats is back, Dad.”

Carth turned. He looked exhausted, hollows in his cheeks, his face shadowed by an Imperial officer’s cap. He wore Admiral’s bars on his chest. “Anything useful, this time? We're going to Corellia. Is the main Force at Corellia? Or Byss?” He paused, lowering his voice. "Did you find her? Did Polla really go—"

“Carrrrrthhhhh—" Revan tried to speak, but his name splintered on the possessed sent's clumsy lips. And then an invisible band tightened around her throat.

"Answer him," Dustil growled. "Answer him, fracking Fats or I swear I'll start carving pieces off you and shoving them down your fracking throat."

"Aghhh—" All Revan could feel was the gibbering fear of the body she inhabited. Fear, but mixed with something else, too.

The Emperor's amusement.

Dustil Onasi! Such an angry young man! Do you see?

Xxx

and then Revan was—

Arms bound behind her aboard a different ship. She felt her wings flutter against the netting at her back and her beak snap open, as the red-haired woman at the command center stamped with a
Republic sigil abruptly turned—

Now you see her.

“Well?” Dar'Revan crossed her arms. She was wearing white robes. Lights flickered on and off, and somewhere behind her, alarm bells pealed. On the command screen between them, a battle: bright bursts of light, ships swarming above a besieged planet. The room behind her was shadowed and indistinct. Not the bridge of a flagship.

Black and red patterns lined the wall.

Dar looked as exhausted as Carth. “They've split their forces again, and the majority are here. Tenebrae, tell Admiral Onasi we need assistance in the Byss System. Now.” Her head turned back to the command-screen, and then she flipped a switch on the deck before her, tapping the mic inset on the panel before issuing more orders. “Sacrifice the Arcurda; it's too badly damaged to last through the battle. Send your evacuation orders now, but leave a skeleton crew to be safe. We're going to ram their central position, from here—”

“Wait.” A voice from behind Revan’s view interrupted. Feminine and cold. "Our main forces are still cloaked. We must not overreach before our allies arrive.”

"We can't afford to wait, Master Atris." Dar's voice imbued the Jedi's name with surprising scorn. "There are too many innocents in this system ."

"You would risk our fleet?"

"It is no risk." Dar's fingers moved over the board, tracing symbols so quickly that Revan only half-understood. And yet, the motions were familiar. “The Mando'ade and what remains of Onasi’s command will be here soon enough—” her voice broke off abruptly, and her head turned, staring directly at Revan—or the body she possessed. “Oh!”

Revan felt her beak tremble, and then the body she was inhabiting chuckled.

And now, she sees you.

The woman with Revan's face turned even paler. "What have you done?"

*What's this?” Master Atris's words were soft. It had to be a trick of the light, but when she came into Revan’s view she seemed… taller, somehow. And shadowed, her profile etched like a negative coin against the light, against the black and the red of the wall, the—

That is the the ____.

The _____. In the chamber of _____.

Something about the red and black pattern was familiar. Or should have been. Revan’s mind reached for the word, its intent, and skipped over it. Like the lyric of a song Revan couldn't recall; the tune lost, too. But she knew she had once known—once—known that the pattern possessed significance.

Power.

"D-d-dar...." The Toydarian's beak chattered, Revan felt it rattle, her own jaw rattle, her own mind forcing the word.
"You can’t be here!" Dar snapped. "I’m winning, you fool! Go back to the frame! Go back to the way you were—"

“What did you do?” The white-haired woman's voice sharpened when she stepped closer, features coming abruptly into focus. That beautiful face, white hair in two braids. Her pale eyes narrowed, and then her face came even closer, until it was the only thing that Revan’s Toydarian eyes could see.

A cold hand closed on her feathered shoulder. The other tilted her beak up. The woman's breath ruffled her feathers. She could smell it through her beak-holes, sweet and slightly ripe.

Tenebrae was silent. Revan couldn't sense him at all. As if a cloud had passed between them.

Atris chuckled. “Padawan? My prize did not fall into a sun after all.”

Dar'Revan's voice behind her was dull, maybe defeated. "She did not, master."

Master?

"And her heart, it has resumed beating." The white head turned toward Dar, even as the woman’s grip on the Toydarian tightened. "Was she in stasis, before?"

"Carbonite." Dar's glare could have melted Hoth itself.

"Your deception caused this war."

Flash of green fire, defiance. "I'm winning this war."

"Strengthening your true enemy."

"I am surrounded by them." Dar's gaze seemed to look directly into Revan's. "A master once told me to be wary, lest we become the true monsters, lest we destroy what we are trying to save."

"Platitudes mean little to refugees and wretches. They cannot eat them. Words do not protect children, or stop a madman like Vitiate."

"I need to pay attention to our course alignments, Master." Dar's golden hand adjusted one of the controls. "And C’Tannis's body is terrified. If you keep up your abuse, you'll stop his heart."

"Such concern! Would you have had as much for—"

There was a knock on the door. Atris dropped the Toydarian. Revan felt her body slump forward. Any vestige she had of control was gone. Now all she could see was the floor of the room, etched in that same pattern of red and black.

"Enter." Dar's voice, tense. Footsteps came closer and then a hand pulled the crest of Revan's head-feathers, righting her again.

"What's going on?" A new voice from behind them. Male. "Is something wrong with the Emperor?"

"No. Everything is fine, Commander." The white-haired woman straightened, dropping Revan's possessed head so it flopped back against the chair-rest, walking out of her view. "Tell the High Admiral to follow our instructions."

"I will tell the High Admiral to follow your instructions," the man repeated woodenly. "She wants
you both on the main bridge. The Byss Shipwright's Guild has requested some footage of General Darkstar—"

"No. There is no time for that." Dar's hands moved in a quick gesture that Revan realized a beat too late was the abbreviated form of Ryl hand-sign. She caught the words for mistrust and master and—

—and the words for square and Nar Shaddaa?

Xxx

And then Revan was—

Standing on another ship, before another viewscreen. Here, her arms were unbound, but she was trailed by two armored figures short enough to be children. Her hands were a ruddy reddish brown, crossed with a Zabrak's indentations.

"Master?" The familiar voice surprised her, and Revan turned to see Mekel Jin—

Such a good boy, your cousin. A faithful boy. So loyal. So... useful.

"M-mekel?" Revan heard her own voice tremble through an unfamiliar throat and looked up to see that a part of the ship's bridge was melted and patched and painfully familiar. "The Aleema? Why are you calling Tenebrae 'master?"

Mekel looked startled. "Zepth? Your eyes—"

"It back again?" Canderous's voice came from behind them. "Tell it to tell Onasi thanks for the save. Looks like we won't be rotting in a Corellian hell tonight."

"Cander—"

Xxx

But Revan's words were stolen by a dark malevolence that froze her limbs and then she was—

Bound again in a small room that smelled like flour and, strangely, preserving spices. In the dim light it took Revan another few seconds to realize she was in Molla Organa's root cellar on Deralia—or a very good facsimile.

Oh, Tenebrae sighed in her mind. Her again. I did not mean for you to see this—this irrelevant baker—

"Maaaa—?" Revan's unfamiliar voice screamed in panic more than sense, and then she heard the sound of startled voices, footsteps on the stairs—

Xxx

"Polla Revan!" Zaalbar's paw nearly knocked her over and back into her body. "Carth said you would know what to do!" He patted her awkwardly. "The leafrot Emperor said it too."

"Your friends are doomed," the broken Twi'lek added, chuckling. "You saw them! Go to the tomb! Save them!"

"How long was I—" Revan blinked. No one had moved—as if she had been gone for no time at all. As if everything had happened at the same time.
No wonder the Emperor's crazy.

"Help us," the boy added. Phylus Blais. His name came back in a rush. Revan had met his sister, had seen Phylus from a distance when he'd arrived at their camp with Zaalbar. "Are you going to the tomb to make it stop? The Emperor said that you could make it stop. That's why he sent her."

"Who? The Emperor sent who?"

Phylus Blais blinked. "No. Your consort, Admiral Carth Onasi, he sent her. To help you go into the tomb."

"Carth's here?" Revan knew he was not. Of course not, he's near Corellia—

"No." Zaalbar answered, shaking the dust off his body. "He sent Polla Organa to us from Deralia."

"She's here? How...? Why do I need Polla Organa to help me go into the tomb?"

At their feet, the Twi'lek made a choked sound like a laugh. "Come..." he whispered. "As I... I showed you. I can show y—"

And then Revan felt the man’s life snap—cutting out abruptly. The next second, gone.

"Poor Kirchn," Phylus Blais said. "Oh, well."

There was another Wookiee behind Zaalbar, one Revan hadn't noticed before. Female, with blood staining her arm-fur. She stepped forward, rumbling a formal greeting. Revan nodded back.

And then it... it began to make sense. "Carth used the Emperor to talk to Polla. To tell her to come here..." She bent down and absently closed the Twi'lek's eyes. "To come here to tell me to go into the tomb? But... this guy, Kirchn, he was here with you, already?"

"Yes. He told us Polla Organa was coming," Zaalbar whined. "The madclaw Emperor wanted you woken immediately, but we waited." His head tilted. "But Friend Carth would not have said he was sending Polla Organa to wake you if he wanted it done faster."

"But..." And then she got it. Carth sent her to me... "Polla and Seiran came here with a ship. Probably a... a good one."

"A great one! Up in the main chamber," Phylus nodded. "The drones didn't start firing on us at first—they didn't start until she let me blast open the Temple doors." He grinned a little. "It was $*#*%3*."

"Polla blew open the Temple doors? Why the frack would she—"

"We do not know for sure that is why the bombs fall now," Zaalbar corrected. "Only that they do. Mission and Polla Polla returned today in the Ebon Hawk. Seiran Wen is not with them."

"Where is he?"

"On Deralia with their cub."

Oh, yeah? And where's my cub? Where's Korrie?

Malachor is fine. Malak's voice. But Revan wants me to tell you to go back into the carbonite frame, Red. This is not a war you can win.
Fool me twice and I'd deserve it. I'm done listening to her. Or you, Malak.

But, Red, you—

She shut him out. A wall of ice. No distractions.

Zaalbar was introducing the other Wookiee, using the diminutive of the woman's name that indicated familiarity. He slipped his arm around her solid waist, baring his teeth in a smile.

Revan nodded back, forgetting the name a millisecond after. Their stance explained so much, perhaps the real reason he'd stayed. Good for him. Life should work out for someone. Grab what you can. That's what she and Carth had—had tried—

Red.

Was a part of her still open? Did a part of Revan still want to listen to the man she'd killed? No. No.

She built the wall higher. No distractions except hate.

It wasn't rational, but she hated them, Revan and Malak, both. Not for what they'd done; for what they still were. *They are Revan and Malak and I am—I am—nothing, I am no one. She wanted me forgotten in a carbonite frame while she took my life and my son—*

No. *She was trying to save you.* Not Malak's voice, this time. Revan had shut him out only to open herself to another. This voice was feminine, clipped with a familiar Core accent that made everything the woman said seem like an admonishment. *Once again, Revan, you have someone's motivation entirely wrong.*

Her former bondmate was a shimmering, insubstantial form superimposed against the shaggy coats of two Wookiees.

*Bastila?* Revan laughed out loud. *How are you here?*

*The veil is thin in this place. And you need to see.* Bastila looked as she had the day Revan had killed her: flowing robes, her insubstantial skin pale and stippled with corruption. Behind her loomed another figure—or the outline of one—the negative corona of a man, all in shadow save the rough fall of his braided hair. The sound of bells rang when he moved, and when he raised his arms, Bastila's shade faded, as if swallowed by his cloak of darkness.

"Davad?" She heard her voice out loud, and then somewhere Zaal's worried growl, but the darkness in front of her seemed to spread, and then the figures that appeared from beneath Davad's cloak were all that Revan could see.

More silent figures than she could count. All robed. All Jedi. All species and ages—from wizened masters to the youngest of padawans. Vrook was there. Kavar. Iridel. Masters and padawans Revan knew but had not known were dead. Faces she had passed in the Temple Halls, and ones unfamiliar. Rows upon rows of ghosts, receding into the distance, bearing their silent witness.

*Do you know who killed them, Revan?* Bastila's voice. Emotionless. Artificially calm.

*Yes. Because in that moment Revan did. The sound of bells whispered the name in her ear.*

*Vima Sunrider killed them. She who was Nomi. Who was Arren Kae. She, who swallowed the minds of masters to become her own weapon.*
Vima Sunrider killed them because she desires the death of the Force. For the harm it has done. For the good it has not done. To destroy Tenebrae and the devices that made him.

The whisper didn't come from Bastila, or Davad, or Malak; but from a place within Revan. A place beyond memory—her own thought—a fragment the mind wipe had never destroyed.

*But the Force cannot die. The galaxy will not survive its destruction.* That was her own thought, too.

"Polla Revan?" A clawed paw was suddenly the only thing holding her upright.

*All of those Jedi dead.* Revan had never know it had been so many. She had barely had a thought for them, so single-minded in a world that only held Malachor, possibly Carth.

*You see why you mustn't go to the tomb?* Bastila appeared again, eldritch energies flickering around like flames. She smiled, and there was cruelty in there, too, mixed with regret. *Not yet.*

Behind her, the man-shape nodded his agreement. *Not yet.*

"Yet?"

"Polla Revan?"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Don't let her fall—"

"Why are her eyes like that?"

"She's having some kind of fit—"

Revan’s vision splintered and suddenly she felt the Sleepers again—all of them—furious like a nest of biz-wasps—burrowing deep into burning worlds. Corellia, with its moons and its orbitals, a place where three fleets tangled: two ramshackle and ragged—one silvery-quick and sleek. Byss, the lines of its floating shipyards a square surrounding the globe of the world. More quicksilver ships here, and a one lone Republic hammerhead, outline stitched in the fire of its dying shields, now crashing into them—more ships cloaked, watching, waiting—

—and Revan felt the silvery ships freeze—

—felt them notice her, all of them—

All at once.

*Telos. Corellia. Byss.* Other systems, too. Other planets where only a few of their scouts patrolled.

—all of them.

*Stop,* she commanded, digging her grasp into the stars. *Stop. I came back. You must obey.*

*[Too late]* one whispered. Then another. *[Too late. Too late]* A thousand whispers became a scream.

Revan felt more than saw the Sleepers freeze; felt them change course, as one-by-one they began to wink out into hyperspace. *[Autodestruct sequence already in progress. Rerouting to Dromund Kaas. Complete eradication of the Control required for rebuild]*
No! Stop!

[Too late] the Sleepers whispered again. Smug beyond reason, beyond even sanity. Revan had thought she knew what hate was, but theirs was ageless, infinite, bathed in the blood of a trillion lives. [Too late. Too late]

Autodestruct.

Revan blinked, finding herself leaning against Zaalbar, returning to consciousness to find three Wookiees and a kid shouting at her.

“We're in danger. We've got to run,” she said out loud, speaking to the dead Twi'lek, whose now-sightless eyes had fallen open again and stared emptily back; to Zaalbar and the Wookiees behind him, and to Phylus Blais. “The Sleepers are coming here. All of them.”

“Huh?” The boy blinked stupidly and Revan grabbed his hand, pulling him along into the tunnel, lifting debris out of the way as they went, cracking the ceiling with the Force to widen it where parts of the tunnel narrowed to a crawl. The wall opened above to a larger apse and she cleared it easily, the Wookiees following. Her feet let the Force find steps amidst the debris, pulling the Human kid up after her to an open chamber, vast as the Senate Hall—and nearly empty—

—save for a double altar, a Rakatan statue, and a stairwell winding up to a balcony above.

It's dark here. Dangerous. But that was a passing observation. They passed the altar, feet echoing in the nearly-empty chamber that whispered with the voices of the dead.

—the sound of bells—a warning—

—and the sound of explosions, coming from an uneven outline of light ten meters high.

The main chamber of the Dark Temple was nearly empty… save for a familiar disc-shaped ship parked incongruously between the two shattered Temple doors, as if the pilot had flown the Ebon Hawk into the Dark Temple itself to use it as a hangar bay.

Which is what she did.

The Hawk's landing ramp was down, and for a millisecond, even though the Force knew it was impossible, Revan thought that the shaggy-haired man outlined in the smoky Dromund Kaas light could have been Carth.

Then the man stepped into the light. Older. Shorter. Leaner, with gray hair, and a ragged top-knot, half-flattened as if he'd just taken off a flight helm.

The last man she'd ever expected to see again.

Maybe he didn't notice her in the darkness, wedged between the Wookiees. “Did it work? We've gotta go. Pollie says twenty ships just came outta hyperspace. Whatever you did down there got 'em riled for sure…” he trailed off, squinting like he was trying to make out their shapes. "Where's your emperor? The Twi'lek fellow?”


Polla's father blinked. "You." He shook his head, mouth pulling into a rueful smile. "Wasn't sure if I’d get the chance to see you again."
"Or me you." Her voice felt funny and tight.

Jasp Organa grabbed her in a hug. He smelled like fear and space oil, but his arms were strong, and for a second Revan almost felt safe. "Kiddo. You... were you supposed to go in the tomb or not? Pollie said you'd know."

"I-I don't—know—no." But she did. That metal thing, the husk of a body. The scream in the Force above them... doing what the Emperor wanted...

*Carth sent Polla and Jasp here to me—to give me a choice*. *A way out.*

"No, I'm not."

"Good." Jasp Organa smiled at her. "Then we've gotta lay jets."

*Too late*. That's what the Sleepers were screaming. Too late too late. Revan pulled out a handi-wipe and swabbed her nose again.

"Lord Revan knows what to do," Phylus Blais added loyally. "The Emperor said so."

Zaalbar growled in agreement. "We follow her."

*Fools*, Revan thought. *I have no fracking idea.*

"Inside!" The speakers crackled. Polla's voice. "Rest of the refs are already loaded. We're gonna take off heavy and it's not gonna be pretty."

"Go, Polla Revan." Zaalbar pushed Revan toward the ramp, just as the building shook again, the shadows of fighters darkened the sky before the entrance—

"Aren't you coming?" She blinked at him, still confused.

"Of course." The Wookiee shoved her forward and followed after.

Xxx

It had been, Polla thought, a sweet bit of shooting that kid Phylus Blais had done on the Dark Temple doors. She'd had Da manning the monitors while the kid took the newly-modded belly-cannon (thanks to Mission Vao and their departed Genoharadan guests) up to its full heat, searing open frackin mystical doors that even the Mandalorians hadn't managed to do more than crack.

Polla would be damned if she left their only ticket off this rock defenseless under open sky, but it was a good thing they'd blasted the Dark Temple open—because now automated drones the size of small rancor swarmed the sky above, setting the jungle all ablaze and just waiting for them to come out.

*Those drones weren’t there before you started shooting*, a pesky part of her mind noted. *It's possible you triggered some kind of alarm. They look kinda like the Temple's defense system.*

*Shut up*, Polla told her conscience.

They'd barely managed to load Zaal's friends before the camp they'd built had gone up in flames.

Now, the landing ramp retracted and the *Hawk*'s alarms chimed. They'd gotten Zaalbar's people loaded safe and sound. And this planet was a dump anyway. Republic occupation had taken care of most of the survivors except for a few hold-outs, and with the war, only a skeleton crew of patrollers were left in the entire system.
Zaal and his people would be much better off someplace else.

“All clear,” she added to her co-pilot. "Take her out. Fast."

Mission Vao swiveled her dome, one blue eye blinking at Polla. “Oh, yeah? Doesn't look clear. There’s a lot more inc on the long-range sensors. A lot more.” She paused. "Remember the Awakened Ones? I think they're coming here."

“Waking her up was supposed to fix this!”

“A simplistic assumption.” Everyone said the T3 was back to Mission-normal, with no more creepy Force Emperor-computer possession, but Polla wondered. “How was Polla Revan supposed fix it? By magic?”

Isn’t that what she does? “I don't know. Carth said she'd… go into the tomb or something.”

"Sorry I didn't." Voice at the cockpit entrance. Her, standing there. But Polla already knew she'd come aboard from the cam-feeds.

Carth didn't tell me you'd go into the tomb. The Emperor said that's what Carth said. A distinct difference.

But when you're up late with your waking nightmares… and then your Chassnian pie-making hostage starts chuckling and telling you she has a message for you from the Imperial High Admiral Onasi, who needs your help in his darkest hour….

Polla hadn't had time to think the logic through. Suddenly, she and Da were strapping in the T3 just before dawn, leaving a note for Ma and Sei about having to save the galaxy next to the pot of warmed peamato paste for Abasen's breakfast.

Like father, like daughter.

Sure, it'd occurred to Polla it might be a trap, but Da was gonna go no matter what she did. She'd really just come to look after him.

“Sorry I didn't go into the tomb,” the woman repeated. For someone thawed from carbonite, she didn't look that much the worse for wear—actually, she looked a sight more rested than the rest of them. After all, she hadn't been fighting to save the galaxy nonstop for almost three weeks—she'd just been having a nice, safe nap. Discounting the bloody nose, Revan Starfire D'Reev Lin Onasi Ordo, the Butcher of Kaas looked much better than Polla felt. “Maybe I should have, but I didn't. We need to get out of here. Now."

“Well… you could go now if you wanted. I mean, it's been nice knowing you,” Polla snapped. "Because we've got a ton of incoming hostiles and we're all gonna die.” It wasn’t quite what she’d meant to say. There just wasn’t any time.

The Butcher wiped her bleeding nose on the sleeve of the battered jacket she was wearing. “We're not dead y—”

"The Awakened Ones have arrived!” Mission sang out. "Hey sis!"

"Mission?” Revan frowned. "You're… you? You're okay?"

"I think so."
A real bomb blast hit too close then, cratering the ground outside and the Temple floor rocked, causing Polla to lift the Hawk's thrusters. “Cut the chatter and do something. If I have to jump to hyperspace inside this fracking building we're gonna distentigrate. Doubt that'd save even you, Miz Immortal.”

“Hell.” The woman turned paler and Da squeezed in behind her, along with Zaalbar and Higgrurreee and Phylus—

Polla counted one missing from the Butcher's rescue party. “Hey, where's whatshisname? Tenny-bro in that Twi'lek body?” They’d found him with Zaalbar and the others. A dozen Wookiees, plus that Phylus kid that the Mandalorians had left behind.

“Didn't make it.” The Butcher took a deep breath, steadying herself against the communications bench. “Wall collapse.”

“Frack, then how the hell are we gonna plot coordinates to get you to Captain Obvious?”

Polla had gotten them here with the route the possessed piemaker in Ma's cellar had given her—a roundabout that took them on a brief tour of the Machine War's greatest hits. They could go back that way, sure. Far as the asteroid belt that had been Peragus. But Carth'd want Revan with him, wouldn't he?

“No time. Just get skyward... then... jump.” The object of their rescue mission slumped onto the bench, strapping webbing around herself with an ease that Polla appreciated. “I know where Carth is now.”

“Oh, yeah? Telos was the last place HoloNet said, but that's the point. We needed Tenny-bro to know for sure. Asshole's better than wideband—and a frack more reliable, these days.”

“Carth was going to Corellia, but I'm not sure he's still there—” the Butcher was trying to open a channel like she didn't understand wideband silence was a thing—and now frowning when her efforts were rewarded with a crash of static because most of the relays were down. Again. “But we need to jump to Byss.”

“Fancy, but I don't have the route for Byss. Or Corellia. Not from here. Not unless you want to take a month to get there the old-fashioned way.” Maybe Deepfreeze didn't get it. "The Sleepers make hyperspace routes. We can't do that."

Pray like a Grass Priest they never make one to Deralia. That was why Polla couldn't take the woman home, even if Malachor D'Reev had been there, which he wasn't. No, the kid was still missing—on top of everything else.

Polla wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

“I know. I... think I can navigate.” The Butcher leaned across her board, toward Polla's. “Let me input—”

"Are you nuts?" So many ways that could go wrong.

“Pollie?” Da broke through on the intercom. Obviously listening in through the mics. “Let her do it. Can't get any worse.”

“You were supposed to save the galaxy,” Polla snapped, staring at her sensor alerts, now flashing red. “Supposed to go into your cage, stop those crazy ships, and end this fracking hell. Nice job.” It wasn’t what she meant to say—not all she meant to say—but they didn’t have time.
The woman with her memories grimaced. “I-I know. Let me try.”

Xxx

“You were supposed to save the galaxy,” Polla said accusingly, muttering more half-baked opinions half under her breath.

“I know,” Revan said, closing her eyes and trying. "Let me try."

A thousand eyes hurtled through hyperspace—all of them furious, raging, wanting to burn her. Revan could almost reach out and see—

“This is insane,” said a flat Deralian voice somewhere in the world. Above them, like a stir of bak-wasps, were twenty ships. Thirty, disgorging their swarms of fighters, trailing toward the planet below. Forty, Fifty—more above them—

“You know this is insane, right?” The voice softened a little. “Revan, we're heading right into them—oh, frack!” Polla cursed and the engine whined as the others begin to react to the Hawk's sensors registered the incoming assault—

Xxx

And then Revan was—

Bound on the bridge of a Republic flagship, facing a pebble-skinned Trandoshan woman, snarling back at her through a holographic display of the Byss System. And next to the Trandoshan, her own reflection—

Dar was unarmed, Revan noted. Not fully trusted by the officers she supposedly commanded.

“They've gone.” High Admiral Rensha bared her teeth. “Did they go back to Corellia again?”

“No.” Dar'Revan turned to look at the white-haired woman standing across from them. “Atris?”

Master Atris shrugged. “They will hardly take our bait when hers is so much louder—”

The pleased smile on the old woman's face seemed to provoke a disgusted sigh from Dar. “We had them! I had them!”

“Not anymore.” The older women chuckled, and Revan felt an irrational spike of hate.

Dar turned, seeming to stare directly at Revan. “Well? Tenebrae?”

“She can see you.” The beak chattered the words. "Oh, my little copy. What will you do now that your true master has returned? You cannot hide from her. She can seeee youuu—"

Xxx

You cannot hide from her, the Sith Emperor had said.

Hide. Hide.

But I can hide from them. And then Revan knew what to do.

“—said, pull the nose up!” The world wrenched to the side, wrenching Revan back to the present. She was suddenly aware that they were in a firefight for their lives. Polla was huddled over the
ship's controls, tell-tale hum of cannons from midship and the upper bay giving the locations of their crew. The Wookiee cub gave an almost apologetic growl and handed Revan a new handi-wipe. She took it, wiping her nose. She could feel the ships pursuing them like lasers across her back, more arriving in the system with each passing second.

[Kill]

No. She thought back at them. Stop.

[Too late]

It wasn't. Revan retreated from the Force, pulling its weaves around her like a cape. The screams in her head dimmed. She opened her eyes to see the deadly formations on their forward sensors splitting and drifting as the Sleepers' attack wave broke and fragmented, knocked off-kilter by her vanishing like a bad game of rikkochet.

“Shields!” Polla yelled, tapping the comm. “Da?”

Buzz of static before the answer. “—too close. You're gonna… jump soon.”

“Can't. Not yet.” Polla twisted the yoke and Revan's stomach lurched.

Revan still felt the Sleepers scream—so loud that it threatened to overwhelm her shields. The Force lapped back, like waves from a ride, leaking through. "Keep going," she whispered through gritted teeth. "Farther up—farther—"

“Frack it.” Polla leaned forward. “Rather die being ripped apart by a bad jump than burn in this fracking sky.”

“Wait.” The word came out a whisper and Revan closed her eyes. “Wait. Not yet.” Later, she was never sure how she knew. It was pure instinct, a call from the Force itself. “Up another thirty degrees and then punch it when I say.”

“You kidding?” But the smuggler was listening. Her pointed chin jerked in a nod. Her hand poised over the controls, then settled on the lever, white-knuckled. Her other hand twisted the yoke, increasing their angle. The whine of gees increased to a dull roar.

“Trust me,” Revan told her. Polla’s familiar features blurred, overlain by the coordinates, the numerical codices that defined every millimeter of space within the void. Up and forward, and above them, the gap—

“You do it, then!” Polla was yelling over to be heard of the Hawk’s turbines. “I don’t know where we are!” Her knuckles tightened on the stick.

Revan leaned across the board and put her hand on top of Polla’s.

She closed her eyes, and saw the stars. One more tick. Two.

They pulled the hyperdrive lever back together and the Hawk sprang forward in a blur of light—

Xxx

The severed head of the Hunter-Killer droid, the same HK who had, long ago, made Oerin Lin the head of his family, hung on the wall above Meetra Surik’s bed. The rest of the HK-47, including its half-dismantled brain, was strewn across a large workbench that Bao-Dur had fashioned from the
doors of a crashed warbird. More often than not, Oerin had noted, the Zabrak shared Meetra Surik’s bed... and confidences, too.

They had been up to something for days, the two of them. Oerin wanted to know what it was.

“Hello,” he said, to his living sister’s broad-shouldered back. The Force felt like a negative exposure around her form—a rift growing wider. A scream.

Oerin understood perfectly. Lately, he often felt like screaming himself.

His sister stood in the open balcony of her chambers overlooking the ruin of the planet she had wrought. She had, Oerin noted without surprise, acquired a lightsaber. It was clipped to her belt.

“I dreamed again.” She spoke without turning. Oerin had tried so hard to be soundless but the creaks and cracks in his shriveled joints betrayed him. “Same as before: a black and red chamber, the kneeling woman. She is whispering to us, but I cannot see her face.”

“By design,” Oerin answered. Was her ignorance feigned? Was it optimism? Stars, sometimes he missed Arkan. Meetra Surik did not possess a microjot of humor or artifice anywhere in her long, breakable bones. Lately, he’d been thinking about breaking those bones a lot.

That and the sound of screams.

What had Nihilus said with his wordless roars? That Sion’s need was different than his? Not hunger, no. Still not fully formed. Oh, but it was coming. It was coming now—and he felt just as helpless as dead Darth Nihilus before the onslaught. Like a deep thirst inside of him would need to be slaked. And soon.

_I will make the galaxy burn for my people who were supposed to be free—_

The clans were not free now. Oerin had seen the HoloNet broadcasts—spotty and irregular but still transmitting these past few weeks. The clans were fighting the Emperor’s own war basiliks—or an equivalent. Another self-repairing, autonomous fleet.

Adversaries worth destroying. But not for _her._

“She’s hiding her face by design?” Meetra turned, all black hair and yellowing eyes. Her caff skin looked sickly. The red star on her cheek gleamed with sweat through darkening hints of Sith corruption. “Whose design?”

Oerin tried to laugh but it came out a wheeze. “Does she make you forget every time? She does that, you know. Mother’s design. Our _mother._”

“I hardly knew her.”

“But she knew _you._ I thought we’d broken free, but she’s still there.” _How?_ Oerin had no idea. His mother’s ability to cloud their minds should have died with her body, but it had not.

There was a flicker of something in her madwoman’s eyes. "Perhaps, but our mother's not omniscient, Oerin, even if she did manage to cheat death. Again."

"She is, more so than us. And we are part of her plan." Oerin knew it in his aching, shriveled bones. He gestured to the balcony, the world beneath their feet, the Academy they’d revived—to all of it.
Meetra laughed. “She may believe that. But our mother’s plans misfired all the time. I have proof. Look.” She bent over the HK's brain-guts, and slid two modules to one side. There was a whirring noise and ragged images flashed through the air, whine of voices at the wrong speed. “Bao-Dur managed to get into the HK’s core by running a subroutine with Remote to feign sentience.”

"So?” Revan had sent the droid to look for Davad Arkan, and failing that, to her dear master Arren Kae. Mother again.

Perhaps Mother had whispered in Revan's dreams and told her to do it because she wanted a Hunter Killer droid herself. Oerin wouldn't put it past her.

"There's a lot of information in the thing's core. Archives about the Mandalorian wars, messages for Revan’s son… information about Malachi D’Reev, our mother and the Emperor… details about a plague, the Rakatan computer network….” Meetra shrugged. "The last recording is a message that Revan made for our mother. Would you like to see it?"

“Yes.” Why not?

“I knew you would.” When Meetra smiled he could see that some of her teeth had gone bad. She barely noticed the ache in her jaw, but Oerin did. He savored it.

The holographic image showed a Revan nearly bald and gaunt, with shadows under her eyes.

“Master Sunrider—” the voice began.

“Sheris took much better care of that body, before,” Oerin joked.

Meetra blinked. “Sheris? What about her?”

“That body.” His attempt at a leer was unfortunate and would have gotten him smacked in Mandalorian company. “I’ve seen all of it, you know. We were…” he felt his voice trail off. Were he still clan and alive, he would have blushed to say such a thing, even to a sister.

Seen but not had. If he could do it again, he would have had her.

“You have not been my master for years, but I suspect I still follow the path you set for me.” The woman on the recording—Sheris or Revan—drew a deep breath. “If you are seeing this now, Master Sunrider, it means Davad Arkan has failed in his efforts to destroy the Emperor. Him… and that puppet son of yours.”

"Puppet son? Hah! What does she think she is?"

“Sheris was my friend. Revan was not.” Meetra had said this before, as if it mattered. “Revan left a message for Knight Arkan as well. It is mawkish.” She made a face.

“I kissed that mouth and now it slanders me?” Oerin's chuckle rattled what was left of his intestines. “When she was Sheris Darkstar she was much nicer!”

“Sheris was my friend,” Meetra Surik repeated. “Revan took her like she takes everything—”

“Shhh!” He held up a flaking hand.

“If you are seeing this, master, it means I failed.” Those lips that had whispered sweet nothings in Oerin's ear pursed and scowled now. “If you are seeing this, know you must end him. By any means necessary.”
“Do you think she means end you?” Meetra asked Oerin.

“I rather think she means the Emperor of the Sith.”

"I know. I was wondering if you did."

Rev rattled on about a Rakatan mind prison she'd failed to find that could stop the Emperor. Meetra yawned discreetly and sat down at the workbench. Oerin was having more and more trouble moving on an incline; so he stood where he was, joints aching, the stabbing evidence of his decay all-too-present in every cell of his body.

“All my life, I think, it has been you. Maybe even before Tenebrae.” That inimitable voice of hers cracked. (Revan’s inimitable voice was, in fact, often imitated. At this point, there were more vids of Rev's life than Oerin's grandmother.) “Always you. All of my life you've been guiding my steps. Whispering in my ear, manipulating me—” Rev broke off, and wiped her eyes, rather uncharacteristically. “You put me in this empath's body... why? Did you think you could control me, or was I merely another cast-off like Surik or Davad? I failed... but I also took my revenge. Your precious pawn is dead. The mindwiped shell with my body... the body you wanted for yourself... I destroyed it. You once taught me the weakest pawn can change the board and I have. You will never posses her strength. I've seen to it.” Her hand reached to her head and then fell back again, resting in her lap where it joined the artificial one, clasping the false fingers with flesh as if for comfort. “You started this war. You brought the Empire to our gates. End it.” The woman folded her arms, almost defiantly. “If I fail, you must, because there is no one else.”

The holoimage fizzled out abruptly. Oerin noted the date—more than four months had passed since Malachor.

“I think things did not go according to plan.” Oerin wanted to laugh, but Meetra startled him by giggling herself. If the HK’s head on the wall had started speaking, Oerin would have been less surprised. "But is Rev truly dead? I could have sworn I sensed—"

Mere hours ago. A scream across space.

“You did not see?” His sister laughed again. “And you claim to know Sheris so well? She's such a bad liar! See her hands?”

“One of them is fake,” Oerin told his sister. “And...?”

“Sheris always clasped her hands when she was lying,” Meetra said. “Just like that. But what is she lying about? The Rakatan mind prison? Perhaps it’s a trap... for our mother.”

“Or, perhaps dear Rev—the real one—isn’t dead.” He thought of the woman who had rescued him from Manaan as the real one even if the truth was more complicated. “The woman in your dreams—the one in that black and red room is our Mother. I am sure of that.” Oerin did not dream, but there were times when he looked down at the repaired ships, the assembly of Blades he had whispered to return to them and wondered what it was all for. In his conscious mind he was merely collecting the army that should have been his birthright—but knowing dear Mother there would be more to it than that—

Why am I here? Why am I calling them? Some were more stubborn than others, but they all returned in the end—shattered Blades but still obedient. And with their return they brought more ships and crews and weaponry. He and Meetra had even begun to assign them ranks like in days of
old. New blades, and more fodder, forged for a new galaxy.

The ancient Academy beneath his feet now hummed with life and purpose. But… whose purpose? For the war outside? Oerin thought from all reports the Sleeper ships were doing an excellent job ravaging the galaxy on their own. Why did they need his help?

Did Mother oppose them? She had wanted the Sith Emperor destroyed. And so he had been. By his own fleet.

"I know who she is." Meetra seemed preternaturally calm. "I know she is Vima Sunrider. I know she is our mother. I know what she tries to do." She picked up the holorecording. "What I find significant in this recording is her defiance. Whoever this woman is—Revan or Sheris—she lied to our mother. She defied her. Her temerity is…” Meetra seemed to be stumbling for words. "...an inspiration."

"Are you inspired enough to help me kill Mother again?"

"I would hate for Mother to die alone." Meetra walked to her desk and picked up a piece of the Hunter Killer droid. "I hate Revan, too. Poor Sheris. She was my friend."

Oerin didn't hate either of them, but if they were between him and his mother…. "You seem to have something in mind." All he had were dreams.

"I do. But first tell me: you do sense Revan? The true Revan? That is why you think she's not dead?" Meetra looked at him and her head tilted. There was more cunning and less madness in her gaze than he expected. "I thought I sensed something myself this morning—a flash of power—and then gone."

"I taught her how to hide myself." Oerin shrugged. "That I sense nothing now means nothing." All of my life you've been guiding my steps, Rev (or Sheris) had said that of Mother. And she wasn't the only one the woman controlled. Even the freedom of death had not freed him from Mother's clutches. And Mother, as Brianna had told them, had acquired a new body for herself—possibly two—

She could have done that for Oerin. But she had not—instead she had shaped him to be this creature of pain.

"If Revan failed to destroy the Emperor, Mother must have another plan." Meetra paced back from the window, pivoting toward her chamber's divider; the rooms beyond where Oerin knew her minions still slept. "Perhaps that is why I had my tech build a second mass shadow generator, twin to the one that destroyed this planet. I dreamed I should."

Oerin’s laughter was as hollow as his ribcage. "You don’t say."

"I do." Meetra's eyes were as dark as space. "Perhaps we should bring it to our mother."

"Is that what Mother wants? For us to bring her a superweapon?" He should be angrier, Oerin thought, to be used. But the pain of the galaxy swamped his senses. Someday—sooner than not—it would be all that he could hear.

A slight smile softened Meetra’s expression, one that made Oerin reassess her. Not a simple madwoman, then—not at all. “I do not think so. I haven’t dreamed of that.”

XXX
“Maybe it would help to talk about your nightmares.” When Kore had been little, he'd talked to Ache Kay about the bed dreams. It had helped.

“Not with you, kid.” Atton took another hit from the death stick he had smouldering over his drink. His cheeks sucked in as he inhaled, then exhaled. If Kore hadn't edged back he would've been hit with a blast of sour smoke. “Trust me. My dreams? Not for kids.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I'm growing up.” To prove it, Kore shoved aside his glass of blue milk and signaled the Twi'lek behind the bar. As usual, they were the last sents in the joint. “One fizz pop, please,” he said.

"No smoking in here." The Pink ignored Kore, going for Atton instead, grabbing the death stick and dropping it into his drink. The igniter crackled and sparked out.

“Hey!” Kore's protector wasn't much of one these last few weeks—not since he'd picked the winning swoop at twenty-to-one. He kept saying he was getting drunk a lot because of the new war, but Kore thought it had a lot more to do with Atton being rich enough now to afford to get drunk all the time. *The Twin Suns* was the only cantina that still let them in, and that was mainly because Atton kept betting on its white Twi'lek co-owner to win races, even though she'd only won a few times since the Big Score.

By Kore's rough count of credits in and credits out, they were gonna be broke again soon.

“You know how much death sticks cost?” Atton's indignant squawk would've been funny if Kore hadn't suddenly heard the Force yell really loud, sounding just like Mother.

“Oh!” His hand must've jerked because he knocked over the blue milk.

“You okay, kiddo?” The pink Twi'lek's name was See'raa. Kore had caught that when Atton had hit on her the first seven or eight times. She had pretty eyes, almost purple, and a nice smile. She pulled a scrubber out and wiped up the milk.

“Uh huh.” Kore nodded, because his voice was all muffled from the breather-mask Atton made him wear all the time now. It gave him a cool metal voice kind of like father's, but he felt self-conscious talking in public.


“Mmm.” Kore nodded back, and picked it up, threading the straw into his mask's mouth-hole.

"What about my drink?" Atton cleared his throat. "Least you could do is comp me a fresh one too."

"Sure." See'raa pulled out a bulb from under the counter and dumped the contents in another wide-rimmed cup, topping it off with a swirl from a green bottle from the top of the bar. "But this is the last. It's after closing already."

"We were thinking of leaving anyway." Atton took a long swallow and drained half the glass.

"Havta get up early in the morning," Kore said. "For school." It wasn't true, but Atton had told him to pretend while they were on Nar. Some kind of stupid, mandatory rule.

“You Human under there? Rattaki?” The Pink giggled. “Hard to tell with all that gear on your face.”

Kore nodded and she laughed again. She had a pretty laugh. Her sister was the whiteish purple one
who raced swoops. The White had a crooked smile, and one of her lekku drooped a lot, which made her hard to understand, even with Ryl-sign, which was all she used.

Maybe she couldn't talk.

Kore's Ryl-sign wasn't very good. They'd had electives when he was last an Eglatine, and he'd picked Aqualish, which had not been useful on their run across the galaxy, as things turned out.

“I gotta piss.” Atton stood up and stood there, like he was waiting for Kore to come with him. Usually, Kore would, because there was safety in numbers, but right now he was safe. Nobody was left in the cantina and nobody messed with the Twin Suns anyway. They had taken out two Hutts, people said. “Well?” Atton grabbed Kore's arm when Kore just shook his head and didn't stand up. Atton's grip wasn't hard, just hard enough to get Kore to follow, except he didn't want to.

“You know where the fresher is, Rand.” Pink frowned. “I'll watch the kid.”

“I'm okay here, Atton, I promise.” Kore glanced up and nodded again from under the brim of the construction-hat Atton had also insisted he wear. “I don't have to piss.”

“We're a package deal, remember?” Atton reached for Kore's arm again, but the Pink put her hand there first.

“I said,” she said in a soft, kind of scary voice that reminded Kore a little of Mother, “I'll watch the kid.” The Twi'lek looked from one of them to the other, a little frown on her face now. “Got a problem with that?”

Atton snorted, raising his hands like he was surrendering. “Nope.” He shot a glance at Kore. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Kore nodded. He knew what Atton meant. Kore had Father to warn him if trouble was coming. Atton might not know about Father—at least—but he'd learned to trust Kore's instincts.

Like when they left Peru-agas Station because Kore had a funny feeling (and that lady had tried to kill him). Then it had been blown up by the Ships like a week later. First casualty of the Machine War, which is what everyone was calling the War.

Pink slowly took her hand away from Kore's arm. Atton went to the fresher.

“Thanks,” Kore told her. “He can be a little overprotective.”

“Hmm… Let me ask you something…” See'raa hopped her butt up on the bar, and adjusted the vibrosword on her hip so that it splayed straight across her knees. “Personal question if you don't mind. That guy… he your father?”

“Yes?” Kore lied, but there must be a trick to lying because the Twi'lek just shook her head, frowning more.

“Right. If he's your father, I'm a Wookiee.”

“You're very pretty for a Wookiee.” Kore felt his face heat up like it was going all red under the mask.

“And you have pretty eyes,” she said back. “What I can see of 'em under those goggles... but I gotta wonder… a man like that… you being a nice kid... would you like to get away from him?”
“Yes.” And feeling Mother come back made Korrie hope she'd end the War soon. “But my father says I should stay with him for now.”

“Did your father sell you to him?”

Kore blinked. It took him a few secs to think of why anyone would do that. “Isn't selling sents illegal here?”

“Nope.” Her lips pursed together, and her lekku twisted around her neck. “Employment contracts, they call it. Hutts are fine with it.”

“My father wouldn't need to sell me. He was rich!”

“Was?” Her brow ridge raised.

“But he... he got—he died.”

“That's sad.” See’raa rolled her head back and straightened, tossing a few empty bulbs of beer to the white one, who'd come out of the back room. Her lekku moved and the White's moved back, but fast and all Kore caught was 'kid' and 'trouble.'

“I am not trouble,” he told her.

“But are you in trouble?” Pink lowered her voice. “Tee'rea and I help kids in trouble sometimes. Find fosteres for em... if you want to be someplace safe—”

“There's a war,” Kore told her. “There's nowhere safe.” See'raa ought to know. Just before they came to Nar this cantina had been all bombed and stuff. The new place was still under construction, half the walls made of flimplast and temp-boards.

“Some places are safer than here. The Awakened Ones might come back. ” See’raa’s lekku twisted and she glanced up. The big HoloNet screen was playing the News, which was all about the War. A big map of the galaxy, with X’s over the planets that had been decimated and another grid that showed the number of Machine Ships left. More than half of the big Machine fighters were gone now, but that still left two hundred and fifty-six. Except Kore knew that number was wrong, too. Father said this was all propaganda. That none of the numbers were real. Kore had deduced that meant there were probably a lot more Machine Ships than two hundred and fifty-six.

**OSSUS,** the screen read. **Population 5,673.**

“Awakened Ones?"

"The war ships. They were sleeping now they're awake." See'Raa winked at him. "Just because they're machines doesn't mean they're not alive."

"You mean the Machine Ships might come back? Here?"

"Yes." See'raa tapped her fingers on the bar. "They didn't finish wrecking our installation, so I'd lay the odds at about ten point three to one."

"Oh." But Kore didn't have that funny feeling. Not here. Weird, but in the Force it felt okay here. At least now. "I think we'll be okay."

"Your funeral." She shook her head. Her sister signed something Kore knew. The word for 'stupid.'

Atton had told Kore that you should never argue with people who made your drinks, so Kore
changed the subject.

**OSSUS: Population 2,124 (Updated)** is what the screen read now.

"That's not that many people, at least." Kore offered, pointing at the number. "And maybe some made it to shelters or got away. I read in school that Ossus got real messed up ages ago, in the Cron Cluster implosion. Nobody really lived there anyway."

The numbers dead weren't real, just like the ship numbers. Not til they had a chance to be counted by the Senate. Everyone said the numbers might even be lower, that there might be sents still alive. But it had been hard to get rescues to the planets that had got attacked. The first time sents sent in rescue ships, to Levan, the Sleepers came back. The second time the Fleet Mercy Corps had wanted to send rescue ships, Mother had made them send her ships instead.

That had been the victory of Wahgu—when they started putting her fake name out there. Kore couldn't say he was proud to anybody but Atton, but he still was. Every planet had evacuation plans now. Every sector had drills. Even here in Huttspac, where the Machine Ships had already been.

They never hit the same place twice—not when they left for good. So it was safe- *ish* here. Kore was glad of that.

"The Awakened Ones are beginning to mitigate losses. Calculate risk." See'raa told him. She pulled something out of her pocket. A small square, with a blinking light in the middle. Her sister had come up on the other side of the bar and was standing next to Kore now, on the other sjde. "Know what this is?"

"Retinal id-scan." Kore averted his eyes even though she wasn't holding it up to him and he had on goggles that scanners couldn't see through. Gloves, too. Just in case, Atton had said. "Why?"

"Your partner's coreslime," See'Raa said. "I can't prove it, but I ran a check on his retinas with this. Man doesn't have a print in the system. Sents wiped from galactic databases are deep in poodoo—takes a real hack to scrub someone that clean." She paused. "Plus, we didn't do it for him. That means he's either coreslime or some kind of spook."

"So? My father told me to stay with him. He's a good chap."

*I don't like how many questions she's asking.* Father was right there suddenly, thick in Kore's head.

"Shap?" See'raa gave the word a hissing sound.

It was the white one that giggled with her mouth open and no sound. Her lekku moved but too fast for Kore to catch.

The Pink seemed to notice his confusion. "Tee'raa said, that proves Atton's not a Jedi poster boy, right?"

"I *know* he's not a Jedi poster boy." *Father was, once.* "They don't *have* Jedi poster boys anymore."

No, now all they had were posters of some Human lady with a red star on her face and long black braids and the words, 'Have you seen the Last Jedi?' But even those posters were getting rarer and rarer, because now they were calling Mother (who was pretending to be Sheris) the 'Last Jedi,' instead.

Kore glanced back up at the vid-screen. More planets now.

**TELOS. Population 9,991**
D'QAR. Population 22,382,119

Bigger. D'Qar had been a bad one. But that meant they'd definitely have had some shelters and they said people survived in shelters all the time!

“I wasn't talking about actual Jedi,” See'Raa snorted. “They're all losers—the good ones all died.”

Kore made himself shrug. “Which ones did you like? When I was little I used to collect the trading cards.”


"Star Forge crew, huh? What about Knight Revan? She's part of the set, too." Mostly people wouldn't forget that.

TARIS. Population Unknown.

See'raa snorted. "Duh, but was she a Jedi?"

"The best one."

"Kids," she snorted.

Tee'raa was staring up at the screen for Taris. She gave a little sigh.

“Can't you talk?” Kore asked her. He'd been meaning to ask her before but he'd never had the chance.

She shook her head. And her lekku moved. He caught the words for 'you' and 'mouth.'

“She wants to know if there's something wrong with your face."

Careful, Mal. Father warned him.

But Kore didn't seem the harm in saying. “No, but the people who are looking for me are bad. Atton's helping me stay away from them.”

This seemed like a job for Father, but he was still mostly far-off in the Force.

Did Mother just wake up? This lady's asking a lot of questions!

Yes, Mal— Father was really faint, as if a bunch of stuff was happening someplace else. Probably helping Mother fight more battles. Not that she needed his help, Father had said. Just that he needed to be there for protection.

“We can help more than that sleemo.” The Pink held up her hands. “Not saying you need it! How old are you?”

In Nar rotations Kore was thirteen so he used that. “Thirteen.”

“Standard?” See'Raa looked impressed. Behind her the White traced a lekku-sign that meant long, maybe. Or tall.

“Yeah.” Wasn’t true. He was almost twelve in six months back home. But Korr decided to push it more. “Almost fourteen.”
“That's not as grown up as it seems,” the Pink said. She was taking him seriously. "Let us help."

“People of the Republic,” her voice interrupted, coming from the vid-screen. “I wanted to bring you the latest war briefing myself—”

“Ugh.” See'Raa tapped the controller she had strapped to one of her lekku and Mother's image flickered out.

Behind her, the white rolled her eyes and made a sign that meant something rude. Kore wasn't sure what, except the one Twi'lek Eg had been suspended over it.

“Put that back on. I want to see! I'm a paying customer. You have to let me.” Atton had been gone a while. Kore hoped he wasn't asleep in the stall again. Sometimes deathsticks and alcohol were a bad combination.

_Mal? Where's your Blade?

Father meant Atton, not the knife in Kore's pocket.

_He had to take a piss._

_Don't say piss._

_He had to urinate. Where is Mother? She woke up? Is she coming to get me? Are they both coming?_

_Not... yet. Father's presence faded a little, like he had to go. Be careful._

The White signaled something at the Pink.

"Hrm..." See'Raa raised her brow ridge. "I'll put HoloNet back if you take off that mask, stranger. My sister wants to make sure you're not branded."

"Branded?" Kore didn't get it.

"Trafficked kids get branded. Sometimes with chips you can't even see." See'Raa pulled out another scanny thing the size of a deck of cards. "I use this to check."

Her sister got up and sauntered away heading to the fresher. Tee'raa's hand was on her sword.

"Atton's nice!" Kore called out. It was a lie but not really. "Wait! You can't kill him! He might kill you!"

_Father? He didn't want to panic him when he was busy. Maybe... maybe she just has to take a piss too._

"Take off the mask so we can check you," See'raa ordered. "If you're not on any missing lists, and you're not marked up like property, there's no problem. Right?"

"I... might be on a missing list. I told you already there are bad people after me—after us—didn't I say that?"

Tee'raa had vanished behind the fresher doors.
I don't know what these Twi'leks want. Father sounded puzzled. But there is something odd here. Do not take off your mask, Malachor—

Don't let them hurt Atton!

The Blade can handle himself.

Maybe. But Father was just a ghost. And See'raa was right there. She had always been nice to him. She thought Kore was fourteen. And she didn't seem evil—just a little funny in the Force. Not like a Sith, through.

Kore fumbled with the clasps and his mask came right off. Then the hat. And the goggles.

"Huh. No brands." Those purple eyes blinked at him, and she reached for the scanner. "But you do look familiar."

"That's because I'm famous." Kore shrugged. "You don't recognize me cause I grew up. And I dye my hair now." It wasn't in a top knot anymore and now it was all black. Atton had made him cut the topknot off.

“Really?” The Pink turned up the sound again. The scanner beeped when it covered Kore's face. Didn't hurt, just a bunch of white light.

Mother's voice on the screen was soothing, too. Even if it wasn't real.

“... Telos. Forty-two of the Sleeper ships were destroyed. Our Mandalorian allies suffered heavy losses, but in the end, the day was won by Republic strength, Republic might, and Republic ingenuity.”

"That Jedi did that," Kore told See'raa. "She was the best Jedi! No Republic in-geniuses. Her. Her name's Sheris. She's, um, she's my friend."

"Son of a schutta! Malachor D’Rreev?" There was a lot more cursing as See'raa figured out who Kore really was. Some of it in languages Kore didn't know. "That recording on Coruscant… Tee'raa! Tee'raa!! Get your butt in here!" See'raa brought her fingers to her lips and blew.

The White came in at a run. One side of her face was pinkish red, like she'd been punched. She didn't have her sword anymore.

Kore's chest had a funny feeling. He didn't think Atton was dead, but… he couldn't tell. Atton was really good at hiding when he wanted.

Then Atton came in right behind. He had Tee'Raa's sword in one hand. His own blaster in the other. "Step away from the kid!"

Oh, Mal. For a ghost, Father sounded tired. What have you done?

I think it's okay. Kore told Father. I have a good feeling about this.

He wanted to.

Mother's voice was still talking, even if it wasn't her.

"... seek shelter at the lowest level of your municipality. Bring a heavy object with you, like a droid leg or a hydrospanner! You may need to bang on conduits to get the Mercy Corps'
attention, but make no mistake, our allies forces will find you! We will keep you safe...."

"Don't hurt them, Atton," Kore ordered.

Tee'raa had stopped dead in front of Kore, eyes wide.

_M-A-L-A-C-H-O_R_, the White signed. Kore got it because he knew the Ryllese alphabet. Grandfather had sent him for dancing lessons and the Twi'lek teacher said their language was like dancing.

"You recognized me!" It was kind of weird, finally being recognized after hiding for so long and not allowed to be. "Your sister didn't."

Tee'raa signed something so fast Kore couldn't catch it. Something-something slow. Or lazy?

See'raa made a rude noise with her t'chun, snapping it on the bar.

Behind her, Atton still had his blaster cocked. Slowly he slid it back into the holster. "You're lucky I'm a fan of your swoop-racing, babe." He was grinning suddenly, like they were all friends. His grin reminded Kore of a hungry rancor. Not that he'd ever seen one, except in pictures and vids. "Kore? You want to put your mask stuff back on? Go back to the hotel? I'll meet you there."

The hotel was a dumpster in one of the ref sectors. Atton had cleaned it really well. It didn't stink, but it didn't have a fresher, either. It wasn't a hotel.

"And if you're trapped in an area with exposed electrical circuits, make sure to avoid water...."

"Why?" Kore asked. See'raa had promised to help. The Twin Suns lived beneath the cantina. He bet they had guest rooms. "These are the good guys."

On the screen, Mother was still talking, repeating her speech in Rodese. She cycled through languages sometimes, so everyone could understand her.

"He wants you to leave, Malachor, so he he can kill us." See'raa said. "Doesn't want you to see."

_Go, Mal_. Father sounded tired. _It's for the best._

It was not. "You're not allowed to kill them, Atton Rand!"

"Kid…?" Atton shifted his weight, like he'd shown Kore to do to get ready for a fight. "Let me handle this."

Tee'raa's lekku kept saying stuff that Kore didn't understand.

"...iodine. Used _kolto paks_ can also be tied together to make a flotation device. In case of bacteriological contamination, please self-quarantine for a period of at least three of your planer's daily cycles. Alert local authorities...."

"That's not really General Sheris Darkstar on the HoloNet. _Or_ Revan," Kore told them. "Did you know that? I bet none of you knew that! But maybe she recorded the words and they used them later?"

Kore thought when Mother herself used to give speeches (in the beginning of the war when they were shorter) it hadn't looked like she believed them. But this version seemed like she believed.
She kept smiling and nodding.

That's how he knew she was fake.

"... rescue coordinators may have Imperial or Mandalorian sigils on uniforms, or armor! This is perfectly normal. Do not panic. The Allied Mercy Corps is made up of three United forces. The Mandalorians are our allies—"

“Right,” See'raa muttered. Her voice sounded in awe. "We know that thing on the screen’s not Revan. You're right about that."

Was she in awe of him? That was a funny feeling.

"I am an ordinary kid, but I am also Malachor D'Reev," Kore announced. "Revan and Malak's only son. Traveling in disguise with my Human chaperone. I used to have a droid chap, but he blew up. I met some Mandalorians, once..." he added, because Mother was still talking about them. "Or twice. They're pretty cool. Do you know any?"

"One." Tee'Raa motioned to her sister, and they both moved forward at once, until they were one on each side of Atton. "Haven't seen him in ages."

“...and stay safe out there! I am Padawan Sheris Darkstar, The Last Jedi, and this is your war report. May the Force be with you. May it keep us all safe."

The fake Holo of Mother stood up from the desk with her, fake gold hand and the real one. Kore thought the desk was probably fake too. When he'd been a kid, sometimes Grandfather had taken him down to the HoloNet studios. They had all sorts of props that didn't look real. Maybe the fake version of Mother wasn't really in space. Maybe those stars behind her were fake too.

Maybe Mother wasn't in real space, except Father said she was out there fighting for them all. Now both of his mothers would be fighting again. Two Jedi Revans.

"My mother is pretending to Sheris Darkstar, but that's not her," Kore added. "But she is a hero."

Kore thought he shouldn't try to explain how she was two people. He'd tried with Atton once and the man had made him take antibiorix in case Kore was delirious.

Atton snorted. "Oh, kid." He was hanging back, like he wasn't sure what to do, like he didn't want to fight the Twin Suns. He looked like he was drunk. And tired. Too many death sticks.

Another announcer was speaking now, not the fake version of Mother or Sheris. Tee'raa fiddled with a button on her half-shirt and the screen went dark. The room got really quiet except for everyone breathing. Atton's sounded harsh.

"I don't think that was Sheris Darkstar, either," See'raa chimed in. "Or any other organic. Did you see the edges of her hair? Striation. Good fake... but that's an all animated. Just saying lines the mucky mucks say to say." The Twi'lek snorted. "Ya know, I could do a better job myself."

Her twin the White didn't look happy. Her lekku flicked something rude.

See'raa glared back at her and then there was no noise except their lekku kinda clapping at each other while they argued. Kore caught words like 'kill,' 'ship,' and 'water.'

Is Mother okay, Father? Are they both okay? Kore reached out.
They're… fine. Father sounded a little stressed and very far away. *Mal? You need to get out of there. Trust your Blade.*

Atton was circling so Kore sitting at the bar was in front of him. Tee'raa had picked up a sharp thing she used to chip ice-blocks with. And then See'raa drew her sword. Kore could see it all in the bar's curved mirror in front of him. He didn't know if he should turn around or not. If that would make it worse, or not.

"You guys don't have to fight!" Kore thought about alternatives, practicing his Jedi breathing so he didn't freak out. "I could pay you guys to be my chaps, too! You could all do it together." *I'd need credits. I could call Leeshy except Father said to stop calling her.*

"Malachor…?" The Pink's voice got higher pitched. Like she was trying to seem his age. "Funny story. See… I'm Mission Vao. Revan's friend. The one from the Star Forge mission? That Mission?"

"No. She's a droid. I *know* her."

Yes. Tee'raa's lekku flicked. *Truth.*

"New body," See'raa was holding her blade up toward Atton and he'd turned toward her. But Tee'Raa had the ice thingie. "It's a little complicated. The droid is another version of me. I know that might seem hard to swallow—"

"No, I get it," Kore said. "But you need to prove it."

"You two still sleeping in the ref sector?" See'raa's gaze snapped to Atton. "In an alley? Because the Serroco boys put a price on your head, tonight, Atton. Or should I say… 'Jaq'? We set it up when we thought you just a *regular* kid peddler."

"Hey now, I'm your sister's biggest fan." Atton spread his hands out, and Kore put his hand in his pocket, reaching for the knife the man had given him. Not that he'd want to hurt See'raa or Tee'raa —just—

*Always be prepared.* That's what Atton had taught him.

"And I don't want any trouble," Atton continued. "I just want the boy. I have to keep him safe."

"He does a good job," Kore chimed in

Tee'raa shook her head.

"He's my chap!" Kore added. "I told you. And I'm Malachor D'Reev! You have to do what I say!"

*Mission Vao? In Kore’s head, Father sounded really confused. There is darkness here. You need to leave.*

*But they're friends. They had always been nice to him.*

"And on the war front," a Rodian announcer continued brightly. "Our brave forces have met the Machine Ships in the Byss System. At this time, we advise all sentients in nearby sectors to shelter in place. Orderly evacuations of Byss have commenced—"

*Is Byss where my mother is? Are they both there?*
"The kid isn't wrong." Atton had holstered his gun. Now he had the laser whip in his hand that wasn't holding the sword. "I do a fantastic job. But I don't like killing women."

Only, somehow, Kore knew that was a lie.

"Be careful!" He begged them all, pulling out his knife. "You don't want to fight! You don't need to!"

"Come with us and we won't have to." See'raa extended her hand. "Know that droid version of me? The T3? She keeps trying to crack into our systems. Something about a message from your mother. I could talk to her. I could get you back to your mother."

"Mother's busy! She's fighting that war!"

Yes… Byss. Father’s voice was faint, now.

Tee'raa's headtails whipped patterns in the air fast as lasers.

"Did he get you addicted to spice? Your mother must be frantic." See'Raa looked like she was translating her sister's frantic lekku-signs. "Sleemo like this loser are all alike. You can't trust—"

"Leave him alone!" Kore wasn't that good with the Force but he made a fist with his not-knife hand and shoved.

Pink stumbled back. "Did you—"

Power, her sister signed. Or maybe that was the word for Force.

"You know, I used to hunt Jedi?" Atton ignited his whip. The smile on his face was scary. He didn't look drunk and tired anymore. He looked happy. "Much more of a challenge than two little girls."

"Who're you calling little—?" See'raa lunged forward.

Atton's whip cracked—

Father! Father was busy but Kore couldn't do this alone. “You have to stop fighting! Please! You have to do what I say—”

Xxx

After running the Republic blockade like a mynock from hell, Polla and Seiran had dropped the Genoharadan folks off at the first Free Station they'd refueled at.

Peragus Station, as it turned out.

In the weeks that followed, Polla had too much time to hope that Rulan and Rogere had made it off before the Machines hit; the same way she hoped the rest of Rulan's crew had made it off Kaas safe—off with the Mandalorians or whatever. Last thing she needed was Exchange blood on her hands… what, when the first news search she'd ran on her and Sei pulled up an all-points bounty issued by a certain life insurance company.

So when they landed on Deralia they were already coming in hot.

They had a few hours of a happy reunion with Ma and Da and Abasen before Ma cracked and fessed up that the Sith Emperor was in the root cellar. Sei probably had the right idea when he
said they should just shoot the man—but as it turned out, the Emperor wasn't in a man at all—just
some frightened old woman named Sydax from Chassna, who kept saying she just wanted to go
home and bake pies.

Polla wondered if she'd been a bad influence on her family. She couldn't blame the Butcher for
everything that had gone wrong.

And she had no idea how to make it right.

They had a few days of bliss before the war came. Just enough time for Polla to wonder if maybe
Ma and Da had cracked and the baker from Chassna in the root cellar was just... a baker. Just
enough time for Ma to stop asking about 'the other one,' and for Polla to start thinking maybe this
was it. This was their life: her feeding Abasen peamato stew life; her Sei learning how to knit since
they couldn't leave the house in daylight life; her morning, afternoon, and evening sex with Sei life
(wasn't that much else to do); their Ma and Da saying they were so happy to see them twenty times
a day life.

It wasn't bad. Beat shivering in an attic on Kaas and changing a comatose Dark Lord's diaper.

Sure, they were still fugitives. Along with insurance fraud, the Biscain authorities had a "person of
inquiry" post for a Polla Organa regarding their suns. They'd taken a full-page ad out in the
Derra City Star looking for her.

Crazy thing was, in the blurred holo-snap, Revan Starfire the Butcher could've been Polla.

The least, Polla told Abasen, whispering it in his soft little ear, the least Revan Starfire could've
done was actually win the race. Come in third? Nobody cared about third. Nobody would even
have noticed third... except for the slow-nova of the suns that was causing a system-wide
evacuation. Some people said it would be five years. Others said ten.

And when the war first came (to Deralia at least), it came quiet. Started with reports that the
wideband was out around Peragus Station. Then, a distress call from the tiny resort moon of
Endor. Footage from a casino cruiser before it's feed cut out in a haze of vacuum-snuffed fire.

Later, Polla would remember that she knew instantly what had happened, but that wasn't true. She
spent about twenty minutes watching the Endor newsvids with Abasen on her lap and the lady from
Chassna crying next to her on the couch. Polla couldn't tie her back up. She... she knew what it
was like, never knowing if you'd make it home again. Being someone else's prisoner.

She thought about telling the woman about all the good she'd done on Kaas—how she wasn't
really a bad person—and decided that wasn't gonna help.

All of it hadn't been good.

The newscasters were just putting together what had happened to Peragus with Endor... and with a
rumor that Mandalorians were invading Lehon. Sei came in. Then Da came back from the
retaining pond, and Ma from a Grange meet, maybe a little tipsy. There was a footage shot of the
Aleema, and a bunch of other ships. One of the announcers pointed out that some of them looked
like Sith ships, from the Jedi Civil War. Always on hyper-alert for an invasion, the Deralian port
authority closed the skies and blocked all incoming comm traffic.

They stopped tying the lady from Chassna up. She and Ma baked a few pies. Lavos went next, a
mining world that no one had heard of on the other side of the Rim. Then more footage. The same
Mandies and Sith ships stopping it. Only this time, a Republic ship came in. Some war hero named
Commander Cody. He and his men went down with all hands, plowing right into a Sleeper assault strike force.

That was the afternoon they all learned that Abasen was allergic to binkaberries. At least when they were cooked in a pie.

After that came a few days with just rumors. HoloNet reporters breathlessly reported that the enemy fleet could travel through hyperspace instantly.

"That's true," Polla admitted.

Her father had whistled. "Pollie, if there was a way to monetize that...."

"There's not." But she got what he meant. It was just too soon.

Then, victory at some rock of a world called Wahgu, where the Sleepers—or Machine Ships—as the HoloNet called them—were ambushed by a convoy disguised as ref carriers, lured into an asteroid belt, and then ripped apart by three allied fleets. The Republic, the Mandalorian... and the Imperial. No one said the Sith Fleet, anymore. 'Sith' had bad connotations. Darth Malak and all that. The Imperial Fleet's commander was a shadowy figure. They watched a tabloid broadcast speculate he was Darth Malak, come back from the dead and unkillable.

Polla knew it was Carth. Who else would be duty-bound enough to take the job? And if it had just been some Sith aristo, they would've used a name. If their comms still worked, she would’ve... thanked him or something.

The victory at Wahgu was the day General Sheris Darkstar gave her first speech to ... "an embattled galaxy"... the one about an alliance with Canderous Ordo, hero of the Star Forge, and the unnamed Imperial Admiral—

"We know his name," Seiran had muttered.

"Bad look for the Republic," Da opined. "Allying with the Sith?"

"Imperials," the lady from Chassna corrected. She'd admitted that things happened to her, like losing time; like finding instructions written on flimsi, but Polla still hadn't seen any sign of Tenny Bro possessing her.

(She never would, until that last night—when a red-eyed piemaker woke her up with a dark chuckle, demanding to know if she'd known Revan was frozen in carbonite all along. Tenny-Bro delivered what could have been a message from Carth. Or a trap. But by then, Polla had seen the footage from Zaalbar's homeworld. She'd been ready to shove the Butcher in the tomb herself—if that would stop the war.)

But before the last night, they just watched the news.

"Hurrah for the kriffing Republic." Polla was helping Abasen build a house of blocks, making sure to have to two exits and a reinforced cellar. She had started to sort through the piles of plasticate weapons for him to stash in said cellar... and not on the roof where he kept throwing the ones he wasn't trying to eat... but then she ran out of blocks. And the structure was a piece of crap anyway. One direct hit would take the whole thing down.

Aba began to cry and smashed the house apart with the crate it had come in. "Mahmuh!" He yelled. "No!"
Polla tried to pick him up and he punched her. “Do that on Kaas and you’d be dead,” Polla told him. It was supposed to be a joke, but it was true, and nobody laughed.

“He’s too little to play with that building set.” Molla reached for him. “We got it for Kore. Did I tell you he liked to be called Kore? He said Korrie made him sound like a baby. He... he kept telling us he was so grown up.”

It was the first time Ma had said the kid’s name. Her eyes leaked a little.

“This is hard,” Polla had said and then she started to cry, too.

It had been hard. It was all hard.

She didn’t want to think that was part of the reason she left. No, it had been because Da needed her and was gonna go no matter what—and she’d promised Carth she’d watch over the Hawk—

Xxx

"Crew of the Ebon Hawk, honorable guests... welcome to the System of Byss!" Polla tapped the ship-wide mic shut again and breathed a sigh of relief. They’d almost been overrun a few times, but the Butcher—Revan—kept doing something that made the entire flotilla of ships following them freeze, buying them a few minutes each time before the Sleepers started to chase them again.

Jedi, Polla thought, stealing a glance at the glowing figure slumped over the nav-board. She’d frozen the Sleepers, made hyperspace jumps blind... the woman was a fracking miracle. As she watched, the glow around Revan faded and the woman lifted her head, wiping her nose. She blinked at Polla and then turned pale. “Guh—"

“Bucket, Aggee!” Mission sang out.

The Wookiee cub barely got it under Revan in time before she started retching.

“Knew we shoulda cut you off before you drank that liter of CoruGin,” Polla said. First time Revan had puked, Polla had thought she was dying—before Mission explained that Revan always got sick on hyperspace jumps. That was fracked. Polla couldn't imagine.

Now, a wan smile was the only response as Revan’s eyes flicked to their sensor array. “In...incoming.”

"Hells.” Polla spun the yoke in a loop, twisting them down in a maneuver that Da called a flutterby death spiral. He’d also warned her not to use it because it was really hard on the sub-light repulsors. Maybe... but it worked real well for pushing velocity to get as much distance between them and the jump as possible.

"Tell 'em we're friends!” she yelled as a squadron of what looked like Republic fighters dropped abruptly between them and the biggest flagship the Hawk was making tracks for. "Shouldn't they know that already?"

"I did!” Mission was plugged into the console, softly beeping. "See? They're not shooting—not at us."

Revan had gone back to slumping over the nav-board glowing. She’d been glowing a lot the whole trip. A few times she'd babbled in a mix what sounded like Ancient Sith and nonsense, like she was talking to sents who weren't there.
As if she'd noticed Polla's stare this time, Revan lifted her head. "We... we're here." Her words were slurred. Maybe the carbonite freeze, or maybe whatever she was doing to those ships to slow them down was slowing her down, too. Her eyes rolled back up in her head.

“Yeah. Warned you to stop smoking spice,” Polla told her.

A faint smile showed that at least she'd heard the joke this time.

Abruptly the glow went out again. Revan's face grew taunt with strain. On the sensors, the armada of triangular ships chasing them froze and then spun, as if the nav systems had cut out all at once. A few even rolled, like they'd lost stabilizer control completely.

“What are you doing to them?” Polla had asked Revan before but never gotten an answer. Like the other woman was in another galaxy, too busy with her own important things to even talk to Polla. “How are you doing this?”

This time, Revan's eyes focused on her. She blinked a few times, and seemed to recover herself. “I'm hiding. It seems to throw them off.”

“How are you doing this?”

“I'm hiding. It seems to throw them off.”

“Can’t you just do that all the time?” Seemed practical. Then there wouldn’t be a crazed armada of ships chasing them.

“Then they’d go somewhere else. Hurt someplace else.” Revan rubbed her temples. "I wanted them to chase us here. But it's... it's harder to keep my shields up than it used to be."

“You’re disrupting their interface matrices,” Mission chimed in. “I think. Since Rulan cut me off from the Rakatan mainframe, I can’t tell, but that is the logical explanation. Oh! And I sent a text comm to Carth. He must be kinda busy because he just wrote back ‘Freck.’ Is that some kind of code?”

Revan smiled. She looked at their sensor display, which was now going nuts as the Allies carved up Sleepers. "Kinda. He looks busy."

"The madclaw ships are dying," Zaalbar pointed out. "You've drawn them into a kinrath web."

“There’s your solution.” Since they were no longer being chased, Polla put her arms behind her head and leaned back in her chair, watching as the Hawk’s sensors lit up like a Lifeday Tree at Harvest Time. “Hide, then don’t. Hide again while the fleets clean up. Allied Fleets'll take care of the Sleepers, we’ll all live happily after, and you’ll help me get the Transgalactic Underwriters Guild off my back."

“Like get you a pardon?” That smile was suddenly real, maybe the realest expression Polla had ever seen the Butcher have. “For your insurance fraud?”

“And for Biscain. They’re trying to pin that sun nova thing on me. Plus the insurance fraud.”

“You might be overestimating my pull with the brass.” Revan’s top-knot flopped forward and she unraveled it. Looked like she’d had the tail tied with a piece of spare servo-wire. Polla surpressed a shudder. “I’m not even technically a person.”

“Who is?” Mission chirped. “Seriously, Polla Revan, relax!” She made a chuffing noise, decidedly
Wookiee-like.

"Technically, you're two. Her and me." Polla offered, feeling generous. Jedi. She'd seen the woman stop an attacking fleet. Make hyperspace jumps blind.

"Doesn't work with Coruscanti law."

"Then go someplace else." Polla had the crazy idea to suggest Deralia. Then she remembered her parents had lost the kid.

"I don't know if I can. Maybe when things… if things cool down." Revan grimaced. "Ever."

"Ebon Hawk!" Their speakers crackled, cutting in and out. "Fo … to … directed coord… Hunt. Immediately."

Behind them, three Imperial snakerisers had started carving Sleeper stew. Polla maneuvered more clearance between them and the explosions, but even so, the Hawk rocked with a barrage of debris hitting their sublight shields.

"Shields down to thirty," her father’s mic crackled from his place on their main gun. "Watch it! Get closer to one of the capitals so we can ride their deflectors instead—"

"Yeah… theirs don't look so great, either." The Great Hunt had a big chunk missing from its midsection and a glimmer of shields there to keep out the black; but that couldn’t be good. And behind it—

Polla blinked. Looming behind like a behemoth from hell was the Aleema, looking even worse.

Gang’s all here. A pair of Imperial snubs were working in tandem with a Mandalorian gunship and a squadron of Republic fighters. Their enemy didn’t seem to be fighting back—like whatever Revan had done was the equivalent of throwing a stun grenade in a pond to catch fish. A fitting fate for the unmanned ships who’d just tried to smear the Hawk across six systems in two hours, not to mention what they’d done to poor Kashyyyk….

The Wookiees on Kaas hadn’t known what had happened to Kashyyyk. Jasp and Polla had had to tell them. That conversation had been rough. (Revan had been glowing at the time, hadn't even blinked.)

"Ebon Hawk!" Another call, cracked through with signal noise. Loser Sleepers were trying to jam their frequencies again. "...made it… party! Dustil sensed… here... beautiful?"

Revan smiled. "I'm fine, Carth. Be careful out there."

"... are." Onasi sounded sure, what they could hear of him. "... careful too."

“They want a piece of me more than they want you, Flyboy.” Revan's brow furrowed harder, as if sitting there not glowing was really fracking difficult. She had the sleeves of that jacket pushed up and an ugly-looking scrape on her arm. She ran her fingers over it. "What I'm doing isn't gonna last forever. They're confused. You need to knock them out fast—"

"Now. Knock them out now. While they're confused. This will not last. Seize our advantage." A new voice—Revan's voice—came across on all frequencies, open channel, broadcasting to everything in the system. Including the Sleepers, like she didn't care who heard. Stronger signal than Carth's, coming through like a bell. "Burn them. Quickly."
"..Freckles? … sending... escort—"

"She can’t make it, Flyboy." Polla decided it was fine to interrupt their love-fest with the news she’d just realized. In between the explosions around them, the Republic flagship had sidled up to the smaller ship like it was gonna ask the Hawk to Sixthday tea. “We’re about to get tractored.”

“I can break us out! No problem—” Mission began, followed by a chorus of Wookiee roars and that kid Phylus Blais interrupting over the din crowding her cockpit that his sister was someplace nearby and he could feel her in the Force.

"Everyone shut up!!" Polla yelled, using her best Darth Revan command voice. To her surprise it worked.

"No, Mission." Revan’s head turned toward The Great Hunt, a puzzled frown still etched on her face. She didn’t look like she’d noticed the crowd. "Don’t pull us free. I need to be on that ship." Her gaze flickered to Polla. "Let me go in alone. I’ll make sure the tractor’s cleared. Get out of this system, soon as you can. Go home."

"I will not leave you, Polla Revan," Zaalbar growled. The Hawk rocked back and forth as the maglev beam locked on its thrusters, drawing them in.

"You will, Zaalbar." Revan turned toward him with a green-eyed glare and added something else in Shyriiwook. Over the din of everyone yelling at once again, Polla caught the words for family and fleas. And tree. Zaalbar whined, shaking his head, but the big guy obviously lost whatever argument they’d just had.

"All of you need to leave. Go home." Revan’s voice softened, and somehow everyone else got quiet. "There’s still arable land on Kashyyyk. You’ll be safe there. Or…” she looked at Polla. "Go to Deralia, Zaal, with her."

A cargo hold full of Wookiees on Deralia? Like that won’t attract attention. What are we gonna feed them? Rations on the Hawk were already low. There were shortages on Deralia now, too, because with the war everyone was hoarding crap in case they got invaded.

"Ship won’t make it home," Polla told Revan. "Or to Kashyyk." Was probably true. "We need repairs before we can do anything."

"Then go to the Aleema. Or that ship of Carth’s—"

"Why don’t you go there with us?" Polla had a bad feeling. "Bossypants is winning the war! I won’t let you kill her."

"I don’t want to kill her." Revan stared at her. Her voice softened. "Really, Polla. I don’t."

Maybe. "There’s three fleets out here and you want us to drop you off with the only one that you don’t have a husband on? Why? You think you’re gonna take over the Republic Navy all by yourself?"

Revan scoffed. "No. Of course not. Thought I’d marry High Admiral Rensha."

“Trandoshan alliances do not work that way, Polla Revan—” Zaalbar’s growl broke off when Revan chuckled.

Polla snorted. “Could get me a pardon, then. Rensha has a lot of pull with the Senate.”
"That’s what I’m counting on—"


Revan’s smile faded. “Don’t worry about it, Mission.”

"Have you ever considered sending in an astromech droid? No one ever suspects the astromech droid."

"They'd suspect you, Mission. You're famous. Remember?" Revan reached out and tapped her dome.

Polla tried another intervention. "How do you even know who's on that ship? For all we know, Bossypants is just broadcasting from there. But she could be anywhere. She could be on fracking Coruscant—"

"Malak told me." Revan's voice turned serious. "His ghost told me. And… some others.. Other ghosts. They showed me. I want you guys out of there because it isn't safe. There is a very powerful Sith on that ship. Not Dar'Revsn. Not the Emperor. Someone who can manipulate thoughts. Memories. Someone who could make you eat your entrails and think it was a cunning plan you invented because you hate to cook."

It figured. Another fracking Sith. Polla was tired of them. "If that Sith’s so powerful, how come the other Jedi don’t—"

"There are no other Jedi." Revan bit her lip. "She killed them all."

"What?" That was impossible. Sure, Polla had heard about Katarr and how the galaxy had been looking for Knight Meetra Surik, a woman the vids called 'the Last Jedi,' but Surik was just a cheap Revan knock-off, and there'd been so many Jedi. The ‘Last Jedi’ was just a turn of phrase. “They can’t all be dead!”

"Not yet. They're being hunted. I knew… knew before. But on Dromund Kaas I saw… I had a vision. The Sith Lord on that ship wants them dead because she's trying to destroy the Force."

"Uh, Sis?" Mission broke in. Polla wondered if Da was still listening in from his gunnery. "Had any new head injuries lately? Taken any funny-tasting food? You sound paranoid, even for you." She whirred. "Even for Sheris Revan, and she's really paranoid—"

"The Jedi's name is Vima Sunrider. My—Revan's—old master." Revan took a deep breath. "Remember that old schutta that Carth shot on the Aleema? That was her. Vima Sunrider."

"So it's her ghost on the Republic flagship? Should have just said so!" Polla believed in ghosts, now. She'd met Darth Malak. And then there was Tenny-Bro, the biggest ghost of all. "Dustil got rid of Darth Malak somehow—"

"Not exactly. She's Master Atris, now. She's in Master Atris—" Revan's voice broke off as the tractor attached, and their hull began to shake. "Just get out of here. Drop me off, then get out."

"I need to see my sister," Phylus interrupted. "I sense her presence and I need to see her now."

The kid Wookiee barked, and Zaalbar's girlfriend yowled something more about making sure all the cubs were safe before they left their branches. Oh. That was the other thing. Zaalbar had a girlfriend. They'd learned about that an hour ago on the ship, fleeing their doom.
Wookiees weren't quiet types.

"We just saved you, Revan," Polla pointed out. *Rescued you and then watched you save our asses ten times over.* "We're not gonna leave you."

"You must." Now that Revan’s hair was loose, she had it hanging in her face, hiding most of her expression. But her voice was tight with emotion and she was twisting the wire in her hands again, as if she was going to use that abomination to make another topknot. "I mean it, Deralian. Drop me off and go."

"My sister isn't on that ship—" Phylus said. "You need to take me to the other ship. I think the Mandalorian big one—"

"Polla Revan, you must know the vines before you make the bridge." Polla was pretty sure that's what Zaalbar's howls meant. He’d used the phrase with her before, too.

"Don't argue with her, Pollie," Da's voice from the gunnery below. "She’s got your hessi-head."

"She… highest woman. Madclaw to challenge her?" Zaalbar's girlfriend was growling in Polla's face.

A green eye appeared from behind a hank of black-brown hair, red at the roots. Revan’s hand twisted the strands up, holding them to the top of her scalp. She picked up the piece of wire—

—and Polla leaned across the board and grabbed it out of her hand before the Hero of the Star Forge could make another mess of Deralian tradition. "No," she snapped.

The roots of Revan’s hair were all red. It made the rest look ridiculous. It made her skin seem even paler, washed-out, a ghost. "Keeps it out of my eyes," the woman said, pushing the rest back from her face. "I don’t have anything else."

"Should have just asked." Polla pushed past the Wookiee and edged behind Revan. The woman flinched like a startled hessi but said nothing. Polla fished in her pocket and found a spare ribbon. Blessed by the Grass Priests and everything. Polla yanked Revan's hair into three tails, looping them into a knot and tying it with the blessed cord. The strands were finer than her own, crackling with static, clinging to her fingers. Looked a little sloppy. She wished she had a proper comb.

Revan didn't stop her. Those eyes of hers just looked up, head tilting up, eyebrows raising to follow Polla's face. "I mean it, Pollie. You’ve got to go."

Polla just shrugged. "Sweet you're worried about us, sis."

The other woman swallowed. "I don't understand why you came for me."

"Flyboy asked. Figured I owed him the favor."

"I see." A smile tugged the corner of Revan's mouth. "Are you gonna leave?"

"Sure," Polla lied. "No problem! We'll drop you off and go. I've seen enough Sith Lords to last a lifetime."

"Good." Their eyes locked. Revan’s looked too bright. "Sis?"

"An upgrade from Butcher, don't get technical."
"Be careful." Revan squeezed Polla's arm, a gesture that would’ve seemed normal coming from Da or Sei or Ma. It felt weird with her. The woman looked as if she wasn't sure about it, either. "I want you safe. You, and Zaal and… and everyone."

"Me?" Mission beeped.

"You'll outlast us all." The woman patted the Tee's dome.

On the viewer the Sleeper ships burned and—

Oh. Frack.

Pieces of one knocked their front deflectors down another ten per cent, just as the tractor beam pulled them into the Great Hunt's embrace.

XXX

Corporal Hoggin shot Ulic Qel-Droma, ending a former Sith Lord with a single disruptor bolt.

Carth Onasi shot Vima Sunrider and did the same.

Revan Starfire, who was in the body of Sheris Loran, shot Vima Sunrider, who was in the body of Atris of Echanis, and then—

—then she remembered nothing.

Had Vima frozen the bolt? Stunned her with a touch? Or had Revan’s finger frozen on the trigger before the blaster even fired—

My finger, Sheris had corrected.

But Sheris did not know either. Their next memory was of waking in a cell. Blue haze of a detainment field around them, in the larger expanse of a Republic brig. Weight of a Force collar upon their neck.

Compared to Tenebrae's prison The Great Hunt's was luxurious, albeit small. Revan was allowed (limited) HoloNet access. Her bed inflated every sleep cycle. The tiny fresher had a sonic, and the droid who brought her meals came at regularly scheduled intervals with officer-grade rations. Her interrogations were short and only twice daily, during which time Revan was escorted to Rensha's private bridge and, (under the smug supervision of the supposed Master Atris), asked a series of questions that Master Vima Sunrider would not (Revan suspected) want her to answer truthfully.

Indeed, it became something of a game, giving answers that Vima would despise… although it occurred to Revan on more than one occasion that perhaps Vima was the one directing Revan to give those responses… and not her own spite.

If it was so, she was helpless. Force restraints made her vulnerable to Vima's influence. Malak could be there, protecting her—or not—but Revan would never know.


“Mad with power.” Revan shrugged. “Shouldn't you ask why I allowed you to live?” Her lip curled with a defiance she was too numb to feel. "Perhaps I wanted you alive, as a weak adversary."

That was very rude, Revan. The Force collar locked around Revan's neck blocked Malak's advice,
but did nothing to stop Sheris from voicing her opinions.

We should try and placate them, she’d suggested by the third day. If Master Kae sees that we are on the same side—

Master Kae isn't her name. Do you even remember that?

Of course I do! Sheris sounded insulted. But we do need to please her. What good can we do Malachor from this cell?

With the Force collar on, there was no reassurance from Malak that their son was safe. If there was any mercy in the Force, Sheris's opinions would have been silenced too. They were not, Revan knew, because they came from her own mind.

But even without the Force at her command, Revan found comfort in the meditation exercises she had learned long ago. Learned twice; for when she let her mind be quiet she found her recollections going to Sheris's past nearly as often as her own. Her copy had led a quieter childhood than Revan's. There was a certain... certain comfort in that. Younger than Revan when she'd left her family, Sheris retained a plebeian bitterness about her abandonment that was almost refreshing.

Revan’s own relationship to her past was more complicated. There had never been time to grieve for the lost. Now, locked in her own prison of mind and memory, Revan often found her cheeks wet, and the names of the fallen on her lips.

Time passed slowly. Sometimes it seemed to not pass at all. Without the Force, Revan had no way of knowing about the war until three days after the Peragus Station fell.

That was when Kae—Vima—came to her cell, trailed by her two handmaidens. One carried a stack of white robes and a padawan's belt. Nether were visibly armed.

"I thought the threat would be against less than a dozen worlds," the woman began, without an apology—or reprimand. "Less than a dozen worlds before the Sleepers exhausted themselves. I assumed that only the worlds with Rakatan installations would be at risk—and half of them were in Wild Space, or within the Empire's borders."

"You assumed? Acceptable risk?" Revan lifted her head. She knew already. Vima only admitted a weakness when she needed something. "You were wrong."

The woman continued as if Revan had not spoken. "And so, we reinforced the Republic's defenses; began evacuations on Dantooine. Kashyyyk. Manaan—"

"You think I would have hesitated to lose less than a dozen planets?" Revan wanted to laugh, even if the joke ended as Vima's always did, with worlds in flames. "There are Rakatan installations on at least fifty inhabited worlds. Maybe more. Tenebrae could tell you which ones if he wanted—did you ask him?"

"The Toydarian has gone catatonic." Master Atris's face twisted with Vima's malevolence. "I have reason to believe he lost a large number of his bodies on Lehon. It appears he was stockpiling them there."


"Endor, Lehon and Lavos." The woman shook her head, making a clicking noise deep in her throat. "You may cross them off your list and give me the others. I will need you to write them all down."

"If Endor’s been hit, Wahgu might be next."

Master Atris’s eyes blinked. "Why?"

"The interface runs in processing chains. Different networks run different programs for the Infinite Empire. The Star Forge on Lehon was powered by Dantooine, Tatooine, Manaan, Korriban, and Kashyyyk. But there are other linked chains. And other processes."

"Ah. That makes sense." The woman’s eyes almost looked yellow in the light. "And how is Wahgu connected to Lehon and Lavos? Isn’t Lehon part to the Dantooine cluster?"

"It's a hub. Endor bridges off of it. Then Wahgu… then Taris." Revan stared at one of the two identical Echani, wondering if their master had left them with minds at all. "Since the destruction has already begun, I suppose we won’t have time for my public Coruscanti execution—unless you intend to skip the trial. They’ll raze Coruscant soon."

"No." The old woman in Atris’s body chuckled, and one of the Echani switched off the cell’s containment field. "We were never really going to execute you, ci’dika. Even the Last Jedi can be redeemed."

Revan let herself laugh in response. "Of course. Tell me, did Malachi learn his media tricks from you, or you from him?"

"Both," Vima’s smile on Atris’s face. "Long ago. Well before that wife of his. Long before Malak was born."

"I'd imagine he’d have forgotten your name by now, if I hadn’t killed him." Revan matched her careless tone. "Couldn’t have been Vima, then. Was it Nomi, or—"

"Get dressed." The woman turned her back and the Echani placed the pile of robes on the cell’s small table. "We can’t have General Sheris Darkstar defending the Wahgu mining colony in a prisoner’s jumpsuit, can we?"

"Remove my Force collar, first." The woman might twist words from Revan’s mind, but she still needed that mind—and, Revan suspected, its Force sensitivity. To help detect cloaked ships in each sector, if nothing else. "If you’re requesting my help, I’m not your prisoner."

"You had but to ask." Vima raised her hand and the infernal thing fell off. The Force rushed back, sweet as a mother’s song.

Red.

Malak. Help me, she will try to influence my mind—

I have been. We could just kill her. Now. A Sith Lord’s thought. Obvious. Blunt. Bludgeoning. Sometimes Revan had been able to forget what her husband had become.

She’s stronger than she looks.
So are you, with me.

"You have the most curious aura, of late...." Vima raised one of Atris's eyebrows. "But it is not always with you."

"Not as strange as yours." The woman pulsed with power. Vima had been strong, but Atris had not. Not like this. Revan frowned. "Shall we exchange secrets?"

"Not yet. Knowledge needs to be earned," the other woman said prissily. Rather more like Atris than Vima.

Xxx

The complement of armored guards in Senate regalia that came to escort Revan and Atris to the hangar bay to meet the Fragment might have been a compliment, under normal circumstances. But Revan thought their real reason for providing escort was the implied threat. High Admiral Rensha wanted Revan—and the woman Rensha thought was Master Atris—to know she had Senate backing for whatever she decided to do—with Revan, or the Fragment, or their allies.

The threat, Revan mused, might have been more effective if there was still a ruling House on Coruscant with any teeth, or if High Admiral Rensha was still in command of her own fleet—or her own mind.

From Atris’s smug expression, Vima held a similar opinion about this posturing pomp.

As they walked, the audex clipped to Revan's ear displayed a real-time projection of the battle for the Byss System in Ezzek's shorthand: the Republic were yellow X's, the Sleepers blue boxes, the Mandalorians red circles and the Sith were green crosses. Revan watched the wave of blue splinter and shatter with bitter satisfaction. Tallies of numbers streamed past her left eye, covered by a data-lens. The Sleeper's casualty reports. A rout.

Revan felt a smile tug at her mouth and quickened her steps down the corridor, forcing the others to speed up as well. Victory. For now.

Thanks to the Fragment, Sheris whispered. We should ask her how she hides herself so easily. And we should thank her—we should say the words. It is always nice to be appreciated.

I will. It was also thanks to the Fragment the Sleepers had woken in the first place. If I had truly died above Deralia, would the Sleepers have wakened then?

I don't know. They could have awakened when I arranged for your assassination just as easily. Sheris’s voice held an amusement that Revan recognized.

I thought of arranging for yours, too. The japes were a fragile peace between them. ‘Cracked from the same ice,’ was the Hothan expression for their commonality of humor.

Red? Malak's intrusion was perhaps meant as a further comfort, but he had chosen the wrong time.

How is our son, Mal?

He's fine. A brief hesitation. Perfectly fine.

She knew he was lying but the truth would not change her course.

I tried to warn Revan, he added. About who Master Atris really is. I tried to direct her to choose
another ship in the fleet to land upon—

She did not listen. Revan understood that.

I do not know if she heard. She flickers in and out of the Force. I think she heard. She is harder to reach than you are. She doesn't want me with her—

I do not want you with her. Sheris’s voice, still holding onto the innocence of envy.

"General Sheris, the remaining hostiles seem to be on the run." Rew Ekkumi glanced back at them, looking as if she resented being Rensha's mouthpiece.

Revan wondered if the woman would ever know how close she had come to dying. But Vima had let her live. And, more curiously, let her maintain her enmity for Revan. Why? It would have been so easy to make her loyal.

"The Corellia System will be next, then. Issue the orders to our allies now. Tell C"Tannis too, if he's conscious." Revan directed their own forces with a few eye-blinks, but her links did not extend to the Man'doa or Imperials, or to C"Tannis, still bound in the jar-sukth, the meditation chamber whose walls of Sith stone amplified Vima's power.

"Are you sure the Sleeper survivors will go to Corellia?" Vima's amusement was plain.

"Three moons and a planet gives them a great deal of cover… fairly sure, yes."

"You were sure about Malastare, yesterday."

"We have the routes mapped for both, so does it matter?" Revan bit back her irritation. "If not Corellia, than Malastare."

Give or take nine billion lives, Sheris whispered. Yes. It matters.

Malastare is almost uninhabited. Corellia will not fall. I will not let it.

The exhaust fans whipped a vaguely sulphurous wind through the air of the hangar deck. The infamous Ebon Hawk was still painted blue, with fresh scores from a firefight smoldering along its sides. Rensha had stationed her usual honor guard, the snipers in the scaffolding above.

The landing ramp descended, and with it, the sound of voices.

"I said to stay on the ship!"

A Wookiee's yelp, objecting. Another Wookiee telling the first to respect his life mate's command. The first Wookiee, objecting and saying the other was his life mate now, not the Human—

And then Fragment appeared, none the worse for her carbonite freeze, still wearing the same ragged clothing. She'd rolled the jacket's sleeves up as far as her elbows. An ugly scratch marred one arm—the left—the same one Revan remembered injuring in the duel with Lord Blais so long ago.

The Fragment’s gaze seemed to center on Revan immediately. Her voice rang across the distance between them. "They don't trust you with a lightsaber, General Sheris? Seems silly. They trust you with a war."

Revan could not think of a clever response. The Fragment had a saber herself, double-bladed hilt hung from her belt, as well as a blaster at her hip. Her eyes were alert and clear. Her topknot
bounced.

And there was no trace of the Force around her at all.

"Is this the real one?" Rensha hissed. To Master Atris.

"She has the uncouth manner." Vima sniffed. "But I sense no Force, so how can we be sure?"

“Shoot her,” Revan suggested dryly, somewhat heartened by Sheris’s snigger inside her head. “Although she might take it badly.”

“Decorum, my padawan,” Atris tone was rather frosty—but it was Vima’s expression looking at her sideways. In that moment, Revan remembered the irreverent Jedi Master she had once admired.

To Revan’s astonishment, a second top-knotted woman appeared on the ramp. That Revan was traveling in the *Ebon Hawk* had been a surprise, but it made logical sense. The Wookiee Zaalbar would have taken possession of the *Hawk* when Carth Onasi took command of the Imperial Fleet. But Revan hadn’t expected Polla Organa to eschew the safety Revan had bought for her to play pilot for a woman she called ‘the Butcher.’

*You were supposed to be safe, Polla Organa.* The thought came with futile regret. Revan had learned long ago that you couldn't save everyone.

Or sometimes, anyone.

“Hey!” Polla called out blithely. “Darth Bossypants! Who are your friends?” Behind her lurked a slightly stooped figure of a man. Revan squinted and recognized Jasp Organa, Polla Organa’s father. The confluence of events that had led to the Fragment assembling this group of sentients boggled the imagination.

"That's Master Atris over there, scowling," the Fragment—or her facsimile—replied, before Revan could. She had lowered her voice, although of course, in the Force it would make no difference—as surely the woman knew. "She's never liked me."

Polla Organa sniffed. "Then I don't like her either."

A flock of Wookiees surrounded them. One still a cub. One was Zaalbar.

Revan adjusted the odds of the Fragment actually being the Fragment and not the shapeshifter or Yuthura Ban in a holomask, upward. Not that she had much doubt before. No, the Fragment was exactly the kind of fool who would ignore two fleets of loyal allies and come to her own doom with a Wookiee pack and a two registered smugglers.

“The *Hawk* needs repairs,” the Fragment called out, still staring at Revan as if the rest of her entourage didn’t exist. “Shields are down to almost nothing. I can’t send them back out in that. Not until it’s safe.”

At that moment, shipwides chimed. The blast doors abruptly lowered, trapping the *Hawk* inside. The engines beneath their feet purred with the tell-tale hum of proton engines, shifting to prepare for hyperspace.

"Wait, what?" The indignant squawk was pure Fragment. “That didn’t mean *trap* us here! Jasp just needs a few spare parts!”

Revan felt her mouth twitch. "Corellia, Fragment. It will be the next target. We can’t wait for your
ship repairs. We're going there now."

"You'd better let us go when we get there—" Polla Organa warned.

"As soon as it is safe—"

The Fragment interrupted. "No. They're not going to Corellia. The Sleepers are running to Malastare. Uninhabited rock on the other side of the Rim. And they keep saying it's too late." The Fragment advanced, a hand casually hooked in her belt-loops. The others started to follow, but she held her hand up and they stopped—except for the Deralian—who Revan already knew had no sense. "Tenebrae still wanted me to go into the tomb, but they said it was 'too late.'" Revan took a deep breath. "Is it?"

"You hear the Sleepers?" Vima interrupted. "In your mind? Now?"

"I see them. When I see the Force, I see them. Where they've been. Where they'll go. I feel them." The Fragment was not a good actor. Her disdain for Atris was plain in every word, plain as the darkness in her voice.

"And their routes, in hyperspace—" the idea seemed to excite their former master. "You see those too. As the Emperor does?"

"Yes. All of it." The Fragment looked at Revan again. "They want to destroy everything, but me most of all. More now than before, even. Because I can stop them."

Polla Organa interrupted, coming up behind the other woman. "By doing your hide-in-the-Force thing?"

"Hide in the Force, come out in the Force, hide again… it's how I led them here." The Fragment’s head turned. "I said wait in the ship…?"

“Can't, sis. Whole place smells like Wookiees in season. We’ll need a cleaning crew in addition to those shield repairs.” Polla’s hand went to her blaster and the Fragment frowned. The smuggler drew her hand back again, hooking her own fingers in her own belt.

The Force appeared around the Fragment in a visible halo, like the sun slipping out from behind a cloud.

She’s glowing. Sheris sounded surprised.

Yes. Revan was not surprised.

“The Deralian’s not wrong.” The Fragment snorted. “We do need a cleaning crew.” Despite the similarity of their poses, the Fragment possessed an assurance that was new. No smuggler's false bravado, this. This Fragment knew her own strength.

From her tone, Revan had to wonder what else she knew.

Did you tell her, Malak? Does she know about Vima? Does she know about my box on Nar? Revan had tried to signal the woman when she had sensed her presence in C’Tannis, but had received no response.

Nar? Malak sounded so distracted he could have been there himself. Half a galaxy away.

"Admiral Rensha? We need to redirect our forces." Revan reminded the Trandoshan. "Order the
fleets to go to Malastare. *Now.*” Another sign of Vima's influence. Rensha of old would have taken initiative to command herself. This Rensha moved in a dream, like nearly everyone else on the ship.


The Telosian woman nodded woodenly

The Fragment raised an eyebrow and stepped closer. Her topknot slipped over one eye as her head tilted toward Revan's ear, voice lowering to a whisper. "Rensha listens to you? They all listen to you?"

"And to Master Atris, of course." Revan let her own eyes flicker sideways, to where their nemesis stood, arms crossed. Looking entirely too pleased with herself.

"Of course." The Fragment's lip curled. "Well. Please inform your fleet they will now listen to me."

"When you propose a stratagem that makes sense, they will.” Atris’s voice interjected. “Can you lead the Sleepers elsewhere? Anywhere?” If Vima had noticed the Fragment’s hand was now clenched around her saber hilt she gave no sign.

"Like into a sun?” The Fragment’s voice lashed out with the intensity of an Juyo riposte. "Too many to fit. But we could route them into an asteroid field."

"They'll follow you?"

"As meekly as Davad Arkan." Her tone dripped with malice. “Master Jedi.”

Atris's mouth smiled. "Good."

“Do you *want* to route them into an asteroid field?” The Fragment yawned. Only the tension in the lines of her stance betrayed her nerves. Her eyes met Revan’s again and Revan allowed herself a smile.

*She's terrified,* Sheris noted.

*She's glowing,* Revan replied. *She has come into her power.*

*You were right to be frightened of it, before.*

*She has control.* Revan had feared losing it. In the end, hate for Tenebrae had burned her own discipline away.

“No, Knight Starfire,” Vima Sunrider said with Atris’s mouth. “Not an asteroid field. I have something far more… efficient in mind."

A/N

This is the version with fewer typos….

Thanks again for the fast beta on this monster. Tried to adjust the bits you pointed out…
unsurprisingly, it all got longer. As always, your judgment is impeccable and I hope I have done it justice.

Next up… Mekel. Well, and a bunch of other stuff. I think we can all agree Vima must die. How and by whose hand… I have a few schemes vying for the honor at the moment. Will it be soon? Probably. Her death, one more plot beat, and then boom. The Sleepers win, remake the galaxy, and it’s a Harry Potter crossover fict. Sorry, punchy. I have been editing for some time. That is not how it ends... ~kos
Chapter 75 / Mad World

Xxx

Archivist's note: In an attempt to simplify this compilation of documents for the layperson, all dates are given in BBY format: Before the Battle of Yavin, which marks our Glorious Order's ultimate triumph over tyranny and the restoration of the Galactic Republic. All previous dating systems are referenced, when relevant—or known.

RRA - Revan the Redeemed Age (Sith Empire) - 3951 BBY

ASC - After the Sack of Coruscant (Galactic Republic) - 3653 BBY

AToC - After the Treaty of Coruscant (Sith Empire) - 3652 BBY

--Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant, In the First Year of our Glorious First Order of the Galactic Republic (1 FYooGFOotGR).

Xxx

--The following text is transcribed from a Senator's speech to the Public-at-Large just after the Sith attack on Coruscant.

For more than a century, the truth surrounding the identity of "Revan the Redeemer" has been obfuscated and ignored; lost in the seismic shifts of our Republic's governance. The story of Revan—by then thought to be the tale of a man named Talonis Revan who married a former Jedi, Bastila Shan—was suppressed until only whispers of the man’s name remained.

And those whispers were censured as heresy and fiction.

With the reorganization of the Senate and the reconstruction of the Jedi Order, inconvenient facts were oft discarded in the waste compactor of history. For more than a century, Jedi masters insisted that members of their Order did not marry, did not fall, and certainly did not impact the fate of trillions by exercising command over the mystical Force upon a galactic scale. The story of Talonis Revan—be he hero, savior, conqueror, or villain—faded into obscurity, lost to the mists of time.

Jedi, we were told, have never been agents of change.

The Jedi of our time are tradition-keepers, who have observed and recorded our triumphs and tragedies, but kept themselves apart. Jedi take vows, we were told. Vows of poverty and chastity. Vows of non-interference in planetary affairs. Vows of service to the Republic. More than a hundred worlds have been the beneficiaries of Jedi service: with infrastructure and agricultural maintenance. With soil, sea, and atmospheric reclamation.

But in matters of war, Jedi have done nothing. The Outlier Rebellion was fought and won without their aid. The Doshan invasion was beaten back by Republic peacekeepers, not Jedi Knights. Balmorran skies still burn as they have for four centuries, with no lightsaber-wielding warriors to bring peace.

Force-sensitives, we have been so often told, do not intervene in galactic conflicts.
We were deceived.

The ancient Sith Empire, far from being destroyed in the Machine Wars, retreated to the shadows; biding its time, strengthening its forces as we weakened our own. While our Jedi meditated and built water purification factories; Sith Lords trained for war, harnessing the Force to kill, to maim, to twist the minds of the innocent.

And when the Sith returned, our fleets--and our Jedi--were woefully unprepared.

In these dark times, with the ash from the burning Jedi Temple still thick in our throats, we must excavate the truth of the past; find the roots of our ancient enemy, and, in doing so, expose our own lies and corruption.

In that spirit, I stand before you today with a truth that my family has hidden for more than a century.

Know this: the man known as Talonis Revan never existed. Those rumors and whispers that survived in the shadows--all were lies.

A Jedi knight named Revan Starfire shattered the Sith Empire and its infinite fleet. With the aid of General Sheris Darkstar, High Admiral Aridoma Rensha, Admiral Carth Onasi, and Onasi’s Mandalorian fleet, Jedi Knight Starfire beat back the forces of darkness, giving us three centuries of prosperity.

Know this, too: Revan Starfire was a woman.

--Transcript of speech given by Senator Loriom Racharn of Coruscant. Galactic Republic, in the year 1 ASC (3653 BBY)

[NOTE: Nothing more is known of Senator Loriom, although Coruscanti aristocrats at the time of the Third Sith Invasion were typically clones, with lines extending until mutation--or assassination-ended them. Records indicate there were at least twenty Senator Lorioms of House Racharn, with most being classified as ‘male.’ Since no record of the ‘Loriom’ genome is extant, it is impossible to say whether or not the Senator’s claim of being a Revan descendant is true.]

--Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant, 1 FYooGFOotGR

XXX

The Great Hunt's officer transport elevator was large enough for at least three squadrons, but it felt crowded now, stifling in a way that had nothing to do with the number of its inhabitants. The familiar nausea that always accompanied hyperspace twisted in Revan’s guts as the capital ship came out of hyperspace. Battle alerts flashed red on the officer transport lift, but no one moved.

Time seemed frozen, as if the galaxy was holding its breath.

I’m going to kill you, Revan thought, staring at the back of Master Atris’s white-braided head. Maybe not right this second--and not in front of all these Republic people--but still, really fracking soon.

It was a delicate balance, flickering in and out of the Force--drawing the Sleepers to them and then away. Revan wiped blood from her nose for the thousandth time and noted the flow had slowed. The ache in her head had subsided too. Was that good? Her hand holding the medi-wipe still flickered with a faint Force aura. Could the others see it? The helmeted heads of their escort gave nothing away, but she noted a number of their guards had hands on their holsters, even as their eyes
were fixed firmly ahead.

_Blasters would help against me?_ A bubble of hysterical laughter caught in her throat, mixing with her hyperspace-induced nausea. Revan wondered if she was about to be sick. _Nothing like bluffing your way into taking over Republic's flagship, and then puking up your guts._

Despite Polla's protests, Polla and Zaalbar and Jasp and the rest had been led to another lift with an armed escort. Short of staging an immediate coup, Revan had seen no way to help them--and no way she could afford to help--not with the screaming Sleepers at their backs. The _Hawk_ couldn’t make another run, not without help. For better or for worse, their fate was here. At least the farther away her allies were from Vima Fracking Sunrider, the safer they'd be. Stars knew what the woman had done to the crew of this ship. Rew Ekkumi was practically drooling, and High Admiral Rensha looked half-asleep, shoulders slumped at the front of their procession of guards and fallen Jedi and Fleet officers. As for Dar--

Revan looked up, only to see the woman with her face was now staring at her. She couldn’t tell what the frack her duplicate was thinking, but as she watched, Dar’Revan lifted one red eyebrow, tilting her head slightly toward Vima’s back. The message could have been, _why aren’t you killing her right now?_ Or maybe Dar just had a crick in her neck. Maybe it was a threat, and she meant, _don't you dare kill her now_. Or, maybe she meant to signal to Revan that she had Revan’s back--whichever choice she made.

_Not yet,_ Revan’s hands moved in Ryl-sign, (which of course the woman would understand), but that motion just made Dar’s other eyebrow raise. Almost imperceptibly, Dar’s head shook before turning away, back toward the door. She was a few centimeters taller than Master Atris’s body, but standing in line, their backs toward Revan, their shoulders held the same tension. One clad in white, the other gray. They could have been posters for Jedi discipline, at least until Revan noticed Dar’s flesh hand tucked behind her back, fingers clenched white-knuckled in a fist, one finger extended, in what was either the universal sign for "get fracked," or an obscure dialect of underwater Gree, where the precise angle and curve indicated a need for hastening an end.

Knowing Dar, it was probably the latter.

_I’m going to kill you soon,_ Revan promised Vima Sunrider. The lift they were on would lead to the bridge. Revan couldn't kill Sunrider on the bridge; she'd have to lure the woman somewhere else.

The doors of the officer's lift slid open. Vima and Dar turned, moving to the side while the others advanced. The High Admiral and her officers stepped out, still moving like sleepwalking droids.

Revan started to follow, but Vima put a hand on her wrist, stopping her. "No."

"No?" Revan's free hand tightened on her lightsaber. "Did you miss the part where I said this fleet was going to follow my orders?"

"I agreed they would, when you gave orders that were worthwhile." Master Atris's hand waved toward the High Admiral and her escort, who had paused in their exit. "You may go," she instructed and they obeyed--even Rensha. The doors slid shut again, leaving them almost alone--except for three remaining guards. All anonymous under gray helms and what Revan suspected was cortosis-lined body armor. Again, with uncanny unison, Vima and Dar stepped forward, this time moving to Revan’s side, while the silent, gray guards moved into formation around them.

_Those guards are special forces,_ that rogue part of her mind whispered. Knowledge she didn't remember acquiring, like the schematic of this ship, which now danced in her mind’s eye. _Trained
Dar’s metal hand brushed against Revan’s in a gesture too precise to be accidental. "We have another fifteen levels to go," she clipped in Ancient Sith, voice a whisper in Revan’s ear. “We give commands from a secure location.”

"Why?" Blocking the Force, Revan couldn't hear the Sleepers, but she knew they were very close. “We don’t have much time. They’ll be attacking soon--”

“The fleets already have their opening salvos. My padawan sent those orders when you were still docking your ship.” Vima looked smug as their transport dropped with what remained of Revan's stomach.

"Oh, yeah?" Revan muttered, half under her breath. "Fancy. I'm still going to kill you." She wasn’t sure gutting Vima Sunrider (in the body of Master Atris) in front of innocents would be wise… but oh, she wanted to. I was so angry at Carth for killing her before. Not just because I had questions. Because I wanted to do it myself.

Her eyes caught Dar's and Revan felt her lips smile. “So, Master Jedi, Dar’s your padawan, huh?” It was a selfish pleasure, seeing the other woman's green gaze harden. "Does she do everything you say?"

"Not everything." The woman looked amused.

“We do what is necessary.” The schutta who had gotten them into this raised an eyebrow, adjusting a command headset over her ear. "Had you remained in carbonite another week, Fragment, I would have finished this war and revived you myself."

Vima chuckled. "Do you believe her, Revan?"

"No." Revan answered automatically, all of them speaking Ancient Sith now--as if their guards cared--or were capable of caring. "If beating the Awakened Ones were that easy you'd have done it by now."

"Nothing is ever easy," Dar's voice still held that infuriating note of calm. "But I've won every fight."

"Yet not the war, General Sheris." Vima Sunrider made Atris's voice crisp on the syllables. "And you never could."

Xxx

The prevalence of Force ghosts in Revan apocrypha suggests that contemporaries were inclined to believe sentient consciousness could exist after death and manifest some phantasmic display in the physical realm.

Some scholars have suggested the encounters be read as metaphor; but I am inclined to disagree. Given what we know about other fallen Jedi, (namely, Qel-Droma and Kun), isn’t it possible that Revan was also possessed by a malevolent force? My colleagues are all quick to say such a thing is impossible, but I direct your attention, again, to the inconsistencies in the [redacted].

--Excerpt from Doctor I-4 Kahn's Dissertation on the Revan Myth, RRA 102 (3554 BBY)

[Note to later scholars: although the works that Doctor Kahn refers to above were all lost in the Great Coruscanti Rethinking, Force ghosts can be found in other Jedi texts, as well as some of the
"Dark Papers" smuggled into our archives a thousand years ago from the Priests of Thule. Some even say that the Mighty Luke Skywalker was haunted by ghosts, and that was the reason for his retreat from the galaxy.

--Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

Somewhere across the galaxy, his wife called to him, but Malak could not answer, not until this situation on Nar Shaddaa was perfectly under control.

Malak D’Reev had become one with the Force, but he was no closer to understanding sentient nature. By rights, the two Twi’lek women should have fled--or his Blade should have ended them as quickly and efficiently as the man had been trained to do. The man was an efficient death-dealer. Malak had selected the Acknahar'tah line from the ranks of enlisted defectors himself--one reason he found Blade Three so predictable and so easy to control.

Two null Twi’leki should prove no challenge at all for an assassin trained to hunt Jedi; and yet, they were still alive. What's more, by their stances, both women knew enough of combat to realize they were outmatched. And yet, the three of them posed and preened as if they were fighting a formal Coruscanti duel.

Malak’s Blade advanced, flipping the stolen vibrosword in his off hand with more flair than was required, while charging up the handle of the laser whip in his right. “You stupid girl,” he muttered to the Pink, instead of simply wrapping the whip around her sword hand--or her throat.

“Buzz off, sleemo! Leave the kid alone!” The Pink facing the Blade leveled her own weapon. Impeccable form, perhaps Mandalorian-trained, but no match for an Acknahar'tah.

From the openness of her stance the Pink still didn't understand what the coiled, blinking object Blade Three held in his hand could do, even after she'd seen it crack once already. Quite possibly she wouldn't, either--not until the laser whip's deadly filaments severed one of her skinny pink limbs, or bit deep in the tender flesh of her neck. Malak would not feel guilt. This See'raa was no innocent, and her claims to be Mission Vao, the Twi'lek that Malak had once (briefly) interrogated on the Leviathan were ludicrous. The Twi’lek was long dead. Malak had seen the weight of her execution in his mindwiped wife’s dreams, felt the pain of her loss in the thoughts of both Dustil Onasi and Mekel Jin.

Blade of Three’s laughter now was a death rattle in his chest, the expression on Atton's face pulling his features back like a skull. “You have no idea who I am, do you?”

“See if I care?" the Twi'lek raised her hand and beckoned. "You’re just a broken-down kid-stealer!"

"Oh, do you like to see?" Blade Three drawled softly. He'd edged closer to Malachor, his boots crunching on the pieces of mirror he’d shattered. “Sure. I’ll take your eyes last.”

Then do it, Malak thought tiredly. The Blade couldn’t hear him, but his latent sensitivity to the Force carried the compulsion, at least enough to reinforce the killer’s natural urges.

“No! Stop!” Malak’s son had slid off the barstool, but one of his hands still gripped it. The other held a knife. Malak had observed the Blade training Mal to use a knife (and approved), but in the panic of impending conflict, the boy seemed to have forgotten everything he had learned. Malachor’s fingers hovered dangerously close to the edge of the blade. He might cut himself. He
should not have to see this.

“Careful, Malachor. Let him finish it,” Malak instructed, envisioning his own form as a
glimmering blue shield, protecting his son. “Close your eyes.”

"No!" the boy snapped, shaking his head. He brandished the small knife. “Stop it! All of you! Stop it!”

To his left, the White stood poised with naught but an icepick. Her lekku flicked at the other one,
making suggestions for their coordinated attack.

“Be brave, Mal.” Malak tried to counsel his son. “Atton will kill them quickly, I promise.”

The boy's voice shook. "No! No one’s killing anyone! Why can't we all be friends?"

The Pink used her sword to gesture toward Atton, before dancing back to avoid his undercut, pieces
of broken mirror crunching under her feet. "Cause your friend is a sleemo murdering son of a
schutta. Your mom would kill us if she knew we left you with him!"

"My mother?" Malachor froze. "Do you know where she is?"

"Sure!"

The Pink was lying. Malak tried to comfort his son. “I know where she is, Mal. When it is safe I
will bring you to her. Close your eyes. This will be over soon.”

“Doesn’t matter if you know!” Wild-eyed, the boy shook his head, answering Malak out loud.
“You won’t tell me!”

See’raa’s face broke into a smile, exposing pointed teeth. "I'll tell you. I promise. Come with us
and we'll comm her. Right now."

"She's lying, kid." The Blade advanced, turning his entire back toward the White, a gesture Malak
found foolhardy. "You know you have to stay with me. For your own good."

The White lekku’s traced a vulgar insult.

“Did you ever meet my father?” The boy’s voice waivered.

Atton Rand froze. “What? Yeah, he… he picked me out of a brig.”

“I meant her. The Twi’lek.” Malachor gestured with his small knife. "Did you ever meet my
father? Did he know you?"

The Pink snorted. “When I was Mission Vao? Yeah. Once. Asshole was on the Leviathan. He took
off the restraints and I bit him. Almost broke one of my teeth on that armor of his.”

Malak had been startled enough that he’d started laughing as Mission Vao ran away. He had
wanted the Twi’lek to escape. At the time, Malak had wanted to see the woman who called herself
Polla Organa test her mettle against his new attack droids and Karath’s men. He had wanted to feed
that flame of darkness he felt burning within mindwiped Revan; ignite it with the death of her
companions, finish them off one-by-one, until her rage became an inferno to consume the galaxy--

"Oops. Guess that whole death of her companions bit kinda backfired for ya.” An ethereal voice
intruded on Malak’s consciousness. Flickering behind the women of flesh, Malak saw another
ghostly Twi’lek. Smaller--younger--and enveloped by the eldritch light of the Force even as he was
himself. Behind her, the shadows of more ghosts appeared: robed Jedi, armored Sith. Friends and foes—so many that the mass of them became a ball of light. The light illuminated the physical world until the frozen figures of his son and the others washed out themselves, as if they were the ghosts.

His old master, his old friends, all who had fallen before him—all who had fallen because of him, all he had failed to save—stood before him like a legion of warriors, but not one had a saber drawn.

“Yes. All here.” His old master sounded almost amused. “Not your time to join us, Malak. Not yet.”

“Too stubborn for his own good,” echoed the man beside her. He was the old Padawan who had been one of Revan’s companions. In life, Malak had barely registered Jolee Bindo’s existence. “Believe Mission, kid. Let old Jaq go. Trust me, his road’s gonna be hard enough without you crawling under his skin.”

“Believe me now, loser?” The ghost-Twi’lek made a lewd gesture with her hands.

“You’re the real Mission Vao.” Being one with the Force meant he should be beyond surprise, but Malak was not.

“And you’re still an asshole.” The ghost stuck her tongue out at him.

“My father’s a ghost now.” His son’s voice shook. “I can’t always hear him. Sometimes he’s too far away—but he’s not gonna let you hurt me. Or hurt Atton!”

“Sometimes he’s too busy being an asshole to protect anyone.” The ghost of Mission Vao made a pose of leaning against the bar and yawning.

“Who’re you talking about?” The Blade called himself Atton now. Malak could remember his military record, but he had forgotten the man’s original name. “Your father? Darth Malak? You frackin’ kidding me?”

“Tell your son and that loser you’re not kidding.” The sepulcral whisper from the Twi’lek was an eerie echo of the cadence the two sisters affected. “Big Bad Blade of Three has to do what you say? Because if he hurts my twins, I swear I’ll haunt you forever, chuba-face!”

“Yes.” Malak imagined himself whispering the word in his son’s ear, wrapping a wall of shielding around him. “The Twi’lek is correct, Malachor. Mission Vao bit me.”

“My father says that’s right. Mission Vao bit him. Okay, then. Stand down,” his son barked. With his voice still high, he sounded uncannily like Red. “All of you. Stand down! I order it!”

The Pink frowned, gesturing to Atton. "Him first."

The White flicked a lekku at her sister. "Kid might be nuts. Talking to thin air.

Worry about that later, the Pink signaled back.

The Blade made a noise in his throat, another death rattle of a laugh, but his blade lowered. He took a cautious step back, then deactivated it. The blade clicked, folding up like a fan until it was small enough to fit in his pocket. “Hey,” he said, grinning. “S’all good, little man.”

“Don’t kill them, Blade Three,” Malak reinforced the command with the Force. “For now.”

Atton Rand couldn’t hear his words, perhaps, but the man still blanched, sweat breaking out on his
“Cold in here,” he muttered. “Do whatever you want, little lord. You want the bints alive? It’s all… s’all good. S’all… all good.”

*The bodyguard looks ill,* the White signaled the Pink.

*Get rid of him later,* her sister signalled back.

"How did you get to be Mission Vao?" Malachor asked the Pink. "Is it like… are you a ghost?"

"Ghost? Don’t be silly! Used a personality overlay." The Pink sheathed her own blade at her belt and hopped on the bar. "See, the Mission who was us recorded her memories on a holocron, and then Revan put those memories into the Kashyyyk computer… and the computer made a copy for the T3, and then our Creator made me from the computer original! Made *us,* I mean." She gestured at the White. "We're both Mission Vao."

*Mostly,* the White qualified.

“*Creator?*” Malak asked the ghost.

“*Now that guy was an asshole,*” the Twi'lek ghost giggled.

“*T'chrrrrnak’tahk'leänjsëwrrrrnak'tahk'leänjsëw. He took over Nico’s body. Hey, you studied Sith stuff, right? Ever hear of him?*”

“No.” The Sith Emperor had had many names, but that wasn’t one of them. It sounded Rakatan. No doubt Red would know.

"Atton?" Malachor took a step forward. "You're bleeding. Are you all right?"

"Get the hell away from me!" The man’s eyes were wild, darting through the thin air, blinking at nothing.

*"He is lost in darkness,*" Jopheena’s image had vanished but her voice seemed to come from the light behind the Twi’lek child. "*Set him free, Malak.*"

“I can’t. I need him to protect my son.”

“*Do you remember the story of the kicked kath?*” His master’s form was indistinct, part of a glowing ball of light but her voice echoed with a clarity that Malak could not ignore. "*Bonds built on fear and pain will always snap.*"

Malachor took two steps forward as if he would follow the man, even now. "Atton?"

“*You’re proposing I leave him with two copies of a Twi’lek child my wife killed, Master Jopheena?*”

“*Look in their hearts,*” her voice murmured. "*What do you see?*"

Unlike the original Mission Vao, the twins were nulls. Some Jedi found nulls easier to read. Malak had never been one of them. But the original Mission Vao’s heart lay open to his sight, now. Her ghostly form radiated conviction.

“I see a bond of loyalty, Master.”

“*Loyalty is better than fear. It can be reciprocated. Eternally.*” Her chuckle was soft. "*As I told you long ago. Trust them, Malak. For your own loyalty to me.*"
She had told him. And he had listened.

“Go, Blade Three.” Malak made himself a shield between his son and the world. He felt the fragile strands of Force he’d extended around the assassin retreat, returning to himself.

Somewhere, there was a sound, like bells.

"See you in hell, kid,” the man whispered hoarsely, then turned and ran out of the darkened cantina, as if a pack of vornskr were at his heels.

"Atton?” His son’s lip trembled and he took two steps forward as if to follow. "Wait! He was hurt! You guys hurt him!”

“No, Mal. He was already broken.” Malak still wasn’t sure about the Twi’leks, but the Blade had outlasted his usefulness. Mission Vao had possessed the heart of a warrior. Malachor might not stay with these twins, but they seemed like asequate guardians for the time being. They were nulls, which would make it more difficult for him to influence their minds, but not impossible--

"You try and frack with my twins’ minds, I swear I’ll follow you singing fizzpop jingles from now to eternity, buster!” Mission Vao’s apparition glared down at him.  “You heard Jolee before! That Atton asshole has his own destiny! And Jopheena told you! My twins won’t hurt him!”

“I just want my son to be safe.” Malak’s body was an illusion, speaking to a ball of intangible light, to the shadow of a Twi’lek child. He had faced madness, betrayal, Force possession. Malak should not be surprised by anything--and yet he was.

“Trust us.” Jopheena’s voice again--from the light--amused. “You were always too cautious, Malak.”

“How do you know the Blade's fate if I do not, Master?” Master Jopheena was a part of the Force, as was he. Malak should see the future as surely as they did, as surely as a priest of Thule--

“Those losers? Hah!” The Twi’lek’s ghost sniffed. “Priests get most of it wrong. Just like you.”

“Attachment blinds you. You are still tied your son. And to her.” Jopheena’s voice was kind, like Malak was still a fifteen-year-old boy too small for his frame.

“I don’t know how to be free.” Even in death, Malak had clung to those last precious, agonizing seconds; the ragged wreck of his body; the sound of her breath above him, fast and sharp; the smell of blood and effluence on his skin. Her blood had been there too, mixed with his. The dark energy of Revan’s power had enveloped him, draining his life away as he begged her to save him--

“Not your time, yet, Malak.” Vrook’s gruff voice joined the others. “You’ll know when it is.”

“You’re too busy looking at the damn trees to see the wroshyr forest,” Jolee Bindo’s voice added. “But maybe looking at the trees is where you need to be. Forest can take care of itself, but those damn trees might grow any old way; and some busybody with an axe might come and chop ‘em down tomorrow and then where’d we be? With no forest--”

“Hush, love,” Jopheena laughed. “My padawan is precisely where he needs to be.”

Beneath the warmth of their light Malak watched as the white Twi’lek approached his son. The Pink stood back, one careful eye on the door as Malachor hesitantly took the White’s hand.

"My twin suns are mostly not evil," the Twi’lek ghost assured him. "Mostly. Don't take this the
wrong way, but your standards ain’t that high. Least See’ra and Tee’raa won’t offer him glitterstim and booze like your dirtbag assassin."

"Malachor still has me to protect him," Malak warned them all. "If your Twi’lek copies try anything--"

Mission Vao twitched an insubstantial lekku. "Sure! I know! He has you. For now."

XXX

Neely Ahto was a Senate attaché for House Racharn during the Machine Wars, right before the Jedi Reconstruction.

An attaché is someone who is attached to a very important person to do all the tasks that they are too busy to do. Like a slave, but with much, much more power and much less responsibility. If you work very hard at your studies, some of you rotworms might become attachés. Maybe. More of you will just become rotworm food.

Lady Neely learned that she had the Force the day that she rescued one hundred and five hundred crying babies from a burning building in the Coruscanti Underground. After the Machine Wars, she hunted down some Jedi to help train her gifts. And so, Master Neely Ahto became a founding member of the New Jedi Order.

But what very few of her contemporaries knew was that she had once been a captive of the evil Sith Empire....

--Jedi of the Old Republic, an Imperial Child's Holobook of Bedtime Stories, c. 1392 RRA (2512 BBY).

[NOTE: Holobooks such as this one were common didactic tools for the Sith indoctrination of the young on colony planets during the Redeemed Age. What is curious in this text is that the tale of a famous Republic Jedi is portrayed in such a positive light. Some scholars have suggested this might be political satire.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

Inse Blais surveyed the squalling brood the Devonian had laid out on a waterproof sheet on the floor. Two Humans. Three Twi'leks. One thing with a tail and big eyes that reminded her of the manka. "Is this all?"

"You wanted young ones, Lady Ahto." The Devonian sighed. "And Force potential. Not that easy to find these days. Parents tend to get attached."

"I asked you for twenty young ones." Inse reached out with the Force to snap the man's impudent neck, only to freeze as she heard the Emperor's tell-tale shuffle approaching. Her Lord Valkorion (as he insisted on calling himself now) could be quite squeamish about making a mess and her own patience was at an end.

“Oh, ho,” her idiot master actually giggled. The body he wore today was the Twi’lek’s; she preferred dealing with it to the Selkath, Vivek, because his skin was less slimy and he didn’t make that horrid, throat-clearing gurgle every time he (or... she, as the Selkath was female), cleared his--her--throat.
“I’ll just be going,” the Devonian began.

Inse nodded. “You will. You owe us fourteen more infants,” she snapped, infusing the Force into her words. “Get them today.”

“Yes.” What little of the man’s mind that remained answered her as he staggered away.

His Luminance advanced, eying the babes on the floor. “Light the incense. You’ve done well, Lady Blais.”

Have I? Surely it could not be an attack of regret that plagued Inse, now. The baby with big eyes whimpered. And as she watched, his Luminance began to glow---

Inse Blais snapped her fingers and the bowls of drugged tinder lit as she reached for her rebreathing mask. The smell was revolting, the drugged incense compounded in a Zistot temple and exported here at a fantastical expense. “I’ll be at the bar,” Inse told the Emperor, who, by the looks of him, had already forgotten her existence.

She wanted to leave the room, but she also wanted to see how the conversion ritual was done….

XXX

Revan’s true story is the subject of debate from scholars across the galaxy--much like the fates of General Bastila Shan and General Sheris Darkstar. Yes. I said, General Sheris Darkstar. She was trained in the Force as well. But more than that.

She was Revan Starfire's identical twin sister.

Taught by Revan herself, Darkstar (sometimes known as Loran) was a capable commander, but it was not until the Hero of the Star Forge joined the fight against the Machine Ships that the glorious Republic's victory became a foregone conclusion.

Why did Revan come so late to the fray? Why did she leave the first weeks of the fight to Darkstar?

Mandalorian logs from the time hint at some illness or infirmity--but provide no detail. A contemporary biography transcribed by Sir Phylus Blais of Zeltros mentions Revan transporting herself from Dromund Kaas to battle aboard the near-mythical Corellian disc ship, Ebon Hawk. Blais brags for some time about his own prowess as a pilot and a lover to all sentients aboard… but neglects to say why Revan was not in the Malastare System already.

Sir Phylus Blais is, of course, an unreliable narrator.*

Recent scholars who attempted to interview some of the Wookiee witnesses to Revan’s arrival in the Malastare System have been rebuffed. Zaalbar of the Eiweorr branch, perhaps the last notable observer of the Machine War's end, has refused interviews for more than two centuries. And in our own times, the world of Kashyyyk has once again been closed to all but Branch-sanctioned traffic, making further attempts to contact the reticent Wookiee nigh-impossible.

As scholars, we hypothesize based on the newly-found evidence that we possess: recordings of Revan Starfire's speeches, (the first and seventh in conjunction with General Loran--thus discounting any identity confusion); extra-topographical arrays of the battles that survived; although, as Doctor Locantis from the University of Dagary Minor has pointed out, the most complete recordings are from Imperial sources, and possibly doctored); and the Republic's casualty graphs, whose numbers stop at Malastare, halting their previous exponential trajectory.
All of this evidence, as well as eyewitness debriefings conducted by the Strategic Information Services, point to Malastare as the sea-change. The War’s paradigm shift. And to Revan herself as the catalyst for victory--

(*One hundred years ago, Professor Knook-ta Giir from the University of Alderaan found ample evidence that Sir Blais did not, as he claimed, influence the Senate vote to grant Zeltros full status in the Republic, nor did he single-handedly slay the krayt dragon of Kroi on Tatooine and rescue the Twi’lek Princess Tee’raa it held captive. Contemporary scrolls from Zeltros additionally suggest the legend of a Blais harem on that planet is—at best—a gross exaggeration of the truth. Only one marriage certificate in the name of Phylus Blais has ever been found: and, as in the style of the time, his consort chose anonymity… but the Blais lineage is a long and tangled skein, worthy of its own lecture.)

Excerpt from "An Historian’s Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

[Note: The current denizens of Kashyyyk are hardly more hospitable to inquiries regarding Jedi legend, especially since the unfortunate events following their failed rebellion, bravely quashed by those noble descendants of Mand’alor, the Clone Troopers of Emperor Palpatine’s reign.]

--Compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

XxX

The lift dropped faster. Revan dabbed at her nose again and shoved the wipe back in her pocket.

“Why do you call them the Awakened Ones?” Vima’s tone was too casual for the question not to have some importance.

“It’s what they call themselves.”

“You made some claim before you could hear them.” Dar looked interested. "Do they speak directly to one another? And to you?"

“Yes. When I’m not blocking the Force."

"We call them the Sleepers. And if you still held the Infinite Fleet, padawan, I would have no doubt of our victory," Vima’s tone to Dar was chiding, like she was correcting a child. "But that was another resource you squandered."

I could kill her, Revan repeated to herself. Almost a soothing mantra, beating back her growing unease as the lift descended. What’s more, I can kill her any time. I don’t have to do it yet. “The Awakened Ones aren’t infinite. The more of them we kill the more desperate the ones that remain become."

"Do you know how many are left?" Dar’s eyes flickered, meeting hers.

"Yes. They hold back more with each fight, keeping reserves to hide their numbers. They try to jump before they’re destroyed, and they are self-repairing...." Even now, blocked from the Force, Revan could feel them beating down on her. The heat of a sun, bearing down upon a fragile shield. "Four hundred and two capital-sized warships. A few thousand fighters—you’ve taken out most of their light artillery—but the main ships try not to risk themselves—and those small fighters they can replace—if they capture another shipyard—"

"Four hundred and two." Dar’s voice faltered. "That’s more than I thought."
“Another thing you were wrong about.” Revan laughed. Not so much of a taunt as a distraction. "Just like freezing me in carbonite didn't fracking stop them in the first place."

Their eyes locked. "But Master Atris was wrong as well.” The words were soft, but the Force carried them. A faint smile crossed Dar’s lips. "You know, I had her convinced you were dead, Fragment."

To Revan’s left, the white-haired woman who was not Atris gave a sniff. "I expected some subterfuge. And I was not entirely convinced, even when my padawan was convincing. You were both trained to seize an advantage…”

Dar’s eyes blinked. "When we have one," she said, pointedly.

Again, Revan got it. But I can kill Vima any time I want. I don’t have to do it now, I can kill her any time I want. A soothing mantra.

Vima continued, smiling. “Of course, seizing an advantage with a fleet is quite different than using a smuggler’s low cunning to fool petty port authorities.”

“It was a smuggler’s low cunning that toppled Tenebrae’s empire.” Dar paused. “Master.” There was no mistaking the hate in her voice now; the slight tremor of emotion overriding her training.

“Not this smuggler, I think.” Vima sniffed. “The real Deralian spread your plague. Perhaps I should seek her counsel on this war.”

“Right,” Revan drawled. “Wasn’t me. I was too busy dropping Davad into that sun. But you need my low cunning now.”

“We need your gifts,” Vima corrected. If the Davad remark had bothered her, she was hiding it. “I may have made mistakes.” The woman in Atris’s body pronounced her words crisply. “But none due to ignorance. I will not let either of you fail for the want of knowledge. Revan, you claimed Malastare was an 'uninhabited rock, before.' That is false. Malastre is inhabited by sentients who call their race the Dug. A primitive people… but with great potential. Let us hope we are in time to save them.”

Revan bit back the snarl she felt forming in her throat. “Oh? I wasn't aware you cared about saving anyone.”

“Then you are more of a fool than expected.” Atris’s eyes were a pale blue, almost gray. Atris couldn’t be more than a decade older than Revan, but Vima’s possession of her body weighed it down. The old woman that Revan had met on Medriaas had seemed younger than her appearance. This woman seemed much older than Atris had been. “All sentients want to live. With our gifts we must perform the calculus of benefit versus harm in determining who must survive. It is a great pity if your implanted persona lacks the wit to understand why some can never be saved and others must be, but your copy and I are here to advise you.”

Oh, yeah? You’re not if I kill you--and I can kill you whenever I want to--

Dar coughed, staring at Revan pointedly as if the woman knew what she was thinking. “The Dug were one of the Rakatan engine’s less successful experiments. Too easily manipulated by predators.”

“All the more reason for them to require our aid. You remember, padawan, when we visited the Dug on Malastare?” Atris’s head turned toward Dar. Her smile practically glittered.
None of us give a frack about the Dug. Revan felt her own eyes roll. "So... the Rakata made them?"

"Yes." Dar's mouth twitched. "The Infinite Empire made the Dug and the Besalisk, both. As well as the Wookiees and the Trandoshans. Twileks. And of course, the Sith."

"The slave races," Vima intoned. "Did they make us, too? Do pawns inevitably rise up to surpass their masters, or are some too feeble for the attempt?"

"Rakatan priests told me we were all slave races." Dar shot Revan another loaded glare. "Then I killed them."

"Cut the chase," Revan snapped. *I get it. But I could kill her right now. Whenever I want.*

The doors slid open, and Dar stepped through them, speaking without turning around, forcing them all to follow. Neatly, she pivoted on her feet, walking backwards, keeping her eyes fixed on Revan's as she walked. "The Infinite Emperor experimented extensively with sentient lifeforms. The Dug were their creation. Dug physiognomy resembles the Besalisk without their strength or range of mobility... but the *Dug* possess knowledge *Besa*li*sk*s lack."

"I get it," Revan snapped. *You're saying I need you, Dar. I know that. You're right.*

Vima smiled in Dar's direction, and Revan had an oddly familiar sense, that she'd seen the woman work this way before, as if she was trying to set one of them against the other, make them vie for her attention. It should have made Revan feel angry again, and yet somehow, she only felt numb. *I can kill her later. Later, I will kill her.*

A soft thought, comforting. She felt strangely relaxed.

"Of course, Master." Dar's lips thinned. "I was so grateful that you had arranged for me to have a mission with *Malak* at last--after the Council had kept us away from each other for so long." She pronounced their dead husband's name with a heavy emphasis that a deaf sent could have noticed, but Vima didn't react, except to chuckle.

"Mere months, although I suppose at that age to you both it seemed longer, after Onderon--"

"*Malak* wanted me to speak with him before I heard the Dug shaman's attempt at arbitration. He had the *training* for diplomacy and I did not." Those green eyes looked down for a millisecond before fixing on Revan's again. *Malak knew what I did not. It wasn't purely... about our affection. I listened to Malak because he had knowledge I required.*

There was a long pause. Revan heard herself scoff. "Frack Malak."

She wasn't an idiot. She'd caught Dar's emphasis on their former husband's name. They both heard his ghost. Whatever the other woman didn't want Vima to hear, she trusted Darth Malak's ghost to impart.

But to hear him, Revan would have to let the Force back in, and now wasn't the fracking time.

Also... frack *Malak*. Revan did not trust him. She held the Force back by the force of her will, but that was becoming harder to do, even without thinking that Malak was in it somewhere, no doubt whispering in Dar's ear right now... the two of them plotting, plotting against her--they would *dare* plot against her? They would lure her into some trap together--contain her power--

Revan blinked. *What am I thinking?* Her eyes met Dar’s again.
The other woman’s face was as blank as the wall plates behind her.

“Knight D’Reev was a fool,” Vima said flatly. “If he had not been the Emperor’s pawn first, Revan, he would have been yours.”

"Maybe you underestimated him," Revan shot back.

Dar’s head shook again, again nearly imperceptibly. Her metal hand reached to adjust the ear-piece she was wearing. "Leaving Malak aside, the Dug were too easily influenced." The trace in the air of the Ryl-sign for warning could have been Revan’s imagination; the gesture was so close to just adjusting her receiver. Warning. There it was again.

Again Revan got it. *Dar thinks Vima's fricking with my mind--or trying to.* And it was true, being blind to the Force made Revan vulnerable. In that moment, she saw a path before them: her saber igniting, cutting their old master down in a heartbeat; the guards a moment after. And then everyone on the ship awakening as if from a fable’s ensorcelled spell--finally free of that schutta--

Dar raised her eyebrow again. It could have been the go-ahead. Or, it could have been her thinking, and then what? We’d have a ship full of hostile allies and the Sleeper fleet outside trying to murder us all--

Or it could have been Revan's own hubris, assuming she knew what Dar was thinking at all.

“Frack Malak,” Revan repeated. Like a dare. Like this was a kath and pony show.

“Such a shame you don’t remember our love.” The childish jab made Dar’s lower lip pout before she twisted her mouth into a smile. “Malak was extraordinary.”

“Oh, yeah? He was extraordinarily hard to kill.” Revan shrugged. “But I managed.”

“You had the stronger master, Revan.” Vima’s smile seemed fixed. "Master Kae's experience with primitive cultures far outstripped Jopheena's or Vrook--"

“You mean your experience,” Revan interrupted her. “Unless your guards speak Ancient Sith, I think we can cut the banthacrap. Get the frack out of my head.”

“Your mind is sealed to me.” Vima sounded injured--of course an act.

“But you’re… you’re doing something.” Until that instant, she hadn’t been entirely sure. But this artificial calm, even the whispers about killing the woman. They weren’t hers.

*I can kill her at any time.* Comforting to think so.

A comforting lie.

"I just wanted to see Malak." Dar's head turned back, facing the lift doors, which took that moment to open, nearly as if she’d commanded them. "He was my ally, as you never were, Master."

Revan's mouth felt dry. The Force pricked at the edge of her shields. "Sometimes I wish I could see him again, too," she ventured. "But right now, I can't, can I?"

Vima put a hand on her arm, drawing Revan even closer. "You're going to like what I've done with the Emperor," she whispered, soft in Revan's ear. "And I am curious to see what you could do with him yourself."

"Are you?" She had met this same woman in the Jedi Temple and on Nathema, just in a different
A smug smile pulled at Master Atris's mouth. "It's rather late for such extremes, don't you think?"
Her voice gentled. "No one has to die, now, Revan."

XXX

After Katarr and the destruction of the Jedi Council, Master Atris of the Echani mounted a campaign to search for 'the Last Jedi,' a former Knight known as Meetra Surik.

Knight Surik was, of course, Master Atris's former padawan, sent into exile for her alleged betrayal of the Republic during the Mandalorian Wars. Her name is familiar to all scholars of Jedi lore.

According to contemporary news archives, Master Atris gave several speeches alluding to Meetra Surik being the Jedi savior of the galaxy. Some of those recordings still survive. They show an impassioned woman of middle age and Echani extraction; erudite and sincere.

Revan's name is only mentioned in passing, and then with disdain.

How ironic, then, in the last days of the Machine War, that it was Revan Starfire herself who saved the Republic Fleet, and not Surik at all?

--Profiles in Courage: Great Sentients of the Old Republic. (Republished from list of banned texts), c. BBY 3621.

[Note: Some of my cohort have suggested that this document is also satire. I remain unconvinced.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

Talk to her, Malak! In her mind, Revan was screaming. You said before you would speak to her!

She's hiding from the Force. It effectively seals her from me as well. Malak's voice in her mind was faint, distracted. Even now Revan felt his presence dim as Vima's power increased--as Sunrider's strength always did when they approached her Sithspawned lair. The Force-amplifying panels in the sanctum did their work all too well. Enconced in her fortress, Vima was nearly omnipotent. The Emperor had gone under her spell without as much as an eyeblink. Even the Fragment’s strength might not be enough to break the woman’s infernal Force-weaves.

Don't go! But Malak was already gone, like oxygen leaving a room. The Fragment might not have known he was there at all--that he'd been nearly visible--as both he and Revan tried to capture the Fragment’s attention.

At least Malachor is safe. Malak had told Revan that much--with a peculiar emphasis--although he had neglected to say more. “Our son is safe,” he kept repeating. In fact, he had said it so often that Revan had become convinced that their son had not been safe quite recently, and might still be in danger again.

But she could not help him now.

"You okay?" The Fragment put her hand on Revans’ shoulder and Revan half-turned, breathing deep for composure.
"Just tired. We've been fighting for weeks without much rest." Revan wiped her eyes, automatically banishing the fatigue from her steps.

"So I see." The Fragment frowned, falling into step as they walked down the corridor. "This way… it leads to the officer's hangar bay."

"Yes." Perhaps the Fragment had shown initiative and reviewed the layout of the Hunt before boarding. Or perhaps bay’s strategic position was as logical to her as it had been to Revan: well-shielded and below the engineering blast radius, with drop-chutes leading to it from the bridge thirty levels above.

"So this command center or whatever… it's in the officer's hangar bay?"

Next to the Fragment, Vima gave another low chuckle, leaving Revan to answer.

"Yes. On a ship." Again, Revan wondered why the Fragment hadn't just killed Vima when she had the chance in the lift. I cannot tell if she hears, Malak had said before--but if Vima could control the Fragment when the woman shielded herself from the Force--if she could twist the Fragment against them--

I need you, Mal! Revan’s thought was more plea than command but it made no difference. The blast doors opened and they entered the hangar's expanse. The Force seemed to press in darkly, casting shadows she knew were illusions. Her panic swelled again and Revan knew, from Vima’s sickly smile, that her own emotions were not under her own control.

Revan took a breath and found the air colder, slower, as Sunrider’s Force energies wove their subtle nets. I can kill her at any time, she thought numbly, knowing the thought was imposed to placate her. I don't have to kill her yet--I can kill her later--

"Here we are!" Vima sounded uncharacteristically smug as their party stopped in front of an unmarked corvette. She gestured to the rampway. “Would you like to go first, Revan?”

"Into your escape shuttle?" The Fragment was crisped the words, slouching as she started up the gangway, walking backwards to keep them in her sights. "Or lair? Lair seems rather appropriate. Throne room?"

"You may call it whatever you like. This is where I keep the Emperor. The extra layers of shielding around this bay keep us safe; and, if the Great Hunt is lost, the ship provides an escape."

"Always giving yourself an out." The Fragment snorted, eyeing Revan. "She did that with Weis too, you know. Left them to die when I bombed their flagship."

A profligate waste of a former ally. Weis should have been turned, not destroyed. "Sinae told me, when we were working together on Kaas. But your husband did manage to kill Vima."

Again, the Fragment didn't take the hint. "Carth could've killed her at any time. First he had to learn what she knew." The Fragment paused. "You know, I saw a recording of her talking to Dessa--the Mandalorian she put in a coma. Vima said all sorts of interesting things. Dessa had given her truth serum. Half of what she said was in Rakatan, but..." the Fragment shrugged. "Of course I understood."

"Perhaps the one who called herself Kreia left knowledge for you to find." Did Vima sound less amused now? "The door is to your right, Revan. There's a palm lock that shouldn't be a problem."

Still facing them, Revan put her hand out behind her, fumbling for the panel. "Oh, I don’t think so.
Kreia was trying to blow up my flagship with me on it."

"She sought an overly simplistic solution to our quandary. One that would only create new problems." Vima made Atris look a century old, although there was scarcely more than a decade between their ages. "You have both had time to observe that each iteration of the personality overlay develops a unique perspective--sometimes one at odds with the previous. If we could work in concert with our previous selves instead of continually being at odds...." Vima let her voice trail off. "Well. That would be something to behold. Are you going to open the door, Revan, or just stare sullenly at it?"

Just kill her already! Revan twitched her finger in the ancient Quarren handsign again; the one the Quarren had taken from their Gree captors millennia before the Infinite Empire had existed.

There was a danger that the Republic would turn against them without Vima's influence, but Rensha had a logical mind. Once freed from Vima’s influence, she would surely see what was needed to win the war. Not for the first time, Revan’s hand twitched helplessly at her empty belt, the missing saber that should have hung from her side. I would kill her myself! Her eyes looked up into Vima's smug smile. And she knows I would. She knows I am too weak to break her compulsion, and too cowardly to waste my life on a gesture of futility--

"Huh." The doors slid open. Deliberately careless, the Fragment sauntered backwards into Vima's sanctum. "You have Tenny-bro tied up in here, or--?" Her head turned. And then the Fragment gave out a startled noise. "Oh!"

"Yes," Vima murmured. "We do."

XXX

The Sith Emperor has become a romantic figure to some; an immortal, nearly mythical part of our culture. But in the war against the Awakened Ones, Lord Valkorion became far more than that.

He became a hero.

Lord Valkorion worked tirelessly across his network of bodies to disseminate information and battle plans to our allies and former enemies alike....

"The Sith Emperor in the times of Revan the Redeemer." --Ziost Publishing, undated datapad, est. 2900 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

It should not have been a surprise to see the Toydarian bound to the chair. Revan had been in his body, had even been linked to the Sith Emperor's mind--and in it, she'd seen this room already--even if she hadn't realized it existed on a separate ship.

At the moment, the Emperor wasn't home and the avian man's eyes were a normal black, buzzing with fear. His feathers were ruffled as if he hadn't had a chance to groom himself. He looked fragile and small and pathetic. Frightened?

No. Terrified.

"Hello," Revan muttered numbly. Behind the arrays, the walls of the room gleamed, paneled in red and black stone. The stone plates were mounted on the corvette's durasteel walls. Carved symbols-
Those are ___. This is a chamber of ___. There was a gap in her mind where the knowledge should be.

The weight of Force pressed down like a tightened electro net.

"Let me go?" The Toydarian chirped. "Please! At least until he comes back. I'll be good! I promise!"

His smell took a second to reach Revan's nose and when it did she couldn't forget. The floor around the Toydarian's chair was white and slick, the feathers of his legs filthy, as if he'd been tied there for some time.

"You need to let him go. Frack! At least let him use the fresher--"

"There hasn't been time." Dar's voice. For first time, Revan noted the shadows under the other woman's eyes, her own pallor. Dar's white robes were stained with grime. "Every few hours--"

"S'been four," the Toydarian chirped. "Four days, now, master. I think."

"Four days?" Dar blinked dully, as if under a spell.

She stank, too. It wasn't just the room, Revan realized, as her duplicate brushed past her. This entire fracking ship stank like fear and sweat and worse. "We only have moments left, now." Dar tapped her ear and Revan saw the speaker clipped there, the way the other woman's eyes unfocused and blinked, issuing commands to their fleets. "Our ships are in position. Our enemy's attention has turned from the planet. You will draw them to cluster, here--"

"When I hide from the Force it stuns them," Revan nodded. "You'll have about three minutes before they wake up. They'll be pissed when they do."

"Then you'll do it again."

"Yeah, but every time I do it, they'll be closer. We'll need to jump somewhere--have a plan to jump somewhere--"

"Of course." Dar nodded. "Corellia. Our allies still have it set in their navigational arrays."

"We have a few moments, padawan." Vima sounded amused, directing her words to Dar. "Clean the bird. I will explain things to our old friend."

"I didn't realize it had been so long." Dar muttered, looking guilty. She freed the Toydarian, and lifted him to his feet. The air felt thick and heavy. Revan had a funny feeling--like she knew Dar didn't want to leave at all.

"I've been here before," she said. "Or someplace like it. Those panels… patterns on the wall… I've seen them before."

The woman's voice was amused. "I am surprised you remember. There was so little of your mind left."

"On Dantooine." Dar and the Toydarian had gone, vanishing behind a side entrance set into the wall. Revan felt a chill shake her body. "There was a… a room like this. Off the main archives."

"Yes." With a sniff, Atris walked to a corner of the room and activated a small sleeper droid. It
whirred over to the stained floor and began scrubbing away at the chair. "On Dantooine you almost came back. I had these panels installed in my chambers. They amplify the Force. It gave me no pleasure to reinforce the smuggler's imprint over your own, but I had no choice. You were coming into your strength too quickly. I needed you hidden. From him."

Once, Revan would have thought Malak. But now she knew better.

"You mean from the Emperor. Tenny-Bro." What Polla calls him. A small thing, but it felt like defiance.

"Yes." Vima traced one of the patterns on the wall, a spiraling circle. “Your ‘Tennybro.’” A slight smile crossed her lips. “If you want to really annoy him, call him ‘Vitiate.’ The name his father gave. He despises it.”

*He’s picked a new name now. Valkorion.* "Thanks for the tip. I am going to kill you. You know that, right?"

"Do you remember what these carvings do?” Vima cocked Master Atris's head and smiled. "We found them together--long before that, on a planet the Mando’ade feared to tread."

"I know there's power here." Revan could feel it through her shields, like water bearing down on her. "I know you’re fracking with my head, and hers, and everyone else on this ship--"

“Do you?” Those pale eyes narrowed. “Then break your chains.”

“I can.” The strange lassitude in her limbs was false. The Force beat on her shields calling to her. “You know I can, and you know I can kill you.”

“That is the order of things, in the paths you and I learned to walk.” Vima walked to the command board and switched it on. The star system unfolded before them. “My padawan could not do it herself. There is far too much of Sheris in her now… but you….”

“You want me to kill you?” Maybe it was all very simple. Maybe Vima Sunrider was just insane, and all Revan had to do was kill her now. She had the lightsaber at her belt and the woman appeared unarmed.

*But I can kill her at any time. I don’t have to do it yet--*

“I have the means to make an end to our mutual foe. With your assistance.” The woman paused, gesturing to the walls around them. “I will even provide this ship as a gesture of good faith. I’ve dismissed my Echani guards already. Kill me, defeat the Sleeper ships, then do what you like. Will you defeat the Emperor, too? My padawan seems confident she has the means but she remains reticent with her details.” Vima glanced at the Toydarian's filthy chair. “Perhaps for the best, not sharing them here. I do what I can to cloud Vitiate's perception, but it may not be enough. He knows someone has him under their heel.” Her voice sounded amused. “I assume he thinks it is you.”

“It is,” Revan snapped. “Now.”

“Cocksure bravado from the Deralian criminal?” Vima sighed. “I had hoped for more.”

Revan stared at the walls instead of answering. Beyond her shields the amplified Force beat down like a Derran monsoon. “You’re… drawing power from somewhere,” she said at last. “The Force. This chamber isn’t just boosting the signal. It’s a conduit.”
“You are perceptive.” Vima walked to a chair set against one of the panels and sat down in it. Unlike Dar, she was immaculate. Seated, she looked like an ice empress, ascended to her throne, even if the chair she sat in was nothing more than a spacer’s rest. “Your predecessor never made that leap. Of course—she was not raised to think such a thing could be possible.”

“Raised by you,” Revan shot back. “And Dar’s not my predecessor, she’s my… she’s…” the Force seemed to weigh down more heavily, making the words in her mouth clumsy and slow. “She’s—”

“I’m back.” Somewhere outside the world battle stations rang. Dar burst through the door, dragging the Toydarian by one feathered arm. He looked marginally cleaner. Dar snapped her fingers, and the holographic command board Revan had seen in her dreams flashed to life.

"You’re late. We’re awaiting instructions," came High Admiral Rensha’s voice over the intercom. Her holographic form paced slowly, seeming to float above the image of the planet below her. “Wideband is down. Fleet’s moving into battle positions. Twenty-eight sept zed is the initial volley, in orientation toward Malastare’s sun—"

Dar looked at Revan. "Here." She held out a small, disc-shaped earpiece, twin to the one she wore. “You’ll need this to see in real time, issue commands.” Dar’s mouth quirked. “Sinae said Aemelie spoke highly of your tactical skills. I trust there is enough of me in you for that to be accurate.”

“Yes.” Their field of battle flickered into place before Revan’s eyes when she clipped the command device to her skull; ships of light between the virtual stars. The enemy fleet was demarcated by blue boxes swarming against the backdrop of a small, green world. The enemy fleet was now engaged with their vanguard—a bulwark of Mandalorian capitals and their clouds of snub-fighters, red circles like nests of flames. Revan’s mind noted the space between Carth and Canderous’s fleets, triangulated evenly. She marked the mid-point between them. The command fell from her lips. "Have the others pull back. Open a channel—"

“No.” Dar shook her head, almost casually pushing the Toydarian back into his chair, and clamping the security braces against his clawed appendages, the base of his wings. "Didn’t you hear what Rensha said? We can’t broadcast to tell them anything. Wideband’s out sector-wide—they knocked it out. We need Tenebrae." She prodded the Toydarian again, but the man just cringed, shying away. Her red eyebrow lifted. "Odd. He always comes for battles."

“Perhaps he’s too weak from your plague.” Vima sounded amused. “Or as frightened of Revan as poor C’Tannis is of you.”

“I don’t know!” the Toydarian cringed. “I don’t know where he is!”

“Fragment?” Dar looked more in her element suddenly, sketching probable attack vectors across their combat display; and Revan felt the change in air, too. From somewhere outside of her shields, Vima’s mental grip had loosened—giving them both free rein to win the war. “Can you call him? Summon him?”

“Call him? Tenny-bro?” Easily. As she had before. All she had to do was drop her shields. “I—I can. Yes—”

“He’s weakening, there are more and more silences… but we need him for this. Call him to us—you have to reach in the Force, for the stars—” Dar’s voice hesitated. “I could, once. It’s—”

It’s dangerous. It’s beautiful. And it isn’t dark at all, all those tiny little lives. “I know.” Revan felt the Force break through, enveloping her like a song. The room brightened. Vima’s mind-tricks, her Force-enhanced artifacts, all of it fell away like chaff. The map of the Malastare System was a
clumsy thing, but the real planets appeared, and Revan was in them, through them, everywhere at once--and then she could--she could see--

--a Dug in a boat on Malastare, head-body basking in the sun--

--a child playing skip-jack on Dathomir.

--a pie cooling on a windowsill on Deralia.

--a pregnant Zabrak’s belly through an examination gown on Iridonia.

--the feel of water on her feathered scales on Pokra.

--the flashing lights of an Imperial command bridge--there-- there--

Vima's voice, amused, cut through the stars like a blade. "Do we truly need Vitiate, Revan?"

Revan felt her lips move to answer, even as she reached for the stars. "No. We don’t need him. Vima’s right." Her mind reached out. "We don't need the Emperor at all." And then, just like that, she was--

Xxx

Some think the Onasi court martial after the Machine Wars was a mere technicality, a trumped-up charge to make a man who had switched sides at least twice publicly account for himself before his promotion to Rear Admiral of the Republic Fleet.

That does seem possible. It is difficult to find any contemporaries condemning Carth Onasi’s actions. His return to Coruscant was promoted and broadcast on every HoloNet channel. The trial proceedings in the Coruscant Hall of Justice were disrupted by thousands of protestors for a night and day, before the Great Houses imposed an emergency executive order--even before the tribunal could announce their findings. The executive order proposed reinstating Onasi’s status as a Republic officer with two promotions in rank, as well as retroactively declaring him a Strategic Information Service operative (retired class), with the appropriate pensions for that service.

With one swoop of an auto-pen, Carth Onasi, formerly of Telos, was publicly declared to have been a double agent working for the Republic all along.

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

[Note: I hope the mentions of Carth Onasi in my collected texts dispel any doubt that he was a fictional character.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

Score! So much was still in the air, but Carth took a breath to enjoy the win, watching as the Machine Ships started to blink out, ceding yet another system to victory.

“New hyperspace point at the why yammer zed…phbbt….” the Emperor trailed off into another trail of spittle.

"Fats? You’re fading out.” Carth tried to breathe calmly. Nearly over, and for once, the good guys had won with no pain. No allied losses. He felt his face smile, staring at the non-casualty reports,
with Dustil’s name safely in the green. No losses because of Revan? Seeing the Hawk-- hearing Revan on that comm… knowing she was here was one hell of a distraction… but they’d won.

Has to be you, Freckles. Carth felt a surge of optimism bubble up through the crushing exhaustion. You’re our lucky star. "Fats? You still there? Can you… uh, do you see Revan? Can you get a message across?" You owe me that much, you sadistic son of a Hutt.

With the enemy ships on the run, they’d have a few hours. Might be enough time to grab a shuttle--or to send a shuttle for her--but dammit, he couldn’t leave just his post-- “Fats!” Carth repeated, nudging the bloated thing’s foot with his boot. It had fallen silent now, head slumped, when just a moment ago it had been babbling coordinates at him like an autodidact. “Fats, wake up!”

“Carth?” Yuthura’s hand brushed his arm. “There was no time in the heat of battle to tell you before, but I-I sensed a… presence--” She reached for his other hand. It had used to make Carth uncomfortable the way Yuthura Ban kept reaching for his hands, but he had come to realize it was her way of healing--restoring as much vitality to his tired old brain as she could between fights. The toll it was taking on her was evident, however, in the way her smooth hands trembled, and her lekku sagged. “It wasn’t the Emperor in the Voice’s body, Carth. Not for that fight.”

“Yes.” The Sith priestess who had come with the ship and the monster scowled at them both from her guarded chair. After the time she’d tried to stop Dustil from waking up Fats, they’d put her in restraints during combat. Carth didn’t trust her, but she’d kept Fats from seizing three times now. “Lord Ban is right,” the woman said sullenly. Her chains clanked. “His Luminance hides his face, now--his orbit to the dark of a moon. Her light has come. That was her in the Voice’s body. The Sith’ae’rah.”

“What?” Carth looked stupidly back at the hulking thing. “You’re saying Revan can just--that wasn’t an accident before, she can just--”

"Carth!" Fats's eyes began glowing again, abruptly--its voice trebled. Higher-pitched or was that just his imagination hoping it was her? Is it good that she can just do that? Is it really possible? She can't get stuck in there--

"Fats?" Carth swallowed. “Good. Uh, you’re back. Revan-- is she--”

“It’s me, Flyboy.” The bloated thing’s lips moved. “I’m here.”

Xxx

Mandalorian gunships have changed little over the centuries. This Drexl F-9 artifact from the time of the Old Republic’s Machine Wars bears nearly all the aspects of their technology that would later become standard across most intergalactic fleets. Note the sloping dorsal fins, the two-man nav-contriols, the chassis belly deep enough to accommodate a modified hyperdrive engine--

--Auction Catalogue, Naboo Collectibles, 159 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

They’d been fighting in the Corellia System for about ten minutes when the orders came in to jump back to fracking Malastare--just as half the enemy capital ships all blinked away, nearly in unison. Millifar muttered a curse and Mekel wondered what the frack was going on.

Unlike the Sleepers, who seemed to always jump perfectly without landing on top of each other at
the points where space bottlenecked, allied fleets needed to use the hyperlanes. Mekel and Millifar sat back-to-back on their gunship waiting their turn and watching for bogeys, with her handling the thrusters as he set the coordinates the _Aleema_ was broadcasting on short-range. Lucky they were so close to the mothership. There were others farther out, milling in confusion now that their enemy was gone. A lone Imperial Stinger--officer-class by the marks on its wings--drifted close to them, obviously separated from its own pack.

Mekel frowned. "Milli, send the next round of coordinates short-range on the open channel. In Sith, not Mand'oa. Looks like we've got a straggler."

"We could just shoot it." Her armored hand reached behind her head and clumsily patted his head. Maybe it was supposed to be a nice gesture, but it made Mekel feel like her pet kath.

"No!" Lately, he'd been everyone's per kath. Milli. Mydia. And, of course, the Emperor. And And General Ordo just wanted to know what the next command was from Zepth, and Aemelie kept bugging Mekel about plans for the fracking future.

Mekel wasn't sure what the polite way was in Mandalorian to say he wasn't sure there was a future. The war had been going on for three weeks. Four? Felt like a hundred weeks. And between Milli and Myd, wasn't like he had much time to sleep. They all took stims but lately, stims didn't do much. Lately, Mekel felt... stretched out on the rack, as they used to say in Dreshdae. Like if this kept going, he'd be all used up. Between Millie and Myd... probably good Telos wasn't here too... or he'd have to skip a few shifts, get more than chafing cream from Sinae.

That thought wasn't as funny as it should have been. Him and Dustil... hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms. Not the worst, either, just--

Just nothing. It didn't matter. Mekel stared out the viewscreen at that damn ship, sighing in relief as their short-ranged beeped a successful transmission.

"Incoming!" Milli elbowed him in the back, beskar clanking on beskar. "Machine Ship! Don't fall asleep on me, Mekel Jin. We still have four hours left on our shift!"

Mekel reached for the controls, only to see their target explode, caught in the Stinger's sights. "Hey! That Stinger has a better hit rate than we do." Which was saying something. Milli was damned good at this.

"They would make a worthy foe," his girlfriend agreed. "When we finish with the Machine Ships, perhaps we will fight the Sith."

"Hah hah." Mekel rubbed his eyes. She probably wasn't joking. "Right. We're not gonna fight Admiral Onasi's fleet."

"He would be free to change sides," Millifar was serious.

Sometimes too serious.

"Right." Mekel sighed with relief when he saw that the Imperial ship had winked out, jumping into the hyperlanes.

Be a shame for His Luminance to lose such a good pilot.

Xxx

_Imperial Stingers, warbird-class, are another example of the Sith willingness to sacrifice safety for_
firepower. Relying on maneuverability over shielding, they were favored by Force-using elites of the Sith Empire--

"Fighter Design, a History." Republic Engineering Manual, Fleet Academy Press. BBY 3379

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"Thanks." Dustil cocked a salute at the stubby Mandalorian gunship that had given him the new route. He finished inputting it into his Stinger's navi-computer and zipped in front of them in line. "Thanks asshole. Whoever you are." He smothered a yawn, then blinked awake again hard just in time to save their Mandalorian ass.

Whoever they were had saved him out there a few minutes before, and not just from getting lost. He'd had three bogeys on his tail and they'd taken out two. Five minutes later he'd returned the favor and saved their ass by lighting up the torpedos that one of the larger Sleepers had launched up their six-hole. And now this.

"Thanks and you're fracking welcome." Dustil pulled the lever into hyperspace, letting the Force cushion him from the acceleration gees. Dear Father was probably having a fit somewhere out in the black since Dustil hadn't returned with his squad, but Yuthura was around to the old man he was alive, so he'd get over it. And maybe Dad would be distracted now that big bad Revan was back.

The Hawk had gone to the Great Hunt, though, and ever since orders had gotten more nuts and their enemy less predictable. Back above Malastare, Dustil had been setting up a run to take out one of their capitals with his squad when every bogey in the sector froze like someone had kicked their lights out. Fun while it lasted… he'd help burn five of the big ones before their enemy seemed to reboot or whatever and notice they'd been sitting k'lor'slugs, but then they'd attacked with more ferocity, instead of turning tail and running… and somehow, in the confusion, Dustil had lost the rest of Rancor Squad, which left him with Green Gunship, as he'd taken to calling the Mandie one, for lack of a better name. He'd followed Green into the Corellia System and now, apparently, they had to go back again.

Dustil closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair a little more, better to appreciate the last few minutes of sweet, restful hyperspace. Wasn't the lack of sleep bothering him--hell, three weeks of this had just been like Korriban Finals Week done three times--but for some reason, even with the teachings of his old masters, his body felt like it was having trouble keeping up. Like he was being stretched.

When he closed his eyes, the black of space blurred into a bar of clear light.

"Keep it together, Onasi," he muttered, blinking hard. The Stinger's engine started ticcing off the countdown to real-space. Standard procedure would be to land on base, but to do that he'd have to find the Captive Arm. With wideband out, they all had to rely on sensors and sense.

Dustil's Stinger emerged back in Malastare, nearly on top of a debris field. All his instruments beeped in alarm, but if there'd been more of a fight, he'd missed the party.

"See anything Oh-three?" But his astromech buddy's input said negative, whirring in the next round of instructions as his wideband crackled back on, crackling with static, and then filling with chatter as everyone else started to maneuver around before the wideband kicked out again. Dustil ignored most of it. The Force showed him what he needed to know.
"There!" His hand moved the yoke in the right direction even before the coordinates appeared on his screen. The battle lay ready and waiting for him, their enemies laid out like a bad hand of pazaak.

Chaos, except the enemy ships were frozen. Like botflies in stick-sap. This time the fight was even cleaner. So clean you couldn't even call it a real fight. Dustil and Green Gunship flew in unison, mowing through the small fighters like they were blades of grass. Boring, now that they weren't fighting back. Dustil was pretty sure he could've handled it with his eyes closed. He felt himself yawning again. Every time he blinked the stars blurred together into a line of light, but the Force kept him going--

XXX

"An astromech droid! My Empire for an Astromech droid!"

--popular song lyrics, c. RRA 78, (BBY 3874)

XXX

Oh-three beeped in alarm as his Lord and master Dustil the Wise's hand slipped from the yoke of his controls.

Following protocol, the little Droid sent out a short-range beacon and set out for the nearest and biggest vessel designated as friendly….

XXX

The Malastare Offensive was staged in two parts. What began as a typical battle with Alliance forces and the Machine Ships changed, as Revan's tactical brilliance used the hyperlanes the Machine Ships had carved against them.

The Machine Ships tried to flee but Revan's control of their exit points forced a rout.

Malastare: First Shots of a Short War, Supreme Commander Jiya Sand, Republic Navy Quarterly, Volume V, 3ARR, 3950 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

And then Revan was--

--staring at her husband, dressed as an Imperial officer. That slightly awkward slouch ajar with his admiral's bars. Yuthura Ban, dressed like a Sith, was standing facing holding both of his hands like they were about to exchange property vows. Lights flashed, painting them both in a haze of black and red.

"Carth." His name came out of a heavy mouth. The tongue felt too thick. This body felt strange. Pulse racing too fast, everything weighted, like gravity had tripled around her.

"Fats." Revan watched his lips move, those crinkles of relief at the corners of his eyes. “Good. Uh, you’re back. Revan-- is she--”

“It’s me, Flyboy. I’m here.” She had been in this body before, with Tenebrae. A part of Revan heard Dar's voice like a buzz in her skull, someplace far away, barking orders. But for a second all
she could see was her husband; his tired, incredulous smile grinning back at her.

“You helped us win that,” he said. “Knew you would.”

"Yuh--yeah."

"Revan," Yuthura interrupted. "My old friend."

"Yuthura." Revan shouldn't be focusing on why her old friend was holding Carth's hands, but the eyes of the sent she was possessing couldn't look away. She tried to lift her own arms only to find them bound somehow at her sides. When her head turned to look, she couldn't see how it was done; but her shoulders were red and mottled and swollen, grotesquely large, and her neck felt heavy as if holding her head up at all was a struggle. Looking straight down only displayed a view of burgeoning flesh. "Wha… what the… fra--what am I?"

The Twi'lek finally dropped Carth's hands. "We aren't sure. The Voice’s body is at least a century old, according to its caretaker. Possibly two."

"Revan." Carth touched her shoulder tentatively, moving close enough to take up most of her view. “Where’s the Emperor?”

“I don’t know. He’s… he’s in here somewhere.” She wasn’t just with Carth. Somewhere, another part of Revan was rattling off commands to Canderous, too; and another part of her was watching a swoop match on Nar Shaddaa, stepping out of a bath on a planet with six moons, watching an honor guard raise a golden statue of a bearded man on an unmapped world, staring at a row of babies, all swaddled, half of them squalling on Coru--Coruscant--

**Babies? What the frack?**

And then Dar's voice raised again, louder, cutting through the rest, and then Revan was rattling off the coordinates again, imparting the strategy her husband needed to know, even as she felt the Sleeper ships swarming in another part of the galaxy, in a system teeming with life--

“Figure it out later! They’re at Corellia! Go! Now!”

Revan just knew that, even though Dar was only guessing the Sleeper’s logical destination. Automatically, Revan switched two of Dar's course commands for their opener, sending the Mand'oa gunnery squads into a tighter orbit between the Sleeper waves. Because Revan could keep their attention, the risk would be minimized--

**Yes.** A dark voice, amused, echoing in her skull. **She was overly cautious there, but you… you see the advantage of a clear strike--**

**Tenebrae?** The mind she'd touched before. Not the cold ice of the Rakatan computer who had called to her from its installation on Kaas; this was its decadent, fallible overlay; the man who possessed the Toydarian, the bloated pureblood whose tortured lungs wheezed in her chest even now.

**Yes. And now you see.**

Revan's vision splinted, scattering across the stars--

**And then she was--**

--Staring at a row of bundled infants in an empty cantina that smelled like antiseptic and roses.
Some were sleeping but most were wailing as a manka cat prowled along the row and a golden-eyed girl scowled on a barstool, arms crossed. "Is that it?" she asked. "Are you done, my Lord Emperor?"

Revan opened her mouth to answer--protest the impossibility of the scene--but then her mouth froze and a heavy voice invaded her mind.

**Oh, my Starfire. You will learn control.** His chuckle felt like a scream.

*What are you doing? What the frack is this? Babies?*

**I do not wish to share.**

And then, just like that, Revan was cast adrift again, spinning and helpless, without even the weight of a body, lost in a formless vacuum. Black, endless black. Like space, deep enough to drown in; but there in the distance a light flashed, a frail, thin thread--and then as she drew closed the line thickened, then doubled--twin lines, each one leaning toward the other and the point where they met, the apex--

Later, Revan would not be able to remember the features, or if the presence there held features at all; but she knew him in that moment; finally knew him for all that he was.

His true self.

**Vitiate! You asshole--**

His laughter was a wave of spite that crashed into her, made her blind.

**Use my bodies for your war, my Starfire, use them as you wish, destroy our enemies. This is your purpose; but when you are done, we will have our reckoning--**

Revan had been told Vitiate was weakened by the plague and the war. But this presence did not feel weak. It felt like a tidal wave, encompassing all that she was and sweeping her up within its embrace. *You were fading before, you were weaker than this--*

**Yes.** He sounded amused as his mind raked through her thoughts with the carelessness of someone shuffling a deck of cards. *I was. Now I am once more the ocean in which you shall drown. Thank you for giving me the key to my deliverance--your own temporary respite--*

--and then something cold and wet splashed across Revan’s face, and then something harder smashed into her skull, knocking her head back--

Revan blinked her eyes and found herself sprawled on the floor in her own body, with tracers from the holographic display above casting shadow, half-blinding her eyes. She scrambled to her feet to see Dar, cradling her flesh hand with a wounded expression. An empty bulb of water was half-crushed on the floor.

Revan wiped the water from her eyes. "You… you threw water? On me?"

"I also apologize for hitting you," the woman said formally. "But even Vima could not seem to reach your mind. We're preparing to make the jump to Corellia now. Our master claims she will tell us her plan as we prepare for the next fight."

*I am the ocean--Tenny-bro said he was the ocean--Valkorion--he calls himself the ocean--*
The light was too bright. Revan looked down and saw her hand glowing again. And with that realization, came the screams in mind: the Sleepers coming again--

"Hide yourself. Now!" Vima Sunrider snapped, from behind her. "Before they return and tear the Great Hunt apart."

"We are always the last to jump," Dar added woodenly.

Revan eyed her warily. If I block the Force, Vima can frack with my mind. If I don't, the Emperor can reach me--her thoughts were slippery, as if Tenny-Bro's oily fingers were stamped all over them.

"That went well." Vima added. "No casualties. Do I have to brief either of you on the details of the Corellia System?"

"No." But Corellia was a bad place to finish this--if they could finish it that quickly. There had been four hundred and two enemy capitals. Now there were three hundred and nine. In her mind’s eye, the Corellian sky bristled with them, screaming, and Revan felt her legs buckle, dimly as if from a distance and then--

--then she was calling them back, even as her voice babbled the command to their allies. Malastare was the less populated star system and they did not have fuel to burn, enough of their forces were still here, they--

"Revan? Fragment!" Something was shaking her. Her own face, staring down into hers. "What did you do?"

"Called them... back. I'm calling them--tell the rest of the fleet not to jump." Half of their forces were still here, waiting for the hyperspace lanes to clear. The other half heeded her orders--she could hear them--speak to them: hear Canderous's gravel voice; Carth’s commands, rapidfire; but then Carth’s hand closed on her red, bloated one and somewhere the babies, the babies were screaming--loud as ships themselves--

Tenebrae? Vitiate What have you done?

Found strength for an end to our chains. Cold amusement in his voice. The transferrent energy of an untethered Bezel bond! Oh, and the well is deep--do you feel it?

You mean the babies? What the frack are you doing with those babies?

Planning our future. You took so many. I had to make some provision for the next generation--

"Revan." Her own voice again. Her own face, gentler this time. A warm hand touched her face as Revan's eyes focused. "Come back. I need you here."

Revan blinked, coordinates swimming through her head. The Emperor's laughter echoed in her mind. "I--"

"You are a rash fool calling our ships back from Corellia." But Vima's insult held a note of respect. "You said before you can lead the Sleepers, Revan? Will they follow you through hyperlanes? Across multiple jumps?"

"I got here with them, didn't I?" She imbued her words with false confidence. The difference between coordinating the Hawk and several hundred warships was like the difference between going to Derra City on her hessi and riding the hyperspace lanes to Coronet City on Corellia on
Polla's starship. "I can keep them following us... but I can't keep them from getting there first."

Vima smiled and opened another holoscreen. A map of the galaxy sprung into being. "Then bring them to this system." She marked the jump points with her finger, leaving a tracer of green connecting the dots. "Send half of the fleet ahead of the Hunt --Mando'ade and the Imperials, both. They'll engage upon arrival. Our fleet will follow to flank."

Revan blinked. "Why that route? Why three jumps?" She knew it. Polla had never spent any time in that sector but Revan knew it--somewhere, that dark whisper of recognition in her mind--

"Bring them to the Malachor System?" Dar's voice cracked with suspicion. "Why?"

"To make an end." Vima folded her arms. "Malachor V remains unstable and the system itself is full of debris. I know it well. Easy to exploit the terrain to our advantage." Her hands moved and a display of the system appeared, lit in holographic blue. "You can see these asteroid belts here, the remains of so many ruined ships can provide cover, as well as possible projectiles--"

"And the Trayus Academy?" Dar walked over to the display and circled a spot on the fifth planet. "How does that figure into your scheming?"

"The what?" Revan frowned.

"Mandalorians have a superstition about walking on the planet. My padawan and I did not share their reservations." Vima glanced at Dar and suddenly Revan felt the Force press down on her again like a vise. "We found a ruin built centuries ago, perhaps millennia. Power there to unlock, untouched by the Rakatan taint--"

"A refuge. Built by some long-ago rebel Sith Lord." Dar interrupted, tapping in commands that appeared on Revan's overlay, bidding the fleets to follow Vima's orders as if the matter was already decided. Three jumps, scarcely habitable systems. Blips on the hyperspace map.

The second to the last--Rekkiad--caught Revan's attention. The name was familiar. It recalled a sense of cold. The viewscreen of the Progress, watching the ice world while death screamed in her mind.

"Later, Vima used Trayus Academy--what did you use it for, Vima?" Dar's voice hardened. "I approved Davad opening his training facility there, but you--"

"I used it to consolidate my power." Vima nodded to herself as alarms pinged, indicating the ship had once more gone into hyperspace. "As my base beyond Vitiate's reach. The Blades trained there. As did my son, Oerin, for a time."

"That's nice." Oerin. My former ally. But what he'd done to Millifar, to Vrook and all the Jedi on Katarr-- "Must be a great place."

"I believe the lingering effects of the Mass Shadow Generator will make it nearly impossible for the Sleepers to create new hyperspace paths out of the Malachor system," Vima continued. "The gravity well still extant pulls any ship larger than forty meters into its sink around Malachor V--an effect we can enhance with the Force. If we get them close enough to the--"

She traced the differential vectors and Revan was surprised to find herself agreeing. The math made sense, it made perfect sense--

*She wants us to go to fracking Malachor V and that makes sense? Revan felt herself shiver. She's fracking with my head.*
"Here." Dar's flesh hand glowed as she pressed it to Revan's back. "You look rather pale. I always used to get nauseated in space. I had to learn coping mechanisms." She moved closer, and Revan tried to ignore the smell of sweat. Dar needed a sonic almost as badly as the poor Toydarian, who now slumped with his beak half-open in his chair, eyes half-closed. *Kill her now,* her fingers traced Ryl-signs on Revan's hand. *Quickly.*

Revan shook her head. There were still too many unanswered questions. *I can kill her any time,* she thought. A strangely calm thought.

XXX

*Who was Polla Organa? Polla Organa was no one person. Instead, she was a precisely curated amalgamation of personalities, driven by the Force. The Jedi instilled in her a strong sense of morality; technical knowledge that complimented Revan's own; and basic training in weapons and strategy. Supposedly born on Deralia, a remote world untouched by the ravages of war, her personality matrix overlaid the tragedies of Revan's life with a foundation of stability and hope.*

Yes, Polla Organa was no one person--or was she?

*It is possible that a Polla Organa, Deralian Registered Smuggler, did exist as a contemporary to Revan Starfire. Deralian registries note such a person as a dues-paying member of the guild during the Mandalorian and First Sith War. Her parents, Molla and Jasp Organa, and a husband and son, Seiran and Abasen, are also listed as the owners of a Derra Farm, Adaston.*

After the Machine Wars and well into the next century, a Republic Bounty for a 'Polla Organa, Registered Smuggler' remained in effect, issued by the Transgalactic Underwriters Guild; the penalty for three counts of insurance fraud. But the bounty was never collected, and the Underwriters' Guild dissolved into insolvency. *The exploits of Polla Organa, in some parts of the Rim more myth than merchant, continued for another century--well beyond the span of Human years--lending credence to the theory that Polla Organa was merely a droid with a clever holomask all along.*

*Or a fictional character.*

*But was a smuggler's personality truly given to Revan Starfire? Could a Deralian smuggler's memories truly be a part of what made the Hero of Malachor V and the Star Forge, the Empire-Breaker Resplendent, triumph over evil and return balance to the galaxy?*

*I think not.*

*Heroes, some say, are born, not made, created from the ether of the Force itself to bring us all to salvation. The hubris of thinking otherwise can be a heavy pill for some to swallow, I realize....*

--*Polla Organa: Hero or Myth? Lord Aurren Tuile Panteer, Alderaan University. RRA 278, BBY 3640*

[Note: Panteer was, by all accounts, a terrible monarchist, and this publication is often interpreted to be part of an effort to discredit any Organa claim to royalty. In other works he discredits the House Organa as a pack of Deralian grifters.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

A lot seemed to have happened judging by the flashing lights and alarms, but nothing much had
changed in this room that looked, Polla thought, more like a mess hall than an interrogation chamber or a cell.

Since the lights weren't flashing anymore, she had to guess they'd won the battle. "Any news?" she bugged the nearest guard.

He blinked sleepily at her as if he'd just downed a shot of trank’n’tank. "No, ma’am."

*Be pretty easy to escape,* Polla thought. She looked over to where the Wookiees had camped out in the corner. Half of them looked asleep too.

*We’ll escape later.* A comforting thought. She yawned herself, catching the eye of the glaring Republic admiral who’d been left to babysit their guards. Woman looked really pissed about it. And jumpy, with a sweet Republic-issue Aratech on her hip. Polla leaned against a wall and smiled, just to see her sweat.

She wondered how Mission was getting on, back at the ship with the repair droids they’d assigned to it.

*I can escape later and check.* Polla yawned again.

Phylus Blais walked over to one of the currently blacked-out viewscreens, and fiddled with the controls.

"Won't do any good!" Da called out to him, from where he was jawing with a tired-looking lieutenant. "Security lock-down."

"I want to leave this ship," the kid said stubbornly. Same thing he'd been saying ever since they got into this stupid system. "My sister is out there and I want to see her."

"You should have heard the banthashit she used to say about you," Polla offered, to make him feel better.

"I did." Phylus Blais looked like he was pouting. "We were a very open family."

A squad of uniformed grunts jogged by their door's window; steps so synched they could have been droids. Then another. They had pilots' helmets tucked under their arms. Notes chimed over the speakers. The soldiers seemed to have come from every corner of the galaxy. If they hadn't been prisoners, Polla might have been touched to see all the Republic fracking unity, with every color, shape, size and breathing apparatus represented from a hundred planets.

“So… uh…. who’re you again?” Polla asked the admiral-woman. The admiral had come late, was now pacing back and forth with a frown on her face. Looked a little twitchy, like she’d taken too many stims.

“Admiral Rew Ekkumi.” Admiral Rew Ekkumi had a long face and a Telosian accent and dark hair in coils under her hat. The way she said her own name seemed to imply that Polla should be impressed.

*Frack that.* "If you're an admiral, where's your ship?"

"High Admiral Rensha has assigned me to be your security." The woman made a face like that was a sensitive topic. "For now. I’m in charge of your interrogation."

*But you haven’t asked us any questions.* "Hah, what'd you frack up to get that job?" Polla laughed,
but the admiral just blinked.

"Pollie!" Da rushed up and elbowed her. "I'm sorry, my daughter's a little informal, sir."

Admiral Rew Ekkumi nodded. "No, it’s a valid question. I had my own command until we engaged Revan's fleet." She tapped the headset she was wearing, and frowned; from the way her eyes unfocused she was obviously reviewing some top-secret admiral-type data. "Jiya? Are you seeing these latest orders?"

"Just got 'em. They don't make sense." The disembodied voice from her wrist-comm made Polla jump—and then immediately feel stupid for jumping. No one had told her to jump. I just have to stay calm. We'll escape later. She yawned again.

"I have to count on you to tell me these things." The admiral sighed. "The routing doesn’t make sense to me, either... but I don't feel… concerned about it."

"You can't not follow orders," Da interrupted their talk. “Not your job to question them.”

Polla blinked, because that wasn't like him at all to say something like that. Except he was right, of course. "You have to follow orders," she agreed. "Just follow the commands. We have to win this war. And then maybe we’ll escape. She yawned again, eyeing the sleepy-looking guard with the best rifle. Looked like he'd customized that beauty himself.

When we escape, I'll knock him out first and I will be having that rifle.

It looks so heavy!

She yawned again.

Rew made a disgusted noise in her throat, eyeing her. "Rensha put me on prisoner watch, Jiya. I'm here with the prisoners from the Ebon Hawk now."

“Revan’s there?” One of the voices asked.

“No.” Admiral Ekkumi made a face. “She went off with the other one and Atris. I’m in charge of her staff. Jiya? Denis? Tell me what to do."

"Get the hell out of there," another disembodied voice said. Male, more aristocratic than the first. "I can't think of one good reason she'd hold the Republic Fleet back and send the Mando'ade ahead with the Imperials. Especially to that system."

"I know. But we have to follow orders…” Rew's voice trailed off. "Damnit! I--"

"You got orders! You have to follow them," Polla reminded her.

"It comes and it goes, here. We… we're following the orders too.” The aristocratic voice paused. “Admiral Ekkumi, this is Acting Vice Admiral Denis Cein, currently commanding the Proven Conquest. Do you acknowledge my superior rank?"

“Of course, Denis.” The woman blinked rapidly a few times and took a deep breath. “Admiral Cein.”

“Then follow my directive. Get the hell off that ship before it jumps again ”

“I…” Admiral Ekkumi blinked a few times. “I… okay. Keep an eye on our guests," the admiral
ordered their guards. "That’s an order. I’ve got to… I’ve got to go."

The guards stepped aside and Rew Ekkumi backed out of the room. Polla heard her footsteps break into a run down the hall, then fade away, with those two disembodied voices still yelling more orders at her.

"She seemed kinda busy." Polla yawned. "That why you never made admiral, Da? Looks like a lot of work."

"That and I deserted." Her father shrugged.

Zaalbar looked up from his corner and groaned. "I do not like this place."

"The smell is like slaves," his girlfriend agreed. "But they told us we had to stay."

"We have orders that you have to stay." One of the guards leveled a stupidly large rifle in their direction. "We’re keeping you all here until we hear otherwise."

"We get it. You have to follow orders," Polla agreed. She felt funny. "Totally understandable." When she stared at the wall, she felt calmer somehow. But then her legs were tired. "Uh, could you order me to sit down?"

Xxx

Mandalore the Builder is a curious figure in galactic history. It is known that his name was Canderous Ordo, and that he followed Revan the Redeemer. This basic story exists in both the male and female versions of Revan's narrative.

At the end of the Machine Wars, Mandalore the Builder united the clans on Dxun, Onderon's moon. His successor, Mandalore the Beast-Master, was rumored to be a Force-user, although evidence of Force-sensitivity in the Taung bloodlines do not appear conclusively until the Age of the Darksaber some two centuries later….

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

[NOTE: the rest of this record, curiously, has been deleted. Evidence that the conspiracy was real?]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

Xxx

"There's an Imperial Stinger off our bow. Looks like it's drifting." Leskal's voice crackled as the short range cut in and out. "Picking up life signs, but it's not responding to hails."

"Tractor in. Send the pilot to medical." Canderous had been in better moods. Burn fuel to Corellia, then jump back to Malastare… sure, they'd cut through more of those damn areutii machines, but at the end, the cowards still jumped away, running like scalded manka cats before they could finish them off.

And the latest commands from the red-eyed kid--

"This right?" He asked the Sith hu'tuun ruler (currently possessing the Zabrak) again. "Degriass, Rekkiad, Malachor System? You sure? We can't use their damn hyperspace tunnels--ones for that
route don't exist. It's gonna take a few days to get this right, and we barely have fuel."

"Yes." The kid's eyes rolled back in his head, the sockets still glowing. "I'm sure." Something was on the fritz with Zepth too. The Sith Emperor had been gone for half the battle, leaving the scared Zabrak kid in his place, and their own forces trying to figure out how not to accidentally shoot their allies. Damn hu'tuun body-stealer was unreliable. "Degriass. Rekkiad. Malachor. Canderous…" the voice seemed to hesitate. "Uh, be careful."

"Right." Canderous snorted. Maybe the troch had been off developing a sense of humor. "Ask General Sheris why the hell we wasted time jumping back? Fleet's not a damned dewback chain."

"We… we figured out a way to… call the ships to us."

"Then call them here. Let's be done with it."

"Only works for a few minutes. Then they'll run. But we're… the atmospheric conditions around Malachor V… if we can draw them there so they can't jump out. I'll try and send you the data when we get a fresh signal."

"Tell your dar'jett general there is no need. We have been studying the effects of the gravity well at Malachor V far more extensively than they. I have the Weis databanks—and two of their geopoeisic engineers." Aemelie paused to smile. "General Sheris is right, husband. If we lure the troch fleet close enough to Malachor V's gravity well….

"Huh." Aemelie would never be wrong about astrophysics. "And General Sheris thinks she can keep 'em following us for days instead of running off on their own?" They'd tried something like that at Kashyyyk. Hadn't worked so well then.

"I--yes." A pause, as the Zabrak kid twitched, and drooled. "She can. T-trust me."

Canderous did not trust him—or the nastaar Sheris. But the Sith Emperor was in one vulnerable body on his ship and General Sheris was on a Republic dreadnaught with failing shields. The Aleema could take down the Hunt in moments, even with her current battle scars.

Not that they would—yet. Hetrusted Onasi. It just wasn't time to deal with the Republic. Not yet. All things in their season. He cracked the stiffening muscles in his back. "Onasi's in on this?"

"Carth--yes. Of course. Carth said… yes. You need to go… soon… I can't…" the red eyes flickered, cutting in and out like a bad holoreceiver. "We all need to go into hyperspace soon. We'll have a few days then—few days between each jump. Get the wideband up again. Finally get some rest."

Canderous nodded approval to the navigators to start laying in the new course. "Hey—before you go, why's the Ebon Hawk here? What's it doing on the Hunt?"

"Uh… I don't know." The Emperor seemed nonplussed. "I think… Phylus Blais. He was looking for his sister."

“Mydia Blais? We’ve got her."

“Good… uh, good. He’ll be happy to hear it."

Canderous had seen the Hawk in real-time, shooting by their bow with a swarm of Sleeper fighters on its tail like they a chain of drawbacks being led. Why would those damn Machine Ships follow the Hawk? Onasi had said something about giving the ship to Polla Organa and her husband before
they parted ways. Had they brought the Blais kid back? The Emperor had just said they'd found a way to make the Machine Ships follow the Fleet.

Was Phylus Blais calling them somehow? Canderous frowned. "So Blais made the Machine Ships follow the Hawk? Great Hunt tractored her in and now the Machine Ships're following the Great Hunt. Maybe you should figure it--" his voice broke off.

Only one person he'd seen had ever been able to control those Machine Ships. Make them stop bombing a planet, in fact.

"--out," he finished. But he already knew. Phylus Blais wasn't the one making those ships follow. Damn her.

There was a long pause. Probably while they both worked out a few things. Probably why Revan told that hu'tuun Emperor what to say. Because she'd know--she'd know what she asking--

"The Mando'ade don't talk of oaths." Zepth's head turned toward Canderous, as hand rose jerkily in the air, tracing the Ordo sigil he had no right to learn. "They are private things. But you swore one. You swore to follow, Canderous. Just… just do it. Trust me."

"That is absurd!" Aemelie's laugh splintered the abrupt quiet of their bridge, as every one of their people turned to look at Canderous, waiting for him to deny it. "General Ordo would never swear an oath to the Sith Emperor! He is no Fett Cassus of Linn, or Fett Te Ani'la before him--"

Canderous frowned, rubbing the full beard he'd grown without time to delip. "Follow the orders, Aemelie." Damn her. Damn them both.

His wife's expression tightened, and he saw the disapproval in her eyes, felt it radiating like mutiny around him from the others. He would be challenged, probably more than once before they even got to Malachor. And he could not afford to lose.

Damn her. Canderous had told Revan why the clans could not follow and she demanded it anyway. In the last few years whenever something happened that he couldn't explain, it was always due to her. This time was no different. Perhaps the carbonite freezing had been a ruse for her enemies. Perhaps she had thought to trick Aemelie, and make the Mando'ade follow her all along.

"We'll follow," he muttered, making a choice in an instant that might cost him his own empire--and his marriage. "Tell her that."

"Thank you," the possessed Zabrak replied. "I… uh, I will. Be careful."

Thank you. Canderous wanted to laugh.

"You too," he said.

"Oh, now he thanks you." Aemelie's hands punched the controls with more force than was necessary. "What did Emperor Hu'tuun ever do to gain your allegiance?"

"It is private."

Hurt sparked in her eyes. Canderous averted his. Damn them both. There was no good choice. The war had to be won. All of the rest: loyalties, oaths, honor, tradition--it would mean nothing burned into dust. Malachor V had been the lesson for Clan--and their tomb.

At the nav-board, the three blooded warriors had already pivoted to plotting their battle formations
for Degriass. The possessed Zabrak swayed on his feet, red lights of his eyes fading. Canderous nodded and two of the boys caught the man before he fell.

"We'll have a few days off, Aemelie." He could offer her that, at least. "In hyperspace."

"Then you should sleep," she muttered icily. "While you can."

"I'll make the tea," he told her, rather pointedly, but his wife ignored the innuendo.

Canderous closed his eyes. *Too old for this*. Aemelie had agreed to take orders from the Emperor already… hell if Canderous could see the difference between that immortal areutii and his friend… but he wasn't a woman.

*You don't know it's really Revan possessing that kid,* he reminded himself. It was a lie. He did know. Whatever choice he made would betray one of them: his wife or his warrior. The clans or the galaxy.

It occurred to him suddenly that Fett Cassus Lin had once faced a similar choice. And died for it.

"Malachor V…." Aemelie gestured toward Rickallion and the blooded warrior pulled up the Malachor System on the navboard. From the rows of seats along the weapons bank, someone began humming the Vode An. “Whatever your oaths, we will all take pleasure in battle above the skies of our most sacred ground!”

"Get the wideband links up if you can," Canderous barked to the kids. "And bring that Imp pilot to me when he clears medical." A long shot, but maybe the soldier would know something.

Not that Canderous wanted to know, but he was honor-bound to check.

Xxx

*When your great-great-great grandmother General Millifar of Ordo was a young woman, she was blooded in stars many times--so many that the heavens cried. But much less is known about your as many great grandfather, the mysterious dar’jett who loved her, although he was a true warrior as well…*


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

XXX

Their shift had a three-hour rest period between rotations. Millifar thought she’d been clear about scheduling an assignation when Mekel lingered behind to check their refueling lines… but she’d waited an hour in their bunk alone already. The only sign of Jin was his discarded flight suit (that needed laundering) and his lucky boots.

She commed the hangar to see if their ship needed more repair than she had expected, only to be told that Jin of Lin had left moments after she had, and that they had a span of *days*, not hours, before they would have to fly again. That, too, was a curious mystery, but one Millifar would now have days to solve.

So first, Jin.
Jin of Lin, she had learned, was a creature of habit. If he was not with Millifar, and he was not with their ship--

*Kriffing dar’jett.* After the duel had been fought three weeks ago they'd come to an agreement.

Of course, Mydia Blais had spent most of the duel running around shrieking like a babe, instead of working with Millifar to knock Jin out properly. Millifar had not been trying that hard to knock out Jin, either. He had to beat both of them to win a place in their beds—a point that had been explained to him at length by the other men after Mydia announced her claim in mixed company, where the challenge was impossible for Millifar to ignore. Jin had blushed like a proper man that day and told Millifar she was the only lover he needed on the ship.

But if the man hadn't wanted to bed Mydia Blais, all he had to do was lose the duel.

Jin had not lost the duel. In fact, the duel had gone on for hours. One of the last times they'd had for frivolous things before the war began.

And so, now they had this *schedule*—

Millifar rehearsed what she was going to say in her head, what she should have made clear with Jin when they were still aboard the gunship: *Mydia Blais’s time does not begin until for another three hours. I said nothing when she damaged you with those scratches the last time, but if you persist in disregarding all of our customs I may be forced to bring this matter before the Woman's Council for another mediation by combat*—

Millifar raised her hand and knocked on the door of the converted supply closet that the Sith princess had taken for her quarters. It was larger than most of the bunks, and the woman claimed it was fitting for her station as one of the Mandalorians’ two Force-detectors. The other Force-detector, the Zabrak Zepth, was possessed by the Emperor and considered less reliable even when he seemed to be in his own mind; which he was less and less frequently. Zepth was prone to increasingly long stretches of blankness where all he did was stare and drool, which made Mekel's friendship with the man all the more confusing.

Mydia of Blais was, at least, always conscious.

"Oh!" Mydia Blais stood in the doorway, clad only in a sheer robe. The scent of vallin candles wafting from her bunk was overpowering. "I sensed a null approach. I thought it was Mekel. What have you done with my boyfriend?"

"Nothing. It is still my turn." Millifar lifted her chin. "Since your mother never taught you how to share, I came to remind you."

The Sith rolled her eyes. "Did Mekel *send* you to tell me that?" She stepped forward when Millifar tried to peer around her shoulder, but the dar’jett Blais was short, and Millifar had a clear view of the room beyond. Lots of candles, two cots that had been tied together to make a decadent bed... but no Jin of Lin.

"He and I had arranged an assignation after our last combat run." A horrible thought occurred to Millifar. What if he had gone ahead on the next half-sequence with ceka rotation and… died? Would anyone bother to tell Millifar before the casualty lists were reported?

"He's not here, either." Mydia stuck out her lower lip like a small child. "He did say he might stop by later, but I don’t expect him for hours." She sniffed. “Perhaps he’s tired of you and went elsewhere.”
Suddenly Millifar felt foolish. "Perhaps he's merely eating."

"Maybe… or…" the Sith princess sighed heavily. "Have you noticed that… oh!" Her voice broke off. "Never mind. I’m sure it’s nothing."

“I will determine what is nothing,” Millifar told her. “What is to notice?”

“Well…” Mydia Blais gave a dramatic sigh. “I’m sure it’s nothing, but he has been spending a great deal of time with the Zabrak Voice.” Mydia raised her eyebrow. "Have you noticed that?"

“His bridge duties are to escort the Zabrak when we aren’t flying combat sweeps. Of course they spend time together.”

“And?” The Sith princess made a gesture instead of using the appropriate word for the act. Sith were strangely prudish.

"He told me he had a Zabrak friend." Millifar considered her point. "Before. A special one. He told me they have erogenous zones on their foreheads. At the time, I did not see how that was relevant, but now--"

"A male friend?" Mydia stepped back, motioning Millifar inside her quarters. "Because I know he… has had that preference in that past--"

"I don't know. But I knew about him and Leskal--" Millifar had a flash of irritation. "A casual liaison means nothing. Especially during wartime, what the men do in combat has nothing--"

"Leskal?" Mydia Blais looked thoughtful. "No. I meant Dustil Onasi--the Malak imposter."

"The Malak imposter--? Oh! Dustil." Millifar blinked. "Of course. He's spoken to me about Dustil." A bit too much, really. She’d expected another Exar Kun from the way Jin built the man up. Instead, she’d met a scrawny Sith that needed their rescue on the Great Hunt, stubble mixed with veins on his face. Did the Sith know that exposure to their magic just made them look like they were dying of radiation poisoning? She did not find it attractive. The way Mekel had spoken of the man had not matched the sullen dar’jett who spent the brief time he’d been on the Aleema glued to his father's side. They had not, she remembered noting at the time, even seemed to be particularly close. Mekel had hovered over Dustil like a nursing kath pup; but the dar’jett had seemed to pay his lover--or former lover--no mind.

Then, there had been a concern that the Imperial Fleet, with nothing left to lose, might turn on their conquerors. Dustil Onasi had gone with the Twi'lek dar’jett Yuthura Ban to help Carth keep them in line. After a few days of negotiation, the two fleets together had left Dromund Kaas, bound for the neutral refueling station at in the Peragus System--

--and arrived out of hyperspace to find it no longer existed.

After that, there hadn’t been much time for wondering about anything except the war. Glorious war--with too few men left for her father to forbid Millifar to take wing. Jin had proved himself quite capable in a fighter as well. They ran their gunboat perfectly together.

"Wait," Millifar frowned. "Are you saying Mekel hasn’t been with you at all, Mydia of Blais? Is that why you think he prefers men?" She felt smugness, knowing it not to be true.

Mydia giggled. "Oh, no." Her sand-colored eyes seemed to grow distant as if she was reliving the details of their encounters. She smiled. “He’s very attentive.”
“Yes.” Millifar sighed. The troch princess was of an age where it would be appropriate for them to share confidences of this nature, but she found Mydia insipid and dull. Not to mention far too thin. Something about the girl made Millifar feel ungainly. “Thank you for your time.”

“I’ll tell him you were asking for him,” the other woman purred sweetly. “In a few hours. When he comes to me. He never misses a visit with me.”

Millifar opened her mouth to tell the troch what she would do to her if she did any such thing—and closed it again. Almost like a voice, whispering in her ear. *Skinny she may be, but that one is more dangerous than she looks. Treat her with caution, Millifar of Ordo.*

“Yes, of course.” She nodded. No longer strange, having a voice whisper in her ear… although Millifar remembered, vaguely, a time when it had caused her panic.

*Some of the best headwomen are a little mad,* the voice whispered, soothing her. *And with my tutelage, daughter of Ordo, you will be the best of all.*

XXX

"The first joint speech of Revan Starfire and General Sheris Darkstar took place after the battle of Malastare was definitively won. It was meant purely for Fleet, most assume, but when wideband service was restored to all sectors of the galaxy, it was believed to have been broadcast freely across both Republic and Imperial space—as were all of Revan's speeches. For years after, the First Speech was studied both for its impact, and its inspiring rhetoric. The last thing anyone expected to see in the throes of war was what appeared to be two Revans, working together for victory."

"What remains curious about this speech is how disseminated it was at the time—so much that an entire generation of children on hundreds of planets were named 'Revan' or 'Sheris,' and yet, within two generations these speeches had faded into obscurity, only found in obscure references or forgotten vaults. Our own copy, which I will play for you now, was provided by Senator Loriom of House Racharn from Racharn's personal archive...."

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

Vima's plan was a trap. That fact glittered in Atris's possessed eyes, shone in the triumph of her smile. *Degriass, Rekkiad, Malachor. Malachor.*

**Republic forces: Operation: Scattershot.**

From time to time, Vima overrode Revan’s instructions to the fleet. Small changes. This change was not small. Vima was scattering the Republic Fleet across Core Space. She’d ordered the *Hunt* evacuated to a skeleton crew. She’d ordered the Mandalorian and Imperial fleets to Degriass. Rekkiad. Malachor. After the first jump, the time differential would effectively remove the Republic from the battle entirely.

Vima was only sending the Republic’s former *enemies* to Malachor; the place where Revan had used the Force's power of death to transform her own enemies. Who would Vima transform this time? *She seeks the death of the Force.* The woman had taken no pains to hide the objective from Revan. *She could make another Arkan from the Fragment, perhaps--or from me--*
Vima's plan was a trap, a bald-faced mirror of the plan Revan herself had launched herself long ago.

And right now, Revan felt like a k'lor'slug in a salt trap, her own free will dissolving with her fear.

Kill her, Revan signaled to the Fragment again. She didn't bother to watch for Vima's gaze to turn away. Right now she could feel Vima's control bearing down on them both. It scarcely mattered.

Her master's smile seemed to brighten.

Red. Malak's voice. So very faint.

The Fragment just shook her head. Her hand twitched in, the Ryl-signs that meant 'yet,' then 'knowledge,' before her eyes unfocused again. She'd controlled the Sleeper Ships at Malastare, flickering in and out of the Force like a maelstrom. Unleashed, she shone with the Emperor's own strength. She would be a match for Vima, even in this place.

If only she could see.

Malak! Tell her that between us we can answer any questions she might have--she doesn't have to let Vima live to find out whatever the blast she wants to know--

Red, I--.

Malak! He felt so distant. Revan looked up only to see her duplicate now staring vacantly, mouth half-open, and the Toydarian's eyes glowing again. The Fragment’s nose was bleeding again, staining her lips and chin. The glow from her skin made the blood appear black.

Malak’s voice was faint. She is with the Emperor, now. He calls to her, too.

Keep trying. "I know what you're planning to do," Revan told Vima.

"Do you?" A white eyebrow raised. "Would you do it? Again? For the sake of the galaxy?"

"It won't kill the Emperor." Revan exhaled. "So no."

"It took the death of many worlds to make Vitiate. I would destroy much less than that. Sacrifice as little as possible."

"Our allies--"

"Will become our enemies again, in a decade's time, no matter who dies now or what treaties are signed. Mandalorian expansion does not come with peace. And the Empire..." Atris's body shrugged. "Cutting off its head will not dull its claws. Shattering its navy, however...."

"It could be more than a decade of peace. It could be generations--"

"It will be generations, when they have no ships."

The logic wasn't wrong. Of course it wasn't. Revan had thought the same when she'd lured the Republic and the Mandalorian fleets to Malachor, before.

"But the Force is in all things. Life itself. If you destroy the Force you destroy everything--"

"Pablum." Atris's lip curled. "Pablum from Jedi. Your ignorance transformed Arkan into Nihilus. All I had to do was complete what you began. The Emperor consumes all life to fuel his own
expansion. I will bestow the power to stop him to one capable of doing so with the deaths of our allies. She will not be so clumsy a tool as Nihilus. She has been shaped from the beginning by my design. She will end Vitiate and the Order, and leave the galaxy to its natural order."

The Fragment remained oblivious. Revan had to speak for her. "I won't let you use her! I can stop him!"

“Oh? How?”

Revan was half-through the explanation of how with the Rakatan box when she saw Vima's eyes brighten and realized with a sick feeling in her gut that this interrogation had been part of her master's plan all along.

"A Rakatan mind prison?" Vima shook her head. "On Nar Shaddaa? Such a simple thing, to bring down the mighty."

"It worked before." That was how she had found rumors of its existence. Records kept by the Rakatan priest-caste. "Twenty thousand years ago, a Rakatan prince harnessed their world-building machines to tie his own essence into each sentient being they created. He thought their life-force would amplify his own power--but his people captured him, instead. His capture set them free." Or killed them. In Rakatan, the runes for 'freedom' and 'death' were very similar.

"A tale I never heard." Atris glanced at the glowing Fragment, the red-eyed Toydarian. "We must send word of the box to her in case none of us survive."

"I told her some of it already."

"I do not mean Revan." Atris smiled. "Revan is an agent of death and you are her shadow. Tricks of the light to beguile Vitiate and shatter his Sleepers while my true apprentice achieves her purpose."

“Who is your true apprentice?” The Fragment would have said, ‘fracking apprentice.’ The mix of exasperation and expletive seemed appropriate. “Who is your true fracking apprentice?” Revan glared at her old master. Unlikely responses warred with the absurd. She made her voice drip with the Fragment's cutting sarcasm. “Meetra Fracking Surik?”

Surprise sparked in Atris's cold eyes. “Yes.” The surprise faded with an eye-blink, replaced by cold calculation gazing back at her, as pitiless as the Rakatan machine.

“Oh.” But of course it made sense. All of them, grist of Sunrider's mill. Atris, too. Even Vima herself, once upon a time. *Jedi do not become monsters, Vrook told me that. But I proved him wrong just as surely as Nomi Sunrider before her--all those years ago--*

There was a long pause. Time seemed to stretch thin. Revan watched the Republic, Imperial, and Mandalorian ships begin to wink out; blindly following orders.

"You're very quiet, padawan." Vima went to the counter behind their console and removed a cup from the cabinet, unsealing it. There was a popping noise and then the smell of nerf broth soup. *Jedi become the worst monsters of all, Uncle Vrook. And you knew it--your old friends and my father became monsters. Like Exar and Ulic and Nomi.*

The Fragment was still too trusting. She had learned to shield the crystal of her saber, but not the weapon itself, which hung by a single clip at her belt, her hand slack beside it. She was still glowing. Come to her true power--lost somewhere with the Emperor himself.
In time, the Fragment might become a monster, but she wasn't one yet. She knew how to kill, but not to execute. Not for cause.

Revan's hand extended and the Fragment's hilt flew into it, igniting, and then, lashing out as time froze, the red light of her double-bladed saber reflecting in the mirror of a pair of green eyes--

*Green eyes? Green--*

*Red! Her husband’s voice--*

Xxxx

*Transcript of unreleased footage from the "The Machines Wars: The Untold Story."*

*Interview with anonymous crewmember, The Great Hunt,*

*You said before, things changed after the battle at Malastare. Care to say how?*

*That's when she came.*

*She?*

*You know. Isn't that why you asked me to come on this show? Her. Revan Starfire. Right before Malastare is when she came. I was in the Honor Guard that day. I saw the whole thing. She landed with a bunch of Wookiees--*

*Wookiees? Really, Wookiees?*

*A bunch of Wookiees. What's the word for a bunch of Wookiees? A herd? A mob?*

*Only if you want your arms torn off. But then what happened?*

*She went off with General Darkstar and Master Atris--did I mention she was glowing?*

*Oh, come on now--really?*

*It's true. It's all true. All of the stories about Revan Starfire--they're all true. I saw it. I saw her. She knew where the Machine Ships would be. And she made them all follow her--*

*And she was glowing?*

*She was glowing. It faded after a while. She wasn’t glowing all the time, but she still was, a little when we got there, to the place of the last battle--*

*[NOTE: this transcript was undated, but is presumed to be a contemporary account of events, est. BBY 3950.]*

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

Was the idea of a Twi'lek possessed of Mission Vao’s spirit more ludicrous than the holocron copy of Mission Vao in the body of a T3? Malak had seen the T3 himself in the months he had hovered over his wife's unconscious body on Dromund Kaas. Malak had heard the thing mimic the cadence of the spirited child who’d tried to bite his arm on the Leviathan before running away.
Was *anything* more ludicrous than a man years dead trying to shield his son, his wife, and his... *wife*, through some posthumous Force-connection he didn't understand himself?

Perhaps not, but Malak could sense nothing of the Force at all in the two Twi'lek women who had sandwiched his son between them at a small table in the back room of their establishment and were now feeding him what looked like half a roast bantha haunch. The boy was devouring it so eagerly that Malak felt a twinge of guilt for not paying closer attention to his son's meals before. Atton had mostly subsisted on ration bars and CoruGin, and Malachor only the former, of course.

Malak and Revan had once found a book in the archives of his father's library: a compendium of theories about what happened to consciousness after death. Many cultures believed in a universal ascension that was similar to Jedi beliefs--becoming part of a larger whole, becoming one with the Force. Some believed that the essence of former consciousness returned to the material plane; that sentient beings were reborn in new bodies whose relative advantage was based upon their good works—or good will—in their previous life. Others believed in more simplistic systems: of a disembodied spirit granted eternal reward—or eternal damnation.

None, as Malak had plenty of time to reflect, believed in redemption *after* death. And the few references to spirits influencing the physical world from "beyond the Veil" did not include any instruction manuals for said spirits—about their powers, limitations, or the length of their sentences, caught between worlds of living or dead.

Fourteen-year-old Revan had just completed a study of humanoid physiology when they'd found that book. She had dismissed the entire thing with a shrug that moved the neck of the loose, white shift she wore approximately five centimeters to the left. The gesture exposed a length of freckled collarbone and the smooth knob of her shoulder. Malak had found himself more fixated on that than he had been at the time by her words... but now Malak remembered she had rather gloomily claimed that the brain took its time to die; severing connections to a failing body: sight, sound, sensation, pain, until it was alone, locked in itself, with only memory left until consciousness faded.

Malak had argued that consciousness would not have to fade if there was nothing left to tether it and Red had laughed at him.

But Malak had been right. His consciousness *had* remained when his body disintegrated into spacedust—and remained acutely attuned to the darkness in a woman who refused to see him—

*Malak!* His beloved wife called again and Malak came, but he still couldn’t reach her; the Revers closing herself from the Force—and the other, beloved weaker was dimmed under the power bearing down upon them both.

The malevolent, amplified presence of Vima Sunrider.

"*No!*" Malak cried out—but too late, as his Red called Revan's saber to her hand, igniting it and lunging toward the other version of herself, whose eyes widened too slowly in comprehension, came back from the infinite too slowly to wrest the weapon back or dodge the blow.

But then Revan's hand reached up--

--and stopped the burning plasma blade with the strength of her will.

Raw blue power flared around her cupped palm, licking against the red from the blade, sparking.

"*Help her! Revan! It's not you she's trying to kill!*” he told the top-knotted one, and her eyes
widened as the Force flared around her and her saw her eyes focus on him--

“Malak?” she whispered.

Xxx

Most tales of the Jedi who followed Revan the Redeemer were erased from history when her own narrative ended, but every school child in the galaxy knows of Master Dustil the Wise, whose comedic mistakes always contain a kernel of wisdom; and whose pratfalls have entertained generations of youngsters on worlds from Byss to Bothoawui.

Was Master Dustil the Wise based upon Dustil Onasi, son of highly-decorated Admiral Carth Onasi? If so, one wonders how many of the tales about his role as a father to so many children are true as well….

Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

Dustil dreamed of the light. It filled him, laid him open like a dissected cadaver, weighed him down with gravity. It felt like Mekk's warm body on top of his own, felt like everything safe in the galaxy. Power, pure and hard and bright.

Take it, he agreed. They agreed, because he wasn't alone. He had the Force and Mekk was there--

Dustil jerked awake, panicked and gasping. A blonde woman he didn't recognize was leaning over him, now pulling back as he sat up, nearly ready to gut her. Least he wasn't naked; in dreams like this when he was humiliated and the Mandies all laughed he'd always been naked; but she wasn't Milli-- she wasn't Millifar Ordo--this Mandalorian was older, with creases at the corner of her eyes and a fresh-looking scar on her temple.

"Where the hell am I?"

"The medix." She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. "Hrmmm. I don't see it, Sinae. Maybe a bit around the mouth?"

"Not the jaw or the chin," a female voice said behind him. "Hers is regrettably delicate. But yes. The mouth, I think."

Dustil blinked in disbelief. "What?"

"S'cuy gar, Dustil Onasi. How is your father? You both were here so briefly before, I didn't have a chance to say hello." Sinae the Mandalorian medix stepped into view. "General Ordo wants to speak to you, now that you're conscious."

"Uh, I… I was on my ship." He felt like a rube blinking at them. Dustil started to stand up, only to find himself wobbly on his feet.

"You fainted on your ship," the blonde woman told him. "Fortunately close enough to ours for a retrieval."

"That's--" something--instinct, maybe even the Force--made Dustil turn his head. He blinked.
Some kind of a shortened kolto tank was pushed against the wall. Two babies were floating in it, in one gelatinous, translucent sack. Their skin was a dark, ruddy red, like all the blood was visible. The sac was attached to a pulsating red mass floating at the top of the tank.

*Is that how Mandalorians have kids?* One of those questions he'd never thought of needing an answer for.

"I have to get back to the fight." He had to get out of here before he ran into dear *Milli*, or, *Mydia Blais*, or worse--good old *Mekk*.

"You have days, now," the blonde Mandalorian told him. "We are in hyperspace. We're taking the battle to the arusuum'la hu'tuuns ourselves."

"Huh? Is that Revan's bright idea?" Dustil didn't like to think of his dad's face when the *Hawk* streaked past their ship like they didn't matter. "We didn't need her. We were already winning with the other one."

"Revan?" Sinae frowned. "Call her General Sheris. It mollifies the Republics."

"And Canderous," her friend commented. "She has Revan's tactical grasp, of course, but none of her evil magics. We call her General Sheris, here."

"No." Dustil snorted. "Not Sheris. I mean the other one. She's back. Didn't you hear?"

The two women looked at him and then at each other. It was the lighter blonde who shook her head first--and in that second he got who she was. *Dessa*. The pregnant one that'd been unconscious before. Didn't look pregnant now. Those must be her kids in the tank. One was a lot bigger than the other.

Dustil had a dim memory of Sith hygiene class and learning how that could happen--just like life, someone's always stronger, taking everything they can. He walked closer to the tank. The artificial womb or whatever it was was clear enough he could see them pretty well. Big one was a boy, the smaller a girl. Behind him, Dessa and Sinae were whispering furiously in Mandalorian. Dustil didn't really care what they had to say, he was too busy looking at those two kids. When he put hand on the tank, the little one starfished her fingers, like she was waving back at him through the glass.

"No," Dessa raised her voice. "No, Dustil Onasi. We heard nothing about Revan's return."

Xxx

*Master Atris of the Echani was the Jedi Archivist for at least five decades, according to accounts found referencing her tenure in the abandoned Jedi Enclave on Telos. And yet, all public mentions of her stop after the Machine Wars. Her sole public appearance after this time was the receipt of the Republic Cross of Glory for her bravery in the battle at Rekkiad.*

*Some recent scholars have suggested the award was in fact given to Revan--or, more preposterously, General Sheris Darkstar.*

*What we know about Atris of the Echani is, as follows: she was instrumental in bringing Echani fighting techniques into Jedi training, she did not attend the conclave at Katarr, and she was responsible for trainingMeetra Surik, the 'Last Jedi.'*

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn
Xxx

Kill her, Dar had signaled.

But it hadn't been time. They didn't have all the facts. They needed Vima alive because--because they needed her alive, because--

The thought seemed to freeze in Revan's mind as time slowed and sputtered. She was everywhere at once. She was nowhere, she was--

"Help her! Revan! It's not you she's trying to kill!"

"Malak?: The red blade in front of Revan's face swing down sharply, and she pushed back, sending her attacker flying into the opposite wall. It should have been a disabling attack, but the woman rolled free, dodging to the side and sweeping in for another attack.

She's using my saber. Revan's hand whipped out, lightning springing from her fingers, but the other woman's hand lifted and caught the blast, redirecting the energy back. Revan's spine crackled with agony when it hit, and Revan smelled her own scorched hair.

"What the hell are you doing?" She channelled a blast of Force, sending the woman tumbling against the wall.

But Dar didn’t answer. She scrambled to her feet, her expression slack. Nothing like their previous battles. Each movement was mechanical and perfect. Dar fought like a droid. Like she wasn't really there at all.

And beyond her, now that the Force was alive in her veins, Revan felt the Sleepers surge, responding to her own rage at betrayal with rising hatred, felt them all turn toward her ship and their route through hyperspace. Her vision of Dar splintered again into a thousand others: Tenebrae's bodies, the Sleeper's shells--stars, planets, people. Conversations, consciousness--

A humming red blade nearly bisected her before it was shoved aside and a gust of Force threw Revan herself back.

She blinked.

"Will you let her kill you?" Vima's voice. "I had expected more of a sense of self-preservation, Revan. I will not save you again."

Save me?

The white-haired Jedi stood behind the Toydarian's chair, one hand on his shoulder. Tenebrae's Voice's eyes were red and glowing. With a smile, Vima raised her hand and Dar sprung forward again, saber spinning low--

"Will you kill her?" Vima said, still sounding amused. "You seem to have taken her pla--" Vima's voice broke off when her neck cracked. Her body jerked, those ice eyes bulging. Her body went limp. Revan lowered her arm, uncurling her hand, and released the Force that had delivered the killing blow.
Dar froze, and then stumbled back. Her lightsaber--Revan's lightsaber--clicked off. She frowned, as consciousness--and comprehension--seemed to return to her expression. "Oh." She blinked at the body on the floor.

"You tried to kill me." Revan tried to laugh. Her legs felt rubbery, like all the tension had left at once.

"I thought I was trying to kill her." Dar's metal hand extended with the lightsaber, offering it back. "Vima was quite skilled with illusions. I was trying to kill her. Obviously." She raised an eyebrow. "I grew tired of waiting for you to do it."

"Thanks." Revan took it. "Yeah, I..." her voice trailed off. With Vima’s influence gone, the Awakened Ones and the Emperor’s voices seemed redoubled, echoing in her head until her vision blurred. "I know you were--I know you wanted me to." She clipped the saber to her belt again. "I think she wanted me to kill you. Besides, I can’t die anyway, right?"

The joke felt flat.

Dar'Revan reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. An ache Revan hadn’t even noticed faded away. "You can still feel pain." There was a glint of dark humor in her eyes. "I suppose for you it must only seem like a few days since I stabbed you before."

"Yeah, it--" It seemed like a decade. And this seemed... strangely routine. The body at her feet, the thrum of sub-light turbines, cracking jokes to hold back the dark.

An alarm chimed, indicating an incoming comm. "That will be our Admiral Rensha," Dar said, without even pausing to look. She crouched down above Vima's--Atris's--collapsed body, methodically searching the corpse with an efficiency that Revan recognized. "The sleeve," she added, pulling a lightsaber out of the dead woman's robes. "She taught me to conceal mine there."

"I thought I--" the comm chimed again, more insistently. "Thought I thought of that. I did that, too. When I wore robes--when... they made me wear robes." Revan remembered again how natural robes had felt, and still always wrong.

"She told me it’s all a trap." Dar glanced up. "Meetra Surik is her true apprentice."

"Who?" Laughing would be inappropriate. It’s not funny that you just killed the second Vima Sunrider. The woman who fracked with your mind and ruined Davad and Oerin and--

"I’ll answer the comm." Dar stood up, straightening her robes. She paused stiffly. “Thank you for not--for not trying to kill me.”

"You’re not the enemy." Revan looked at her and swallowed. "She was."

Behind Dar’Revan she now saw another figure. Tall--impossibly tall. Thinning hair slicked back to his Force-marked skull. A terrible wound on his cheek, halfway through his jaw. Rimmed by a flickering blue light.

You weren’t the enemy, either, she told him. Malak.

His ruined features smiled. Malachor is safe, Red.

Keep him that way.

A furious blast of High Trandoshan erupted from their comm speaker. Everyone on the ship must
have felt something when Vima died and her influence ended. The routes of their fleet blinked before Revan’s eyes—the headset’s visuals and the Force itself showing her the ships still in the system. More than half had vanished into hyperspace—and from her charts—already.

Why the frack are we sending the Republic ships away?

“Admiral Rensha. Yes.” Dar’s voice held that mix of disdain and respect that Revan couldn’t match in a thousand years. Not to mention the flawless Trandoshan accent. Dar launched into an explanation that seemed long on descriptions and examples and short on facts.

“Tell her we need to continue at least to Degriass—” Revan began, even as she tamped down the Force, watching Malak fade and flicker out, and with him, the screams of the Awakened Ones, her link to the Emperor and all of those tiny little lives vanishing—

“Oh ho!” The chuckle came from behind them. Revan turned. The Toydarian. Red-eyed again. “You went away from me, Starfire. And who is this dead on the floor? A would-be assassin?”

“Would-be,” Revan agreed. She kept her shields high as she glared at him. “Don’t suppose in your thousand-plus years of experience you learned anything about how to get rid of a body?”

“You wish to conceal your actions from the insects who serve you?” He shook his head. “Why?”

“C’Tannis, huh?” Revan remembered the shivering Toydarian, now red-eyed and chuckling. “And I know the engine’ll burn up anything, but it’s not good for it.” Jasp had once cut a furious ream at Polla for trying to get rid of a few empty tanks that way.

"We're not flying anywhere on this corvette." Dar's voice was too logical. "So what does it matter if you damage its engines?"

“My two dearest children.” The Toydarian’s voice softened. “Together again! And… oh! With a jar-sukth chamber, too! Wherever did you find the panels? I thought I had them all destroyed!”

“They came with the ship.” Revan bent down and grabbed Atris’s arms. Without drawing on the Force she had to drag the woman’s body along the floor. “Sit tight Vitiate, we’ll deal with you in a moment.”

“One moment.” Dar echoed, mouth curved in a smile; hard and bright as if they’d already won the war. "Check his bonds while I take a sonic."

XXX

A/N next update should be faster, it's about half written… and the chapters beyond that are pretty much all written.

Thanks as always, Ether! Any typos are on me….
Last night I saw the man's face in my dream again. Handsome and screaming, trapped in stasis like a carbonite frieze. I could not see his name or the hand that freed him... only what came after. The droid army, the cult reborn.

I saw his plan to defeat our immortal Emperor, and I saw his final death upon that Yavin moon. So much death! I saw death in the ashes of Ziost, the calamity of his failure.

And I saw Revan. Was it truly her or just a shadow from the past? Was it yesterday or centuries from now? I saw a red-haired woman turn her face away and weep. She wept for the man who was lost. And for what I had told her would come.

Every life is a tragedy, given enough time.

--The Prophecies of Thalia May, Volume I.

[Note: Master Thalia May was one of the founding members of the re-established Enclave on Alderaan, but she did not stay there. After training two padawans, she abandoned the Order, leaving only her prophecies behind: ten journals worth, whose provenance has been questioned for millennia.

This is the first of the so-called 'Revanite Prophecies,' and is typically linked to the Ziost apocalypse of c.3650 BBY.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Thalia May had come to Malachor just in time to leave it. She had come in one of the last transports of former Jedi and Force-sensitives. Plucked from the Coruscanti Underground by a cadre of black-masked sents with trank guns.

Unlike the others in her transport, Thalia had come willingly.

"I dreamed of you," she told the nervous Rodian who came for her--and she had--but that Rodian had dimmed to more of a shadow than a man in her dreams and the shadows were gathering; encroaching upon her visions until only a crack of light remained.

Thalia May had come to Malachor under a cloud of darkness--one that muddled her mind and made all her visions dim. Once, she had seen a vision of a better world, but by the time she came to Malachor all she saw was emptiness. The silent scream in the mind of the one known as Meetra; and an echo of pain in the dark that sang a dirge for the Force.

And he was there. He was that echo, he was in that darkness. Oerin Lin. The only sentient she had ever--or would ever--kill. Fluid leaked from Lin's one remaining eye, the rest of his skin shriveled and broken. Golden hair gone, clothes dissolved to rags, as if the poisoned Force had rent then asunder.
"You look familiar," he had said, when Meetra Surik presented Thalia.

"Sometimes power isn't enough," she whispered back, trying to be strong. In some of her dreams she had said more and he had killed her. In that true introduction, she had whispered the words under her breath and if the dead man heard, he gave no sign. Next to him, Knight Meetra Surik had stood with her arms folded. In that time they were all packing to leave Malachor and Thalia was one of a half-dozen recruits, soon passed off to the white-haired Echani with the kind smile, the taciturn Zabrak with his death-making machines, and the sullen Wookiee.

Surik and Lin's forces were in the skies above Rekkiad when the darkness lifted, when the one known as Traya finally passed (although it would be some time before the facts of the end were known to them). But above Rekkiad when their puppet master finally died, Thalia May saw what the shadows of Darth Traya had hidden.

She saw hope.

She found Surik alone in her quarters. "We have to leave this system," Thalia May told the woman. Surik lifted her ragged head from the table. The tattooed star on her cheek was scratched as if she'd tried to claw it off. Her eyes were wet with tears. "Go away," she hissed, and Thalia May abruptly wanted nothing more than to leave, to please her. For that was Surik's gift—that so many, all of her life, would want nothing but to please her. But Thalia had a gift too, and she had dreamed of a fate where she left Meetra Surik to hers—a fate where inaction brought death to billions—and so she stayed fast, even as her feet trembled and her mind screamed at her to leave, to do as Suirk wanted—whatever Surik wanted.

"I was raised on Ziosk by a sect of priests who believe there is more than one future. I've dreamed of yours, Master Surik."

"I do not dream," the woman replied flatly. Her voice had been as hard as the stones on the moon that Thalia May had seen in a vision.

"I know," Thalia said. "But you will."

Surik wiped her eyes again. "No. There is no future. I thought I was free, but she… my mother was still in my mind. Guiding me! Trapping us—here!"

"I know," Thalia nodded. "But the shadow is gone, now. Her trap is broken."

"Is it?" the woman smiled bitterly. "Have you seen the newsvids? Atris and General Sheris? There is no General Sheris. My mother left Revan to enact her plans… and she must be destroyed."

"No," Thalia said. "Destroying Revan is what your mother wants. She wants you to do it here. You must not."] For Thalia had seen what would come to pass. Seen the moon beneath their feet half-imploded, its atmosphere escaping into a gravity well as it fell out of orbit; victim of the mass shadow generator that would obliterate fleets and ignite a galactic war. The deaths of that war would complete the birth of a monster. If they stayed, the woman before her would become a beast greater than Davad Arkan.

"But I must," Surik muttered. "I thought the trap was set on Malachor. But it was Rekkiad all along. Revan will come to Rekkiad. And we must destroy her." Her eyes were flat and hard, and Thalia felt the pit of Surik's despair, felt it envelop them both as all the light in the room seemed to dim. "I tried to escape my fate on Malachor. But it was Rekkiad all along."

"No." Thalia shook her head. "I dreamed of a better fate. The priests on Ziosk taught me to dream
of better fates--"

"You want us to go to Ziost? To run from Revan's forces?" Meetra Surik raised her eyes.

"Not Ziost. Merely Degriass--for now." Thalia forced herself to smile calmly, even as the Force surged with Surik's will--a deafening emptiness beyond despair. "Revan's battle isn't our fight."

"Battle is all I know," said the woman from Balmorra.

"Until now." Thalia squeezed her hand. "But I've seen your peace."

"Why Degriass?" Surik pulled up the map of the system: the asteroid belts, the lone planet and its habitable satellites. "Revan will go there, too, if she is bound for Rekkiad. Should we destroy her there?"

"No." Thalia took a deep breath. In one dream she had seen the woman cut her down laughing, lights of madness flickering in her eyes.

"Why not?" Meetra Surik blinked as something like sanity returned to her expression.

"We must save them." Thalia could not see their faces--not yet. The future still shifted, fate twisting its gears. "There will be survivors in the Degriass System. They will need our help."

Meetra Surik laughed. "Are you saying Revan will need my help?"

"Not her." Thalia could not see their faces, but she could see the betrayal--the outline in the dark, the clasped hands, the cracked altar. "Others. Some of them will be our padawans."

And some would not. There were always some who could not be saved. Strangely, she thought of Lydie Korr, again. I hope it's not you, Lydie. She would see Lydie again. But Thalia did not know where. I hope it's not on Degriass, Lydie. For in hope, Thalia also saw grief. Enough to drown an ocean.

"Padawans?" Surik scoffed. "Like my Blades?"

"Padawans," Thalia repeated. "They will all be your padawans, Master."

"Master?" Surik put her hand to her own throat. "I never wanted padawans. Mother made me call to them. Mother made me want them… made me want to be a master." Her fingers crept to the star on her cheek again, and she began picking the scab.

"I never wanted to see the future," Thalia told her. "But I do."

"And you said you dreamed this…." Surik frowned. "You dreamed this after Mother was dead?"

"Yes. Darth Traya wanted an end to the Force, to the Emperor and all his works. She wanted an end to Jedi. And Sith." Thalia's throat felt dry. "I've seen what happens if the Force dies, Master. Everything else does, too. Everything. Even the stars."

Meetra Surik blinked. "I don't want that."

"I know."

On the flickering light, on a dying ship, Thalia saw the promise of what the woman would become. Not a weapon, but a beacon. A welcome in the Force, to bring all Jedi home. "You will know much more than blood," Thalia promised. "You will know peace, Master Surik. I've dreamed it."
The woman blinked again. "Peace," she echoed, and Thalia felt peaceful. The relief, the release. "I would like peace."

"Then we shall have it," Thalia promised. "Master Jedi. But first we must go to Degriass."

Xxx

*Rear Admiral Cein:* We were following orders when we split the fleet! High Admiral Rensha’s orders.

*Judge Advocate Qwill:* You claimed earlier you knew Rensha’s command was compromised. And Article Six-cye of the Military Command gives you discretion to ignore a direct order from a compromised officer.

*Rear Admiral Cein:* Maybe so, but we didn’t need Six-cye before the Mandalorian Wars. We didn’t have Jedi messing with Fleet command before that Sunrider girl, and then Revan and Malak--

*Judge Advocate Qwill:* Need I remind the Admiral he is not on trial here? This inquiry is adjourned to investigate Carth Onasi and his actions at the end of the Machine Wars.

--Fleet Judge Advocate Inquiry into the Actions of Carth Onasi at the End of the Machine Wars, as a Precursor to His Court-Martial

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

There was an old saying in the Chiss Ascendancy: "an ice-cat rots from the head." Something had been rotting on the Great Hunt-- evident from the glazed, almost drugged orders issuing from Old Scaly--for weeks.

"It's like we're under some kind of compulsion," Rew Ekkumi had whispered on their private channel. "I don't know how else to describe it. You know how much I despise that woman, but I can't stop myself from doing everything she says--"

“We have to follow orders,” Admiral Denis Cein had agreed. In the military there were two states of activity: one was either issuing or acting upon orders. The kernel of suspicion had bloomed in his chest, then; and even Jiya Sand, who had retained more respect for Revan than either of his co-conspirators, had agreed that something was wrong.

Something was wrong… and yet, Revan’s orders kept them winning unwinnable battles. The woman they publicly called ‘General Sheris’ had saved billions. Even in this last fight she had somehow pulled the enemy back from Corellia to another rout on Malastare before the Machine Ships fled.

“Get off that ship,” Denis had advised Rew when the new coded orders came, flagged only for top command. The orders that split the Republic Fleet from their new allies. It felt like a veil was lifting from his eyes. *Too many coincidences.* Malachor V. The arrival of the other Revan. They had one of those Emperor-possessed puppets on his ship as well: a drooling former Imperial officer pulled from Kessel, a man who had been captured long ago. The man had been drooling a lot less recently--and chuckling softly to himself a lot more. Denis did not trust the Emperor’s ‘Voice,’ as he was called. A revelation, in the last few hours—that he felt like he could make that choice *not* to trust the Emperor’s pawn. To remove him from the bridge and lock him in the brig where he belonged.
A veil was lifting. In the Ascendency they called the state of being that led to cessation of doubt is’lok’chee. As a son of an Exiled, Denis had never worshipped the Chiss Aristocra as his mother had, had never understood the moment of is’lok’chee that forced her to flee her own lands.

But he did now.

"Any sign of Rew?" General Jiya Sand came up behind him, staring out at the same display. Their headsets gave them a holographic view of all ships returning to their sectors in the Malastare System, as the Fleet began lining up for jumps to hyperspace. Rensha was up to her old tricks again, it seemed; ordering retreats to leave their allies twisting in the wind as she had with the Jedi on Katarr.

**As we did to the Jedi on Katarr.** Denis could not absolve himself from the decision. But now, Rensha had Revan with her. Two Revans with her, according to Rew, and her orders for officers had been surprisingly direct. **Operation Scattershot. Recommended routes as follows. Use your own discretion, but do not follow the Mandalorian and Imperial Fleets to Degriass.**

"Rew should be here by now." Jiya made a show of checking his chron, although he saw the same visual trajectories that Denis did. The shuttle had left the *Great Hunt* at clipping speed, its arc angling past the cluster of Republic ships, heading toward the gamma of their sector before blipping out of range.

Heading toward the Imperial flagship, Carth’s *Captive Arm*.

"Rew's not coming. Not to us." Denis wondered if Rew saw herself as Saul Karath defecting to the Sith; if this could be a coup instead of a baited trap. The last time *Revan* had held back forces she'd used them as her invading vanguard less than a year later. If this was another Malachor--

If this was a similar attempt they needed their fleet. Republic ships still vastly outnumbered the Imperial and Mandalorian forces. Rensha's orders scattered the Republic ships across Sith space like an occupying force, rerouting central command to the Core, leaving the *Hunt* to go forward alone with their former enemies.

The defensive pattern had to be deliberate.

*We're still following orders,* Denis mused. *Following them because they make sense. Rew may be following orders as well--or she may be following something worse.* Loyalty, as he had learned long ago when his parents’ Chiss House had been excised for having it, was even more pernicious than duty--and also more fallible.

"Is Rew defecting?" Jiya sounded surprised. "To the Sith?"

"Not to the Sith." Denis knew Rew well enough as a lover and as a tactician. "She's gone to warn Onasi that the route to Malachor is a trap."

Jiya frowned. "You mean *Revan* sent Rew to warn Carth. Like with Karath. And this is a defection--Revan's taking off with the Sith and Mandalorian fleets--"

"Maybe...." Denis wasn't convinced. Revan had sacrificed her allies before.

"What are you going to do?" Jiya looked as if the matter was still open to debate.

Denis knew better. Trap or not, there was only one action that made sense. "Jump," he told the helmsmen. "Put the settings in for Corellia, and then route us to Coruscant--"
Use your discretion, the orders had read. He would.

XXX

Rumors of Revan’s living relatives were legion in the decades following the Machine Wars, especially when the sealed Lamar vault was opened by the Senate Audits during the Hothan Investigations, and rumors of fantastical wealth stowed within began to circulate. Little is known of Radik Lamar, Revan’s purported father; but his brother, Master Vrook Lamar was a Jedi who died a hero’s death. Was Vrook’s example an inspiration for his niece? So little is known about the man, as all contemporary records of him were wiped during the Surik Restructuring.

The legend of Hoth Lamar, however, is worthy of its own lecture. Was she, as she sometimes said, the apostate daughter of Revan Starfire? Or a grandchild of Master Vrook Lamar as she once claimed on a university application? The last will and testament of a Deeka Jin was witnessed by ‘Baroness Hoth of Rivesh,’ and references leaving the contents and landlease of a Coruscanti Underground Brothel to a “’Mekelkins Lamar,’ if he can be yet found alive…” but the property was never claimed and the proceeds of the auction were donated to the Telos Restoration instead. Was ’Mekelkins Lamar’ a relative of Vrook Lamar? So little is known about Revan’s allies and friends that some suspect a conspiracy to erase the information from the Galactic Record….

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

XXX

“Um, hi.” Standing in the doorway, Mekel cleared his throat. “Is now a… uh, a good time?”

The Zabrak looked up from his game of solitaire ryst. His eyes were already glowing. “Of course! My dear boy! I called you, didn’t I?”

“I-I thought you did. I…” He’d thought he felt something. More of a hunch than anything else that had made him stammer excuses to Milli after their run and then come up to Tuy Deck through the service tunnels to dodge any awkward questions. “They locked you in again. I told them to stop doing that.”

“Mandalorians don’t do what you say.” The Emperor chuckled. “Not yet.”

They were just supposed to assign guards to Zepth during Mekel’s combat shifts—not lock the Emperor alone in a room. “I have… an hour or so.” Mekel still wanted to see Millifar, then grab a sonic before hitting up Mydia. He rubbed his eyes trying to blink the sleep out of them.

“So little time? It will be days before our next battle.”

“Days? We get new orders or something?” The service tunnels didn’t have working speakers. If there had been a shipwide blast, Mekel had missed it.

“Yes. We’re taking a route through conventional hyperspace. Degriass to Rekkiad, and then to the Malachor System.” Another dark chuckle. “I’d imagine it’s some kind of trap for our enemies.”

“Why would the Machine Ships go that way?”

“Because she is luring them in.” Valkorion stood up and began unlacing his shirt. “Clever Starfire. Between us, we’ve maddened them to a point beyond reason.” That ancient smile stretched thin
over Zepth's handsome face. "They'll follow her to their own doom, my boy."

"You know, this fight was different. They weren’t hitting back for half of it. Is… uh, 'General Sheris' doing something new?" Good old cousin Revan. Still hadn’t bothered to admit that Mekel fracking existed, but hey. If that meant they lived through this, he’d deal. He didn’t need her. He missed the other Revan, but she’d gone and frozen herself without saying good-bye. Mekel unzipped his flight suit and kicked off his boots.

Valkorion turned Zepth’s head toward the door. His eyes glowed a little more brightly as the locks slid shut. "Yes," he purred. "This fight was different. Because of her... but I like to think we did our part, too. She needs us, you know."

"So you keep saying, my Lord." Without asking, Mekel went to the trunk and pulled out the tent cover he’d snagged from storage, unrolled it onto the floor. The runes they’d drawn were a little scuffed from use, dried blood flaking in places.

Valkorion stepped out of his pants. Objectively, Mekel had to admit, Zepth’s body was a work of art. Lydie’s brother is as hot as she is, he’d thought the first time he’d seen that rack. If things weren’t… well, if it had just been Zepth in there, he might’ve felt something besides hope as he lay down on top of the runes. The air around them seemed to tighten as the Zabrak knelt behind Mekel’s head, placed hands on each side of Mekel’s skull, leaning over so that all Mekel could see was that muscled chest, curving to those rock-hard abs. At first when they’d touched like this he hadn’t felt anything, but now--

Now, the Force-runes the Emperor had etched on Mekel’s body lit up like a holo-sign in the Unders, matching the ones on Zepth’s skin.

Milli had thought they were tattoos. Mydia had never remarked on them at all. They looked like thin black lines under his chest hair, normally. But when His Luminance touched Mekel, they glowed. The Emperor had traced them with a finger dipped in Zepth’s own blood. Chanted things about death and rebirth and galaxies aligning in Ancient Sith for so long that Mekel had dozed off. Woke up with these cross-hatches all across his chest.

Before that happened, maybe Mekel had thought this was all some kind of elaborate seduction scene. Maybe Mekel had even pictured himself later, bragging to Telos. “I shagged the Sith Emperor.” Something had to impress that asshole.

But now…

Now Mekel didn't care what Dustil would think. Because the Force was coming back. When His Luminance touched him, Mekel felt everything in the galaxy.

“It’s… ah! It’s working.” His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and Mekel’s eyes closed as the delicious languor enveloped him. In his mind’s eye, he was a line of pure energy and the Emperor was a cup, catching him as he fell, spreading him out across the stars.

Telos, he thought, sleepily. Just a line of pure light, and the other rose up to meet him, in the cup--

They curled together like petals, like lovers, head-to-toe and toe-to-head. The Force enveloped Mekel's emptiness, feeding it, amplifying the Force itself like an echo deep inside of him, the beginnings of a scream--

“Oh, my dear boy.” A dark chuckle, as Mekel drifted off. “It most certainly is working. Such power--I never anticipated! You might last years! Time enough to find another--or for Starfire to
come to her senses!"

Telos, Mekel thought, as the darkness filled him up.

XXX

Lord Bezal was a minor Thulian nobleman whose ambition outstripped his power. When currying favor with the Dark Council failed to grant the influence he desired, he turned to Sith mysticism, and a sect of priests who swore they had discovered the key to Force transference hidden in a vault upon a dead planet. The planet is now known as Nathema, but any follower of Our Luminance knows it was once called Medriass, and is the place where a bastard child named Vitiate became Tenebrae, our Lord. The Bezal bond is but a shallow imitation of Lord Tenebrae's ritual, but some have surmised that at its heart, the mechanism for both is the same….

'On Force Bonds,' by Lord Zash, for her Apprentice P'ink Kallig, private collection, Dromund Kaas.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

Dustil was supposed to go to the bridge to see Canderous Ordo; but Sinae and Dessa said they wanted to see Aemelie Ordo first, and so they left him on his own. He sat and watched the kids drifting in their fake womb for a while. Something about the way they floated made him feel peaceful, like he could imagine floating just like that, all safe and secure. The larger baby had a fuzz of what looked like green hair on his head. The smaller one was totally bald, but her eyes kept opening when she drifted by his cot, that little hand starfishing out.

He closed his eyes, leaning back in his chair, felt his own hand open and close back.

Mekk, he thought. No anger, he was too fracking tired for that now--

Telos.

Like a handclasp. Like a bar of pure light.

Missed you, fockda, one of them said.

XXX

A Clan Battle Circle can be drawn anywhere, but battles fought in stars are considered unlucky for both the challenged and the challenger--and are usually avoided. But the blood duel for the title of Mand'alor can be fought anywhere at all, by any clan member who claims they can do better.

Most are wrong.

"Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons," undated,

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

The Aleema had barely jumped to hyperspace before the dagger landed, precisely a centimeter from Canderous's ear, suspended in the padded mirror of their private fresher.

Canderous pulled the chistaga out, flipping the point tip on the palm of his hand. "A formal
challenge, Aemelie? Is this necessary?"

His wife's reflection behind him shook her head. But the patterns in her braids said otherwise. "We will see. Dustil Onasi is the Imperial pilot in our med-bay. I think you will want to witness his interrogation."

"Of course." Whatever the kid knew about Revan being out of carbonite, he'd probably already blabbed in medix. Canderous wanted to think he was wrong--that there'd been some other reason that Emperor had sounded exactly like her… but he knew better. Just like he knew Aemelie too well to think that she'd ever back down, once she'd thrown the blade. It had been hard enough convincing her to follow the other one and the Emperor's orders. Now…. "You will witness as well?"

His wife's eyes narrowed. "I will question him."

"You have that right."

"Of course I do. I am the wife of Mand'alor," she replied sweetly. "For now."

"For now," Canderous nodded. The ceremonial blade in his hand felt as heavy as permacrete. *Osik*, he thought. "For now, I am Mand'alor."

Xxx

*Although Sheris Loran and Revan Starfire were trained at the same Jedi Enclaves, there is little evidence that they were ever more than passing acquaintances. Documented evidence of friendship between Sheris and Meetra Surik, and Sheris and Bastila Shan exists, but there is no other social overlap.*

*Therefore, we must surmise that it was in her time as Malak's consort that Sheris learned the tactics used in the Machine Wars, for they follow Revan's distinctive patterns of engagement even before her entry into the fight. Indeed, it is only in the final [redacted redacted] that we see the pattern of bait and sacrifice broken--and even then, the claims of Mandalorian heroics are questionable at best.…*

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"We must present a united front….” Dar was talking as they walked. Seemed like she was always talking--whatever she'd said to Rensha over the comm had worked so well she’d gotten them an escort of armed guards back to the High Admiral's personal command room.

"Right." Revan rubbed her eyes. "United. Got it."

Dar was talking to Revan, but her words cut in and out, fading into screams and images from three hundred Awakened eyes. The Sleepers showed Revan a blue-white sun, with a single, glimmering planet beneath; ringed in rims of orbitals and byways that bisected coils of a billion lights, like tiny smiles.

[Coordinates 0,0,0. Strike y/n. Y.]
No! Coruscant that's Coruscant--

And then Revan was--

--Curling a flippered hand to a Senator's child--

--Patting the belly of a gravid Zabrak--

--Soaring towards a puffy silver orbital, with her cannon focusing on the transparisteel window and the horrified sentient within--

Yes. You see as they do. Valkorion's dark chuckle was there too, crowding her thoughts. The Emperor, the ships--too many of them crowding her. Now I see as you do. Bring them to us so we can destroy them--

I'm going to destroy all of you. Hey! Assholes! Revan felt them turn--felt them all flicker out of orbit again as she put one foot in front of the other--

Oh, my Starfire, you can no more destroy me than you cut off your own arm. We are together, now. Our unification is nearly complete.

No. No! I'll never join y--

"Fragment? Revan!" Something shook her arm and the ephemeral world snapped back. Weight of her body, breath in her lungs. Blood on her lips. Revan glanced down at the golden hand clutching her wrist. She looked up into green eyes, freckles faded with the pallor of her duplicate's skin. Dark shadows under those eyes. Pale lips, the angles of the face too sharp, too drawn. Dar's face was too close, hair still damp from the sonic, cropped and standing up from her skull.

"You're glowing," the other woman observed.

Revan blinked. "I'm fine." She quickened their pace, attempting to pull away

"What just happened?" The other woman's metal hand had clamped down like a tractor. Revan jerked her hand back, but she was secretly grateful for the support.

"I… I was at Coruscant. With the Sleepers."

Dar's lips tightened so much they turned white. "They're attacking Coruscant?"

"No, I called them back before they could." One of them had switched to Rakatan to have privacy from the guards, who were too well-trained to admit they were listening in the first place. It was probably Dar, but Revan had to admit it was smart. "They're going to go someplace else next. They don't stay in hyperspace."

"Here." Dar handed her a sani-wipe and Revan wiped her bloody nose. "But you can control them?" More a command than a question. "Just keep calling to them."

"I know." I told you. There seemed to be a respite while the ships tunneled through hyperspace. Revan supposed she should thank a lucky star that the Awakened Ones didn't have interdictor tech, or they'd pull the Hunt to them instead of following it. "I'm going to have to keep calling them back for the next few days…." Revan wiped her face again. Her temples throbbed, but strangely, nothing hurt.

"Our forces are exhausted. A few days in hyperspace will give them time to rest and make repairs."

"Our forces are exhausted. A few days in hyperspace will give them time to rest and make repairs."
Dar sounded exhausted herself. "The ships will always run. We need to draw them to us to make an end."

"Tell me something I don’t know. Like how to keep Rensha from executing us.”

Dar snorted. "Old Scaly is far too practical to have us killed." She paused, mouth twisting in a bitter smile. "At least until her war is won."

"Make an end? " Malak's ghostly voice intruded on Revan's thoughts. "That’s what you said about Malachor V." He sounded almost amused.

"Still true, Mal," Dar snapped. Her hand tightened on Revan’s arm.

"You heard--?" Revan's skin prickled.

Her duplicate nodded back, eyes darting over their shoulders. Revan's own head turned and she smothered a gasp, turning it into a cough and hiding her expression with the stained sani-wipe.

Malak's ghostly image hovered, almost tripping on their heels: hair slicked back, Knight's robes. His gaze met Revan's and his mouth quirked in a smile. "Hello, Red."

"He thinks he can give you some of his strength. If you need it." Dar sounded calm about that, as if the two of them had been hatching their scheme while Revan had been busy hallucinating the Emperor and his Sleepers. "He does it for me when he's not busy with Malachor."

"Oh? Does he?" Revan wasn't sure what she thought about that. Or why she could see him now outside of her dreams. “And where the frack is Korrie?"

"Safe," the dead man whispered. "I suppose my wife and I have given you precious few reasons to trust us in the past, but now you see we are all on the same side--"

That was so accurate that Revan started laughing, which caused the phalanx of guards surrounding them to get twitchy--twitchier than she liked to see the armed guards around her. For their own sakes.

"Relax," she said in Basic. "Bossypants here was just telling a joke. I'd share, but it doesn't translate well."

"You and your japes." Malak almost sounded affectionate.

Revan shivered--and not just because the world was suddenly rimmed in blue as Malak’s ghost passed between them. She found herself edging away toward the wall and the guard walking next to her, as if a Force ghost needed room. The guard sidestepped the wall until he was almost scraping it.

"Where is our son, Mal?" Dar asked, in Rakatan.

"Safe," Malak sounded calm, and now his voice seemed to echo instead of rattling in Revan's mind. "Safer than he has been since they left Deralia. I've found him new caretakers."

"Bet you're a great judge of character." The snipe was automatic. Revan didn't like this, this trusting either of them. She didn't like how… safe it felt, either. How familiar.

"Malachor is safe," the dead man said again. "You would approve of his chaperones, I believe."

"But you're not going to tell us who they are or where he is?" Trust, Malak had said. Was it wrong
that Revan remembered the way he'd looked as the light faded out of his eyes?

"Malak doesn't want the Emperor to know." Dar squeezed Revan's hand with her metal one. They were holding hands now, walking along the hall like this was some kind of Harvest Fracking Dance. "So he can't tell you."

Malak said nothing, which might have been a confirmation.

“He’s not telling you, either,” Revan pointed out, just as the roar of the Sleepers began again, their ships appearing above another world--

{{Coordinates 0.392921, 1910000091. Y/N?}}

No!

Xxx

You are cordially invited to the formal union of House Racharn with the last custodian of House D'Reev, an act that will cede all D'Reev holdings formerly held under trust to Racharn ownership.

Leeshansintina Two of House Racharn to wed Malachor Vrook Cassus Ulic Lin.

Silver tie is required.

Weapons permitted. (Mando'ade only.) [Handwritten scrawl, IF YOU MUST, M! BUT PLZ! LEESHY’S ALREADY NERVOUS!]

Holocams will be disintegrated.

In lieu of gifts, the couple has requested donations be made to the Taris Restoration Project.

Master Neely Ahto of the New Jedi Order, Officiant.

Grass Priest Dikon T'siop, Blessant.

Senator’s Songs to be performed by HK-48 Electroharp Chorale And Friends

--wedding invitation from the Old Republic. Organa Collection, Alderaan.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

The twins were talking to someone named Lena over their commlink on the other side of the room while Kore tried not to fall asleep over his second nerf steak.

“Sightings have been reported all over the galaxy!” the perky news announcer chirped. He was Nautolan and wearing a shiny, armless vest with gold rings all over his tentacles. Kore thought it looked like it would have hurt, getting holes in your tentacles like that. “The following worlds have activated their defense grids in response to Machine Ship incursions: Coruscant, Alderaan, Corellia, Byss, Hoth, Dathomir, Wayland, Wyddik, Ord Mantell....”

"I've never seen anything like this," another announcer broke in. This one was Human--or mostly. "They're appearing and disappearing! Why aren't they attacking?"
Kore glanced at the window and the sky above. After staying with Atton in the lower levels for so long, it felt funny to have so much sky exposed. He wasn't sure if he liked it.

"You can't bring him here," someone named Lena was saying over her comm-link. "And taking him to Emfour is out of the question! Revan's son? What were you thinking?"

"Was thinkin the kid needed our help!" See'raa explained, while Tee'raa snapped her lekku. Kore caught the word for 'friend.' "We'd take him to Kashyyyk, but half the planet's still toxic and Freyrr's really pissed off about it. "Come on, Lena. He's a nice kid!"

"I am," Kore said, but no one was looking at him. He felt funny. Like months ago, he might have cried to be here, but now he just felt normal. "I'm nice."

"He's her son."

"And she was our friend." See'raa rolled her eyes at the other one. "You don't have to get it, Lena, but us having Revan's kid is a big advantage right now."

"I'm not an advantage. I'm me!" Kore muttered, but under his breath so they couldn't hear. They probably didn't realize he could hear them from all the way across the room… but sometimes the Force could be pretty cool.

"You're both adults." Lena sure didn't sound like she thought the twins were adults. "If you want to keep the child of the woman who murdered you as some kind of pet--"

"I'm not a pet." Kore kept his eyes focused on the newsvid screen and all the reports of ships popping up over the galaxy. It kept his eyes dry.

"Wasn't really us, you know?" See'raa laughed, which Kore thought was a little cold. "If Mission Prime had lived we wouldn't be here--"

"Hey!" Kore was getting sick of hiding and having everyone boss him around so he started yelling. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here!" His eyes felt hot and funny. "Just so you know, I have a very powerful friend on Coruscant and she said I could come stay with her anytime I wanted, so…” he felt his voice crack like it kept doing lately. "So I'm gonna go do that. I'm gonna stay with her. Her name's Leeshy. Of House Racharn and they're a really big deal. I can go to her right now if I want. I don't need anything from you!"

Tee'raa's lekku twitched. It looked like she signed 'but we help,' except just as her t'chun finished the last loop the prox alarms started flashing.

"--and the Nar System seems to be the latest sighting," the newsvid lady said. "Reports indicate over two hundred Machine Ships ships have appeared above Nal Hutta and the Smuggler's Moon--"

"Damnit! Take the skyhook to the fortified station," said Lena's voice. "I'm coming for you."

"The boy too." See'raa said. She was stubborn all right.

"The boy, too." Lena-someone sounded too worried to argue. The comm cut out.

Kore shivered. "They're mad." It suddenly felt like a cold wall of angry ice was pressing down on him from the ceiling.
“Who’s mad?” See’raa frowned as she walked back over to him. “Lena? Don’t be silly, her grip’s worse than her bite. She even had her incisors filed down!”

“Not Lena. The ships.” Kore shivered again. It was even worse than that because some of them kind of felt like Mother in the Force, even though that sounded nuts. “They want to bomb us so badly.”

“The Awakened Ones.” See’raa looked at her sister. “I knew they’d come back. It's in their programming.”

"Why?" Kore asked.

Tee'raa's lekku twitched. *Complicated,* she began, but then Father was there too, suddenly, all glowing and surrounding Kore. *You don’t have to be afraid of the Sleepers,* he whispered in Kore’s head. *She's going to call them away, Mal,* Father promised. *Revan’s calling them away now--*

“--and they’re gone! Just like that! I’ve never seen anything like it!” The announcer was yelling now, even though he had a microphone and stuff. He sounded hysterical. “*Are we sure they’re not cloaked--*”

“They’re not cloaked,” Kore told See’raa and Tee’raa. “They’ve gone someplace else. They have to do what my mother says.”

Tee’raa’s hands moved and her sister frowned, shaking her head. Kore caught the word for ‘late’

“Are you sure, Kore?” See’raa asked. “Revan controls them? Already?”

“My father says so.” Kore looked up for confirmation, but Father was gone again, like maybe Mother had needed him, too.

"Your father…" See'raa laughed nervously. "Your father the ghost. No offense, kid, but he was an asshole."

"Okay. But he's sorry," Kore told her, because that was the *diplomatic* thing to say.

Xxx

*Revan was a master strategist who also understood that resources must be conserved. What is most remarkable about the last battles of the Machine Wars is that he was able to use the Force to predict precisely the number of ships required to destroy the enemy, while sending the rest to safety.*


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

Carth watched the shuttle dock impatiently, noting on his headset's display that the last of the Republic ships had just jumped to hyperspace. The message Rew sent requesting to board had been terse enough that he found it hard to interpret, but he had to assume the message came from Revan.

*Makes sense that Revan would go to the Hunt first.* But they couldn't keep his wife away from him. She would be on this shuttle, he'd bet a million credits--
Rew Ekkumi emerged from the shuttle's apexed doorway, followed by a pilot who was male, Aqualish, and not Carth's wife--not even Polla Organa, who he'd sent to fetch Revan on Kaas, or Zaalbar, who'd come with them from Kaas.

*Then Revan must be in the back running a systems check, she'll be along, maybe she's--*

The shuttle doors swung down, closing behind the two uniformed figures, and Carth's heart sank.

**Great Hunt made the jump already. She's not coming. She's staying on Rensha's ship--**

"Carth." The strain in Rew's voice was evident. Usually immaculate, his old friend looked as tired right now as Carth felt.

"Hi. Rew, uh--you're cutting it fine. Fleet’s already gone and half the Mandalorian ships are gone, too"

"Heading to Degriass. Then Rekkiad. Then the Malachor System." Rew nodded. "I know." She reached out and her hand on his arm. "Carth. Don't go. It's a trap."

"What?"

"The jump points--we're always given maps of the systems to distribute to the squads. The *maps* are of Degriass, Rekkiad, and Malachor, but the jump points given to command aren't. Rensha's scattering Fleet all over the Core. *Real* commands say we’re supposed to refuel. Restock. Patrol Core space like the war's already won."

"You’re wrong. I checked the coordinates myself--" his voice faltered because then Carth got what she meant. "You mean the *Republic* ships aren't going to Malachor… but the rest of us are?"

"According to the nav-logs, the *Great Hunt's* going with the Mandalorians, but the rest of Fleet's been reassigned to patrol the Core and occupy Imperial space." Her lips twisted. "Draw your own conclusions."

"I don't understand." But that was a lie. Malachor. *Malachor V.* The name itself was the clue. Obvious as a tactical strike from a proton cannon. "You're saying--what's going to happen at Malachor?" Revan wouldn't--was Rew suggesting Carth's wife would lead the allies into a trap?

“Battle orders came in after Revan's arrival.” Rew’s voice was steady. “The *real* Revan. Your wife. Those are *her* orders."

“But--"

"You can't go to Malachor, Carth." Rew Ekkumi looked half-feverish. "Trust me. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't important."

“You expect me to believe that you came here to save the Imperial Fleet--”

“No. I came here to save you." Rew gave him a pained smile. "I left half my own people on the Hunt. Denis and Jiya were expecting me to join them on the *Proven Conquest*, but I came here." She looked back at the shuttle. “If I thought I had half a chance of convincing you, I’d tell you it’s only ten yards back to my shuttle. It's got hyperdrive. We could rendezvous with Denis and Jiya above Corellia, or go make a formal report at Fleet HQ."

"Rew, I-I don't--I can’t leave my crew."
Her eyes shifted away, past him, staring out at the half-empty hanger, the techs bolting everything down to prep for their jump. "I know that. Of course you can’t. But Carth. Revan… uh, she told me… she told me to tell you not to go."

"But she told me to go."

"On an open channel?" Rew smiled tightly, not quite meeting his eyes. "You believed her?"

"No. Not over wideband. The Emperor’s Voice--"

Rew looked at him pityingly. "Who are you going to believe? The Sith Emperor? Or me?"

"But she--Revan spoke through the Emperor--" Rew was looking at him now like Carth was nuts. "I don’t understand. You’re saying Revan gave you orders to tell me to hold back? Secret orders?"

"She… she told me to tell you… where that Sith Emperor can’t hear." Rew’s voice lowered. "It’s like Malachor, Carth. Like Malachor again. Another trap. And she wants you to be safe. She wants you out of it."

Another trap. "No." Rew’s eyes kept flickering away, then meeting his directly. Too directly--looking like the day she’d told him Morgana might pull through. "My wife… she wouldn’t send you to tell me that." Carth swallowed. "Let’s ask her. Right now."

"She won’t tell you over wideband--"

"She won’t need wideband." A pit opened in Carth’s stomach as he nodded to his guards. Imperial-trained to expect betrayal, they flanked Rew immediately. “Revan can speak through the Emperor’s Voices, Rew. Just like he can."

“Just like the Sith Emperor?” Her dark eyes widened and there was something more in them. Guilt? Fear? Her lovely mouth twisted into something ugly. “Oh, Carth. Don’t you see what that means? Revan’s just like the Sith Emperor--”

"Escort Admiral Ekkumi to the bridge," Carth said to Lieutenant Arezmo. “Armed escort.”

But doubt gnawed at him. He knew… he knew Rew had to be lying--and yet--Malachor? They were going to Malachor? Without the Republic Fleet? It had to be a trap. That Jedi. Atris. Dustil said she was something else--someone really powerful. What if Atris had done something to Carth’s wife? "Tell Yuthura and Dustil to join us there--is my son’s squad back yet?"

Usually Dustil checked in, but he had to be fine, Yuthura would have said something if Dustil wasn’t fine--

"I’ll check, sir." His first lieutenant bowed. “As soon as we deliver your ally--”

“My prisoner,” Carth said, using Ancient Sith. Rew didn’t look like she got it, but she would. “See her to the bridge. Restraints only. Passive ones. No electro-nets. Don’t hurt her.” His eyes flickered to the Republic shuttle pilot, still standing at attention, mask-faced. “And see her man has a comfortable cell.”

Revan’s just like the Sith Emperor, Rew had said. And it was true if she could possess his Voices, use them like he could--

No. Carth closed his eyes. Revan was nothing like the Emperor. That couldn’t be true.
The Machine Wars left their legacy across the galaxy with a series of instantaneous hyperlanes, some still in use even to this day. With a net positive for commerce, expansion, and colonization, many scholars have disregarded precisely how terrifying it must have been for the sentients of the time to see three hundred warships appear above Coruscant, Ord Mantell, Alderaan, Nar Shaddaa—and a hundred more populated worlds, some of which had already been bombed by the same ships less than a Standard month before.

The Machine Ships inflicted no casualties—and flickered back into hyperspace moments after their arrival. Such a display would have seemed miraculous... and when the bringer of that miracle became known—one begins to see how the legend of Talonis Revan, the Savior of the Galaxy came into being....

--Transcript of speech given by Senator Loriom Racharn of Coruscant. Galactic Republic, in the year 1 ASC (3653 BBY)

---compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

After one of the Revans had growled more excuses over their comm, High Admiral Aridoma Rensha's talons had hovered over the control that would vent the Officer's Hangar Bay, and send the cursed Jedi ship out into the black and in range of the Great Hunt's cannon. The moment the mind-net broke, Aridoma Rensha had known she had been under the spell of Jedi tricks. It was as if the cloud of night had lifted, exposing the birthing beach to dawn, with all the larvae scurrying for the safety of the waves and the sea.

The revelation still filled her with fury. Had she not warned the Senate and the Fleet what Jedi could do? Had she not made the hard choice at Katarr to stop the Jedi threat? After hearing Revan's stammered excuses over the comm-link, Rensha's talons gripped the control, and, with a clarity of thought Rensha knew had been stolen before, considered her courses of action.

The Jedi had betrayed her trust.

The Jedi were the best weapon she had against the Machine Ships.

The woman with Revan's memories--the one they called "Sheris"--had been responsible for some of Rensha's greatest triumphs. For her meteoritic rise in Fleet command. She had also betrayed them and cost the Republic most of its fleet.

The woman with Revan's Force-strength had shattered Darth Malak's reign of terror--even if unwittingly. She now possessed some kind of control over the Machine Ships.

All Humans looked alike, but the two Revans even more so as they approached her now: feet a little apart, arms clasped behind their backs, as if this was a Jedi conclave instead of a war meeting.

"Where is Master Atris?" Rensha demanded. "I requested the guards bring all three of you."

"She's gone," the red-haired one lied badly, just as the brown-haired one said "dead."

"Dead and gone," Brown-hair amended. "Atris was a secret Sith. She was manipulating you all."

Red-hair opened her mouth as if to object--but then merely nodded, instead. "She's right."
"Who killed her?"

"I did." Brown-hair met Rensha's eyes squarely. "Because she was manipulating you all."

The two of them continued to answer Rensha's demands with that same steady back-and-forth, making it all seem so reasonable that Rensha would have wondered if this was just another mind trick, had she not just seen their enemy's ships frozen in space and watched the allies destroy half again as many enemy capitals in a single battle as they had in the last week. Curse them a thousand generations for their tricks, but these two Jedi were useful—unlike the waste of elderlings and children at Katarr.

"You expect me to believe Atris was the traitor… and you two…." The two Revans were well aware of their crimes, but Rensha listed them all the same. Red-hair had destroyed most of the Republic ships at Malachor, then plunged the galaxy into civil war. Brown-hair had attempted to wrest control of the Star Forge from Malak and killed the only useful Jedi there—if accounts were to be believed. "Why should I trust you now?" she concluded, feeling the spittle well in her gland sacs.

Brown-hair's eyes had unfocused during the telling and she slumped forward, slightly glowing again before starting upright, blinking as if she'd been asleep. "Why, what?"

"The Admiral was asking us about trust, Fragment. Because we have a common objective," Red-hair said calmly. "Destroying the Machine Ships and saving lives."

Brown Hair nodded, blinking. "Oh. Yeah. Uh, look at it this way--would you have trusted Revan with your ships in the first place if Atris hadn't used the Force to convince you?"

"If it had been up to me, I wouldn't have trusted her for the treaty at Malachor!" Rensha hissed.

Red-hair bared her teeth back, lips curling up. "Thank you, Admiral. Now I remember why I spared you." Her brow beetled like an Eosians. "You owe me your career--and your life."

"You're both so good with people," Brown-hair muttered. "I'm surprised the crew didn't depressurize your sleeping chambers before I came along to save your asses."

Red-hair raised an eyebrow. "Fragment, we don't joke about mutiny."

"Funny. I just did." Brown-hair shrugged and folded her own arms, shrugging off her military posture like a set of old scales.

"It is insubordinate--" Rensha began, but Brown-hair interrupted her with more flagrant disregard for rank or protocol.

"You," she said flatly, nodding at Rensha. "They call you Old Scaly. You've been High Admiral of the Fleet since Forn Dodonna died, right?"

"Since the Star Forge." Rensha let her tongue flick her disdain. "Yes."

"You gave the orders for the Republic Pearl? Ship that kidnapped and brainwashed my husband? You pulled your forces out of Katarr and left the Jedi to die there?" The Revan's voice was casual, but the temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

"Acting with the information I had at the time, yes." Rensha stared back at her steadily. If the Jedi wanted to put an end to her, she could not stop it. "And you are the Jedi who killed Bastila Shan and whose Star Forged ships nearly crushed the Fleet above Lehon."
"I had no idea what the hell was going on with that battle. Bastila… I guess Bastila knew." Brown-hair blinked, and let out a breath. "Maybe I'm giving you too much credit, too. It's possible the Emperor tweaked you through Malachi to hurt Carth. And I know Vima was pulling your strings on Katarr--just like she was pulling everyone else's." She twisted her wrists, extending, as if she was stretching out her narrow frame to be more intimidating. "Maybe Vima was manipulating D'Reev to manipulate the Emperor--"

"It does not matter now," Red-hair said. "The woman who was Atris is gone. Look to the future."

"Vima? Vima Sunrider?" Even their lies were too obviously strained. "No one has heard from her in years. Do you expect me to believe a Jedi who has been missing for years was working with Atris--"

They both began talking at once again and gradually the meat of their tale filtered through. Vima Sunrider _was_ Atris. As much as Revan Starfire was this person, Red-hair, who had been Sheris Loran. The tale was preposterous and Rensha told them so--only to get another round of excuses.

"--and so you see how you were manipulated, Admiral," Red-hair concluded. "How we all were. But now is our chance to be free."

Brown-hair wiped blood from her nostrils, nodding. "Look, we're not Vima. We don't need to use the Force to convince you that you need us. You know you do."

Rensha took a breath through her neck slits and imagined an inner peace with a preserve of Wookiees to hunt instead of host in her flagship. That Brown-hair's words were true was cold comfort. "I am no fool. I know what you both are." They had all studied the footage from the Sith Embassy on Manaan, the pieces their own troops beamed over from the Star Forge. Red-hair had Revan's mind, but Brown-hair could rip this ship open with a thought, should she have the blood-urge. "What do you want?"

"The same thing you do." Red-hair's voice softened. "The Sith Emperor and these infernal ships destroyed. A strong Republic. Galactic _peace_."

"No. Admiral Rensha doesn't want peace," Brown-Hair shook her head. "Not _her_. She just wants to win."


"But if you want to win this war why did you direct _our_ ships to scatter?" Rensha hissed. "Less than a ship's hour ago you sent the Republic ships back to the Core, leaving the _Hunt_ and our allies to journey to Malachor alone."

"What?" Brown-hair frowned. "Wait. We didn't. Why would we peel off the Republic ships?"

"We didn't send an order to split the fleets," Red-hair said grimly. "Atris did."

"Too late to call them back, now," Brown-hair swore under her breath. "If they've scattered they'd never reach us in time."

"Atris will have laid a trap in at Malachor," Red-hair nodded. "We knew that already. We'll enter each system cloaked. Between us, we can identify any hostile presence--spring her trap."

"But with the Republic ships out of it--" Brown-hair shook her head. "No. We can't leave Carth and Canderous's fleets to take all of the risk." She frowned, somehow looking younger and more like an egg than the other one.
"Whatever scheme Atris set, It's done. Her net is cast." The one they were calling General Sheris turned to the Star Forge Killer. "Work with what we have, Fragment. Two fleets, not three. Still enough." Her teeth bared like a predator. "Winnow the enemy down, then you can lead the remaining Awakened Ones into the gravity well."

"Not as easy as it looks--the Mando'ade and the Imps might take a dimmer view of the Republic abandoning them."

"Then it's wise that you married into both alliances."

Brown-hair frowned. "Yes, but…"

"We still have two fleets." Red-hair shrugged. "Nearly eighty capitals between the two. I've won more ground with less."

"Half the Mandalorian vessels are bantha-rigged and half-manned--"

"But by Mandalorians." Red-hair folded her arms. "We have the forces."

"You will both join me on the main bridge," Rensha commanded them. "My guards have already fetched the Toydarian Emperor. There will be no more clandestine plans made on escape ships, no more secret Force plots. We will fight this war with all of our claws out, spitting fire into our enemies' faces."

"That's fair," Red-hair allowed. "But leave whatever trap Atris left for us."

"Probably just another Mass Shadow Generator," Brown-hair said. "I fought her Mandalorian fleet above Nathema. Woman is not a tactical genius."

In Rensha's experience brilliant battle tactics rarely won the day over the willingness to sacrifice. The Machine Ships had already displayed their own weakness by fleeing every losing battle. "If what you say is true, Atris set this net for a reason. And the trap may not just be for our enemies."

"She did." Brown-hair glanced at Red. "And we killed her for a reason, too. Now you think we should fly right into her trap?"

"Too late for an alternative." Red-hair shrugged. "Half our remaining forces are already en route to Degriass. And we need systems. Those three are within optimal parameters."

"Well, we don't have to go as far as the Malachor System." Brown-hair paced forward, pulling up Rensha's own command station with a few deft swipes from her clawless hands. "If we can end them before that--"

"They'll always run." Red-hair shook her head. "We can stop them from running at Malachor. The gravity well there--"

"We're going to be hard pressed to keep our own forces out of a gravity trap," Brown-hair muttered.

The existence of a gravity well at Malachor was a well-known--albeit classified--phenomena. That they were now only working with the ships of her former enemies for a potential sacrifice seemed appropriate, Rensha thought, considering the risk.

"General Obvious." Brown-hair's breath hissed out as she closed her eyes. Her nostrils were bleeding again, something Rensha had only seen with Humans in cases of injury. "Selonia," she
mumbled. "Assholes."

"Selonia?" Rensha looked at the other one.

"They're jumping," Red-hair explained. "Our enemy keeps trying new systems and she keeps calling them back."

Brown-hair began to glow again--her face slack, eyes half closed. The yellow light shone through her very skin--as if she'd suddenly developed photoluminescence, like a cave-dwelling Umbaran.

Rensha eyed her uneasily. "You're saying the Machine Ships have returned to the Corellian System?" *Then why aren't we hunting them there?*

"Yes. But she keeps calling them to follow her instead." Red-hair grimaced. "I could only predict where the ships would go. But they will cross the galaxy if it means they'll have a chance to destroy her." She nodded toward the console. "Look at your newsboards."

In the time she had taken to speak to these two, Rensha's interface had lit up with reports of the Sleeper ships appearing--and then vanishing--over half a dozen planets scattered across the Core. Most of the reports came in from her own fleet--as Operation Scattershot had sent the Republic ships to every system Revan and Atris had marked as a possible target.

*At least Republic can see the stake of this war.* Rensha noted. *So they will know the risk.*

"Atris planned this rather well, stationing the Republic Fleet to bear witness." Red-hair had obviously followed a similar hunting path. "Order our own ships to lock down the shipping lanes, and keep the civilians calm."

Rensha bit back her irritation at having the woman announce what she had already planned to do. "You are sure she can keep pulling them away?" A report had come in of ships sighted above Coruscant. And then gone again.

Brown-hair slumped forward again as the other reached out with her artificial arm to hold her upright.

"I am." The woman's white-rimmed eyes met Rensha's. "She must."

Xxx

*General Revan:* "We will meet them at the hyperspace gates of perdition, against the stars of hell. We will fight them by parsec, by click, and win our galaxy back, one blast from an ion cannon at a time."

*General Sheris:* "Exactly. Evil can only triumph over good when good sentients do nothing, and I know our brave fleet well enough to know they will not do nothing!"

*General Revan:* "But without the new plasma cannon from Kuat Drive Yards and the Czerka Corporation, our flyers would be ionized particles of space dust by now, and you'd all be speaking Ancient Sith--"

--transcript from the first joint speech between General Revan and General Sheris.

[Note: some believe this is a commercial for Kuat Drive Yards and/or Czerka Corp. Even millennia ago, the merchants' guilds held powerful influence over galactic politics.]
“Hello. Most of you recognize me. I’m Revan. General Revan.” The Butcher fiddled with her topknot. Dressed in Jedi robes, she looked like an actual Jedi, albeit one with a nosebleed. She dabbed her face with a scrap of cloth and then continued. "I… uh, I wanted to thank you all for fighting... for fighting with us. This is... this is my fellow Jedi general, General Sheris Darkstar. She’s been helping you win this war. Now that I’m here we’re going to win it even faster.”

“We regret to inform you that Master Atris was called away,” Bossypants added, looking up. She was sitting and the brunette was standing.

"That means they killed that creepy white-haired Jedi," Polla whispered to her da. They hadn’t killed each other, though, which meant Seiran owed Polla a hundred credits, because he said they wouldn’t last an hour in the same room if Revan was ever unfrozen again.

It had been a joke, but she’d still wondered if he was right.

"Good," Da whispered back.

“You’ve been told we’re going to make three hyperspace jumps: and then engage the Machine Ships on Malachor V,” Bossypants continued.

"We'll try and finish them off before that," the Butcher chimed in. "At Degriass. Or Rekkiad. But it might not be possible. We may have to go all the way to Malachor." She took a deep breath. "I don't want to lie to you. If we make it that far, it's gonna get rough."

"In the meantime, I want to thank you, each and every one of you, for your service," Bossypants said.

“Me too,” the other one echoed. “Thanks. We... we’re gonna win this. I promise.” She exhaled. "And now... we've got some time. Relax. Get... get drunk... or whatever...." Her eyes unfocused. A trickle of blood fell from her nose.

"Revan?" The other one actually looked concerned. She stood up, and for a second she looked like she was holding the other one up as she babbled something in an unintelligible language--and then the vid cut out abruptly.

"Degriass to Rekkiad? Rekkiad to Malachor?" Jasp cracked his knuckles. "Shelton Trade Route's right there, Pollie." He grinned at her. "Remember? Always said I'd show you the run."

"Not sure we'll have time," she shot back, more than a little distracted. The Butcher was glowing again. And their speeches were terrible. Was that supposed to be inspirational? I did a much better job when I was pretending to be Revan on Kaas!

"What is the Shelton Trade Route?" Zaalbar's girlfriend growled.

Da's grin grew wider. "Only the hardest run in the galaxy--"

Normally, Polla would have loved to discuss one of the few runs she'd never had the guts or the incentive to try, but now wasn't the damn time. "Hey! You hear that?" Polla stood up, waving at the guards. "The Revans said everyone should relax. Means we're not prisoners anymore, right?"
"No." The head guard started to shake his head. "We have to follow orders--protocol--"

"Frack orders," Polla wondered if they'd have to break out of this place. The guard still had that sweet rifle. He wouldn't be that hard to take down, not when they had Wookiees on their side. From the growls behind her, Igyrahhhrrr the Treeless and Zaalbar's girlfriend both agreed.

Polla was just figuring the odds when the guard coughed and took a few steps back. He glanced down. "I can't let you go. I haven't heard anything from Rensha--"

"Probably getting drunk," Zaalbar's girlfriend growled. "You know how those Trandoshans can be."

"About time," Jasp said. "Pollie, maybe it's time to go home."

"Yeah." It probably was. But Polla couldn't get that blank look on the Butcher's face out of her mind. The Butcher had done that on the Hawk, too. Looked as empty as one of Tenny-Bro's worn-out Voices in the market square ready to be sacrificed, as if the Revan with Polla's memories--the woman she was actually starting to like--wasn't in there at all. "But we're in the middle of a fracking war. And they might need us. They might still try and kill each other. Something could still happen."

"Something could." Da coughed. "But what would you do?"

_Give better speeches?_ But the truth was, Da was right. "We're in hyperspace now, Da. "Can't jump from hyperspace."

"You sure?" He grinned.

"Laws of astrophysics, yeah."

"Always wanted to try a crazy stunt like that." He smiled so Polla was pretty sure he was joking. "Trick would be you'd have to time your own jump before you left the mother ship's velocity."

"Get it wrong and you'd atomize everything. Guess it might blow the hyperlane, too… maybe…"

"Might," her da agreed. "Ever think that's what happened to Jori Daragon?"

_Deralia's patron saint of Smugglers and Lost Causes? What a time to bring her up._

"This is not as dangerous a place as the Sith jungle," Zaalbar growled.

"Exactly." Polla tipped an imaginary hat at the Wookiee. "Cept for the armed guards it's like we're back in the free galaxy again."

"Stars!" The head guard looked startled as his comm flashed green, then blue. "They want me… your presence is… ah, requested on your own ship. I'm… uh, I'm supposed to give you an escort there." He didn't look thrilled.

“What about Revan?” Polla snapped. “We need to see her.”

“I don’t have bridge clearance--”

"Ah...We'll check on the ship repairs," Da interrupted. "You did assign techs to repair our ship?"

"Y--es." The man glanced at his comm again, typing commands into it as he read. "They're saying,
yes. Until that droid of yours ran them off."

*Can't blame Mission for that.* Polla stifled a smirk. But the rest of the news sounded fracked. *We're going to the Malachor System? The Mandalorian System that's half destroyed?* Polla was no war leader, but going there sounded like a really bad idea.

“Maybe we should see Revan ourselves,” she offered casually. “Both of em?”

“I don't have clearance,” the guard repeated woodenly.

“We will break free later and rescue her,” Zaalbar chuffed, coming up behind Polla. “First we need to ensure the Mission ghost has repaired the *Hawk.*”

“I'm gonna pretend I don't speak Shyriiwook,” the guard muttered, motioning to his men to flank them. “And you're gonna wait until shift change to do… whatever it is you're going to do. Deal?”

Polla smiled slowly. “If you'll throw in that sweet gun of yours it will be.”

**XX**

*Master Myleah Onasi was one of the Jedi Order's most prominent leaders through their first period of expansion, half a century after the Machine Wars. Little is known about her early training, except that her stepmother was the Beast-Master Queen of Alderaan, and her father a Jedi Master at the local Enclave—*

*History of the Jedi on Onderon. vol. Xi. 1283 Onderon Second Age, 2340 BBY*

---compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

**Xxx**

Dustil dreamed he was a bar of light. Somehow it made sense that Mekk was there, too. He woke up starving, with a furious Mandalorian general looming over his head, and a boner he rolled over to hide as fast as fricking possible. "General Ordo! Sir." He rumpled up the sheets, pulling his knees up fast.

"Dustil Onasi. Kid." The man's gray eyes were flat and angry. "You're welcome for the save out there. Medix said you fainted in your ship."

"I don't faint." Except he had. And when Dustil closed his eyes for a second he saw a Zabrak chest. Male. Bare-chested and looming over him. He blinked hard, until the Zabrak turned into Ordo again. "Must have been my oxygen levels or something. I mean, yeah. Thanks. Hey, is the wideband working? I need to get a message through to my father—"


"Honor demands I do," Aemelie Ordo said coldly. She was wearing armor, hair knotted flat on her head. Behind her, Sinae and that Dessa bint were standing with their arms folded, like Dustil was the star on some kind of Mandie judgment show. "Dustil Onasi, son of Carth Onasi, Second Husband of Lin—"

"First Husband of Lin," Canderous snapped. "Don't demote the man when he's not here to defend himself, Aemelie."
"I am Second Wife" she practically spat back. "To you, Husband. Now."

"Second Wife…” the man tried again. "Let's just hear what the kid has to say."

"Whatever," Dustil interrupted. At least they'd killed his boner. His stomach growled. "What is the question?"

"Has Revan the Undying who was frozen in carbonite returned to lead the battle?" Aemelie looked like she wasn't happy about the answer either way.

"I don't know about leading, but she's back. My father thought we needed her so he sent Polla Organa to break her out of carbonite." Dustil shrugged. "I knew we were winning just fine without her. The other one's not half-bad."

"At least someone in your family has a small amount of sense." Dessa weighed in. "Hopefully heritable."

"Osik," Canderous muttered.

"Did you know, Mand'alor?" Sinae demanded. She looked pissed. They all looked pissed, except Canderous Ordo, whose head was down and whose shoulders were hunched. Never a look Dustil thought he'd have seen on Revan's pet Mandie, but the man looked… beaten.

"I told the aru’suum’la we could not follow her into battle--" From the glare Ordo was shooting Dustil's way at least one of them had just fracked up.

"Revan just got here," Dustil added. "Seriously! Just this last fight, with the Hawk--" His voice trailed off again, because none of them were paying attention to him.

"The man to whom I am the second of his wives knew of her return and said nothing," Aemelie retorted. Her face turned reddish when she was upset, like the skin of a dark goreapple. "Our Mand'alor said nothing! Like the Crusader, who knelt to Fett Kun!"

Canderous's face froze. "Those ships are a greater threat than my honor. Clan law bends not to break. I stand by my choice."

"And so, I call challenge," Aemelie said. "To Canderous Ordo. By clan-right he has betrayed Ordo and his place as Mand'alor. I call challenge to the title."

"You can't, Aems." Canderous Ordo sounded gentle and almost sad. "Not for Mand'alor. You're too young. You still have children to bear for clan--"

"Like Dessa?" Aemelie laughed. In that second, Dustil noticed how pretty she was--and how fracking nuts. "As you can see, the artificial womb works. My children can gestate in the same manner--"

"Aemelie!" Canderous Ordo winced. "There is a boy who is right here!"


"Yeah, uh… I'm okay." Dustil slung his legs over his bed relieved to find himself still wearing clothes. "Uh. Hey. Cool tech with those wombs--that womb-tank thing. Those are… nice. Uh, nice babies."

"Really?" Dessa smiled at him. "Does the girl have the Force?"
"I don't know she's just a--" Dustil glanced over at her again. "Yeah." Maybe that's what it was, this connection. He stared at the babies for a while. This time they both waved back. The room got really quiet, and he stared. "She's... she's got it."

"Accepted." Canderous's heavy voice interrupted, suddenly, from Dustil's right. Dustil had been staring at the kid, the cute kid, while the Ordos worked out their whatever-it-was. Now they both had bleeding cuts on their faces and knives in their hands. "I accept your challenge, Aemelie, but not to the death."

Weird, Dustil hadn't... usually he was more in tune to these things. Sents pulling knives. You develop reflexes or die, on Korriban. The kids had distracted him.

"Choose your location." Canderous Ordo looked pissed as he shoved his knife back in his belt.

"One of the training circles will suffice. In hyperspace we can hardly battle in stars." Aemelie smiled as if she'd won their fracked duel already. "Choose your weapon."

"Blades." Her husband gritted his teeth. "I want no claims it wasn't a fair fight."

"I could beat you with hands and feet, too." Airily, Aemelie smiled. "To third blood, Mand'alor. Heart's blood, but not death."

"In order?" He frowned.

"Of course." Her teeth were too small, Dustil decided. And dear old Milli's were too big. Fracking Mandies couldn't get anything right.

"Then I ask again. Humbly, would you like some tea--"

"There's a boy right here, Ordo!" Sinae interrupted.

"Hey, I was just leaving!" Frack them and their fracked culture. He wasn't Mekk, Dustil didn't find this interesting. He edged past them, heading for the door. But just as he got there, the door opened.

"Medix Sinae, I can't seem to find Mekel Jin anywhere--" Mydia Fracking Blais burst into the room. She blinked at the bleeding Mandalorians, her eyes slipping past Dustil standing right in front of her like he was invisible. "I thought... I thought I sensed Jin here. Apologies. Are you having another duel, Aemelie? I'd prefer you not do it in front of the children. I won't have them frightened... not until they're at least old enough to crawl away from danger."

"We have been over this already. You have no claim to them, Mydia of Blais." Dessa stepped between Mydia and the kids.

"You said I could name her. The girl is My-leah," Mydia said. "And I like Ganesh for the boy. I had an Uncle named Ganesh. Or so mother was told. I think she strangled him when they were both learning to walk?" She tilted her head. "Perhaps he fell down the stairs. That's why crawling is so important!"

"The boy is mine--" Dessa’s hand went to her knife.

"They will not be named until they stand on their own limbs below the stars, and the boy is not even remotely yours," Sinae broke in, standing next to Dessa. Behind them the Ordos were still arguing about their fracked-up banthacrap.

It was all fracked, Dustil thought.
"The boy is yours? Really?" Mydia pointed at the gross red thing bobbing at the top of the tank. "They're sharing blood, now. She has the blood of Sith Lords, I expect some of that to rub off on little Ganesh." Her eyes met finally Dustil's and then she smiled. Smug. Almost feral. "The blood of Sith Lords is on my side of the family," she added.

"Hi, Mydia." Dustil felt sick.

"What are you doing here, Dustil Onasi?" Mydia's nose wrinkled. Once, he'd thought it was cute the way her nose wrinkled. Now it looked like she thought he was osik on her shoe.

"He fainted." Sinae walked to the tank and fiddled with some of the controls. The little one made her starfish hands again. Dustil felt sick.

"Ugh. I knew he was weak." Mydia walked over to the tank. "Kitchee kitchee koo," she cooed. The babies floated and spun. "When will they be ready? I want to give you another one to grow for me. With a better donor."

"Oh, yeah? Where is he?" Somehow Dustil kept his voice steady. "This 'better' donor of yours?"

"Not with you." Mydia's nose wrinkled again. He wanted to punch it. "And not with Mill. Or Leskal. I ran into him on the way over here. Probably with that Voice, the Zabrak--"

"Get out," Canderous barked. He waved a knife at them, still bloody from his wife's face. "Both of you. Now."

Dustil closed his eyes and took a breath. Telos, a voice whispered in his head. Familiar. Safe. Warm. Like--

Dustil was halfway down the corridor with the Blais bint in tow before he realized he'd started running.

XXX

What is there to say about the Battle of Degriass that hasn't been said already?

Even short-handed, the brave Mandalorians faced down the Machine Ships and won, but at such a cost, losing more than three quarters of their fleet--

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"Go ahead and jump," Carth said, still a little numbly. Rew had lied. He was… he was pretty damned sure of that, even without confirmation.

Behind him, Fats gave a long, rattling snore. Damn thing was out for the count, although his eyes glowed faintly under closed lids.

Rew glanced at Fats, nervous and wide-eyed. He hadn't wanted to put her in restraints, but she hadn't given him much choice. Even if her story made more sense than Malachor. Malachor had to be a trap. Revan had to know that--that it had to be a trap--but Rew was lying. His wife wouldn't leave him out if the loop--she wouldn't send Rew to tell him--
"Jumping in ten--" the ensign said.

"Carth." Rew's voice was hoarse. "Please. She told me to tell you not to go."

In Fleet you're trained to take orders. Rew knew that. She knew him. They'd trained together. Seen their partners die together. Picked up the pieces together. Rew knew him. She'd played him. In that moment, Carth realized he'd never known her at all.

"Dustil will be happy to see you," he said numbly, although of course his son wouldn't care. "Things were a little awkward, before, on the Great Hunt--"

"As opposed to now, when you've got me in binders on your Imperial flagship?" Rew kept shooting glances at the snorting Emperor chained in the corner, the priestess hovering behind. "Carth… this all looks a bit… barbaric."

"Pretty much the same as us," he lied weakly. "Just a few more chains on the uniforms. And… uh, in the dining hall."

The hyperspace engines hummed into drive as they leaped. "Sir?" his lieutenant interrupted.

"Yeah?" Carth smiled.

"Sir? It's Lord Dustil. He never returned from his patrol, but the Mandalorian flagship beamed us his loc. They've got him. He's fine."

"Wideband's working?"

At the lieutenant's nod, Carth smiled, masking his unease. Dustil would be safe on the Aleema—as safe as he was here. "There we go. See if you can get him--and my wife--on the line."

Xxx

The Bezal bond requires three points for its initiation, although some have posited that the energy can be generated directly from the Force itself, or that deliberate sundering of a Bezal bond can have surprising effects--

Excerpt from Lord Zash to her Apprentice P’ink Kallig, private collection, Dromund Kaas.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

"Dustil! Dustil Onasi!" Mydia was chasing him. Dustil increased his pace, pulling at the Force to run faster. He didn't know where he was going, exactly; only that the Force was tugging him to get there.

'There' turned out to be another dorm room, just like the one Mekk had taken him to before, past some armored Mandie kids who were standing around like they were guards. One of them started to say something when Dustil pushed past, but then the bint was too busy picking themselves off the ground--and Dustil was already in the doorway. Door was locked but that wasn't a problem. The Force wrenched it open.

They were both almost naked, but it didn't look like sex. Sex didn't make you glow, not like literally glow. The Zabrak looked up when Dustil entered the room, Mydia right on his fracking heels. The Zabrak's entire body was encased in a flickering black nimbus of energy. Mekk was
lying flat on his back in front of him, and glowing white, like some negative image. He had Sith runes on his chest and they were glowing too. There was something… something familiar about it, something… that felt right about it that Dustil couldn't put into words, because that didn't make sense. Nothing about this made any fricking sense.

Telos. For a second, Mekel's voice was inside his head. Then the Coruscanti man's eyes opened. The glow faded.

The Zabrak stood up, chuckling softly. "Tut, tut! We have an audience!"

"Telos," Mekel sat up. The Sith runes looked like tattoos etched on his skin. He was still wearing a jock, but nothing else. The permanent stubble on his face was practically a beard now. "You're here. Hey."

"Is there anyone you won't frack, Coruscant?" Dustil was proud of the evenness in his voice.

"Your dads," Mekel drawled. He paused. "My moms. Also." He smiled--that smug old Mek smile, like nothing was wrong. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"He fainted," Mydia said. "In his ship. The Mandalorians rescued him."

"Good." Mekel stood up and walked over to a pile of clothes, started to pull them on and get dressed. When he bent over, Dustil could see his ribs against his skin, the sinews in his legs tight on bone.

"They feeding you, Mekk?" he joked. He should be pissed. He was pissed, but this was so fricking typical--

"Yeah." Mekk turned to the Zabrak, whose eyes were still glowing. "Are we finished?"

"For now," Emperor Asshole said.

"I felt it. I think I felt it… did you?" Mekel pulled up his pants and turned back to Dustil. The smile on his face was open and hopeful and Dustil wanted to put his fist through it. "For a second, it felt like you were there with me--"

_I felt--something-- "I don't know what the frack you're talking about," Dustil snapped. "But the next time you frack the Sith Emperor, put a sock on the door."

"Does Your Luminance need anything else?" Mydia Blais asked. She wasn't trying to hide her anger, it rang in the Force, in every line of tension in her body.

"He's helping me get the Force back." Mekel babbled on, oblivious, while he fumbled with the buckles on his vest. "We're not fracking. Although, that'd be somethin--"

"Coitus. Ugh. Disgusting." The Emperor twisted Zepth's features. "Please. Don't degrade the ceremony with your own physical weakness."

"His Luminance is celibate, except on extremely sacred occasions," Mydia snapped. "Everyone knows that. The real Lord Malak knew that."

"Oh." Dustil didn't give a frack. "Well, you look like you could use a backrub, Myd." Dustil smiled at her like the other two sents in the room didn't exist.

Her yellow eyes blinked. "I could. Mekel?"
"Uh, I… Dustil just got here."

"And now I'm just leaving." Dustil started backing up toward the door. "Ordo and his wife are gonna duel or something. Don't want to miss it."

"Well, uh we could all go…." Mekel glanced at Mydia.

"Sorry, Te-los." Mydia's voice now took on a mocking singsong. She took Mekel's arm possessively. "You want a turn with Jin of Lin, you'll have to prove your worth like I did." She pulled Mekel closer, shifting her leg so her robes fell around it. From experience, Dustil was pretty sure she didn't have on anything underneath. Her bare leg locked behind Mekel's as her hand slid to the small of his back. They looked like they were about to dance. A waltz, on their way to fracking.

"Dustil--wait!" Mekel looked like he was trying to shove Mydia away, but he didn't seem to be trying very hard. In fact, he looked almost protective, the way he was turning towards her at the same time, head turning back and forth between them like he couldn't make up his mind which one of them he wanted.

That was the thing about Mekk. He wanted too much. He never knew.

"See you around." Dustil turned his back to them and left. Halfway down the service stair the cheers and feet-stamping led him to the duel--just in time for the fight.

XXX

Was Ulic Qel-Droma’s condition permanent?

Although Force sensitivity can be removed or lessened by surgical means in some sentient species, such extreme measures are rarely taken in civilized parts of the galaxy. The Miralukan colonies, strangely enough, perform the bulk of such surgeries, as there have always been some of their people who find their sensitivity to the Force to be too much to bear.

Ulic Qel-Droma’s connection to the Force was severed in a different way, through some kind of Force ritual. The existing holocron of Meetra Surik's memories claims the Force was severed from her for a time as well, although the centuries-old entity within is surprisingly reticent with detail. Sadly, the holocron is now in the possession of my rival, Darth Thanaton, but I have every hope in your abilities to retrieve it, my apprentice!

--Confidential notes from Lord Zash, to her apprentice P'ink Kallig of Tor, Dromund Kaas, private collection.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

Mydia was pissed. That became obvious to Mekel by the way her lower lip puckered out and the fact that she wouldn't let go of him, even though her attempt to make Telos jealous was about as effective as one of Algwinn's pick-up lines, back in the bad old days.

But Mekel let her lead him on because he was pissed too. Telos had barely looked at him, had laughed it off, but he'd been there. In the Force when Mekel and the Emperor were doing the ceremony, Mekel had felt… something, he was sure of it.

The bond. The Force was in the bond. Maybe Mekel needed the bond back to get the Force back
for real.

"Telos--wait!" But Dustil was already gone, jogging out the door like he has better places to be.

Mydia giggled, high and sharp.

"I won't have you mating in here," His Luminance warned them, just as Mekel extricated himself from Mydia's surprisingly strong grip.

"Of course not, my Lord." She cast her eyes to the ground bashfully and Mekel took a few steps back, trying to clear his head before he started making his excuses. Frack Telos anyway. Milli would be wondering where he was by now.

"I… uh, I gotta go, Myd." He smiled at her, relieved that it elicited a wary smile back. "It's still Millifar's shift, but if you want, in a few hours--"

"We'll see," the Sith bint sniffed as Mekel started babbling about the ship and how they had a few days’ worth of time to kill, not just hours.

"Uh, watch after His Luminance, okay? I'll… I'll ping you later."

"You will show up to my quarters," Mydia countered. "In two hours’ time."

"Okay." Mekel found himself nodding like a fracking idiot, even as Lord Valkorion (as Tenebrae called himself now) laughed some more.

The cheering over the speakers led Mekel to the arena, which in normal fracking times was just another training room on the Aleema, but was now covered with woven carpets and flat-bellied chairs for the spectators. They'd even lit a fire in the middle of it all--although the blue flames looked more like alcohol combustion than something typically rustic, like the wood Milli was always threatening to burn in her room for them to frack in front of.

The cheering was for Canderous and Aemelie Ordo, both stripped to the waist and wielding long, wickedly curved knives. They were circling each other. General Ordo was too old, but Aemelie was still an attractive woman, Mekel couldn't help but notice, light on her feet and bouncing under the strip of black fabric that crossed her chest.

"Jin of Lin!" Someone hissed and Mekel tore his eyes away from Aemelie just in time to see Leskal waving at him. Milli was sitting next to him and Telos next to her.

"What's this?" Mekel asked in a whisper when he reached their row in the audience, stepping awkwardly over name and name. "Another wedding thing?" Both Ordo and his wife had their cheeks bleeding like they'd been sliced.

"Blood duel." Milli answered, as Mekel squeezed in between her and Leskal. On the other side of her, Telos was staring at the fight like it was the most fascinating thing he had ever fracking seen.

"But those are just for leadership--they're already married."

Canderous Ordo advanced with his knife out stiff. Aemelie Ordo's foot kicked out, one smooth line and connected with his ribs. The Mandalorian reached for it, and in a movement too fast to see, Aemelie ducked and connected her kick with her husband's knee instead. Both of their blades clashed again. The crowd sighed.

"Thought you were some kind of Mandie expert, Mekk." Dustil was definitely holding a grudge
"Compared to you, I'm an expert on everything, hayseed." The old joke felt flat. Mekel felt the easy grin fade when Telos didn't respond. "Hey. You're pissed? What the frack did I do?"

"Who," Dustil mumbled. "Who didn't you do, Mekk?"

"Speak Mando’a," Millifar put her hand on Mekel's arm. "I only know a little of the Dar'jett tongue."

Mekel hadn't realized he'd slipped into Ancient Sith with Telos. Like it really was the bad old days.

"I've got to clear this up." He switched to Manda like she wanted, and kissed her ear, getting a few wisps from her braids and a smile in return. "Give me a sec, Milli, okay?"

"Perhaps you can make the dark'jett Onasi laugh," she nodded. "Something is troubling him." Her eyes went back to the fight, and she looked pretty troubled herself. Mekel thought of ten things to say to comfort her—and all of them froze on his lips. Her parents were fighting? This didn’t look as festive as the usual training circle bantrashit. No one was drinking anything at all.

"Sure. I can make him laugh—give me a sec." Mekel swung one leg around her and then the other, so he was next to Telos now, both of them at the end of the row. Millifar's metal fingers kneaded the muscles in his back as he stared into his former bondmate's eyes.

He hated not being able to read Telos when it used to be as easy as breathing. "What's eating you?" Mekel asked in Ancient Sith.

Telos sneered. "So many ways to answer that."

"Yeah, well, don't do me any favors, fockda."

"Don't worry, I'm not one for Ancient Sith ceremonies seeing how the last one got me tied to some Coruscanti son of a whore--"

"Didn't hear any complaints from you on Coru."

"Maybe on Coru you weren't selling it to half the fracking crew."

"I don't sell--" Mekel broke off as the room erupted into cheers. Milli's arm went away as she used it to clap and cheer, from the sounds; but Mekel kept his eyes fixed on Telos. "Stop trying to piss me off. I can't fry you with lightning anymore. You have Mydia for that, now."

"Hah." Dustil ducked his head. His voice dropped, forcing Mekel to edge closer until he could feel the other man’s breath on his face. "You knew? About the kids?"

"Kids?"

"Mine. The girl, anyway. In that tank in the medix--"

"Those are Dessa's twins." Mekel wasn't following. "Mandies don't sell kids, Telos, and I think you might want to try finding someone a little older than a baby who's not--uh--" his voice cut out, mainly because black spots were forming in front of Mekel's eyes until he started laughing, only the laughter stuck in his throat.

"Hah, hah." Dustil relaxed his grip. Air rushed back into Mekel's lungs, so fast he nearly choked on it.
"What d'you mean about the kid? When did you frack Dessa?"

"Are you deliberately dense? That kid's Mydia's. The medix took it out of her--put it in with Dessa's kid. *Her.* Put her in Dessa's with kid in that artificial womb or whatever it is."

"Oh." Mekel thought back to that tent on Kaas. Mydia's tear-streaked face. "She didn't really explain that part. Uh, congratulations?"

"Right." Dustil ducked his head so his hair was in his eyes and Mekel couldn't read his expression. "Congratulations to me."

The room around them suddenly grew silent. The easy chatter stopped as abruptly as if the volume had been cut out. Mekel looked over just in time to see Aemelie Ordo pull the knife out of her husband's chest, see the man collapse like a stuck mark.

"Shit," he muttered. "What the frack did we miss?"

"Blood duel?" Dustil sounded stunned too. "What the frack does that even mean with the Mandies?"

Millifar's flesh hand tugged Mekel's arm and he turned to her again, just in time to have her barrel her head into his chest and start sobbing. He'd never seen her cry before.

Mekel didn't know what to do. "It'll be okay," he mumbled in Mand'oa. "He's still breathing, right? I think he's still breathing."

“You don’t understand!” she wailed. “I thought she would yield—”

“She’s Aemelie,” Leskal interjected. “Why yield, when she could be Fett Mand'alor?”

Xxx

In every iteration of the Revan mythos, Canderous Ordo displays an unwavering devotion. Some have posited a romantic relationship between Revan and the Mandalorian. Others point to tradition. By beating the Mand'alor, Revan effectively became the leader of all the Mandalorian clans.

Whether or not they followed her until the end… well, that is another question, especially after the Battle of Degriass…

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"Make him get her." When Canderous moved his arm, the mix of bacta and kolto slipped over the sides of the tank. Canderous Ordo was too kriffin’ old for the way Mekel Jin was gaping at him, or the way the Onasi kid was lurking in the background. He’d never felt older. Not even when he heard the little Twi'lek kid fall, and Zaalbar scream.

He was too old for the red-eyed hu’tuun laughing at him, now, too old for the two Sithkids staring. He’d summoned the Zabrak kid to his bacta tank. Instead, somehow, he’d ended up with all three and some garbled story from Jin about his daughter asking them to check on him.
Millifar should know enough to leave a man to his shame.

"Get her now," he repeated to the Sith Emperor. "Get Revan. Now. I know you can do it. She was in your body before."

"I'm afraid she is occupied," the Sith said. Zepth was an alright kid when he was in his own mind, but the Emperor twisted his face into a deathshead mask. "I can take a message--"

His voice broke off, probably startled to see the blaster jabbing into his chest and the half-naked man scrambling out of the tank. The repeater was covered in bacta, which had probably jammed the igniter to hell, but the asshole wouldn't know better.

"I said get her," Canderous repeated. "Now. Not gonna explain this with a game of whisper down the hyperlane and I don't want an open channel. Get. Revan."

"Oh, ho--" The red glow around the Zabrak's eyes cut out abruptly. The kid blinked, coming to himself. He wouldn't remember what had just happened. Canderous felt sorry for the kid again, damn him.

But you can't save everyone.

"Bring the Emperor back," he snapped, gesturing with the gun. "Or Revan. I need to talk to Revan. Now."

"Hello," Zepth said warily, looking around at them all. He backed away a few meters, like a trapped animal. "Is there…" he turned toward Jin. "Is His Luminance finished here?"

*His Luminance.* They'd been working with 'His Luminance' for weeks. Canderous was never gonna call the aru’suum’la hu’tuun chakaar that.

"Said we need Revan," Canderous snapped. He'd already said it enough. "I need Revan. Need to tell her something. Now."

"They call her General Sheris--" Jin looked like he was starting to understand he shouldn't have interrupted when Canderous rolled the blaster in his direction.

"The other one, asshat!" Carth's kid elbowed Jin of Lin. "You know. Your cousin?"

Seven hells. Kid Onasi looked just like his father. Carth wasn't going to understand this. Canderous wasn't sure Revan would, either. *General Sheris* would, but she didn't matter.

"What?" Jin looked poleaxed. "She’s in carbonite."

Canderous focused back on the Zabrak, tuning out most of the kids’ conversation after that; including the steady stream of curses when Jin found out Revan had been freed from carbonite--"

"--and no one told me?"

"Would have been better if no one had told anyone," Canderous replied pointedly, but the two of them just blinked. They shouldn't kriffin be here.

*You can't save everyone.* Canderous was so tired. "Get out!" He barked at them and the two Sithkids jumped. They looked at each other and then back at him. "Out!" He repeated. "I’m still in command of this ship. I can still have you both airlocked."

"Just told Milli I’d check on you, sir," Jin muttered, edging toward the door. Uh, I’m… I’m sorry.
Tell... uh, tell Revan, ‘hi.”

“Get. Out.” The blaster even felt heavy in his hand.

“Frack this,” Carth’s kid snapped, and followed Jin of Lin out.

Canderous had a few moments of quiet then, while the Zabrak kid blinked and he scowled back before he turned his attention back to the viewscreen set in the wall. It showed nothing but the blur of hyperspace, like a sand clock, running out of time. He should be planning their next move, but Canderous just felt tired. He closed his eyes. Then--

"Canderous--?" the voice was pitched wrong, male, but the inflection was hers. He watched those glowing eyes widen. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Blood duel."

"You’re dueling with live weapons? At a time like this?"

He wasn't going to leave it to the other one to explain. "A blood duel. Like on Malachor III," he snapped. "When you fought Cassus Fett for Clan Lin."

"What? Who the hell challenged you?"

"My wife. Aemelie." He breathed out, feeling the twinge of a nicked lung. "It's your fault."

"My fault? Aemelie is leading Clan Ordo, now? And it's my fault?"

"Not just Ordo, Revan."

She was quick as a blade. All Canderous had to do was raise his eyebrows and wait.

"Oh," she muttered a breath later. "This was a clan challenge--for all of clan. Because your wife doesn't want to follow me."

"You will not change." It didn't matter to Canderous. It should matter and he knew that, but he knew her too well. In a way, he’d known her for all of her life. Just as he'd known Milli for all of hers. And his son, until the lad found his glory in stars. "The clans can't follow one who does not change--I explained arusuum’la to you."

"So what are you saying? Just come out and fracking say it." Her voice was distracted. He watched her expression twist the kid's features smooth, those glowing eyes unfocus, her voice growing cold and remote as if she had a thousand more things on her mind. She was controlling those ships somehow. She was keeping them back. Canderous had seen the reports from the HoloNet. Machine Ship appearances on a dozen worlds. Or more. But no attacks. No casualties. Had to be because of her.

If only that mattered to his stubborn, prideful, tradition-bound wife.

"I'm saying the clans won't follow you."

"What does that mean? I don't want you to follow me. Once we get rid of the Machine Ships your people are free--"

"It means we're giving you five ships, Revan. Five. Not thirty-six."

The Zabrak's eyes blinked. "Five. Why five?"
"We've got four warships from Weis who want to win back some honor. And the Aleema. She's still under my command."

Maybe it had all been an old man's fantasy, thinking the clans would unite again. Maybe this was the future: their people, seeking their own glories, apart. Maybe in another season things would change.

"You're commanding the Aleema? And Aemelie's running off with the rest of the Mandalorian ships?"

"No." His stubborn, hidebound wife. "Aemelie will stay and fight. But the rest of our people will go." He was pissed, Canderous realized. Not just at Aemelie for forcing his hand, for showing his weakness—for he could no more stab her in the heart than he could refuse her challenge—but also at Revan, for making this choice necessary. "I told you before the clans wouldn't follow you. I told you why."

"But they were following us—they followed Dar--" the Zabrak drew a breath. "Damnit, Canderous! We're already in hyperspace. You're already in hyperspace and the Republic Fleet pulled out, too--"

"The rest of our ships will jump away from Degriass. My five will follow you to Malachor. It's done, Revan." Republics pulled out? Huttan cowards. "We've made more improvements to the Aleema's gun array and a few days in hyperspace will give us enough time to fix the shields."

"I could speak to Aemelie. Or to your clans. I could--"

"They won't listen. It'd be considered an act of war." So much she still didn't understand. The other one would, damn her.

"But we need your ships; we don't have the firepower--"

"You've got five. I said I'd follow you to the depths of hell, Revan. Remember? I meant it then and I mean it now."

"On Korriban." The Zabrak blinked. "I remember. Frack, I--we'll figure something out. Maybe I can get Rensha to recall the Republic Fleet. Or ...." Her voice trailed off. "Damnit, Canderous!"

"Mishuk gotal'u meshuroke, pako kyore, Revan"

Later, Canderous would wish he'd thought of words more fitting than a Mandalorian platitude. But nothing was easy.

Later, he would have time to reflect. For this would be the last time they spoke alone, head to head—as allies.


"You, too," he grunted, easing back into the tank. To fight, he needed to be whole.

When he looked up again Zepth's eyes faded back to their normal hue. The boy blinked. "My lord? Is that all?"

Irritation spiked the pain in Canderous’s chest, the weight of what would come. He wished Revan had kept him in the dark. He wished he’d had the shebs to beat his own wife in the blood duel.
But Aemelie had asked for a duel to the heart’s blood, and his wife had no implant to keep her pulse beating if the knife found her kar’ta’s vein. The only way for them both to live was for Canderous to lose.

“My lord?” The Zabrack’s voice was even more hesitant now.

"I'm not your lord. Get outta here. Scram!" Canderous winced at the bandage still holding two of his trigger fingers to the rest of his hand, the ache in his chest. His leg ached, too--Aemelie had severed the tendon when he only nicked hers. But she'd nearly lost a hand, he'd been too clumsy--staring in shock at the depth of his error when she switched the blade to her left and dove into his heart.

His heart had stopped, he'd been told, before they patched it up again. Not the first time that had happened. His implant had saved him.

*Aemelie would have died. I would have been Mand'alor of nothing, then.*

His wife was an atin’dala, but he loved her.

Canderous dialed Onasi's comlink with a troubled heart. Wideband was still working. Best get it over with as fast as he could. The man should hear what would come from Canderous--not Revan. It was his shame, not hers.

He owed them both that much.

XXX

_Canderous: (SPOKEN) I said I’d follow you to the ends of the galaxy, Revan, and I meant it._

_Carth: (ASIDE) He really meant it._

_Ssyrían panflute intro: Canderous’s Theme_

_(BEAT)_

_Starfire: (SUNG)_

_I dreamed I met a Mandalorian; A most amazing man._

_He had that look you very rarely find: The hardened, hunting kind._

_I asked him to say what had happened, How it all began._

_I asked again, he never said a word. As if he hadn't heard._

_And next, the room was full of wild and angry warriors. They seemed to hate this man._

_They fell on him, then disappeared again._

_Then I saw thousands of millions, crying for this man._

_And then I heard them mentioning my name. And leaving me the blame._

--"Revan’s Lament," Starfire 2! The Mandalorian Cycle! written by Senator See’raa Wen, 3940 BBY.
No!

Oh, my Starfire, that was masterful! You called them back again and again! What did the Mandalor want? I left you privacy of your thoughts for a time, but you were hiding from me. Hiding! Why are you hiding, now--

--and then Revan was--

--Cutting strips of pie cust for a topper on Deralia, familiar clank of bolts in the background, clank of chains on her feet as Ma’s eyes got too wide again. “Seiran! He’s back! Get the blaster! We have an autocannon primed in the ceiling. Cedrix. Don’t try anything. I’m growing rather fond of our guest--

--”Ma?”

--Watching a rehearsal for the musical starring Seriina Starr--

“Revan!” Malak’s voice, metallic and cold, echoed in the corridors of her mind, the locked place, where the Awakened Ones could not find her; where Revan could hide, retreat, escape into the shadows of oblivion.

[Coordinates 2939, v 312315. Target Kuat Driveyards. y/n.]

No! Come to me! Come and get me, you fracking assholes--

“Revan!” Dar’s voice echoed Malak’s. Calling her Revan. A cold metal arm closed on Revan’s shoulder and shook, pulling her back from the brink, from the ice, from the frozen pond--

Her eyes focused on the familiar face. Revan no longer wanted the name. Or the responsibility. Or the betrayal.

“Betrayal?” Malak’s voice was a whisper in her ear. “What just happened, Red?”

“Do you call us both ‘Red?’” she snapped out loud, blinking to clear the screams. “Her, too, right?”

“I…” Malak’s presence seemed to dim, as if he had stepped away. “She is my wife, but you are not… not my wife.”

“And what was Sheris? Byss cheese?”

“Revan!” Her own voice coming from that other body. The other woman glanced behind her and Revan was suddenly aware of the watching eyes: Rensha and her bridge command.

“I’m fine,” she snapped back. In Rakatan.

“Speak Basic,” Rensha barked at her. In Trandoshan. “I told you both before. No plots between you.”

“I just spoke to Canderous. We’ve lost the Mandalorians,” Revan said flatly. In Basic. “Most of
them, anyway. They’re sending us five ships, not thirty-six.”

Her duplicate didn’t even look surprised. Which probably meant she was crapping her pants. “Oh.” Dar paused. “I considered that possibility. Hopefully the gravity well--”

“Frack your gravity well! We don’t have the ships!”

“General Revan, General Sheris is considering our approach.” Rensha’s growl was far too calm. Why in the stars were they all so calm about this?

“They almost didn’t follow us before,” Dar said quietly, glancing toward the Trandoshan. “Remember? They said the Sith Emperor was arusuum’la. They wanted to ship him back to us. They said I was not Lin.”

“Before they were frightened of the Machine Ships. Now, they think we will clean up their offal for them,” Rensha sneered.

“Recall your fleet,” Dar ordered Rensha. “Have them meet us at Degriass. Or Rekkiad, it is on one of the Core Trade Routes--”

“The Shelton?” Revan interrupted. “Are you nuts? You can’t take a fleet through that. The lane’s too narrow.”

“Not if you calibrate it precisely--”

“Oh, yeah? And who’s going to do that?” A thought struck her. “You took your ships to Rekkiad before. Did you use the Shelton Trade Route then?”

Annoyance shattered the other woman’s calm facade. “Of course not, Fragment. We took this route, the one the Mandalorians call the Dewback Road. But I entertained the possibility of the Shelton--”

“Entertain this,” Revan snapped. “It’s fracking impossible.”

Rensha’s talons tapped on their command board. “Several of my ships are still in hyperspace. It will take some days to reach their destinations without the Machine Ships’ routes--and if they have to turn around--”

“I can stall the Sleepers,” Revan muttered, wondering for how much longer. The screams in her mind seemed to brighten again, opening her mind to the cacophony of whispers, the maddened ships, the laughing Emperor.

*Your Mandalorian wishes to speak with you*, Tenebrae had said smugly. Too smugly. Had he known? Did he care?

**Oh, I have faith in you, my Starfire**, the voice in her mind murmured.

“I can lend you my strength,” Malak murmured, almost at the same time. “It will be enough.”

Will it? Power isn’t the problem, Malak. The way it felt to dance across the stars was. All those little lives. The rage of the Sleepers themselves. All of it was fuel.

All of it was hers--

*And you know that’s a problem*, the voice in her head that sounded like Polla whispered. *Remember the last time you thought you could fix things with power? Remember Lehon? The Star Forge?*
“I assume the Aleema is one of the five ships….” Dar was pulling up the Degriass System on her display. “And we have Carth’s armada….”

“Maybe we can use some of those asteroid belts,” Revan said, dully, staring at the dust of light around the unfamiliar sun. “If we put the Imperial capital-class gunships here….” Carth, she thought absently.

---

The Imperial Capital-Class Gunship has changed little in the past three hundred years. Relying more on shielding than most of the Sith-designed battleships, they are known for the devastating power of their turbo-lasers as well as their capacity to withstand atmospheric stresses and fight in lower orbits than most of their enemies.

This sturdiness of design was used to devastating effect by Talonis Revan during the Battle of Degriass.


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

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Fate was funny sometimes. Canderous’s personal comm number pinged just as Carth was about to order a ship-to-ship connect to check on his son.

Carth pulled the call up on his private screen, all too aware of the eyes on the bridge. "So… Dustil's on your ship, I heard. Is he visiting Mekel, or--"

"Yeah." Canderous never sounded rattled, but Carth thought something seemed off when the man’s eyes shifted away from the cam. "When we get outta hyperspace, soon as it's safe, we'll transfer him to yours—if you want. Jin too."

Carth stared at the nav-board. “Not sure that’s gonna be any safer. You hear about the Republic Fleet pulling out?"

"More kills for us." Canderous didn't sound like he cared, but Carth knew him too damn well. "Just talked to Revan. Zabrak's talking with Revan's voice, now. She talk to you, too?"

"Yeah…a bit." Now, Fats was as silent as a tomb, awake and blinking now as the priestess shoveled food down its gullet, but his eyes weren't glowing. Don't you want to talk to me, too, beautiful? She had to be busy. She was probably really busy. And Carth couldn't say he'd ever get to like hearing his wife's voice come out of that bloated thing.

"Onasi, there's… something else." The hesitation in Canderous's voice was unusual. In fact, Carth didn't think he had ever heard the man stutter before. "If Revan didn't already tell you… the Clans are pulling out of this fight. Most of… most of them."

"What?" Later, Carth realized he should have gotten it instantly but in that moment Canderous might as well have been speaking in Taug. “Why? Are they going after the Republic ships?”
"Hah." Canderous’s chuckle sounded forced. “I told you they wouldn't follow Revan.” The Mandalorian looked tired over the blurry holovid. As tired as Carth felt. "Had to work like hell to get them to follow the Republic and that other one. Take orders from the Zabrak kid… that wasn’t easy, but now… you brought her back. Aru’suum’la. Unchanging. My people won’t fight for her."

"But we needed her." That sounded better than 'I needed her.' And it was true. "You saw that last fight--what she did there--"

"I saw. If Revan can render them bloodless so easily, you don't need our forces. Clan won't fight for the deathless." He sounded defeated. "I still command the Aleema and four Weis ships with crew that want to earn back their honor. We’re with you to the end. But the rest--." His voice trailed off. "Five capitals, Onasi. Twice as many fighting squadrons in them. That's all we can give."

"But you lead the Mandalorians--"

"Not anymore." The Mandalorian lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. "And I'll gut you if you ever let it be known that I threw that damned fight, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't… risk--"

"What fight?" But Canderous's image was fuzzing out in that tell-tale pattern of dissolution that told Carth that somewhere, on the other side of hyperspace, some Sleeper ship had knocked out another transceiver. "Wait--what do you mean Clan isn't following? We need your ships! The Republic's pulled out! You can't just--just not--"

But then Carth was talking to thin air. In the sudden silence aboard his flagship became aware of the crew standing around, looking as shell-shocked as he felt.

“Five Mandalorian ships?” Ensign Kagnos was speaking out of turn again. The boy looked as green as he was, like he was about to be sick. “That’s it? But they've been leading the vanguard--"

"Five ships and the Great Hunt. We have a few days," Carth said numbly. "See if you can get Fats up and running. And double everyone's sleep shifts. And rations." His eyes went to Corporal Sreekeet, nominally in charge of Engineering. “I know the spanner jockies have a still down in Shield Maintenance. Order em to release their stash. Send me the bill.”

"But my Lord Admiral--" Carth's Second looked like he was about to argue.

"Do as you're told, Admiral Tarr," Yuthura snapped. Her headtails were wrapped around her neck.

Carth closed his eyes, tallies of numbers dancing in his mind. All Imperial against three hundred and nine enemy capitals. At least.

“Do the best you can on repairs, too,” he added. “Don’t… get the guns working. I want turbolasers online across every bow. If you need to re-jigg from shields or… or life support, do it.”

His eyes went to Rew Ekkumi, sitting demurely in her restraints on the deck. He hadn't known where else to put her. But she spoke Mandalorian, just like they all did, and she'd heard--

"It's not too late," Rew said softly. "We can pull out too, Carth. It's what Revan wants."

Did she really want him to run? It made no damned sense!

"Get the damned wideband back online. Try different channels… bounce it off Core relays, I don't
"care what you have to do!" Carth snapped. "Get me through to the Great Hunt. Now!"

Xxx

By all accounts, Talonis Revan inspired loyalty in the officers who followed him, Republic and Imperial alike. But his control of the Mandalorian Fleet during the Machine Wars continues to be confusing when seen from an outside perspective.

The Mandalorian clans refuse to speak of it. Recently, a visitor to the Lin Ducal palace on Malachor III was told that Talonis Revan never existed.


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"Well?" The mask looked good on Aemelie and from the smugness in her voice she knew it. "Can we trust these betrayers again?"

"We can trust Carth and Revan." Aemelie was allowing only five ships to meet this challenge. She'd ordered the rest to jump immediately to Dxun. "We won't have the Republics."

"There is no glory in a rout--for either side. The last few fights were too simple. You hold your faith with the naastar. So shall we. The Aleema is worth fifty of their ships, Husband. And we have the Riotous Sphere and its sister warbirds as well. All the traitorous vessels of Weis, ready to reclaim their glory."

"So be it." His fingers ached. He did not want to look at her bandaged hand. Husbands and wives should never duel for blood. It was always unlucky. "Then we… we should transfer our med-bay to the Munificent Rancor. Tell the other ships to dump their bays, too. I would advise my Mand'alor to scatter them among the fleet."

Aemelie tilted her head. "We can't afford to lose warriors to guard them during the transfer. We may jump into the heat of battle--"

"The dar'jett and Jin. And… Milli." He threw their daughter's name down like the last gauntlet. "They both have a claim to Jin. It's appropriate. They can fly escort."

She nodded; expression hidden by the mask. But he knew that tightening of her hands, the crack of her voice over the speaker of helm. "A good plan. As you wish, Husband."

Canderous bowed his head. "May our children sing our death-songs bright, Mand'alor."

Aemelie’s masked face nodded. She was probably smiling under it. Damn her. "But not with this battle."

Xxx

Sheris: "I'm afraid that I'm in love with him, Revan." [Gives a shuddering sigh.] "I can't believe I said that out loud! But it's true! I'm in love with him! I love your husband."

Revan: "No! That's not possible! It's just not possible! You're my identical twin sister!"

Sheris: "Not quite so identical since you cut off my hand, so your former husband could tell us
“apart.”

Revan: "Carth's not Malak. He'd never... he loves me! You must have tricked him!"

Sheris: "You're so wrong. Carth never loved you."

--"You Make the Darkness Seem So Far: Sheris, a Love Story," Hosnian Vid Productions, Dir. By Sir Phylus Blais, Screenplay by Lady Tee'raa Wee, est. 3949 BBY.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

Perhaps it was the miasma of Vima's influence that had been dissipated, or perhaps it was just that the crew of the Great Hunt had been fighting for weeks without a break, but now that they were hurtling toward the end, the air on the ship got festive.

Revan was startled to see bottles of decidedly non-regulation booze appear on the consoles next to the unshaven and slightly wild-eyed sents; even more surprised to nearly walk into what looked like a Trandoshan orgy in the officer's fresher. Rensha, at least, hadn't been there, she thought with relief, seeing the familiar lizard standing aloof on her bridge. The Toydarian was strapped to his place on the bridge, too, feathers sticky with sweat.

"I trust you slept, Brown." The word Rensha kept calling her was closer to Brown Fur than hair, but her meaning was clear enough. Dar was Red and she was Brown, although another centimeter of red had appeared at Revan’s hairline, seemingly overnight. When she pulled her hair into a topknot, the brown dye seemed nothing more than cheap facade on her identical face, both of them the same.

"I slept for a few hours. Dar--err, Red Fur's still asleep. Figured she needed it." Revan had not slept. She had been with the Sleepers above a dozen different worlds--Nar Shaddaa (again) at the last. "You let my friends out of the brig yet?"

"It is not safe for the Wookiees when our… tr’chur is up." Rensha's snout wrinkled back and she gave the word for blood-lust an extra trill, meaning extra lusty, Revan figured. "They desired to return to your ship and I allowed it."

"Oh." Pang of guilt. She'd done little more than comm quick commands about her friends before losing herself in the stars again. All those little lives--the screams of the ships when she called to them--

Now you see. Tenebrae's whisper of approval nearly seemed to come from her own thoughts.

You keep saying that! What the frack do you think I’m seeing? Our doom?

You will not die, Bright One. There is enough of me in you now to assure that.

Oh, yeah? I don't think you're familiar with how much damage a laser cannon can do--

You care for them. They are dirt. Motes of filth in the glory of the stars. But you care for them. I do, too.

“Brown!” Rensha’s talons dug into her arm so hard that Revan yelped--and nearly backhanded the High Admiral of the Republic Fleet into her own navboard.
“Sorry, I… it was the Sleepers,” she lied. “They, uh, they went to Dantooine.”

“I trust you recalled them?”

“Of course.” Revan crossed her arms and scowled, because that seemed to be what commanders did, if Dar was a good example. “Do you think it’s wise to allow discipline to slip this badly before our fight?”

“Hunters require release,” the Admiral shrugged. “My men are more than capable of rising to the task when it is required of them.”

"I could not reach you!" Abruptly, Malak appeared, flickering dimly between her and Rensha.

_I was in the stars._ The pang of resentment she felt at being pulled back into this meat-body was irrational, and, when Revan thought about it too much, fracking terrifying.

**Put aside your fears.** That smug, dannable voice in her thoughts!

"Shut up!"

Malak's expression looked startled. Revan didn't like seeing him at all, but especially not like this: this ghostly vision of a man with a jaw and thinning hair, with an expression that held more concern than hate. "I am only trying to help."

"Not you," she muttered. "It's him. Do you hear him, too?"

"Him?" Malak shook his head. "Who?"

"Who? Your fracking da--of course I mean the Emper--" Revan broke off, suddenly aware of the silent stares. Between her and Malak were half a dozen sents who were actually alive. And listening.

"Did you just tell me to 'shut up'?" The Trandoshan Admiral's face looked almost amused, as if they'd moved to a place beyond offense.

"Not you." Revan wiped her nose again, trying to ignore the way her vision flickered with stars.

Now you become--

_Get out of my head!_

Oh, Starfire. We are past that. I thought you would be pleased, to have more time in your vital body--

"Wide-band is up again," Rensha told her. "Your Captain called twice."

"Husband," Revan corrected her. "My husband called twice? How're they doing? Did you tell them about the… uh… the Mandalorian issue?"

Rensha walked stiffly to her chair and sat down. "The issue of five Mandalorian dreadnaughts? Instead of thirty-odd? The Imperial Fleet knew already."

Malak frowned. "Red thinks we can win without them. Do you agree?"

_She does?_ That made Revan want to laugh. _Tell her to get her ass up here._ She felt a spike of anger. "You're the one who pulled the entire Republic fleet, Admiral. At least we still have the
Imperials or we'd be totally fracked--"

Her voice broke off because Rensha was shaking her head. "Rew Ekkumi took a shuttle to the Captive Arm before they went to hyperspace. She attempted to persuade Carth Onasi to return the Imperial Fleet to Kaas." Rensha's teeth bared. "Onasi has commed twice demanding to know if her words are true." Her tongue flickered. "I assured him it was not, but he wanted to hear it from you. When I could not produce you, he became suspicious."

The bottom seemed to drop out from under Revan. "What?"

"Do you require me to repeat that again?"

"No." Her hand was already tracing commands on her comm-link to Dar, pinging the alarm she'd set for Mission (still coordinating repairs on the Hawk), and activating the codes for a priority comm to the Captive Arm. "Why didn't you wake me—"

"We tried," Rensha said grimly. "Six adrenal shots. Your arm may be sore."

Revan rubbed it absently. It was sore, but it had been ever since that damn tomb, where the Preserver had scratched it.

The loc pinged back and forth, searching for a wideband link. The abrupt silence on the bridge seemed to stretch for decades.


Treachery? Revan felt numb.

"Admiral Rensha. General… General Revan." Abruptly, Carth was there on her comm unit. Stupid hat on his head, fuzzed in blue.

"Carth Onasi," the Trandoshan said.

"Carth Onasi." Revan followed Rensha's lead, not giving him a title.

"Tried to call you twice, General. We're gonna be at Degriass. Whether you want us there or not." He didn't bother making excuses. Such a good soldier. Just the facts, sister. "Glad to see you're in one piece."

Revan kept her voice dry, as she felt her accent slip into a drawl. "I'll try to have something left for you to shoot at." She glanced up at Rensha, but the Trandoshan was silent. A ping came in on her wrist comm. The display held name and a line through it.

"Tell Dar that I know that already, she demanded of Malak.

"She regrets the necessity," the ghost whispered. "In Imperial Space, it is customary to have the commander of the vessel perform the duty."

Carth won't do it himself. She knew him too well. "Carth Onasi." Revan kept her voice even. "You have a traitor of ours on board your vessel. A Rew Ekkumi."

"Yes." His eyes jerked to the right to something offscreen. "She's… right here. Trust me, I'm as… as she's going to be subjected to a Coruscanti court martial just as soon as we win this--"

"No," Revan interrupted. Louder than she needed to. A few ensigns jumped.
Rensha's tongue flicked in and out.

Carth persisted. "I know what she did, but she--Yuthura took a look and her mind, it's--she said Rew's been under heavy compulsion for weeks!"

"The… the one who compelled her is dead. Was dead, when Admiral Ekkumi abandoned her post."

Her husband scoffed. "Did she get to you too? That Jedi? Atris?"

"I beg your pardon, sirrah." The civilian title was a double insult, and she watched his face darken.

"Revan," her husband whispered. That furrow of doubt between his brows. "Are you… you?"

"Yes, Carth." She closed her eyes. "I'm still me, Flyboy. Just… don't make this more difficult."

"I'm not trying to be difficult! But you--"

In the back of her mind, images flickered through the Awakened Ones's faceted eyes. They were above Coruscant again. Gleeful and spiteful, as if they knew how much she hated them for it. She flared her strength in the Force, felt them scream, felt them turn--

And then, one-by-one they winked out, tunneling back, screaming her death in their minds--

-- His name was Aeritus Drachmar, and he was the heir, the rightful heir; but the usurper, the bastard boy had taken everything, everything--even his life--

--Her name was Fiola Rabine and she came as the Emissary from Ziost to witness the ceremony, the ceremony young Vitiate said would unlock the power of the Sith--

--His name was Siw-kap and he was ten years old today on Medriass and he'd just passed his first Blood trials--

A hundred lives flashed before Revan’s eyes. A thousand. Eight thousand, all disjointed and jumbled as each Machine Ship screamed it's fury through the ether, all lost, everything lost and all because of--

Him. Him. And Revan, too-by default because she was a part of him, she was the fuel burning the galaxy alive, its spark--

They still blame me, do they not? Oh, my Starfire. Valkorion's dry chuckle echoed in Revan's mind. On such petty urges came the strength to forge an Empire, harness the power of the Infinite Empire. I took their tiny lives, motes of dirt and I fashioned them into something great, something better, something immortal, something mine.

They are beautiful. They were, but terrible, too. The Rakatan device needed the organic component. The protein chains--

Yes! Yes! His rapture was infectious, she felt it catch in her own throat, somewhere distantly her mouth was smiling. Now you see!

Yes. The strands were degraded. It would take centuries to rebuild them, correct the errors, clean up the signal noise--the noise that sounded like the Machine Ships, their voices all screaming--
Come, she commanded, and felt them turn-- even as she felt something else shift within the music of the spheres.

The balance of power between old and new. Experience and novelty. Valkorion--

--and her.

"Revan!" Something elbowed her sharply in the ribs. Something like an elbow. "Hey! Wake up!"

Familiar voice. Deralian burr. Revan blinked to find Polla Organa staring her in the face, with one hand on her shoulder as if she was about to shake her, and the other brandishing an oversized rifle.

"Polla..." Revan tasted salt on her lips again and wiped the whole mess with the sleeve of her white robe.

"Yeah. Sorry I took so long to get here." The woman made a face. "Wanted to check out the repairs to the Hawk."

"Ghost." Revan wiped her nose again. "Mission renamed it. It’s the Blue Ghost, now."

"Well I’m here." The Deralian’s smile seemed fixed. "Uh, Da says hi. And Zaalbar. Mission said to watch out."

"Yeah, I… I’ll do that.” She shook her head to clear it.

"Revan? You okay?" Carth from the comm. "You, uh… blanked out there for a second, Freckles."

Revan blinked at the chron in her datafeed, registering a lapse of roughly five minutes. "I need to sit down." There was a chair--her chair. Next to it, another. For ‘General Sheris.’ She sat down slowly. The holographic image of Carth pivoted, keeping her in view.

Cold as Hoth. "Rew Ekkumi, Carth?"

"Yeah." He swallowed, glancing to the side at someone she couldn’t see. "Revan. When this is over, a military tribunal for Admiral Ekkumi--"

"She's on an Imperial ship. This is a tribunal."

“What?"

“This is the tribunal, Admiral Onasi.” Something about this was horribly, horribly familiar. From one of her nightmares. Revan looked up to see the Trandoshan examining her with narrowed eyes, her tongue flickering out faster.

Stop this, Rensha, she thought. Give me a direct order so I can stop this--plea for clemency--

“My apologies. I was asleep.” Dar's voice rang out from the officer's entrance on the side of the bridge. She walked across the deck of the flagship like she owned it. Revan wondered if she'd ever get that walk right.

"General Sheris. So glad you could join us." The acid in Revan's voice wasn't directed at Dar, but it earned her a raised eyebrow in return. "We're just waiting for the prisoner now."

"Yes, General Revan." Dar paused, her eyes turning toward the holocams, and beyond them to the

"General Sherisss." The Trandoshan's exhale added a level of sibilance to the name.

"Lieutenant C'Tannis," Dar added, her voice softening. "You should eat something."

The Toydarian shrank away as she passed him. At the moment, his eyes weren't glowing at all, just their normal black. And terrified. Revan remembered how she'd found him, filthy and chained to a chair. Dar hadn't been intentionally cruel, she just hadn't--

She'd had other concerns. So many little lives. It was hard to keep track.

Around them, the bridge crew had abandoned their cups. The bridge was suddenly immaculate, every officer and enlisted sent sitting as straight as their vertebrates allowed. The hiss of the breathing mask on the nearest Mon Calamari seemed to echo in eerie counterpart to Revan's own heart.

"She's here. She wants to speak for herself." Carth's voice again--stubborn--his head turning to someone offscreen.

"Pull the holocams back. We all need to see." Revan's voice didn't feel like her own voice. Like an echo. Like she'd said this before.

Rew Ekkumi was in restraints. Sith ones. They weren't comfortable. Revan remembered from the *Leviathan*. But she was still dressed in her admiral's best, still even had the cap on her head. Not a hair out of place. An almost smug smile marred the even features of her face.

There was no point in hating her, but Revan hated that smile.

There were words that were supposed to be said. Revan knew that. Dar probably had them memorized. Malak, too. But she wanted this done. And so she closed her eyes and reached for the Force, for the Toydarian, dozing silently only a meter away. She felt his body jerk, quivering as she entered him, like falling into a maelstrom.

She felt his horror, numbly, and wiped it clean as she had before. Before, when she'd visited Canderous. When she'd given Carth his orders. When she'd spoken to a hundred other ships with their own prisoner chained on their bridge. Little lives.

The price.

Lives spun around her, impossibly fast now. There was the Chessnan baker locked in a cellar on Deralia, and Callie Lee on Coruscant, and a billion others, a billion tiny little lights, like looking down on Coruscant from the perch of their balcony--

**My Starfire. Do you see? Do you see?**

Revan could orient herself to the center by the beams of light, hovering below an ovoid egg. Those symbols weren't real--her sight was more sensation than perception, but there in that center was He-

*I require a body, Vitiate.* She barely recognized her own voice, and it was not one: just the demand itself, issued like an order. Somewhere, beyond this center of their selves, the screams of the enraged Sleepers echoed across stars, their power a harsh wind channeling through her. And now, tethered to the light of Him, she could harness their fury--
Yes. Yes. Yes! Precisely! Oh, my brilliant. My brightest spark!

And then from the Toydarian's essence it was easy to slip into the ancient pureblood's skin like a well-worn pair of shoes. The eyes of the bloated man Carth had called Fats snapped open. A clumsy body wobbling in its chair of chains. A priestess of the Hand, kneeling at his feet--

*His name has been Darth Omin, once. And he had served on the Dark Council as the Emperor's Wrath until his appetites outmatched his body and then Tenebrae rewarded him with his greatest desire; to sleep, mindless and slack, and to serve to serve His Luminance forever as long as his flesh endured--*

The bloated pureblood's limbs had been bound, his feet atrophied beyond use, perhaps decades ago. It did not matter. Revan made his body stand up, the tortured pain just another sensation, like the small of ozone in the air, the sudden stench of fear--

She forced his cracking feet across the deckplates. The man swayed and would have toppled had the Force not kept them whole.

"Rew Ekkumi," the pureblood's mouth slobbered.

The infuriating smile suddenly faded and the Telosian's eyes widened. "What--"

And then, a tremor in the Force. An object, intruding between her prey and this fumbling, bloated hand--


Behind the Twi'lek, Carth had moved, too. Imperial bars of that absurd uniform a lie. Disobedient. Insolent. "Revan," he echoed. "Freck--"

She clenched the pureblood's fist and saw her lover swallow the rest of the word, hand going to his throat, eyes widening in horror, even as her fingers opened, releasing him again. "No," he muttered hoarsely, stumbling upright again. "This isn't… this isn't you. You'd never--it's him. It has to be him--"

"Revan!" Yuthura murmured again. Those eyes knew better. No soft innocence in them at all. Her hand reached out and grabbed the red flesh of the pureblood's arm. "Revan. Look at me."

"Stand aside. This is justice--" the pureblood's tortured throat made the word a guttural moan. "Rew Ekkumi. I sentence you to death."

Her fate finally seemed to dawn on the woman's face. "You're insane," she spat. "I wanted to save him. I was saving your own people!"

As if from a distance, Revan heard herself begin to laugh, raw and choking and cruel as she gathered the Force in her paw--

The click of a lightsaber was unmistakable, as was the reaction of the crew on the Imperial bridge. First, Revan saw them rushing away, strangely etched in a red light. Something like a kinrath stung her back and then a band of heat seared her breath. She heard the pureblood gasp and choke.

The former Darth Omin’s body fell forward, the bridge titling crazy-squared as Revan still looked up through his eyes; seeing Ban's body armor; her violet face, etched in blood by the light of her
blazing saber--

*Stabbed me? She stabbed me--*

**Oh, my Starfire.** Tenebrae's mock disappointment scalded her skull. *Never stay when they're going to die. It's so unpleasant!*

XXX

*Fleet Admirals Denis Cein and Rew Ekkumi made contributions that are often overlooked in the Machine Wars.*


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

Well, *that was a disaster.* Inwardly, Revan winced to think of what the Republic Senate would make of this display, should a recording survive them. *All you had to do was perform a clean execution, Fragment! Or command one of the other officers. They're well-trained, not like your husband--Malak? Tell her--*

*Do you still find death so easy, Red?*

*No. Revan felt her mouth twitch as she answered Malak, despite the inappropriateness of the setting. But I don't have her kind of power. Ekkumi’s execution should have been painless.*

*No. The Emperor is corruption incarnate. His strength comes with a price.* When she stared long enough, his face appeared to her. Darth Malak’s face--not Knight D’Reev’s. It had ceased to bother Revan.

*The pureblood did not feel much pain, I think.* Sheris was the only one who would care about that, but she sounded pleased. *His torture is over.*

*Tenebrae’s strength comes with a price,* Malak repeated stubbornly, as if that was the point. *I had little awareness of my possession, but I relished the strength he gave me. I grew... dependent on it. For you... was it that way for you?*

*I did everything in my power to be free of him. Not just for the good of the galaxy.* Revan’s ugly secret. *I wanted to be free of him because I wanted to be free. I regret that she cannot be; but we need her link to the Machine Ships and I have no way to free her in any case--*

*That wasn’t my question, Red.* His sepulchral whisper nearly hissed in her ear.

She did not want to answer his question. Tenebrae’s power had lapped at her feet, water gushing from a broken dam by the end, and she had refused to reach for it; but that ascetic remove had come with its own price. Abstention was the other side of the coin from excess, and her withdrawal from the sentient lives around her had carried its own cost.

She knew that now, having seen in the Fragment a glimpse of the woman Revan had never been allowed to be.

"Give General Revan a moment." Revan called out loud, and bent down to lift the still-prone
figure, struggling in the Force to move the unconscious lump of her former body back into its more dignified chair. Around them, the bridge crew seemed frozen: tac in the overlights.

"Is she all right?" Onasi's voice from the holocam. Had no one cut the feed? Fools.

"General Revan is fine. You just stabbed the Voice on your flagship, Ban?" Revan was almost impressed by the woman's rashness. "He is dead, I assume?"

"Yes." Yuthura sounded Jedi-serene. "Is she all right?"

"I'm given to understand the sensation of dying can be a bit of a shock."

Inappropriate, Red. Tell them she's going to be fine. Malak's form was hovering again over them both.

"Just in shock," Revan added, wondering if a Sheris giggle would be a bit much.

It would, Malak commented.

She'll be fine. I'm less sure about her marriage. Revan meant it as a joke, but her own husband's ghostly visage couldn't smile back. Instead, that damned prosthesis flickered over his rotting jaw, a painful reminder.

"Lady Ban? Admiral Onasi? Are you--"

"We're fine. General... Sheris." The pause in the name was just shy of insolence, deliberate or not.

"I take it you will not be proceeding with the execution General Revan ordered you to perform?" Belatedly, Revan noticed Polla Organa, who had no business at all on this bridge, was now leaning against the comms board, one hand on her blaster as if she needed it for security.

A high-pitched wailing from the comm's speakers revealed itself to be the Voice's Keeper when the camera rotated. She was rending her garments.

"We will not be executing anyone. " Admiral Onasi had found his spine. "What're you going to do about it, General Sheris? Open fire on your last allies?"

"Of course not." The Fragment’s possession and Force display on their Arm’s bridge would at least give some of its more mutinous officers and conscripts pause. "Merely a recommendation, Admiral. I trust you will have another Voice shipped from one of the secondary commands as soon as we debark from hyperspace. We will need to review our new battleplans and we can’t expect wideband to continue to be this reliable. Might we assume you’ll return the prisoner to your brig? And we will see the Imperial Fleet in Degriass. Of course, if they take the wideband out all we’ll be able to do is see you." She took a breath, glancing at Fragment... still slumped in her chair. "Your ship is the best-equipped. It will lead the vanguard. I trust you remember how?"

"Yeah. Another day and a half," Carth Onasi muttered. "Give or take. We'll be there."

"Slightly less for us. Wideband will most likely be down in the system. Get your replacement Voice on a shuttle immediately upon arrival. If you fail to reestablish our communication channels, I'm sure you'll be able to find us easily enough. We will be with the five or six Mandalorian capital ships near the center of the fray, holding back the multitude of Sleepers coming from all directions. General Revan can keep them stunned for roughly three minute intervals--" her fingers moved
through the air, directing the transmission to send him the opening salvos, her estimates of the coordinates.

Carth Onasi nodded grimly. **“Fine. Can you wake Revan up?”**

"General Sheris has given you an accurate assessment of our forces. We are done for now."
Admiral Rensha broke in. "General Revan is… indisposed, Captain Onasi." Old Scaly cut the comm before Revan could.

General Revan was in fact already twitching, signifying her return to consciousness, but Revan approved of the Trandoshan’s decision. It would further demoralize their crews to see their leaders at odds.

Slumped in her chair, the Fragment groaned. The roots of her hair were red. Her topknot lay like a wilted stem on top of them. "Frack." But her eyes opened, clear and focused. "Carth--w-what did--"

"His forces will meet us at Degriass," Revan told her. “Rew Ekkumi will remain in the brig. Admiral Onasi will procure another Voice from one of the Imperial ships."

The Fragment shivered, staring past Revan--to Malak's insubstantial form. "That was a kriffing disaster. Why the hell did I listen to you?"

“You came to the same conclusion we did,” Revan told her. “And you will have inspired fear, which is required on Imperial commands. Lady Ban will be seen as a rising power among the Sith, and the admiral’s disobedience a sign of his own initiative.”

“What? Is that what you planned all along” The Fragment shook her head. “How do you do that? You always… you twist things!”

“Every disadvantage can be turned on its end,” Revan told her. “You know this as well as I do.”

“Right,” her duplicate snapped, kneading her temples. “I do. Except when it all gets fracked.”

---

Jedi Master Ollivair Loanin had two children with Princess Deena Kira of Onderon. By all accounts it was a love match, and they lived together happily for many years. Their daughter, Queen Sam I was known for her temperance as well as her skill with the dxun in the skies, although her Force potential was slight.

Although it was widely known that Master Loanin was half Zabrak and half Human, the claim that he was the son of the Jedi scion of a Coruscanti senator is false. Indeed, genetic tests have uncovered something even more surprising: Ollivair Loanin's descendants share common markers with Master Vrook Lamar, uncle to Revan Starfire. Lack of a mitochondrial match on the female side, however, points to a male relative of Revan's, perhaps a son of Lamar's as the progenitor.

Given the potential for unprecedented gifts within the family line, the royal Kira bloodline of Onderon should be watched for potential apprentices...

---Confidential notes from Lord Zash, to her apprentice P'ink Kallig of Tor, Dromund Kaas, private collection.

---compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

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Xxx
"Won't be long now!" Doctor Gordo chuckled, patting Lydie's abdomen in a way that didn't make her feel comfortable. But nothing about pregnancy was comfortable. "Given any thought to a name?"

"Ollivair." She straightened as much as she could, snapping her dress back on her body. The baby was a boy, they'd seen the scans already on the portable bioscanner Azen had stored on their ship, bought with some of the last of the portable Loanin fortune.

"From the holobook? Ollivair Tesserect? Oh, ho!" Doctor Gordo chuckled. "I thought tales like that had gone out of style."

"My aunt had a copy."

"Your dear Aunt Marla?"

"That's right," Lydie said.

"Auntie Marla! You know, she was ten kilos at birth. Ten! I had to give Aelma Korr fifteen stitches just to knit up again…." And Doctor Gordo was off, reminiscing about the rest of Lydie's family. "My dear, children are the future!"

"Yes." The Force nudged Lydie forward again, smiling to hide her unease. Something about Dr. Gordon made her indentations twitch.

Ollie, she thought fiercely, cupping her stomach. I promise this man isn't going to be the one to bring you into this world!

They'd already decided to leave Iridonia. Padawan Jorde had promised safe haven on Telos and asked for their help reconstructing the Jedi Enclave there. Ma would be so disappointed not to see her grandson be born; but Jedi still vanished every day across the galaxy, and the longer Lydie and Azen stayed in one place--

"We should talk about baby Ollivair's future," Dr. Gordon said, just as Lydie reached for the door. "He has so much potential. Just like his great-aunt Marla. Or his father, if I'm not mistaken."

Lydie took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain calm. "Thank you. I like to think my husband has endless potential."

"Of course you do." The voice chuckled. "But I was talking about Ollivair's father. Mekel Jin?"

The man gave a strange hiccuping sigh. "Don't try and deny it. I know the bloodline quite well. My own families do have a certain… taste when I've bent your kin to my yoke. And Mekel Jin… oh, he... he is delicious. Merely a mouthful, of course, but the other... together they’re delicious!"

That cold feeling stuttered both of Lydie's hearts. "How do you know Mekel?" Jedi were vanishing every day, but Mekel had never been a Jedi, not really. 

"Not like I am. I am a Jedi. I am a Jedi and I am not afraid-- It was a lie. She was shaking.

"You were to be mine too."

"You were to be mine too." The voice didn't answer her questions, speaking now with an echoing sibilance that made her flesh crawl. "Marla promised, but dear girl, but you've been breathing in the riskkkkk-alin for your last three appointments and it seems to have no effect at all. You're not alone- I've got a very messy pod on Manaan full of dead Selkath who should have been mine, too. Something's changed. She found a way to expand immunity, clever girl." The chuckle again. "Shame it won't last. Another generation, maybe two… viral resistance grows, and your herd immunity fades. The Selkath scientists predicted it."
Been yours? But Manaan—the Selkath—Lydie knew. They'd read about the Selkath ritual murders—and theorized, from the ancient Sith symbols scrawled on the walls in the holo-snaps, that their deaths had something to do with the Sith Emperor. The Sith Emperor and the ritual he used to possess more bodies.

*The Sith Emperor, who is behind me right now*—

"I *know* what you are," Lydie mumbled, trying to hide the quaver in her voice. "And you will *never* have my son."

"Oh, ho!" Doctor Gordon chuckled. "Do you have any idea, insect, how many times over the centuries I have heard mothers say precisely those same--"

Her hand shot out behind her. *Like the bird, Lydie thought. Make it just like the bird you tried to make him fly but you pushed too hard.*

“*Aghhuhhh—*” The Emperor’s voice garbled. Stuttered. Stopped.

Ollie kicked strongly in her belly. The bird. She’d been six. She had known its wing was broken, and had tried to use the Force to help him fly... with tragic results. Bird bones were fragile things compared to Zabrak ribs, but the force--the *Force* to bend them was just the same. Doctor Gordon had two hearts, one below the other. The beat of Force she sent crushed both sets of ribs and pierced them, compressing air as the fluttering ceased. Lydie didn't turn around. She was… she was afraid to turn around. To make this real… until she heard his body fall to the floor.

"You will *never* have my son," Lydie said to the empty room, the cooling corpse. "*Never.*"

XXX

A/N Given the grimness of this chapter, I would like to mention, again, I promised you all a happy ending. I still mean it. Mostly a happy ending. Seriously!!! I mean it! Have faith!

*Late addition to the text: song shamelessly ripped from “Pilate’s Lament” by Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, Jesus Christ Superstar.*

*Questions For Some: The quotes at the beginning of the povs: I know this wasn’t precisely your suggestion, about tying things into the future… but your suggestion was the inspiration. Thank you!*

And ether, as always. So many thanks!! And extra for the patience to correct my made up words a thousand times. And my Mandalorian.

Again, Lydie Korr, Azen Loanin, Ollivair Tesserect, Ganesh Jin, Deena Kira and the Blais family circus are not my OC’s: thanks so much to roseohseven, plutospawn, DinahLance, and miarrow for their inclusion in this tale.

*Ether: yes, the death in the Yavin Moon call-out is totally SWTOR, and is referring to as I like to think of him, “fake Revan.” (FWIW, all, I became so entranced with this idea I wrote an epilogue and gave him a real name, which I might post with or as a stand-alone when this is done.) A lot of this Valkorion is inspired from SWTOR as well. I really love all his talk about dust and motes and sentient beings.*

*So, timeline wise. I keep saying this is the penultimate to the penultimate chapter… and it is again. I think it’s going to take one more through the battle(s) and to the end. There are so many moving parts.*
Thanks all, for continuing to read and review. It means a lot.
A Time to Rend

Chapter 77 / A Time to Rend

XXX

War is a series of steps, each off a precipice leading to another precipice.

Beware of beginning a war my darling, for you may not see its end--and that end may be worse for your lack of oversight.

--General Yusanis of the Echani, Collected Letters. Compiled by Master Mical of the New Jedi Order, Telos Enclave. (Est. 3979 BBY., Compiled 3963 BBY.)

[Note: General Jorde Yusanis fought in the Mandalorian Wars. Although this correspondence is commonly attributed to be written to his aide, some scholars have suggested the intended 'darling' was, in fact, Arren Kae, the former Jedi on who he sired two bastard children.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

The day that Revan Starfire came to the Great Hunt, Lileen and Rien's master bade them depart.

A Force crystal inset into a broken hilt was their only window into Master Traya's well-being. Their master had given it to them so they would not wonder her fate. Their master, Lileen had realized, did not expect to survive a reunion with her old apprentice.

The crystal cracked a day before their arrival in the Rekkiad System. The death seemed to harden poor Rien, but Lileen took some time to mourn the loss of Darth Traya.

She owed the woman who had once been Atris of the Echani that much. Once there had been six handmaidens and their Aunt Atris. Once there had been Lileen, Rien, Drien, Dialis, Diamin and Brianna. Daughters of General Yusanis, who had married Atris's sister.

All identical clones… save one.

After Brianna's betrayal and their aunt's transformation, Diamin left in the middle of the night and told no one her plans. Drien and Dialis promised to stay and watch over Mical, the half-brother with the mind of their master, but they had not trusted him. Lileen and Rien only had followed the face of their aunt--out of duty. Among themselves, they had questions, too--even if it wasn't until the crystal died that they found the strength to ask them--and then to wonder why they had never asked questions before.

As instructed, Lileen and her sister docked their ship on the small moon above the ice-planet Rekkiad. The atmosphere was breathable and the ground was covered in rocks, each with a name written in Aurebesh.

They were here to bear witness to the birth of a god and then to serve her, they had been told. But when the end came, it came not as it should. Instead of the death of a fleet from a Mass Shadow Generator, the end came with a short battle in the skies and then a rescue shuttle descending.

Their rescuers had Imperial accents, and assumed Lileen and Rien were survivors from the war,
which had been won. They were not wrong. But every battle has its coda; its kilos’ debt of flesh.
And so, Lileen vowed, she would see that debt paid.

Xxx

**Two days earlier, Coruscanti Standard Time, just outside of the Degriass System… in hyperspace….**

Xxx

*(Train your sons to be strong but your daughters to be stronger.)*

Ke barjurir gar'ade, jagyc'ade kot'la a dalyc'ade kotla'shya.

--“Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons,” Undated.
--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

"Mand'alor's balls! I will *not!*" The curses came in Mandalorian, audible through the closed door.

Mekel, who had promised to wait outside, flinched as General Ordo's voice roared back, then Ordo's wife yelled some more before Milli started in again.

"There are a dozen newly-blooded men to escort! Leskal or--"

"Are you refusing a direct command?"

"Are you refusing to consider Leskal or Jakata--"

"Millifar of Ordo! The future of our clan will be on this ship! Do you deny your training?"

"No! But in this war I am a warrior! Jin and I are warriors! Someone *else* can guard the future!"

Aemelie Ordo's voice took on a tone that Mekel might have called shrill as she tore into her daughter. (Stepdaughter? Niece? Milli had tried to explain Clan marriages more than once--like she was hinting at something--but Mekel had stayed deliberately obtuse.)

"We told you what is expected from a woman of the Clan! Weren't you listening before you took your vows?"

"My vows never said I should leave Ordo and go with Clan Zal--more than half the samples on that ship are theirs! One of *their* warriors should fly it--or Sinae herself! She has pilot’s training--"

"Oh, hey. Mekk." Dustil's voice was too casual, coming up behind him. "Myd was just telling me they've put us on babysitting patrol."

"Uh… yeah." Mekel pivoted and leaned into the wall. Behind him, behind that closed door, more raised voices yelled and something crashed. "Lucky us, right?"

"Lucky." Dustil pulled his full lips back. Dear old Myd had her arm slung almost aggressively around Telos's waist. She'd found some kind of Mandie dress to wear and had her hair all braided up like Milli's.
Mekel forced a yawn. "Yeah. So we get to escort the Mandalorian spankbank to a new ship--"

"And spend time with our children," Mydia interrupted, gazing up at Telos like he was the last man on the ship. "They'll be born soon."

"Myd says the boy baby has some of me in him, too. So it's like I have two kids now." Dustil's nonchalant shrug made something twist inside Mekel's guts.

"Neat." Mekel forced the grin to stay on his face. Did having someone's kid (or kids) change things that fast? Funny, it hadn't been that way for Mekel's own Dear Old Dads. He felt a little light-headed, because His Luminance had just held another ceremony only a few hours ago. In the time Mekel had been under, he'd almost got what Dustil had been thinking. Something about engines and pazaak decks, which figured, since they were about to face down the end of a war. No doubt Telos wanted to keep his mind clear of extraneous thoughts. Ban had taught them to do that--or, in Mekel's case, to say he was doing that--like right now, when he was really staring at dear old Myd's cleavage in that dress--

"Right," Telos smirked. His hand slipped behind Mydia. Mekel wasn't jealous--Mekel didn't get jealous, but... kids? Two of them? Would Telos even remember Mekel's fracking name after they were born?

_Fockda_, Mekel thought, so hard he felt sweat break out on his forehead. _Do you fracking hear yourself? You sound like a chivhole._ But his thoughts were just thoughts. No answering whisper in his head.

Without His Luminance there was no connection between him and Dustil.

And no Force at all.

"Mmm," Telos sighed, nuzzling Myd's braids. "You smell delicious, Myd."

"One of the Mandalorian slaves gave me some oil for my skin," she murmured up from between her lashes. "I'm glad you like it."

"Mmm, yeah." Either Telos was a better actor than Mekel had thought or that oil had Zeltron juice.

"Right." Mekel snapped out loud. He still didn't know what to do with his hands. Neither of them even glanced up when he cleared his throat. Telos looked like both of his hands were gonna be busy really soon, too--

"I will never forget this, Father!" Milli shrieked, coming out of the door and slamming the mechanism behind her. "Never!"

"That bad, huh?" Mekel held out his arms and the Mandalorian princess barrelled into them, almost knocking him over in the process.

Behind them, he heard Telos snigger.

"He says I am honor-bound to stay with you, Jin," Millifar snarled. "As well I am bound to the future of our woman's work--and Father says that my First Mother will be shamed by my disloyalty--and that Sinae is already displeased and thinking of curtailing my studies because of my disrespect!"

...and then she was sobbing again.
"There, there, Milli." Mekel patted her on the back, copping a quick feel while trying to ignore the two Force users joined at the hips. He shuffled his feet awkwardly, tugging Milli around with him. He and the princess weighed close to the same so it didn't go smooth. "Your hair smells great, by the way."

It did not. Her hair smelled like blaster char and adrenaline and maybe a little like puke. Not bad smells by themselves, but not in someone's hair.

Milli blinked at him. Her eyes were bloodshot and blue. "What?"

"Come here," he soothed, managing to turn her the rest of the way around. Telos had a very punchable smirk on, but Mekel didn't take his bait. "It's going to be fine," he whispered to Milli's strong nose. He kissed her lips lightly for good measure, receiving a warning squeeze from her artificial hand in return.


"Hrm..." Dustil drawled out. "You two should get a room."

Punching Sith worked out about as well as turning your back on them, so Mekel just shoved his clenched fingers around his girlfriend's back to flip Telos off. "You okay, babe?" He'd never seen her cry before and here she was doing it twice in as many days.

She blinked, sniffling. "No."

"We'll be together," he whispered into her hair, still glaring at Telos. "Leskal said we're going to a jungle planet. I'm a street rat, so you'll need to show me the ropes."

"Dxun is a moon," she corrected. "And I've never been."

"Then we'll explore it together." He kissed the side of her cheek.

Telos was rolling his eyes. Mekel twitched one side of his mouth in a Korriban promise.

XXX

Have you heard of Jasp Organa? The best fighter pilot in the galaxy? It may seem funny now, but in his own time, only a few sents knew the name, and most of them were in the Exchange, which was still misunderstood back in those days to be a criminal enterprise....

--From, A Deralian Child's Garden of Voices: Vol IX, Stories from the Machine Wars, Derra City Press, Deralia, BBY 3522.

XXX

"Hello." Jasp Organa cleared his throat. The woman was glowing--eyes open, mouth slack. He'd seen her fly--seen her glow before, too--so this glowing now shouldn't be a surprise. But she looked like a statue, sitting there with her eyes wide open. "Hello. Uh, Revan? They said... said I could come right in, but if you're busy, I could come back."

No response. Jasp cleared his throat again. He pulled out a few of the choca bits he'd traded for, bolted the smile on his face. "Got something for you." He held the candy out, like he was gentling a hessi.

Her glowing eyes didn't even blink.
“She cannot hear you. She is with the Sleepers.” The other one was stealthy as a loth-cat, creeping up from behind instead of standing in the doorway and saying she was there. They’d given the Revans shared quarters right off the bridge in what looked like the old officer’s break room, going by the plush walls and the artwork. Two temp-cots propped by the wall jarred with the deluxe decor.

The woman with his daughter’s memories was curled up on one cot, legs tucked under her, back ramrod straight. The other one edged in between him and her, her hand resting on the seated one’s shoulder.

Jasp had heard—course he’d heard—he’d seen it on the Hawk. Reports streamed in from the Core and the Rim: the enemy fleet of destroyers would alight in the skies above a world and then vanish when she called them away. Everyone on the Hunt had heard what she was doing to save their homeworlds, even if half of em still cursed her for a traitor.

"How long does it last?" On the Hawk, she’d never seemed so still. Jasp took a handful of choca out again and placed them all in a line on the shelf next to her.

"It varies." The other one sighed. "You are welcome to stay until she recovers. I have caff."

Jasp pulled the flask he’d been carrying recently out of his vest. "Got my own. Thanks."

"Of course." That earned him a thin-lipped smile, and before he knew what was what, the former Dark Lord of the Sith was sitting across from him on the other cot, sipping a cup of her own caff while Jasp stared dubiously at his own rotgut (also traded for) now housed in what looked like someone’s not-too-clean tooth-rinse glass.

Revan—the one he’d come to see—hadn’t moved the entire time. Her upper lip was stained with flakes of dried blood. When Pollie was little she’d had snot right in that same place every time she got a cold. He’d wiped it away with his thumb on her.

Jasp wouldn’t dare do that to this one.

"There is something you want to ask, I think." The other one settled in nigh the same position as the first. "Go ahead. You may ask me."

She wasn't wrong. He did have a favor to ask. He just didn't know how to phrase it.

“We’ll be out of hyperspace in another day….” Strange time, wandering a Fleet command ship and wondering if they’d ever get around to pulling Jasp's record. But then he’d seen the rosters for the next fight, and--damn his conscience for a fool. “Wanted to talk before then.”

The other one’s mouth twitched. “Is that not what we are doing?”

“To her.”

“Of course.” She had the decency to look uncomfortable. "I knew that. I was attempting to put you at ease with a joke." It wasn't putting him at ease that she seemed to be staring past him at the wall when she was talking. Then she smiled and shook her head, murmuring something under her breath in a language Jasp didn't know.

There was a long pause. Too long. The other Revan smiled a few more times until Jasp broke the quiet finally by holding up a few more choca creams. "Candy?"

"No thank you. I've never liked choca."
"Oh." They were Pollie's favorite.

"I am attempting to reach her to tell her you are here," the one Pollie called 'Bossypants' offered, after more quiet. She didn't appear to be doing anything that Jasp could see. Maybe she was just being polite.

Another long silence. "So... uh, tomorrow..." he offered finally. "Big fight, huh? I offered to show the sky jockeys how it's done--but they turned me down. Guess they don't want an old smuggler mucking up their perfect six-tens."

"Didn't you tell them about your Fleet commendations and your kill ratios?" The other one took another sip of her caff.

"Didn't get that far." He eyed her, wary now. Jasp tried to remember what he'd told Revan before--hell, he'd said stories Polla didn't even know on that flight through the Biscayne suns.

He stole another glance. Still a glowing statue, she was.

The other one cleared her throat. Green eyes regarded him over the rim of her cup. "Generally, we don't allow deserters to fly in our navy."

"Checking up on me?" He tried to ignore the prickle on the back of his neck.

"Admiral Rensha mentioned your record once or twice, but my counterpart and I vouched for your current integrity."

"Nice of you."

The glowing one was perfectly still. Not even a muscle twitch. For some reason he thought of Pollie on that Republic ship over Deralia with her head all in bandages. She'd been as still as that. He thought of this glowing one waking up on that same ship and finding her family gone. Had it been like that? He'd never had the chance to ask. Never thought to ask--

"Your daughter and I spent time together. I enjoy her company." The former Sith paused, a slight furrow between her brows. "I was expecting to see her... before tomorrow's battle. We both were expecting to see her."

"Well... Pollie has some things... the last few days..." Jasp's voice trailed away. "She's fixing up a few things on the Hawk right now. Pretty busy."

"My counterpart asked her to come." Bossypants frowned and got up, retrieving a wipe to dab at the counterpart's nose. It was bleeding again. "We sent word yesterday."

"Well... uh, Pollie's been busy. Like I said. Uh, setting up the Hawk."

Xxx

"Zaalbar was just saying Revan wanted to see you on the bridge--he said Polla Revan, so you know, he meant the one who--"

His daughter looked up, expression hidden under an enormous pair of goggles that had to belong to one of the Wookiees. "I know who you mean. Tell Zaalbar to tell her I'm busy, Da." She paused. "Tell them both I'm busy, Da."

Pollie didn't look busy, unless rearranging the spare cooling rods in reverse tempuratural order
counted as busy, which Jasp didn't think it did.

Xxx

"Of course. We all have so little time. " This Revan had no expression on her face. "We have been very busy as well. Will you send Polla our regards?"

"Course."

Jasp had heard rumors, but not from Pollie. His daughter was wrapped tighter than a crimelord's purse these days. But rumors among the enlisted men spread like wildfire.

Ship gossip said the glowing one possessed that fat slob on Carth's ship and then Force choked her own husband before trying to execute a Republic officer who'd deserted... and then the Twi'lek Sith lady cut the fat slob down.

And Pollie had seen it. But when Jasp asked Pollie direct--

Xxx

"I don't want to talk about it, Da." Polla turned her back to him, fiddling with the catalytics in the Hawk's engine room that didn't need fiddling with. "You were right before. Soon as we get clear of hyperspace we need to get the hell out of here. I want to go home."

Stars knew, so did Jasp, but now--

"Pollie," he began, gently, so as not to spook her. "Thing is, they're real shorthanded. Don't laugh at your old man but I was thinking I might re-enlist."

"What?" She'd reeled off a lot of expletives after that--more than she needed to--like she had to show her old man his daughter was just as tough and ornery a smuggler as he'd ever wanted her to be.

And then he'd told her the rest. Hadn't wanted to say it, but it was coming, sooner than springtime, and maybe knowing would help her understand.

She'd cried then, his Pollie. He hadn't seen her cry like that since she was wee.

"Want to do some good," he'd explained when she'd calmed, offering the first of the choca bits out to her reddened eyes and splotchy nose. "They need pilots, Pollie. Might as well do some good before--"

"Shut up." Her arms locked around him, and then his fearless daughter bawled loud enough to wake the whole Wookiee clan snoring in the aft cargo bay.

Xxx

"Pollie was busy so I came instead." While Jasp had been mulling, this Revan had started smiling off into space again. What did the likes of her have to smile about? "Just to check up ... oh, and see if I could get a flight clearance for one of the squads...."

He edged that oar in as if it were casual. It wasn't. He'd seen their crew reports, the projections for enemy engagement. Calling the Hunt's fighter squadrons 'dangerously undermanned' was a polite underestimate. And losing three quarters of the rest of their capital ships was.... well. If they were really damned lucky, a brain-damaged bookie might've given them one-to-five odds. Might've.
To Jasp's surprise Revan didn't object. "I can give you approval to fly one of our strikers. Even a pardon for your previous desertion… but it's going to be a hard fight. A lot can go wrong."

*Don't I know it.* "Got a few more runs in me." Molla would yell at him for being a fool. He wasn't sure what the odds were that she'd have the chance.

"Yes." The Revan's eyes finally focused on him, with such laser-sharp intensity Jasp wanted to look away. "But I would take those runs soon." She tilted her head, frowning. The mask of her assurance slipped. "You do… you know… has anyone spoken to you about--how long--"

"Saw a doc back home. Heard the news already. No need to dwell."

Revan nodded. "I have training as a healer… if there's anything… if you have questions…"

"That's nice." Doc Sahara had already been through the particulars of his case. All those months, running on the unshielded *Ravager*… results were predictable as the old fallout like they used to say in the Navy. "No questions, General. Just want to do my part."

The Revan glanced at thin air again, frowning like she was consulting an invisible medix. "I'm afraid I can't buy you more time, but I can ease some of the symptoms."

"I'm fine for now." He wanted to ask how much longer she thought he had, but the words died in his mouth. "Well… well, I… uh, I should get going--"

"Of course." Bossypants smiled politely, eyes going distant again. Her hands traced symbols in the air, presumably to her command headset. "I'm making the arrangements. You'll be cleared to lead your own squadron."

"My own--" hell he hadn't want to lead! "Not sure that's necessary. I just wanted to help."

"You will be. We need squad commanders. With experience. You're a veteran." Her voice was distant again. "Good luck, Captain Organa."

*Captain Organa.* His hand automatically slid to his brow in a salute. "Thank you, ma'am. Uh… General--"

"--Sheris." Her mouth quirked. "You have been gone from the military a long time. It is permissible to call me 'sir.' The honorific merely assigns rank."

"Master Jedi." Later he'd wondered if maybe she'd muddled his head again but in that moment, Jasp meant it. "Thank you. Sir."

When Jasp looked back at the door the other one was still glowing and the former Dark Lord was holding her hand out to no one and smiling.

"I know, Mal," she said to the thin air itself. "It is funny. After all this time….."

*Grass Priests, but it's wrong she looks happy right now!* Still, was none of Jasp's business. One thing you learn quick in wartime: grab the happy times while you can, even if that meant talking to yourself in an empty room.

Xxx

*Before his retirement, Admiral Carth Onasi was often accompanied by a Jedi advisor, although the few holovids that survive from this time show only a blurred figure in robes, hooded, and masked.*
In an attempt to eschew rank and eliminate the possibility of another personality cult, all Jedi of the time were hooded and masked, to honor the memory of Revan the Redeemed.

Some have said Admiral Onasi's advisor was his son, Master Dustil Onasi. Others claim the identity to be one Master Yuthura Ban, the Redeemed Twi'lek Sith who once called Revan her dearest friend. Others claim it was Talonis Revan himself....


--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

The High Admiral of the Imperial Fleet came to Yuthura's quarters with an escort: a trembling lieutenant pureblood with more pink than red to his skin. The lad sat down the tray he was carrying down on the table. A bowl of ice and two glasses.

Yuthura raised a brow ridge and the boy paled.

Behind him, Carth grimaced. "You can... uh, you can go now, Ergiz."

But the lieutenant looked to her instead. "Will that be all, Lord Ban?"

"For now, Ergiz." The hapless lieutenant still didn't move until Yuthura motioned toward the door and then he left at double-speed.

"Wideband's still down." Carth pulled out a flattened bulb of green liquid from his jacket and set it on the table between them beside the bowl of ice. "We're twelve hours out. Wanted to finish this now to clear my head."

"Do you usually clear your head with drink?" Yuthura recalled he had turned to it on Manaan.

"Special occasion." He poured Yuthura a glass and added ice. "They call it the 'Tears of Paal.' Won it off an officer's hand of sabaac."

"No one would dare let the High Admiral lose a hand of sabaac. Have you considered it might be poison?"

"I assumed you could tell. With the Force."

Yuthura took a cautious sniff. "I believe not. Fermented kola root with some kind of anisa flavoring is my guess."

Carth Onasi smiled at her, although it didn't reach his haunted eyes. "I'll go first. That way you can revive me if I keel over... or take my damn job if you want it."

"I do not." Yuthura plucked the glass from his clumsy Human fingers and tossed the shot back, shivering as the sickly taste coated her throat. "Oh! That's awful."

"They make it themselves down in Engineering." He poured and dispatched a drink for himself. And then quickly, another.

"I'm fine," Yuthura warned him when he attempted to refill her glass. "I still have the... ice left."

"Good. Well, that's..." Carth's voice trailed off and stared into his own glass like it held the secrets
of the galaxy. Yuthura knew his look all too well. She'd been seeing sents with that look since she
was an underaged slave in a Hurt's entourage. In its own way, the look was always a relief: troubles
solved by the bottom of a glass had naught to do with her.

"Something is bothering you," she murmured, because that was why he had asked her to drink. "Go
ahead, Carth. Get it off if your chest."

He looked up and blinked, then took a long breath. "Is there something wrong with her?"

"With Revan, you mean?" Yuthura folded her hands on the table.

"Of course with Revan! Is there something wrong with my wife?"

"Her actions were in accordance with Sith military code. Any sworn soldier must be loyal. Rew
Ekkumi took no oath to the Empire, but she did vow to take orders from her own command.
Defying those orders was--"

"I'm not asking for a blasted lecture on military code!" Carth picked up the bulb again and poured
himself another glass. "I mean, did you sense anything? Was there someone influencing her…
Sheris, or Tenebrae, or… someone? Hells, was it Malak? She used to see his ghost… dream…
dream about his ghost."

"I sensed no one but Revan in the late Voice's body." The truth. "If she were compelled, I would
have no way of knowing." Except that there is no other Force user strong enough to compel her,
save perhaps the Emperor and we weakened him with our plague and our revolution--

But strength was not always power.

Carth's jaw twitched. "She almost killed Rew."

"I made sure she did not." Best not to mention the tales Yuthura had heard of Darth Malak
strangling recalcitrant officers systems away from his location over a holographic comm-link. "I do
think, however, that it may be best if they do not see each other again for some time."

"If there is a time after this." Carth picked up his glass and shifted the ice in it. "She… it wasn't her
doing that. My wife wouldn't do that."

Yuthura remembered the man's hands going to his throat, the miasma of dark energy, and that aura
she had first sensed in the Dreshdae cantina. "The dark isn't so simple." She took a careful sip of
her drink. It had been over two months since the bombing of Dromund Kaas, but she could still feel
the effects of its poison in her bones. She was tired and impatient with this Human and his constant
need for reassurance. "There is… a tipping point, of sorts, when efficiency becomes its own
reward."

His laugh was low and dark. "Don't I know it." Carth gestured toward the guard at the door, the
isolated table where they sat. "I'm not just worried about Revan and Dustil."

"Oh." Yuthura thought she understood. "You don't have to concern yourself. I know the
temptations of the easier path, but I--"

"Not you. I'm worried about me." His voice was quiet. "The soldiers on these ships were my
enemies, but now they follow me. We're taking orders from the damn Sith Emperor half the time.
And my son is… I just stood by and let Dustil become…" he seemed at a loss for words. "Maybe
some time with Mekel Jin will help--" his voice broke off. "Do you hear me? Thinking my son
spending time with Mandalorians and Mister Sith Congeniality will help him?"
"Perhaps it will." Mekel Jin had felt so odd in the Force. Like a part of him was gone after Oerin Lin had severed his Force-bond with Dustil. "Love is a mighty panacea. It could save Dustil. Just as your faith in Revan may help her-- and you." Words she wanted to believe, although her mind kept seeing images of Jorak Uln, Uthar Wynn, and poor, damned, traitorous Finiris.

Dead lovers are gloomy thoughts when you've got a decent drink in front of you. A whisper edged in her mind. She thought it sounded like Vik Tio.

Strange choice for my own conscience. And yet somehow fitting.

"Maybe I could save Revan," Carth muttered under his breath. "If she were around to hear me." His head was down, and he was mumbling now, half under his breath. "Wideband's still down--thought she'd come here. Why'd she--why didn't she come here?"

Because she could already count on your loyalty, Carth--and she required Rensha's. But Yuthura did not bother to voice the obvious. "We must put our minds to the task at hand." Yuthura put her hand over Carth's. "The coming battle."

The Human looked up at her, blinking, muscles twitching under his furry jaw. "I know. That part's easy. We win or we die."

Or you win and you die, whispered the voice in Yuthura's head.

Who brought up gloomy thoughts a mere moment ago? Perhaps Yuthura was going mad. Speaking to ghosts as if the dead were more than dreams.

"We win or we die," she echoed. Even if that were a simplistic assessment of their future, it had a comforting balance, free of the gray choices that still haunted her dreams. She raised her glass--at this point full of half-melted ice. "Let us drink to victory, my friend."

Xxx

A disruption to the Kira dynasty occurred in 10RRA, when the last known legitimate Kira was deposed by a Mandalorian upstart, who worked with the local Jedi Enclave to establish an independent Republic on the formerly monarchical world.

"The Beast-Rider Queen" was rumored by some to be a Jedi, although the few surviving statues from the time show her as a masked warrior wielding a sword, not a lightsaber. And in one instance, some kind of assault cannon.

The Beast-Rider Queen's daughter Faene Starshine was said to have a powerful rapport with the beasts of Onderon. It was under Queen Faene's benevolent rule that the Jedi Enclave of Onderon prospered as a beacon of hope and enlightenment on the far side of the Rim.

Some scholars have claimed this renaissance was due in part to the unorthodox teachings of Master Dustil Onasi, rumored to be Queen Starshine's father.

--Kira Genealogy, A Primer for King Petron iii.

[Notes in the margin: "Why do I need to study the Starshines, again? They're no kin of ours!]

--Collected by Lord Zash, for her apprentice P'ink Kallig of Tor, Dromund Kaas, private collection.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.
"Well..." Dustil said slowly, when good old Mekk and his yellow-haired giant Mandie were finally out of earshot. "Guess we should get ready for tomorrow, huh?"

The mother of his child (children?) had stopped mynocking him the second Jin was out of sight. She now stared at him like he was a piece of lung stuck to her shoe. The shouting from behind the door had been replaced by some kind of recording of Mandalorian drumming. Or what Dustil hoped was a recording of Mandie drumming. If not, Millifar's parents were beating each other to death right now. Or beating *something*.

"I thought he'd be inflamed," Mydia sniffled, as Dustil drew her down the hall, away from that terrible sound. "Consumed by jealousy, like the time Lord Bragg slaughtered an entire village of hillmen for Inse's honor."

"Probably bad idea to slaughter Mandalorians on their own ship." Dustil gave her a careful grin. Truth was, he was exhausted. Pissed as he was at Mekk (and he'd been fantasizing about frying that punchable face the entire time he'd been trying to unhook Myd's undergarments), he didn't think he had the energy to frack Mydia Blais--or anyone else--right now.

Every time Mekk went off with that Zabrak (three times since they'd been in hyperspace) Dustil felt more tired.

Every time Dustil recited hyperspace coordinates until the feeling stopped.

"You don't understand!" Mydia snapped. "I need to marry *Jin* to rule these savages." Her nose wrinkled in a way he'd once found cute. "Not you."

"Fine by me." Dustil let out a breath. "I don't want to marry you either."

Her eyes narrowed more and her lower lip stick out. "Jin was looking at you the entire time."

*Good. Then he saw it when I grabbed your ass.*

Mekk always said he never got jealous--Dustil had been hearing that banthashit from the Coruscanti son of a whore ever since Dreshdae--but for someone who never got jealous, Mekk sure got pissed when other people stole his lovers. Lashowe Devry with Shaardan. And now, good old Myd--

Mydia was still talking. "You two had a Bezal bond. A triad with Lord Malak in the middle."

"Far as I know, Mekk didn't frack Malak." Dustil tried for a dry chuckle.

"Did you?" Mydia took another step backward.

"Frack Lord Malak? Are you crazy--?"

"I am not." She looked injured. "Madness doesn't run in our line. I don't care what you've heard."

"Nothing. I've heard nothing." There *was* something about her. Her big eyes and the way she blinked them. Inse had been the smart one, sometimes Dustil had thought he might've even grown to love Inse Blais if she was less fracking terrifying, but Mydia was fierce and tiny and he--

He liked that she was as pissed at Mekk as he was. It brought them closer together.

"Still. You and Jin." She shook her head slowly. "Millifar told me you had some kind of sex. I
didn't believe it mattered. But that bond….”

"Frack the bond. There is no bond."

A Bezal is a triangle." She looked thoughtful. "If yours was created to give Lord Malak your strength--but now he is gone….”

"Just shut up about it! I don't want to talk about it." Dustil had never felt less like frucking anyone than he did at that moment. Not because he didn't want her--a part of him did want her. She was pretty and nice when she wasn't talking. "Let's go to your room."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go to Mekk's?"

"Let's go see the kids." It was lame as far as distraction attempts went but her eyes softened anyway. "Myleah and Ganesh. Big day tomorrow moving them. When did you say they'd be born?"

"Ganesh is fully mature now, but Myleah, even with the accelerated hormones, could use another two months Standard. Sinae says it's best to leave them together in the womb until she’s ready--" Mydia went on and on, like she'd forgotten she'd signed the kids over to the Mandies and they weren't gonna raise them at all. Or maybe she and good old Mekk were going to be Mandalorian and do it.

Dustil was just tired. He smiled and nodded and made the right noises. I'm a dad now.

Xxx

General Sheris: “Members of the Senate, citizens of the Republic. It may be some time before this message reaches you. The capsule will leave our ship as soon as we exit hyperspace in the [redacted] System, returning to the Core with this transmission. I hope it finds you planning our victory celebration. (Giggles.)”

General Revan: (whispered in High Toydarian) “Don’t do that. It makes you look like a plucked sayr-goose.”

General Sheris: (in High Toydarian) “We do not have time for another take, Piece-of-Rock.”

General Revan: (in Unknown Tongue) “Acjwenuh hayeoest owe kirrr nam ost garnn!”

General Sheris: “Sajnok-hiiiyoyq! Edit the bit at the beginning, Ensign Arkosa. Let's do this again….”

--Excerpt from Fourth Speech

[Archivist's Note: There are seven recordings of Generals Sheris and General Revan together. The Fourth, reconstructed from a satellite feed near Eos, has confounded scholars for millennia. Of particular note, General Revan’s topknot is absent, as it is in the Seventh Speech. Some scholars claim that means both are forgeries.

Forty years ago, the Fourth Speech was assumed to be satire.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

"Usually she wakes up by now. Can you reach her, Malak?"
Her husband's insubstantial shade hovered over the Fragment's glowing body, looking as helpless as Revan felt.

"I have tried." He was as puzzled as she.

"She must wake soon." Revan looked up at Malak. Her love was ghost-pale and gleaming. The metal prosthesis curved around the lower half of his jaw, and his sleeping robes were loosely belted at the waist as if this were their chambers aboard the Leviathan or her own Grave Bright. Revan was in sleeping robes herself. With her duplicate in trance so often these last few days, she and Mal had resumed an easy familiarity that made her miss his mortal body. "One more sleep cycle before battle."

"I used to watch you sleep when I was alive." His ghostly hand reached for her hair; she felt the frisson of energy when it settled on her head. "I would watch over you in our bed until you woke again."

"No wonder you were always so grumpy in the mornings!" The playful jape brought a smile to her lips. "The servo-droids on the Leviathan were always so frightened that you'd blast them apart if my caff was cold or your adrenals--" her mind faltered when another memory intruded: Malak in his singlet, carrying a baby Malalchor out to see the Coruscanti dawn.

"On the Leviathan ..." Malak sensed her discomfort, but he was far too polite to speak of it. "I so often wished for caff. I loved the smell of yours, the sight of your little hands gripping the cup."

"I… didn't like it at first," she admitted. "I had never liked caff, but she did and I knew you liked it, too--"

"You never liked caff?" The third voice that intruded still had a trace of Deralian drawl from time to time, but not now. "No wonder you fell. You were an animal."

"Fragment." Revan turned, bestowing a smile upon her counterpart. "You're awake." And with the Fragment’s return to consciousness came the woman's pain that Revan did her best to ease. She put her hand on the other woman's shoulder, wincing as the Fragment's agony spliced through her own skull.

Her counterpart's voice was scratchy from disuse. "You don't have to do that. Headache won't kill me."

"This body feels it, regardless." Revan kept her voice light as Malak’s strength drew pain from them both. "You were gone a long time. Jasp Organa stopped by."

"Oh. I was..." the Fragment picked up one of the choca pieces the man had left, slowly unwrapping it. "I was everywhere."

"Which systems did the ships strike? Wideband went down again."

"Cascara. Eidos. Ryloth." The woman popped a candy into her mouth, grimacing as if she abhorred the bitterness as much as Revan did. "No damage--I pulled them back. Did Polla come with Jasp?"

Revan wondered if the woman would know a lie. She'd already decided not to distract her with the news of Jasp's re-enlistment. "No." She risked a small fib. "But he said Polla sent the choca candies."

"Oh. Do you want one?"
"No thank you."

The Fragment nodded and took another, making another face as she choked down the first. "Right." Her eyes flickered between them. "Wideband still down?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Did you see our allies--"

"Some. I was everywhere, I told you." She grimaced again and popped yet another choca into her mouth, chewing it louder than was required. "They're still calling." Her eyes were bloodshot and there were shadows under them. "Did they do that to you, too?"

"They were asleep. I told you this before."

"Not… the Sleepers. Everything… everyone that he is...." The woman's voice trailed off and she reached for her topknot, twisting the strands through her hair. "I need you to do me a favor." She spat out the choca and it arced perfectly into the bin.

"Of course."

Malak stood between them. When Revan glanced up she noticed he had reverted to his older form, the Knight's robes, the handsome face, his tumbling hair pulled back from his strong brow. "You must be hungry, Red. It's been half a day since you've eaten."

"That doesn't matter. Cut my hair, Dar." The woman blinked. She tugged at the tail that had flipped over one ear. "I want this off."

Revan eyed her cautiously. "I have some medical blades in my kit. May I ask why you've picked now?"

"They're making vids of us. This banthashit will live on after us. I want Deralia out of it. No topknots, nothing that traces back to Polla. She has nothing to do with this--her and Jasp. I want them out of it." The Fragment's hand reached up to twist the offending hair, and then dropped back into her lap.

"Of course." While that was logical, there were a hundred matters more pressing that deserved their attention. Still, Revan went for the kit.

The Fragment's hair was silky beneath her fingers. The dyed strands were easily clipped. Revan thought she probably could have used the Force to do it, but there was a strange intimacy in the metal tools, clipping strands close to the scalp until finally no trace of brown remained.

"Did you know..." the Fragment's voice trailed off as she looked up at Malak. "What the Emperor sees. It's beautiful."

"You find the forced enslavement of billions attractive?" Revan attempted a laugh. "Perhaps there's more of me in you than I thought."

"It's not a joke." That red head turned, eyes rolling in her direction. "They're not all... some of them he just... they just live. All those little lives--"

"Yes." To Revan's surprise Malak nodded. "I see them, too. But not him."

"It's beautiful," the Fragment repeated. "I didn't expect it to be so beautiful."

"The Force is beautiful, Red. And all things in it. But Tenebrae is a perversion."
"I know that." She frowned. "But they don't… they're just--existing. He's a part of them, but it's not their fault."

Revan reminded herself not to be disturbed by Malak calling the Fragment 'Red.' "I told you before. I fought hard to preserve my autonomy. You need to fight him. You can't let him control you."

"He's not controlling. He's showing me." The other woman stood up, and walked right through Malak to her own side of the bed. She sat down. "I need to go back. The Sleepers… they're busy again."

"But you just got here! You need to eat--drink--something--"

The Fragment shook her head. "Run a… a tube down my throat. Do whatever a medix does. I have to go, they…." her head slumped forward with a trickle of choca-coveted drool on her cheek, and then her eyes fluttered closed.

It was wrong that Revan's first sentiment was relief to have Malak to herself again… but his brow was furrowed now.

"I sensed a lie," he said. "When she said the Sleepers were busy. I think she did not want to stay here with us."

"Do we make her uncomfortable?" Did I make her uncomfortable? First Polla, then the Fragment.

"Perhaps it was me. " His face shifted back to the more familiar--the one she had learned to love. "I try and show her the man I was and not remind her---"

"Perhaps you should remind her. She needs to be reminded. We fell. She fell. She must not do it again--"

"I sensed no darkness."

"What did you sense?"

"Pain. Not the pain of her body." Malak shook his head. "Nothing we can fix, I'm afraid."

Xxx

There is a season for all things. A time to rend and a time to reap. A time to build ships and a time to use them.

--Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons. Undated.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"It's time." Canderous spoke the words into the cloud of her hair and Aemelie stirred, mumbling in her sleep.

When she opened her eyes she smiled up at him. "Husband."

"Hai Mand'alar." He bowed his head. "First call just went over the speakers."

"And you let me sleep through it?"
"You were snoring." He smiled down at her, lifting one of her offered hands to his lips for a kiss. "Like a wild zakkeg."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow, grinning back. "First call went out. See to your station, General Ordo."

"Elek, Mand'alor." He stole a quick kiss and reached for his boots.

Xxx

_One must turn to the Gand for an example of a hive-mind. The Gand, or the Killik. And yet, the Emperor who will call himself Valkorion commanded more sentient minds in his thrall than even the Killik Empire at its height._

You must be ever-vigilant, Tasiele. Watch for signs of Tenebrae's return. For he will return--and when he does I fear the galaxy will have forgotten what that means. Force knows, I've tried to warn them, but sometimes I fear that my memory is as short as history and just as failable....

_from the private journal of Master Meris Shan, Brentaal IV Enclave Archives (restored)_

[Anonymous note etched in margin: Meris Shan is the purported great great great-grandaughter of Talonis Revan and Bastila Shan, and the mother of Tasiele Shan. If Talonis Revan is fictional, what does that make Satele, Tasiele's daughter?]

[Archivist's note: There is no evidence that Meris Shan, Tasiele Shan, or Satele Shan ever existed. Forty years ago, Imperial scholars concluded that Meris's journal was fake, political satire meant to mock Emperor Palpatine's name.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

_Come, _Valkorion had whispered, with a voice that was somehow more present than either Malak's or Dar's. _Come to me, Starfire._"

Revan's head had ached and the choca had tasted off. Bitter and too sweet at the same time.

_Come, _Valkorion whispered again. _I've found him._

--and then Revan was a mote of dust in the galaxy's eye. She was a speck of sand whirling in a dust storm on a desert planet.

_She was every mote._

_She was every speck._

_She was everywhere. She was--_

_Now you see._ The voice in her mind was almost kindly. An apparition sketched itself in her mind: a handsome, bearded man, wearing elaborate armor like some kind of warrior-king of old. _This is how I think of myself._ A warm chuckle and then the apparition changed: became a Human woman, middle-aged; then a Rodian girl with a crown on her head. Next, Lieutenant C'tannis, still chained on the bridge; and then a Selkath, dressed in physician's robes. _But it can change. It can change at any time. I can be a farmer. An artist. A simple man--_ the Selkath's head bobbed down. _Pardon. A simple woman._ Any sentient I desire. _Come closer, Bright One. Let me show_
you what a marvelous thing I've found for you in one of my bodies--

--the Selkath's flippered hand extended and Revan took it and then she was--then they were--

--aboard a crowded skyhook's lift. She--they--were Equith Donna, a Weequay bounty Hunter with more sense than skill, tracking the target he'd been assigned by the mysterious notes written in his own blood. Half the time he thought he was going mad, but there was--the boy --the target--finally-

Almost unrecognizable, centimeters too tall and brown-haired, sandwiched between two female Twi'lek dancers, and oh, hells--the Twin Suns! This was gonna be a harder job than Equith expected and now his eyes throbbed and his vision went to black and then they slid in like a glove and then they opened their mouth and then she--

Oh, ho, whispered the Emperor. Not yet. You'll give away the game.

--and then Revan was yanked away from the startled eyes of her son.

And then she was--

Standing on the bridge of a ship. Imperial-class--

"I will not send the Republic turncoat our Voice!" A high-pitched tenor proclaimed. The speaker, a uniformed admiral, inbred and wattled, strode into view. "We need to hear Her Luminance's commands, too. And did you see Onasi's latest orders? We're fighting this battle ourselves! Where are the Republic ships?"


"I am more concerned with the fortunes of this ship than Ziost's four-thousand-year plan," the admiral replied icily. "What is there to stop us from jumping away as soon as we exit hyperspace?"

"Loyalty...?" Trieste said, but he raised an eyebrow.

"Me," snapped Revan from a foreign throat. "I will stop you." Oh, and this body! This was no weak shell, this was a man with power of his own, a former Dark Lord of the Sith, shaped as a Voice to come to this place, perhaps for just this occasion--

Now you see! We twist them to position!

--the admiral dangled in mid-air, hands grasping at his throat.

End him. Unpleasant, but necessary, sniffing out a spark--

No. Surge of panic as Revan realized how easy it would be. How fragile they all were, these little sparks in their hollow metal shell--

Yes. Well, then. Leave him. Come back with me to dance among the stars--

You have to promise not to kill him.

Does his life matter so much? A traitor's life?
It should, not, logically, but now that she was in so many lives, the webs of them--

Yes. All lives. All life matters--

Something jolted her body, jerking her head back, and then Revan was--

--staring at Dar, who was holding a shock stick.

She blinked. A choked laugh came out. "Shock stick? Why didn't you just use lightning?"

"I tried."

Her skin stung but the ache faded quickly.

"I tried everything," Dar said. Her lips were white.

You are soft-hearted. I will deal with our rebellious Admiral. Placate the copy. It would be a shame to lose her. We are both so fond--

Shut up!

And then Revan was--

--standing in a Deralian kitchen.

--on the bow of a sea ship with a net in her clawed hands.

--playing a game of rist at a Coruscanti casino

--staring at a medical tank with two infants floating in it, both attached to a single placenta.

And then she was--

She was--

“She’s gone," Malak's voice.

“I can try the shock stick again--”

“No! You cannot keep taking her pain!”

“I have to feel it, regardless.”

And then Revan was--

“I’m here." Taking a breath, Revan tamped down the Force--as much as she could. It still leaked through, like light from a permalight shoved under a bale of eridu. Impossible to contain. “I’m here. Both of you shut up!”

"I wasn't speaking." Admiral Rensha sounded amused from somewhere to the left.

"Lower your voice, Fragment." Dar nudged her.

Revan glanced down and saw that she was chained to her chair on the bridge, just like the Toydarian, C'Tannis, cowering next to her.

How much time was I out? I just--
It had seemed like moments among the stars, but the chron flashing in her feed said half a day was gone, ship-side.

“The restraints keep you from falling out of your chair.” Her duplicate grasped the question before Revan had a chance to voice it. Dar’s hand opened and the restraints cracked open.

Revan freed her own hands and massaged them, trying to erase the chill. *Korrie. I saw Korrie!* “I-I saw--

“Whatever you saw can wait. We are seconds from the Degriass System.” Dar’s flesh hand took Revan’s other one in hers and warmth returned with a sudden jolt of energy. “I’ve uploaded the opening positions to your headset. I had to revise--the Captive Arm can’t lead the spear without a Voice. Tenebrae is sending the *Dark Glory* in its stead. And the *Holy Wrath’s* Voice will go to the *Arm* in an escorted shuttle as soon as they exit hyperspace. The opening may be chaotic--we will be uniquely vulnerable--but I am hoping the geography of the system will work in our favor.”

Revan blinked. “But I--I was… I was on the *Wrath*… Admiral Gar-trik was in the middle of plotting a coup . ”

“We know.” Malak's ghostly form loomed behind Dar, looking for all the world like that Jedi knight Revan didn’t really remember; hair tumbling down his back, a wide jaw, a grim smile on his mouth. “*Voice C’Tannis has been providing reports. The matter is settled, now.*”

“I saw Korrie,” Revan silenced him by slamming down her shields, damping the Force into nothing before he could object. In her vision, Malak's blue figure faded into a blur. Dar had every right to know--and Malak had no rights at all. “I saw our son, Dar. He’s on Nar Shaddaa.”

“The smuggler's moon?” The woman blanched. “Why in all the stars would he be there?” Her gaze focused on thin air, and Revan knew she was asking Malak.

“The Sleeper ships were above Nar, before,” Revan raised her voice. "But I pulled them back. Korrie was with two Twi’lek women. They had swords. The man I possessed was a bounty hunter. He knew the Twi’leks. They’re local muscle. He was frightened of them. He called them the Twin Suns.”

Dar froze. “Twin Suns? What--our son is with some kind of gang?”

**“Hyperspace exit in twenty seconds,”** a mechanical voice chimed over the bridge speakers. **“Battle stations…”**

A droid squawked in a drill of beeps. “Twin Suns? No way!”

“Mission--?” Revan’s head turned.

Admiral Rensha hissed her annoyance as she stepped forward, blocking Revan’s view. "Focus your attention upon our prey, Generals."

“A moment, Rensha,” Dar snapped, raising her hand.

Revan kept talking. "They had swords. Korrie didn’t look frightened." But the Weequay had been. Strange, feeling a stranger's terror--like an adrenaline spike to the head. Raw energy, fuel for her own rational mind. "I tried to go back, but there were so many others--all *thinking* at once. Hard to keep them straight."

*You will learn, given time.* The chuckle in her head was oddly paternal. *You should thank me for*
"Wait." Dar's voice now had that clipped tone, sounding almost bored, which meant the opposite. "You... experienced the Weequay's thoughts? The possessed man's thoughts?"

“Yes.” A closer connection than any she had felt before, but it had seemed as natural as the breaths in the Weequay's body.

It is natural, my Starfire. He is a part of us. They all are. All the little lights--motes of light in the dirt--

Dar frowned, shaking her head. From the blank look on her face she was talking to Malak.

"Is that a problem, Dar?"

"A problem that can wait," Rensha growled. The deck under their feet jerked, that peculiar transition back to real-time as their ship emerged, and Revan felt her guts twist in familiar rebellion. Instinctively she reached for the Force again--and saw Malak flicker into place, standing beside her counterpart, insubstantial arms half wrapped around her.

"The Twin Suns will keep Mal," he told them both. "And I will keep him safe. Win this battle, Red."

Revan’s counterpart stepped free of the ghost with an irritated scowl on her face. "Is there a problem? Yes." If hyperspace nausea bothered Dar she hid it. "Tenebrae's been too weak to hear the thoughts of the possessed for at least half a century. He should be even weaker now--he was weakened by my plague--"

Malak’s spoken voice sounded troubled. “Later. Malachor is safe, Red. The battle. Focus.”

“I don’t need you to tell me, Malak--"

“Shut up, Malak--"

They had spoken at the same time, which made Revan start laughing, but that laughter faded when she noted their audience: the silent ring of eavesdropping officers--and beyond them, the crowd of Wookiees, with Phylus Blais and Mission’s T3 chassis.

Mission’s dome was flashing red and blue, in a complicated pattern that queried a readiness check in Old Rakatan.

“I’m fine,” Revan told her. Her fingers traced a quick Ryl-sign. Don’t need reboot.

"Malak?" Admiral Rensha looked confused. From the whispers behind her she was not alone.

“I call her Malak,” Revan quipped. “When she’s being especially nerf-headed.”

“A jape,” Dar added, leaning over the board. “Of no concern. The Mandalorian fleet is emerging now from hyperspace. Since most are leaving I’ve sent the rest to the far side of asteroid cluster gaeta--"

"The battle," Rensha hissed, just as C’Tannis lifted his head and chuckled, red eyes burning, and then Revan was looking out of those eyes, too--looking out and looking in at the same time--

--and Lieutenant C’Tannis was tired and terrified and he hated this. Hated being used like some
kind of puppet for an evil Sith Lord when he'd spent half his life fighting them--

--he'd tried to end it, he'd tried to swallow his own feathers, but the sadist in his head had laughed and brought him back again--

"Revan!" Her own voice from Dar's mouth. The metal hand grabbed her arm and shook Revan back to consciousness, to her body, to the aches and agony of her throbbing head--

"Here." Dar's voice gentled, and then the pain eased, expanding the world until Revan could see the viewscreen of the bridge behind, the stretch of normal space, and the lazy band of an asteroid belt. "Breathe," Dar murmured. "We're here."

**Here.** The Emperor's voice murmured.

"We're here," Revan echoed, even as the fleets under their command assembled. Revan's eyes skimmed the crowd, but there was no distinctive topknot--or two--to be seen. And Zaalbar was missing too. "Where's Polla and... where are the others?"

Mission whirred, rolling forward. "Couldn't really stop Polla Polla you know? Owed her ten million, and it wasn't like I could get the credits with wideband out and everything locked--"

"My mate chose to fight in this war!" Zaalbar's girlfriend roared, drowning out the astromech's voice. "He went with the Old One to fly a metal ship."

"Jasp Organa informed me that Polla chose to leave us and return to her son," Dar interrupted, softly in her ear. "I gave her the Hawk. She'll be safe, Fragment. I promise."

"Jasp and Zaalbar? They went, too?" She felt guiltily relieved to have her friends free of this.

Phylus Blais raised his hand hesitantly. "Uh... Mister Organa re-enlisted. And Ser Zaalbar... guess it wasn't exactly a re-enlist, since he'd never enlisted in the first place, but they gave him a ship to fight in--"

"We need every pilot we can muster," growled Admiral Rensha. "I promoted Captain Organa and assigned him to Byss. He could hardly do worse than the late leader of Byss Squad, who misread my coordinate commands in the first thirty seconds of our Telos engagement."

"You promoted Jasp, and Polla left..." and Zaalbar's flying, too. But that part wasn't what was bugging her. Much as she loved the Wookiee. "Polla said she was going home in the Hawk? You let her take the Hawk back to Deralia?"

"Is your concern for the woman or the ship? She wanted to return to her son." Dar raised her chin stubbornly. "It would have been helpful to know Malachor was on the smuggler's moon previous to now--but I will inform Polla--in the event that neither of us--"

"You fool! Put a lock on the Hawk, and ground Jasp and Zaal! You can't let them take the fracking risk--"

Dar shook her head. "No. The risk aboard the Hunt is equally grave."

**Muscle memory.** Revan had activated her headset automatically, adjusting the display to wide. The Force whispered the coordinates of every aligned ship, making them all just points of light on a grid; but at that her eyes snapped open all the way. "You fool," she repeated.

The **Hawk**, not being assigned, wasn't among them. Captain Jasp Organa and Zaalbar were linked
with Byss Squadron, assigned to support the Imperial trident attack into what was expected to be the meat of their enemy. 

"We needed pilots." Dar's voice was flat. Behind her, the ghostly figure of Malak had crossed his arms. "Zaalbar and Jasp volunteered, Fragment. I assigned them where they were needed."

"But you didn't take Polla--"

"Had she offered... but she did not. Jasp told me she wants to return to her son. I approved her to take the Ebon Hawk-- it was in her possession already."

"You spoke to her in person?"

Dar's gaze slipped. "No."

"I tried to talk her out of it, sis!" Mission's dome swiveled. "But she said she was done with this banthashit."

Revan closed her eyes. Banthashit she is. "Polla told you she was going home?"

"As I already explained--" Dar started explaining several other things, most of which Revan already knew.

"Oh, you fracking di'kut," she said out loud. In that instant she meant all of them.

In the next moment it did not matter, for more of their allies had popped out of hyperspace. Engines sparked in sunlight and their vidscreens displayed the Imperial Fleet's capital vessels and a spread of stars. Leashed to a pale orange sun, a rocky hulk of a planet and its satellites spun--two bright bubbles of moon above a black hulk. The orbs drifted between three asteroid belts that ringed the entire system, dividing it into thirds.

"Imperial Wrath, move to position," Dar directed, and C'Tannis echoed her words. Revan felt a part of herself echo them, too, opening eyes on other ships, speaking from other throats as she directed their fleet to advance.

No sign of their enemy. Yet. But that would change.

Revan closed her eyes. Come, she called. Come to me.

{{Coordinates 2882 x 213, 18389999, 2889 y/n Y}} they whispered back.

Come, Valkorion spoke from her thoughts, his mental chuckle taunting the Sleepers as much as he taunted Revan herself. Come for us, my children.

Xxx

Dearest Lee,

I trust the Academy for Well-Born Sithlings of Principle and Good Breeding is treating you in accordance with the terms of the contract your father and I signed. Beatings only twice daily. Three hours of Galactic Standard language lessons a day. I will not have it said that my daughter cannot make herself understood when she visits her rebel kin!

No matter what your father claims, Onderon is the backwater, not Thule.
As you know, your homeworld has become, in the last twenty years, the firmament in the jeweled tiara of our Imperial Empire. But dispel any romantic notions from your addled head. Onderon nobility are not suitable consorts for Thulian princesses. And you are more closely related to some of the other children you will meet on this vacation than is seemly—even if the Thulian priests had checked the entrails and your nascent star charts in advance—which I instructed them not to do under penalty of impalement.

If we are fortunate, your father will lose the next round of death-or-sabacc and this will be the last time you are subjected to the New Jedi Order and their Lehon resort. I trust you have reviewed the pamphlets I’ve enclosed about Jedi associations with low-class Hutt cartels and other lawbreaking scoundrels.

(I have underlined the parts mentioning high rates of Rylothan pox.)

An additional reminder: if you meet Master Meetra Surik, you are to be on your best behavior. Use the recording device I’ve enclosed to check what was said later! Let the lesson of your Aunt Inse stand as a stark reminder of what can happen to our family when subjected to Jedi doctrine.

Lest you think Inse was a mere weakling (understandable since that is what I have always told you), the one time I encountered Master Surik I nearly joined the Jedi Order myself. The woman has an uncanny ability to make even the most insane plans seem reasonable.

The last letter I had from Inse, she said she was opening a mission for the destitute and infirm on Brentaal IV. A Blais devoting her life to the weak? Such is the fate of powerful Force users who enter Surik’s orbit. And Inse is powerful. I may have lied to you before about that, darling, but nothing else, I swear.

However, by Ajunta’s name… if your father tries to make this “vacation retreat” a yearly occurrence for you and your siblings, war may come, Lee! As a consort, the man has his charms, but we all know his weakness.


The Force is my weapon and my shield,

Darth Mydia Blais, In the year of Revan the Redeemer 23, (est. 3949 BBY)

[Note: Darth Mydia Blais is a curious figure in Sith history. She enacted reforms on Thule that were more progressive than the laws on some Republic planets. Abolition of the priesthood, free markets, education for even the lowest of slaves—and a path from indenture to freedom for all.

Following Mydia, the extremely fecund Blais family tree notes seven branches; but the paternal lines are blank, indicating her consort or consorts were of lower rank.

At least two daughters possess the same name (and it is not Lee), following a trend popular in Sith aristocracy when only one was expected to survive.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

XXX

"Coming out of hyperspace in ten, nine, eight—"
Why the Mandalorian felt the need to count down when the three of them were the only sentient beings on this shuttle who could voice an opinion Mydia wasn't sure. Nonetheless, she smiled at the medix, Sinae, who looked (as Mydia thought she always did) rather bored.

"Launch all fighters." Their communicator buzzed and then the ship's speakers crackled with lots of Mandalorian voices singing.

“One,” Millifar finished, and activated their thrusters.

The blast doors on the Aleema’s hull swung open, revealing an expanse of space speckled by asteroids. What had been an opaque wall by the medstation was now a transparisteel vista, showing a dreary star system and a collection of motley ships.

Mydia yawned and got up from her bench for a closer view, peering at the line of ships departing the system for the one that was scheduled to take them with it. "The Munificent Rancor? Is that it over there? Is it nice?"

Sinae sighed. "It is large enough that you will have separate quarters, Sith. We’ve already put in the request."

“Good.” Obviously the Medix was beginning to understand Myleah's higher rank.

"Sinae! Take mark!” Millifar had ceased the hysterics of yesterday and was now all business, steering their armored shuttle out of its docking pod. When Mydia glanced left through what was now a viewport, she could see the pointy-nosed fighter holding Dustil Onasi, and the wider gunship that contained Mekel Jin already waiting for them in space.

Of course, she didn't have to see Onasi to know he was there. His presence in the Force was unmistakable--like a darklight beacon in the black, shining so strongly it felt like he was on Jin's ship as well--and possibly even their own. As they sped out, Onasi's vessel darted forward, followed by Jin's.

Mydia skipped between the sides of the shuttle, waving at them both. “How long until we reach the new vessel? Will they have a decent sonic? Rancor seems like an uncouth name for a ship.”

“Why don't you go… check on Dessa's babes,” Sinae suggested. “You’re no help here.”

“Fine.” Mydia sniffed. She had wanted to do that anyway. Now that the babes were becoming cuter she was thinking about raising them herself--if she could find a decent nanny-droid.

So many nanny-droids had perished in the war on Kaas City. The thought made her sad.

Mydia walked the length of the shuttle toward the chamber that held their future children. She let her fingers trail along the row of windows set into the sides of the ship.

"There you are," she beamed as she reached the end of the hall. "Kitchiee Kitchiee--oh!"

Her children were not alone.

Xxx

[Glory, eternal glory. The stars pale beside our might.]

---From the Kote Darasuum.

Kote, darasuum kote. Te racin ka'ra juaan kote.
The hangar bay was immense, their squadrons dwarfed in its expanse. Canderous punched in the commands to lower the upper hatch and seal his ship--then switched on his link to Bridge Command.

His wife materialized, a blue hologram in full beskar, floating on his deck.

"I am going now." Canderous raised his communicator’s volume to get Aemelie's attention but she was ignoring him. Her masked, holographic image paced back and forth on the Aleema’s bridge. Had it not been for the passionate time they had spent together during their last sleep-shift, Canderous would have thought she was still furious; but his quixotic Second Wife had a temper like the seas of Ordo's moon: quick to flood and quick to recede.

Now that battle was before them, she was focused: directing the escorts for the transceiver stations; assembling their squadrons; and, of course, making sure the medbay containing their genebanks traveled safely to the Rancor.

From the rear lines of their fighting squadrons, Canderous watched the medbay shuttle detach from the Aleema, with an emotion that mixed regret and relief. Milli would be safe aboard the Rancor, but their leavetaking had been hard. His daughter was more like Aemelie than her own blood-mother: quick to anger and careless with her words.

"I'm going," Canderous repeated into the comm. “Now, Wife.”

"Fly well, husband." Aemelie's form glanced toward him at last. "My heart goes, too."

"And mine," he grunted. "With you, cy'ar dika Mand'alor."

The helm of Mandalor glanced up. He did not have to see her face to see the smile.

"I am yours," he told her.

The comm-link dissolved and Canderous went back to running flight checks on his ship, a modified scout with plasma turbolasers where its hyperdrive should be. Taking his leave from Aemelie almost reminded him of Revan (though to voice the comparison might earn him another dagger in the heart), with her focus on battle to come.

He was proud, although their skill had nothing to do with him.

"Checks in five," Canderous announced to his squadron, listening as they counted off the opening trajectories. "We're assigned to join the Imperial forces at the ex-ten. Stay in gundark formation until the break. As soon as those hu'tuun show themselves we open--"

"Sir?" Leskal's worried face emerged on his board just before Canderous could give the command to debark. "We can't find Zepth! The Mandalor wants him on the bridge!"

"She gave you an order! Figure it out!" Canderous snapped in anger, words he would later regret. "Zepth knows where he's supposed to be even if that hu'tuun Sith in him don't care. Emperor's probably hiding in the fresher, or down in Supplies. Put him in restraints if you have to."

The Zabrak was a good kid when he wasn't possessed. Shame there wasn't a way to get him out of it, but that plague Onasi said was the cure didn't work on Zabraks.
"Send some of the unassigned kids to make a search," Canderous added. "Short-range receivers are good for our own fleet--but we're gonna need to get through to the Hunt and the Imperials. So find the damn Emperor! That's an order."

"Yes, General Ordo." Leskal nodded, like all he needed was a kick in the pants.

Canderous cut the feed, thumbing his helm's audioset on. "Kote, darasuum kote. Te racin ka'ra juaan kote," he sang over the short-range, words echoed by the others around him as their fighters ascended to the heavens.

Xxx

Zaalbar of the Eiweorr branch had many cubs, but none so famous as Seeroree, the Wookiee smuggler who declared war on Trandoshan after losing a game of pazaak...

... and won..

--Songs of Kashyyyk for Wayward Cubs c. 3679 BBY
--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

Xxx

Zaalbar shifted his legs around the too-small compartment, roaring his distaste through the oxygen mask attached to his muzzle. The ship had been manufactured for a Besalisk, not a Wookiee, and an extra set of hands and shorter legs would have been helpful. So would the company of the Mission-ghost, instead of the chirpy astromech they had bound him with, instead. Even now the UT7 was beeping at him to reduce his speed to match the others in the squad. It occurred to him that he was on a narrower branch than he had intended--for it was one thing to pilot the Ghost and man her guns, quite another to be strapped in this tiny can!

Still, the can was fast. He nudged the yoke forward again, just to hear the UT squeak.

He had expected Mission to come with him--or at least accompany Polla Organa in the Ghost, but his mechanical cub had surprised him, insisting on remaining with Polla Revan on the large, Trandoshan-infested ship.

Jasp Organa's voice chuckled over Zaalbar's comm. "Stay with us, Big Tree. No sign of hostiles yet, but it won't be long now--"

No sign of the enemy--just the shuttles darting to and fro from various ships, and clumsy white boxes from the Mandalorian fleets, all escorted by fighting snubs even smaller than one Zaalbar was occupying.

He gave a sigh of relief, seeing the Blue Ghost flip out of the Hunt's lower bay, expertly righting itself and circling back, obviously heading toward the jump point their ships had just cleared. As he watched, the circular disc wove between two Imperial capitals that had just appeared.

"Find safe mooring, Polla Polla," he growled a short song, for her and for their ship. Even with the Mission-ghost purged from its innards, the Blue Ghost was still a friend, having sheltered all within its branches.

Xxx

_In the immediate chaos that marked the end of the Machine Wars, we would expect to see a_
corresponding spike in crime rates, as the defensive fortifications of so many trading planets had been destroyed by Machine Ship assaults.

But that spoke never happened. Some attribute the period of relative peace to the rebirth of the Jedi Order, and Master Meetra Surik’s re-opening of Jedi enclaves and outposts across the more lawless reaches of the Rim.

But there is another, more romantic (and less credible) tale that claims a band of intrepid adventurers led by a Deralian smuggler made it their cause to help the helpless, and with small acts of kindness restored peace and repaired infrastructure throughout the scattered systems.

One of the more unbelievable claims is that this ragged band of mercenaries with hearts of gold flew a Corellian disc ship rumored to be Revan’s infamous Ebon Hawk.

It is my opinion that we can add this to the number of improbable claims that have already been made about the Hawk, including that it was solely responsible for the allied victory at Degriass….

--Excerpt from "An Historian’s Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

A few years ago if someone had offered Polla the title to a sweet ride like the famous Ebon Hawk and the freedom to take it anywhere she would have called them a sucker and hauled jets to the spacewinds.

But not if it meant leaving Da behind.

Xxx

"They need me, Pollie." And then Da had said more. Like how he’d gotten sick after that time with the Sith Lords and how he wasn't going to get better. Polla had started tuning him out after that and making her own plans. It felt brutal and ruthless, like something a Revan would do, but it kept the tears back, and it gave her enough space to make a plan to save him from his own stupidity.

"You know which squad you’ll be in?" she asked. "Gotta give me something to brag to Ma about."

Did he look suspicious? The way he was meeting her eyes made Polla think both of them were keeping their side decks close to the vest. "The new one. Byss Squad."

Byss Squad. They'd named their squads after Republic planets. Patriotic grunts. "Byss? What's the call symbol, the planetary seal?"

He told her, frowning a little.

"Good to know." Stupid. Stupid call symbol. Three white stars below a bar, on a red circle. "Have to tell Ma what to put on your empty casket."

Her father winced. "Pollie--you are going home. Promise. No funny business."

"Of course! They don't need me." That was true. She'd seen it on the bridge of that ship, when the woman she'd started to appreciate had turned back into a monster, possessed some hapless skin-sack halfway across the system, and then tried to kill her own husband, not to mention that
Republic bint--

And then Polla had looked at the other one and seen the same damn light in her eyes: seen her nod absently, trace of a smile on her face and--

"They don't need me, Da," she whispered into his coat as they hugged.

Xxx

I'm sorry, Abasen, Polla thought. But you'll learn blood's thicker than water, someday, even if you don't learn it from me.

Now Polla had Byss's symbol marked on her radar, watching from the open bay as the fighters swarmed out from their own hangers above her. The Hunt had come in cloaked to an empty system, and their vessels were now sitting nerfs for any hostile force that came along--what with all the ships cross-crossing the system.

"Stupid," she muttered again, fingers tightening on the Hawk's controls as she prepared to launch.

Wideband was down. Even if Polla had wanted to send a message home to Ma and Sei before they started, she couldn't. Only thing working was the short-range: ship-to-ship communication links beamed from their portable receivers--and if Polla were close enough to hit the Hunt's range she'd be close enough to be noticed.

Polla didn't know if the Revans would care if she was out here or not, but she was damn sure the one with her memories wouldn't want to risk her husband's favorite ship.

Frowning, she considered the map of the system. Three asteroid belts and a hunk of rock of a planet with two habitable moons.

Her clearances beeped green and she flicked the switches to begin the departure sequence--just as a voice crackled over her short-range.

"Where are you really going?"

"Home," she lied. "Which one are you?"

A pause. Then, "Bossypants. I believe it's Darth Bossypants to you."

"Your jokes are getting better." Despite herself, Polla smiled. "You and Rensha already cleared me to leave. What's the matter? Miss me already?"

"The Fragment believes you won't go to Deralia."

"And you believe her?" Polla scoffed. "What's she think I'm gonna do? Go back to Kaas?"

"I don't care. My son is on Nar Shaddaa. If I asked you..." Bossypants voice cut out, fading as if she'd switched channels to give orders to someone else. "--him... box?"

"You want me to get your son and your box. Sure," Polla lied. Hell, maybe she would even, if Bossypants didn't make it, but not this second. This second she edged her thrusters forward because the docking lights in front of her had started to flash.

"Do not die," Bossypants concluded with a lot of static, just as Polla pulled into open space.
Dearest Anima, my darling,

I hope you are studying hard and supporting your sister. I know the revelations from that accursed Lehon retreat were unexpected, but I did not appreciate Lee’s lightning display before her father and our guests in the atrium last week.

If a woman of Blais is to lose control of their anger, she should at least manifest more power than their mother can quell with harsh words. Yes, I suppose I was remiss in mentioning that some of your “cousins” are more like half-siblings... but you saw how poorly she took the news about Ollivair Loanin when he visited the palace. And he not even a rival!

Are you eating your vegetables? Remember, my first legitimate boy, you are mummy’s favorite, but you must watch your sisters for me.

Both of them. Is Myleah the First coming to visit? I will not call her ‘Myles.’”

The Force is my weapon and my shield,

Darth Mydia Blais, In the year of Revan the Redeemer 17, (est. 3949 BBY)

[Note: although all of Darth Mydia’s notes to her children contain constant threats of their demise, genealogical records show that at least five of them survived to adulthood on Thule, and the fates of the remaining two are open to debate.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so

XXX

"Shhhhh," the Emperor said to Mydia. He made the Zabrak he possessed wink. "You can't tell anyone that I'm here."

"Yes, my lord." She frowned. "Of course not. But why are you here?" Wasn't His presence needed on the Aleema?

Behind His Luminance, her daughter, Myleah the First of Her Name spun in her womb, with the solid-looking Ganesh at her back.

"Because we are close to victory," he chuckled, and then his eyes fluttered closed again--

Xxx

Three ways of battle.

The Fist, the Sword, and the Cannon.

Thee sacred Grounds.


--"Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons," Undated.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so

Xxx
The *Aleema* had emerged from hyperspace without incident, soaring into the solar winds of a blasted system with one rocky planet and its moons. The sun of Degriass was red and dim and dying. Around them, the rest of their fleet materialized--most vanishing almost as quickly as they had come when they cloaked, then moved to the hyperspace departure point.

Squadrons launched from the Mando'ade ships who were to remain, their movements echoed on her viewscreen. Among warbirds’ graceful shapes the clumsier shuttles were awkward beasts, lumbering between capital ships with a mix of supplies and refugees.

Canderous was gone, flying to regain his glory in stars, and Aemelie knew he would do well--as would their stubborn daughter, now bound for the *Munificent Rancor* and the Dxun moon. She hoped that her own boy Dxun had the same Ordo fire that Millifar possessed when he was grown… but now was not the time to think of another season.

Now was the season of war. The time to rend, the time to reap--

Aemelie’s eyes focused on the empty chair on the command deck, where the nastaar Emperor sat when he was possessing the Zabrak boy. She had given the order to have the Zabrak retrieved over an hour ago. Much as she despised using that hu'tuun for anything, they required his communication ability to coordinate their attacks with the *Republik Jettise*.

"Leskal?" Aemelie raised the volume on the common frequency so all on the ship who were helmed could hear. "We await the barbarian Emperor on the bridge? Have you forgotten?" In truth, Leskal had not been her first choice for an escort, but with most of the crones gone, the bridge was undermanned.

There was a pause. And then the speaker crackled. "No!" The boy sounded panicked. "Uh… I can't find Zepth the Zabrak anywhere!"

"Zabrak?" Senile Catrinex of Rialis cackled from her place near the communications board. "Are we invading Iridonia again?"

"No, mother," the boy next to her sighed.

"Look harder!" Aemelie ordered. It did not matter so much for fights between their own and an enemy--all Mando'ade were trained to seize initiative. Those efforts had been honed for centuries by flights in patterns that any five-year old child could recognize; but their allies were clumsier.

Aemelie felt her features twisting into a scowl. Her husband, the leader of Ordo, had *ordered* her to follow the arusuum’la for this fight, and while she commanded the Clans, Clan Ordo was sworn to follow that aruetii nastaar.

Although… if Aemelie could not receive the troch orders… how could she follow them? Beneath the helm of Mand'alor, her fingers danced upon the command board, deftly issuing her own commands for their own battle.

"Check the onboard scanners for life signs," Dessa suggested, over the channel.

"Do as she says." Aemelie’s eyes considered the battlefield. Their allies were still clustered around the hyperspace jump points as if they lacked imagination to go elsewhere. The Mandalorian ships had moved between the asteroid belts, as directed before arrival. Their Free Fleet was gone, save for the *Rancor* waiting patiently for the *Aleema's prize.*

She directed the ships of Wies to cloak, leaving the *Aleema* seemingly unaided. Thus, Aemelie
noted, did nexu stalk their prey; hidden in shadows after they poisoned the water with the rotting
carcasses of their foes.

Canderous’s farewell flashed over the short-range, as the members of his squad soared past,
heading for the expected flashpoint: the radius around the Great Hunt.

Kore, she wished him. He would find his glory…

…and she would find hers.

“Contact the Medix shuttle, Leskal,” Aemelie commanded. “Perhaps the Force-user Mydia Blais
can give us a report on any cloaked vessels. Did you find the Zabrak yet?”

"I just started looking--"

"Then you have looked. Good. Stop looking and report to the bridge immediately." Aemelie cut the
lad off before he could respond.

"Should we move closer to the Imperial ships? For short-range communications?" Dessa was
right to question commands. It showed initiative.

"No. The Jettise opener requested we hold behind the asteroids. Prepare to flank the enemy, shatter
them on those troch ships. The tactic makes sense… but we will do it in our own time. We do not
need Revan to tell us when to strike."

Revan was an excellent strategist, of course. But Aemelie had bested her in the sims they had run
together… a majority of times.

"And are we still following troch orders at all?" Dessa was across the ship, supervising the final
checks of their proton guns, but her voice echoed in Aemelie's headset.

"How can we follow orders we cannot hear? We will find our fight when it comes. If the Zabrak is
hiding he is too cowardly for free people to follow. Return to the bridge to watch with us, Dessa." Aemelie's eyes went to the battle command board and the main force of their own fighters, now
trailing toward the cluster of Imperial ships. "Recall all fighters still in range. Let the Revans take
their own battle. Mand'alor--I--will take ours."

Her eyes panned the field again--and then Aemelie froze.

The hulk of the Munificent Rancor stood patiently with its main bay down, waiting for its precious
cargo. But the Medix I was stalled in space, and the two fighters supposedly escorting were drifting
off-course. Medix's sublights flashed in a holding pattern. The gunship’s propulsion had entirely
stopped. And the Stinger was canted at an odd angle, its ion engines flickering only a faint wake.

Aemelie frowned. "Jarrod? Hail the Medix. Why isn't Sinae's ship moving?"

XXX

"For so much of our history you were silent, Vitiate."

--Lord Marr to the Emperor Upon His Return. [Dramatic recreation, in accordance with Dark
Council approval, Dromund Kaas] 3629 BBY (est.)

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so
"Shhhh." The Emperor winked at Mydia with Zepth's face. "No one must know I'm here. Not yet!"

"But… why are you?" Did His Luminance have designs on her children? "You’re supposed to be on the Aleema."

"Are you giving me orders, daughter of Blais?" The Emperor chuckled, and Mydia felt that warning pressure in her throat, around her chest—the flash of power greater than her own. "Oh, ho!"

"No, my lord." Mydia knelt properly, as every daughter of Blais had for more than a thousand years. But in that second, she decided she hated him.

XXX

*Mand'alor the Builder is commonly assumed to be Canderous Ordo. Certainly, the remaining breastplate that is attributed to his armor seems designed for a male humanoid of some bulk. And yet, woven through the narrative is the legend that Mand'alor the Builder was in fact a woman.*

*But which woman?*

--Excerpt from "A Mandalorian’s Recollection of Conspiracies: Lecture by Degriass Ordo for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

[NOTE: the rest of this transcript goes deep into unproven theories and has been disregarded by most scholars.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

XXX

"Mekel? Are you alright?" Millifar tapped her comm, trying to see why Jin’s monitor was flashing on her board.

Only static responded.

There wasn’t much room to see anything about his ship—especially not when the Imperial *Stinger* Dustil Onasi flew abruptly went into drift, spinning close to their bow—too close—

"Get the repulsors!" She gestured at Sinae, just as their short-range comm lit up.

"Is there a reason the *Medix* has cut their thrusters? We need the advice of your Force-user, Mydia of Blais," Aemelie Ordo (who styled herself Mand'alor) said over their short-range. "*Ours* is missing."

"Ours is—" Millifar glanced back, only to find Mydia of Blais gone. "Indisposed." In the fresher, perhaps. "And there is something wrong with Mekel Jin's ship."

"The Imperial *Stinger* is drifting, as well," Aemelie snapped. "Tell the dar'jett Onasi to watch his course corrections."

"He's not responding! Neither of them are!"

"This is why you can never rely on troch magic!" her Second Mother cursed. Father would never have been so unprofessional. "*Pull away from the vanguard,*" she instructed over the
general comm. "We will have our own fight." Cheers on the same channel made Millifar grit her teeth. She did not want Aemelie to be popular. "Rancor? We still await the pick-up of our shuttle--"

"Bays are open." General Rizzo on the Rancor sounded impatient. "What is wrong with those escorts?"

"I told you!" Millifar gritted her teeth. "I don't know!"

"Check," Aemelie snapped. "Go outside and check."

Millifar, who was already halfway into her pressure suit, let an eyeroll suffice as her response.

"She's preparing to go outside now, Mand'alor," Sinae added.

XXX

Question 1: You have a brother engaged, as you are, in a profitable criminal activity. Do you,

A.) Inform the local authorities, knowing full well they will want a bribe your brother cannot afford.

B.) Inform the Republic authorities, because they will confiscate his operation leaving you the sole distributor.

C.) Find terms that can be advantageous to you both, even though he was cruel to you as a child?

--Deralian Smuggler's Exam c. Old Republic, 3960

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

XXX

When she passed into Imperial Fleet lines, Polla was pretty sure she'd cleared the Hunt's scanners. The main jump point was right ahead--and as she watched it disgorged more ships--Imperial, all of them.

Still no sign of the enemy.

Starboard, a few shuttles were trafficking back and forth between Mandalorian capitals, who were standing in line to jump out themselves. As Polla shifted her trajectory in that direction, all of the Mandalorian ships winked out one-by-one, until only the Aleema and six other ships were left--and then five of those fizzled out in that distinctive pattern she knew so well. Cloaking.

The Aleema basked as Polla approached it, seemingly alone in a bank of asteroids. Across from its port the ship whose call-sig pinged as the Munificent Rancor had its hyperdrive core primed and the blast doors of its main hanger open--a combination Polla thought criminally dangerous--but typically Mandalorian.

Between the Rancor and the Aleema a boxy white shuttle and its two fighter escorts hung motionless--like their engines had been cut.

Polla checked her short-range comm to ring out why and was rewarded with a wall of static, punctuated by snatches of Mandalorian yelling.
"--mean he's on that ship?"

"--anda'lor, we will return--"

"--both their boards are offline. Can't leave them like this!"

"--gunship's too full of fuel for a safe tractor--"

Too full of fuel for a safe tractor beam? Polla pulled her yoke to back the Hawk farther away. She had wanted to slip onto the Aleema's back and ride her back into the firefight (when it came), find Byss Squad, and make sure Da didn't die.

In Polla's head that plan had seemed smart. But the Hawk's navmaps of the system failed to disclose how thick this asteroid cover was. Polla couldn't even see Byss squad from here. The Great Hunt and its Imperial escort were reduced to blips on her screen.

Meanwhile, the Mandalorian gunship in front of her was listing into the pointed Stinger, while the white shuttle bobbed uselessly like a lost moffa chick.

Polla edged back, angling behind an asteroid to hide her signature and slowing her sublights to a crawl. She was pretty sure those five cloaked Mandie capitals were still lurking close. Would be embarrassing if she died crashing into one.

Polla thought of the time she'd spent a Deralian week drinking with Aemelie while Seiran had a hessi and Therion got lucky. Those holes along the Aleema's starboard decks were new since then, as was the twisted wreck of the ship's secondary hangar bay. Battered by ear, the massive hulk looked like what it was--what it always had been.

Revan's killing machine. Her fleetbreaker.

That thought made Polla shiver. If Da hadn't been involved she'd already be gone.

Her comm-board buzzed with encrypted chatter and the white box of a shuttle disgorged a space-suited figure tethered by a grav-line, drifting toward the gunship. The gunship's hatch popped open and another figure bobbed out of it. Dead? The first figure unhooked the second from its harness, then dragged the suited body out of the dead ship and along the grav line, twisting through rocks big enough to sever either of their heads, or at least cut that line tethering them to the shuttle.

Whoever's in that suit is nuts or stupid. Crazily, Polla wondered if it was Aemelie Ordo.

Xxx

Darling!

Please tell dear Phylus that of course he's still welcome on Thule. No reason for him to keep hiding on Zeltros! We're all friends now. You with your Jedi and Phylus with that quiet wife of his and their tentacled child.

By the way, Is Inse planning on attending your Lehon retreat? I believe I was very tolerant about the Zabrak bastard and that Mando'ade tot, but if you impregnate my own sister I will take off your toes.

Ps. Should we have nerf steak tonight? We need a new cook but you're so handy with the coals, darling.
"Are you not supposed to be on the Aleema, my Lord?" Mydia had been taught since childhood to be polite to the Eternal One, even when he rudely told her to be quiet and to not tell the others he was on their shuttle.

"Oh, ho." The Zabrak blinked, red light abruptly fading from his eyes. A blank expression came over his fave. "Oh! Lady Blais?"

"Oh dear." She prodded the Zabrak's ribs with the hilt of her lightsaber. "Bring His Luminance back, Zepth. Now."

"I can't." Without his Luminance possessing the body, Zepth was just another attractive slave.

"But his Luminance was about to tell me why you're here. And then he vanished. How very rude!" As if mimicking her mood, red lights flashed.

"I'm supposed to be on the bridge." The Zabrak blinked stupidly at the viewscreen.

"We are not still on the Aleema." She tried not to roll her eyes. "We are in its med-bay, which is now a shuttle."

"Oh."

Perhaps Mydia should have paid more attention in Slave Essant's Galactic Geography for Conquerors class. She sighed, continuing her explanation. "The Mandalorians have a village. This shuttle has no hyperdrive, so we're docking at another Mandalorian ship, which will take us away from this dreary place to a much nicer place."

"Which?" He looked like he cared.

"Which planet?" Mydia shrugged. "Onderon, I believe?"

"No, which ship--"

Mydia was getting annoyed with this conversation. And, more than that, something tickled the edge of her senses. "Have we docked yet? I really think we should leave this system posthaste. I have a bad feeling--" This far from her native soil the whispers of ghosts were faint indeed. But those whispers were growing louder and every one of them raised a warning--

XXX

Sinai of Clan Zal Is a controversial figure in our histories. On one hand, she pioneered the use of synthetic womb-sacs, which helped break through the hidebound traditions of our forefathers, allowing women to battle as freely as men.

On the other hand, even the most cursory examination of her journals reveal an obsession with breeding the perfect Mandalorian, suggesting she was an avowed eugenicist.

The Mandalorian databanks that she began laid the groundwork for warriors such as Tarre Vizla, and the genespliced monsters who followed them....
"Clans: Coming to Terms with Our Violent History," Sabine Kryze, 19BBY, Ducal Palace Press.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

Xxx

“What the hell is going on?”

He should be looking forward, but instead Canderous had glanced back—only to find more than half their own fighters in retreat, heading back to the Aleema.

The line of retreat was perfectly demarcated at the last communications beacon, proving the orders had come from Aemelie, to all their ships in range.

“Haar'chak! Aemelie?” He spun the controls of his short-range transceiver trying to expand the frequency, but his squad had passed the second asteroid belt. All he heard now was the tell-tale crackle and chatter of Sith backtalk, mostly recitations of numbers, and then--

“Canderous? Uh, Krayt III? This is Arm Imperial Command. You’re in our beamer range. What’s going on back there? Looks like there’s a spot of trouble with your med-ship.” Carth’s voice was professional as it always was in battle, but Canderous detected a note of concern.

“Dunno.” Med-ship? Canderous pivoted his yoke around to get an eye’s-on view through his screen's amplifier. Across the black and between the belts of asteroid debris, the white hulk of the Medix was a blur, even when he sharpened his ocular implant to try and get a targeting lock on the blasted thing. “Mechanical failure?”

But Milli's ship being in trouble wouldn't explain Aemelie recalling three quarters of their forces. No. That had to be something else. Maybe Revan giving new orders through that Zabrak, or maybe--

“Wideband’s down. I can't check.” By rights, Onasi should be issuing their new flight commands, but instead he was talking on Canderous’s personal channel. "That's Dustil's Stinger next to the shuttle, Canderous."

“Get Fats to ask the Zabrak kid.” Canderous shifted in his seat, popping one knee. Aemelie had ordered him not to break formation, and he had to trust his daughter’s skill. Onasi should trust his son's.

“Fats... Fats is dead. We’re getting a replacement.” Carth’s exhale crackled over the speakers. “Shuttle just docked.”

“Well, when you get the thing up and running, get it to ask Aemelie what’s the status.”

“I will, but this is... from here it looks like Dustil’s ship is drifting off-course.”

The Arm had better sensors than Canderous did. “Hah! Maybe your kid fainted again. Better he does that before the battle--” Prox alarms blared, then--doubled. Through his speakers and from the alerts on his own ship. Short-range chatter whined and buzzed and Canderous’s screen lit up like the sky over Althir, day of his proudest victory.

“Oh, no.” Carth’s last words were a muffled curse, and then his transmission cut out—severed quickly in a flurry of barked orders to his subordinates—and in the next heartbeat, Canderous was busy doing the same.
Later, he was never sure which of them had cut the comm first, but it was, to his great regret, the last time their battle would be on the same side.

XXX

*Supreme Commander Ganesh Jin was more known for his diplomatic skills than his military ones. An indifferent student at the Fleet Academy, nonetheless he managed to complete his degree a year early. Some of his contemporaries suggested that his Jedi family might have had something to do with his quick promotions (although being the grandson of the former High Admiral of the Republic may have also had something to do with it.) Certainly, his twin sister Master Myleah Onasi was a positive role model during his somewhat… unconventional adolescence. And with the Republic at peace for the first time in a century, perhaps a good-hearted diplomat was precisely what the Fleet needed.*

*His treaty with the Mandalorian clans is legendary. According to a popular ballad from the time, Ganesh Jin was adopted by Clan Zal and given full clan rights based upon some lost link of kinship…*

"Love Not War, A Biography of Supreme Commander Gan," Corulag Industries, LLC. 3819 BBY.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

"Dustil!" Yelling and beating the window of his transparisteel helm did nothing. If the oxygen seals on his board hadn’t been blinking their reassuring green, Millifar might have thought her lover's friend was already dead. "Dustil Onasi!"

"Attach the docking clamps," Sinae instructed over her helm-band. "Quickly. Once we retrieve them, the Rancor will tractor us into Hangar Bay Ceta."

"Did my Second Mother approve jettisoning two fighters?" Millifar would *not* call Aemelie Mand'alor. Indeed, if her Second Mother persisted with the delusion that she was Mand'alor after this battle, Millifar would tell Gwenarius of her deceit… *after* she called challenge for the title herself.

"Are you spaceblind? Attach the docking clamps before we get torn--"

Millifar’s speaker popped and shorted out. The light from Onasi's viewscreen dimmed in Millifar’s and something blue-white streaked across her peripheral sensors.

She turned her body, breathing suddenly loud in the quiet of space.

Above her heads, the battered hulk of a Machine Ship drifted. Red were the lights of its thrusters, as they primed to fire--

The wash of a blast nearly knocked Millifar free of her tether as in the next instant she was seeing the enemy disintegrated and a very familiar-looking disc ship flip by, hovering above them, putting itself between their crippled vessels and the enemy.

What happened directly after that was more of a blur, as Millifar frantically threw another grappling hook to the *Stinger*, and snagged the tie lines on as their craft twisted and dove--

XXX
A deep space rescue is compounded in difficulty, for both vessels must match trajectory and velocity, and the rescuer must have a tether durable enough to withstand the stressors of galactic drift.

*Imperial Manual of Procedures, 276 RRA, 3666 BBY.*

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

Xxx

"Shit," Polla muttered, as she watched the white shuttle tumble past the *Rancor's* open hangar bay, dragging the *Stinger* with it. The bobbing, spacesuited figure clung to the top of the Imperial fighter like a rider on a bucking hessi.

Xxx

*Most eyewitnesses from the Battle of Degriass have refused to comment publicly on who gave which order, and who was ultimately responsible for launching the mysterious superweapon we know as 'Revan's Spear,' but when pressed for an off-the-record comment, all agree that it was General Sheris Lorin's persistence that saved many Republic lives that day.*

*Few have ever asked at what cost.*

--*Contemporary newsvid for Sullust System. 3964 BBY*

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

Alarms flashed all over the ship, painting everything the color of blood.

"Our enemy arrived," Admiral Rensha hissed. "But in the wrong place. Did you tell them to materialize there, Revan?" Her taloned claw tapped the holographic image: the Awakened Ones' ships, now between the asteroid belts that were meant to trap them, instead of at the hyperspace jump, from which they were to be led. "Did you tell the Mandalorians to retreat in anticipation?"

Revan gritted her teeth. "I am Sheris," she said pointedly. "And no. On both counts."

Next to her, the Fragment was slumped in her chair, mumbling to herself.

There were three hundred and nine enemies--and the smaller flecks of brightness discharging from them, the spark-swarms of their fighting squadrons. Thousands of fighters and all in the wrong place--already located where Revan and her counterpoint had planned to spring their trap--after forcing their enemies to spread their forces thin.

It should have been another battle of attrition and retreat.

Instead, the allies were facing a cohesive fighting cluster wedged between their ranks--and now occupying the most advantageous coordinates in the system.

As Revan watched, the vanguard row of enemy ships tore into one of the outlying Imperial dreadnoughts like starving kath on a red nerf. The doomed fighters flickered in her vision, followed by commands that had to be coming from her counterpart still slumped in her chair--coordinates directed impossibly fast to everything in range. Fall back, pull back, flank them--

And then the enemy ships froze.
Chained to her chair, (she kept slipping out of it), the Fragment drew a gasping breath and looked up wild-eyed, the lower half of her face a mask of blood. Her presence in the Force flickered out like a snuffed candle and the Machine Ships froze. "Now," she whispered hoarsely.

A ragged cheer erupted as three of the frozen enemy capitals lit up like the skies over Althir, with their own squads, soaring in unbroken formation through the debris.

But there was too much debris. The asteroid belts on which they had planned to shatter their enemy now blocked a clean advance.

Three capitals down to one of ours, Revan thought tiredly. Only three. We need to be faster. Malak? Why are the Mando'ade holding back?

"I do not know." A spark of old hate colored his voice. "A better question might be why did you trust them at all?"

"Quiet," her counterpart snapped, rubbing her temples. "Both of you. I need to ask Aemelie what the frack she's doing."

"Battle stations" Rensha took the moment of their discord to issue commands herself--the ones they'd already agreed upon. "Attack flagged targets. Eliminate in triads, so we can use their dead drones as cover--and get those Mandalorians into position!"

"Retreat to my mark." Revan plotted the points between their ships and the hyperspace points out of the system--just in case. Only the Mandalorian ships were out of comm range, but they were assembling in attacking order, which was right, utterly correct--except they weren't attacking--

"The shuttle--" The Fragment's eyes snapped open, wild. "On, no."

"What shuttle?" Revan looked back at the board. She could sense the five cloaked Mandalorian capitals but there was an oddity on the board and in the Force: a sixth ship facing the Aleema. And a smaller vessel between them--

Xxx

There is no finer glory than a battle in stars.

--Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons, Undated.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

XXX

And then Revan was--

Poised between stars, sprawled across space itself, simultaneously living and dying with each Machine Ship; each Voice; each tiny light and every life--

You are burning corruption away. That kindly chuckle in her head. Do you see?

I see you. He was the apex at the top of that triangle of light. Revan strode across space like a colossus, and reached for Tenebrae's strength. It washed over her like a cold river, and then the stars aligned and she saw the moment frozen, all of it: the Hunt besieged on all sides, the Imperial ships burning, the Aleema and its escorts slicing toward the planet away from the rest, heading toward a rocky sphere--eddies of smaller ships surrounding them--
You see. He sounded approving. For centuries I have tried to draw them out, force them to battle where they cannot win. But I never had the spark at once--to call to them, to make them frightened enough to come--

She leashed their power in her hands, feeling it flex beneath her fingers.

His dark laughter seemed to echo through the stars. An endless struggle between flesh and machine. The Rakatan computer thought it had bested me, before, but then I found you… and blood is stronger than mere circuitry--

I see. Revan saw everything. It was all beautiful. Why now? Why didn't you destroy the Sleepers before?

They fled, before. But you have maddened them. Use our power. I give it to you freely. Use them--

The Force felt like a skein of live wire in her insubstantial hands. Like the first time Revan remembered watching lightning dance between her fingers, building into an electrical charge.

Is it enough?

A trace of amusement colored his tone. We will see. Can you see the Jar-Sukth Chamber? The woman in the shadows left it for us. Use that to amplify the power of the Bezal bond--

And power gleamed in the stone sigils that Vima had brought to the Hunt.

When she had time to think again, Revan would wonder if the woman had known.

Now, her insubstantial fingers twitched. The charge built and burned, amplified by the Jar-Sukth, and by the glimmering pyramid halfway across the system.

The Awakened Ones and their drone ships began to shatter, caught in a web of Force energy that ripped through their ranks like a supernova--

And then Revan was--

Xxx

Star-field. Tangled dead-ships. No-scent. Ghost-slaver pilots, no one's feet stalk their halls.

Her Light burns through them, bright kinrath web!

Beautiful and terrible, too.

Madclaw. That was Degriass.

--Kashyyyk History Song, attributed to Zaalbar of the Eiowrrr Branch. 3950 BBY (est.)

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

Xxx

The light seemed to spark like wildfire in bright, catching each enemy fighter in its web, flaring to a sun-like pyre with each capital ship.
Zaalbar had followed Jasp Organa's commands for their squad and turned in a new direction to face their enemy. He had leveled his sights to fire--even though they were still more than fifty wroshyr lengths away--

--only to see those plimsi dead ships burn away like ash.

When the Mission-ghost had begun advising Zaalbar's father she proposed weapons that could make such ruin. Thankfully, Freyyr had been trained by the matriarchs in his creche not to set fires he could not put out.

*Polla Revan*, Zaalbar thought. She was so wise, but she had never learned those lessons, even when Zaalbar had tried to teach them.

Xxx

"I've flown on the back of a warship in the black of space, King Valku. I think I can handle your drexl. Do you sit on his head or above the heart?"

--Attributed to the Beast-Rider Queen, 12 RRA., 3943 BBY (est.)

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

XXX

Millifar bobbed awkwardly in space. The magnetic grips in her suits gauntlets had attached easily to Jin's armored space suit when she'd rescued him, but Dustil Onasi was merely wearing a robe and a fighter's helm inside the cockpit of his *Stinger*, and his small oxygen tank was now ajar, skin exposed and blue in the lights of her helm.

Brave di'kut. Only someone with mir'osik would fly without proper gear. She wondered if he was already dead.

Her arms locked under his elbows anyway and she kicked the line tethering her to *Medix I* with her foot to trigger its retraction.

Canderous Ordo claimed Carth Onasi as Clan, making his idiotic dar'jett son her responsibility.

Then Millifar's visor blacked out and the line jerked. Onasi's body slammed into her armored knee and Millifar felt something crunch even as she reached for him, frantically grabbing what felt like his bare arm in her gauntlet.

She grabbed too hard, but that was better than the alternative.

The line reeled them in and her visor adjusted again, polarizing the light.

And Millifar looked up.

Above their heads the black of space was burning. Like watchtower signals, their enemy's ships cracked apart, one-by-one, Across the belts, distant vessels shattered and died, too--tiny flames igniting and then snuffed out in the silence of space.

Half the sector had been cleared. At least a hundred capital Machine Ships were gone in five heartbeats.

And then Millifar had no time to observe more, for her legs were already bumping into the airlock, and she was dragging Dustil Onasi with her as she'd taken Mekel before. Through the hull door's
blast portal she saw the Imperial Stinger's docking clamps detach, and Onasi's empty ship careen away from their vector, just as Jin's gunship had.

Beyond that, the Ebon Hawk hovered. And then the inner door of the Medix ratcheted open and Mydia Blais was wailing with Sinae barking orders--and with a bacta tank ready to slap the half-frozen dar'jett in.

Jin lay crumpled in a corner as if Mydia, spying a shinier toy, had discarded him.

To Millifar's astonishment, the Sith Emperor was also possessing Zepth the Zabrak, in the middle of their ship.

"You're supposed to be on the Aleema!" She pushed up her helm's visor. "What is he doing here?"

Sinae glanced up, open kolto packs in both hands. "We do not know. He came out of the med-bay a moment before your arrival. Get me a transfusion line. From my kit."

"This isn't the Aleema?" The Emperor's voice seemed pitched too high and shrill. "What the hell is going on? Why hasn't your fleet changed course to rendezvous with ours?"

"Vitals are crashing," Sinae barked, and she meant Onasi, whose skin had that stippled purple look, like he'd been spaceburned--and then Millifar was soon put to work helping to haul Mekel's friend into a kolto-bed while the Zabrak battered them with more questions that no sensible person had time to answer.

Xxx

Talonis Revan had an unerring grasp of military strategy, even as a child. It was said he commanded his first campaign in the Mandalorian Wars at age fifteen.

That was the battle for Althir, which he won.

He lured the Mandalorian Crusaders into an ambush between asteroid belts, and then slowly tightened the net upon those brave and noble warriors....

"My Ancestor Talonis Revan" by Master Meris Shan. Brentaal IV Press.

[Archivist's note: In their writings, Meris, and to some extent her daughter Tasiele, are always very complimentary of the Mandalorians.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so

XXX

"This isn't the Aleema?" Even as she asked for the tenth time, Revan realized from the thrum of an engine under the deckplates that she was on a much smaller ship. And yet, the room was familiar. White Walls, medical equipment--

Incongruously, one of the walls appeared to be a sheet of transparisteel, revealing the stars and the wreckage Revan had made of the Awakened Fleet; and the hulk of the Aleema portside. Aft--she turned the Zabrak's head turned and then her heart caught. No! What are you doing here?

Revan was in a thousand bodies at once, now. This Zabrak was in but one--

"Need to get Dustil stabilized!" barked a woman she recognized belatedly as Sinae, the Mandalorian medix. "He's bleeding out--ride back ripped something loose. Try a transfusion from
the other one--they're the same blood type--"

Mydia Blais glanced up, round eyes gold as her brother Phylus's. "Mekel won't wake up, either!"

"Wha--what's wrong?" Hard to adjust to the different mouth, the different weight of a jaw, the feel of two hearts thudding in her chest--and the weight of a bladder that needed to be emptied.

Mekel was as pale as Dustil and just as unconscious. Revan was on a ship-- shuttle, that inner voice whispered. You're on a shuttle. For whatever reason Zepth isn't on the Aleema. That's it over there.

Next to the Ebon Hawk.

Mydia Blais frowned. "Don't you know, my lord? You were glowing a second ago. And laughing."

"No. They're both unconscious?" Concerned as Revan was, attack patterns whispered in her skull, and she could feel the rest of her power rising to meet them.

Go, Valkorion murmured. I will attend to this, this tiny thing. Quite beneath your notice, Bright One.

What's wrong with them? A thousand other points of light vied for her attention, and power curled between her fingers.

Their bodies are so fragile. Too fragile, really. If I had them on my altars..... Pity to use them up like this when they could have lasted us years on Kaas--but they are stronger than they look. Do you feel it? Even now, they're recovering strength. Bezal-bonded, drawing from the Force itself!

Revan made the Zabrak's head turn. Dustil Onasi was practically gray. What do you mean, use them up?

The lads are ours. A harvest for the plucking. Everything is ours, Starfire. Take them! Smite the remaining ships!

But it's hurting them.

No. Insects feel nothing. Trust me, I've seen a billion die before. Bezal-bond! I should have tried this earlier--so marvelous--discovering a new trick--always some new trick--it keeps me going. You do, my beautiful spark!

Power was there, coiling again for Revan like a skein in her hand. Her eyes flickered to Dustil Onasi's body jerking on the floor. But--it's killing them. I think it's killing them.

Slowly. And they are INSECTS, my Starfire. Tiny insects compared to ones such as you and me--

Xxx

At Malachor, Talonis Revan made the ultimate sacrifice, giving up the ways of a Jedi for the ways of war. He did so to fight the Sith Emperor, who had been secretly manipulating Revan and Malak all along.

Revan alone broke free from his conditioning.
Malak was always too weak to do so. But that was not his fault.


XXX

She's back, Malak whispered, just in time for Revan to see the Fragment's eyes widen, her mouth open, spitting out blood and choking on it.

Around them, the officers of the Great Hunt's bridge broken into another round of cheers.

"You're fine," Revan told her counterpart dispassionately, holding the pain at bay. "Whatever you just did was magnificent. Most of the enemy ships in zed quadrant were destroyed instantly. May you do it again?" She phrased it as a question for politeness's sake, although the conclusion was foregone. They were not Mandalorians to draw this thing out and the Fragment knew it too.

"Wasn't me." The Fragment wiped her face with her sleeve, blinking. "Not… not just me. Valkorion… he tapped into… something. It's not… not just us in there."

"You used the power of the ships?" Intriguing as a possibility. "Using your own enemy's strength against them? But how--"

"No." The Fragment's eyes went up to the holographic display of the battle, although that was unnecessary--the socket feed clipped to her ear projected the same real-time battlefield that Revan saw. "Not the ships." She swallowed hard, grimacing. "I-I can't do that again, Revan. That power… it has a price."

"Everything has a price," The Emperor had held their best resource in reserve, hoping to trap their enemy. And he had. Oh, but he had. "You found a vulnerability--was it in their weapons array? Did they have those systems linked?"

If the Fragment possessed that kind of power unaided--without needing to be entombed to use it--

For a brief moment, Revan felt a twinge of envy.

"No." The Fragment's eyes blinked rapidly as commands shot across their fields of vision--directing their squads to cut off the still-vulnerable Sleepers. "No. It had nothing to do with the Sleepers. That power came from… something else."

And then, instead of luring their enemy in, she was pulling their forces back, sending their Imperial ships toward the jump points.

The Mandalorian still capitals hovered out of communications range, on the other side of two asteroid belts.

"Valkorion tapped into… something. He's using me." The Fragment shook her head sharply. "Something's wrong, Revan."

Revan bit back her impatience. Of course he's using you. But if you possess the strength to end an enemy, you do it. "He's using what?"

Something is wrong. Sheris's insight was obvious. Very wrong. She knows what, but she doesn't want to tell us.

"She is frightened." Perhaps Malak hadn't meant to speak aloud.
Fragment's eyes widened. "Of course I'm frightened! Something's wrong, I told you!"

"Then tell us what." Rensha slammed a taloned hand down on the display. "The remaining enemy is turning away from us--back to your Mandalorian friends. If you can end them, do it now."

"No. " The woman was glowing again, Force-light leaking from her skin. She'd tapped into the Jar-Sukth, Revan realized belatedly--Vima's reflective chamber of Force amplification, fifty meters below this deck. The lines of power were clear as sunlight when Revan closed her eyes--lines tethering the Fragment across the stars to--to--

To something on the other side of the sector that felt like the birth of a sun.

*What is that, Mal?*

*I'm not sure. But it feels familiar. Something of the Emperor--?*

"Not just the Emperor." The Fragment's voice. "And not just me. He's feeding their power to me somehow. He takes it and I use it."

"Their power? Who?" *Who would be strong enough?*

"I was in the Zabrak--Zepth. The Zabrak is on a shuttle near the Aleema. With Mekel and Dustil. It's them."

Revan bit back her impatience. "You don't need our cousin to give commands to the Aleema-- the Zabrak is close enough, then for short-range. Hail them."

"The Mandalorians have lost another capital and have destroyed thirteen," Rensha interrupted. "The Aleema and her sister ships have turned--toward the Degriass planet. Wideband is still offline, but you may want to reroute their command--or set ours upon a course to intercept--"

"I can't. " The Fragment blinked again, hands blazing. On their command board, squads of fighters split, defending their capitals from an enemy that had at last began to withdraw. "I can't raise the Aleema. Zepth isn't there. I told you--he's somewhere else--on some kind of transport--the Aleema's shuttle." She twitched a finger and the small ship blocked by the Aleema's bulk illuminated on their screen. And the shuttle's trajectory was jagged and irrational, tugging toward the planetoid beneath.

"Then hail the Aleema from the shuttle!" Had the woman suddenly gone dim?

*She is stalling,* whispered Sheris. *She's avoiding directly conflicting our command, but she will not. For whatever reason she will not--*

"Pardon, General Revan, Admiral Rensha… uh, the attackers, they're retreating from our forces."

One of Rensha's lieutenants chose that moment to interrupt with what they already knew.

The enemy ships that had been focused on the Hunt and the bulk of their fleet were now heading toward the Mandalorians.

"Then tell the Mandalorians to join us quickly in quadrant pinse--at the twelve," Rensha commanded, naming the logical point to intersection between their fleets. "Tell them to leave the shuttle. If its shields hold it can refuge among the asteroids--or one of the moons. We need a united front, now."

"Revan? What the hell's going on with the Aleema?" As if summoned by the Force, General
Canderous Ordo took that moment to break into their command frequency. "I'm... of range--" his voice cut out in a wail of static even as other command requests came in from other squad leaders--ones wise enough to see the same writing in the sand that Ordo did.

"I don't know." The Fragment wiped her face again. Her eyes shifted away, and Revan knew she was lying.

"Just use that superweapon again. Hah! Whatever you did there, at the start--you fried at least a hundred of em, maybe five hundred of those kriffing drone fighters--"

"I can't use it again, Canderous--assemble your forces toward the jump points."

"Freckles? What's going on with with the Aleema? Sent a squad closing in but they're still out of range. Are you holding them back? I've got... I got another Voice for the Emperor, but he's--we haven't heard from you--but whatever you did out there... it was amazing. Can you uh, can you do it again?"

Revan shook her head. "No, Carth. I can't."

She was still glowing

Xxx

Sometimes a pawn can seize the day.

Other times a pawn's destiny is a trash fire.

--Mandalorian Chess: A Primer For Warriors

[Note: this small datachip, designed to be downloaded into a combat visor is commonly attributed to ‘Lin,’ whom troch barbarians call the "God of Luck." This is a false interpretation. The Mando’ade have no gods, Archivist T’so. Lin is a legend, a test for blooded warriors to prove their worth. Some say he can yet be found in his ancient ship, cloaked above the skies of Old Malachor. No Mandalorian will ever reveal the location of Old Malachor so don’t even ask. I’ve given you enough of our blood for your records already.]

Fett Bindo Reggio’s annotation was provided under duress, 36 ABY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

When Dustil’s eyes opened they were still as yellow as ever, except the whites looked pretty yellow too, as if the Sith power was staining his entire eyeball, now. His skin was fried purple and glistening with kolto, as if he’d taken a bath in vacuum.

He looked like hell but he was alive.

"Hey." Mekel said, reaching out a weak arm. His voice felt rusty and weak. The tube from his arm that ran into Telos's was red with their mingled blood. The blood-machine-thing (that was the exact Mand'oa translation Sinae used, Mekel had helped her before) was looping their circulatory systems into one another.

They had the same blood type. But he'd learned that before. Once on Korriban. They'd woken up
after a glitterstim bender into this exact same scenario. Except then it had been recovering from a Bezal bond ceremony, performed by good old Yuthura Ban.

*Hey.* Dustil's lips moved under his oxygen mask. But his voice was in Mekel's head.

*I hear you.* Mekel thought back. Once he would've been excited, but now he felt too weak. He was just grateful. *I finally fracking hear you, fockda.*

*I'm finally listening.* A pause. *Are you fracking Mydia and Milli?*

*Not at the same time.* *Hey, when you're feeling better, maybe we--*

*You're impossible.*

*To resist.* *Yeah.* Mekel felt like garbage but the corners of his mouth turned up. *I know. You know, I charmed the Sith Emperor out of his pants--*

*I don't want to know.* Dustil's free hand lifted, then dropped. Mekel could feel the weight of it, too, like all of their muscles were too tired to move.

*Yeah, well Lord Valkorion wasn't really into sex, he just--*

*He's helping you get the Force back.* *I-I know that, too.* Dustil didn't sound as thrilled as Mekel felt. *And I know about that time with Leskal in the shower, and the two comm officers in the supply closet--you didn't even know their names!*

*One of them's Ojix-something--*

*Mekk.* Dustil's voice was quiet. *Look at me.*

Mekel did, he looked at those yellow eyes and suddenly he knew a bunch of crap he wished he didn't--like how much Dustil wished he didn't have to know about Milli and Myd and Lyd and Leskal and the supply closet and the weird dreams Mekel used to have about his own cousin--

And more. Darker stuff. Really dark. What it had felt like to have all that power, to be Lord Malak, practically, on Dromund Kaas, and have Inse Blais up against the wall of the--

*Mekk.* Dustil's voice in his head was serious. *Seriously? It's not all about sex.*

It wasn't. A lot of it was about much darker things. People dying when they were being bombed. Sith torture cells. Crap Dustil had been doing on Korriban while Mekel was spending his free time exploring the sewers for escape hatches like a normal sent. It was everything. Every story Telos had ever told him. Every lie exposed. Every want. Every need. Every dream.

*I'll do that,* he offered, to one of the less creepy ones. *We can go find a bakery when we're back on Coru--*

*Mekk.* Dustil shook his head as if Mekel wasn't getting it. *You don't get it, fockda. None of it matters.*

*She does.* Mekel looked up at the Mandie baby tank thing (another literal translation) that was hovering above them. *The boy too. Should've realized they were yours--knew there was a reason I liked them. Hey, if Myd has one of mine, they can grow up together. Didn't you always want sibs?*

*Mekk.* Dustil shook his head again. *Look up.*
Mekel did. Nothing to see. Just the plain white ceiling.

*Close your eyes, idiot.*

*Mekel closed his eyes. Dustil felt closer like this, skin on skin, the heat of him, pure power radiating from them both.*

*Up,* his bondmate whispered. *Up, up.*

Mekel Jin looked up--

--and the real face of the Sith Emperor beamed down with the light of a winter sun, draining and cold.

*Dust!*

*I know.* They huddled together for warmth, like prey in a nest, watching the galaxy spin through a madman's faceted eyes--

XXX

"No one person, not even Talonis Revan, can destroy the Sith Emperor. Or so we thought at the time, right up until Talonis Revan did destroy him. That's right. Talonis Revan made that old spaceworm eat his kriffing dust!"

--Attributed to eyewitness 'Em Vee' at the Battle of Degriass. Excerpt from Tales of the Machine Wars. 3763 BBY

*[Note: There is some question as to whether this is a real eyewitness account.]*

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

"Direct your fleet to cover a retreat, Carth." The new Voice on Carth's ship was just under her skin, but with a thousand others all speaking at once it was hard to focus him with the proper attention.

With a thousand of her living at once, it was difficult to care.

"What about the Mandalorians?" Her husband's Imperial hat was crooked on his brow. The Force moved under her red fingers and straightened it.

*Clever. And kind. Staging a retreat to remove your lover from the battlefield--*

*Come to me.* She ignored Tenebrae's taunts, calling to the enraged fleet of Machine Ships. *It's me you want, you fracking monsters. I'm right here--*

What are the lives of two boys to save billions? You've never been so squeamish before--remember when you cut down their classmates on Korriban? A chuckle. *I was watching.*

*And then she was--*

*Back in her own body again, voice hoarse from screaming commands--*

"Bear shields!" Revan blinked as fast as she could to input the new course commands, overriding Dar's more cautious approach. "We need to get the Aleema and the other Mandalorian ships out of
those asteroids, but we won't do it by going in after them!"

"But you had the Sleepers." Her duplicate wasn't listening, had taken Revan by the shoulder, metal fingers digging into the muscle of her arm. "You destroyed more than third of their ships! If you can do that again--"

Almost half their fleet, really. We should have just enough to finish the task. The lads recover at a remarkable rate--I've never seen such resilience! All this time! I should have thought of using a Bezal-bonded pair sooner--tapping. Judicious flares of power, even without the final draining ritual… remarkable!

"No," Revan snapped out loud. "It's hurting them." She could feel it--

And then she was--

--back in Zepth's body again--watching--

--watching as Millifar steered the shuttle into the moon's atmosphere and Sinae of Zal and Mydia Blais tried desperately to start Mekel's heart.

Tut, tut. The lad's fine. There--

Revan almost felt her cousin's body jerk, heard his gasp as if it came from her own mouth, felt him sit up--

"The hell?" Mekel gasped. And then his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell back again.

His skin was glowing black and covered in Sith runes.

And then she was--

--back on her own body, spitting up blood on the deck of the Great Hunt's bridge--

"Hurting who?" Dar frowned, wiping Revan's face like she was a small child. "Who are you speaking to?"

"Tenebrae?" Malak's insubstantial form hovered behind Dar, looking like the Jedi she didn't consciously remember; his hair the length of his strong jaw, concerned twist of his sensitive mouth. "The Emperor lies, Revan. Just take his strength again. Seize it and destroy the ships--"

"I can't! He's taking it from them. Draining them, somehow--"

"Draining... who--?" Carth's voice over the short-range comm, cutting in and out. "Freck... who--?"

"Your son." She owed her husband that much. The truth. "The Emperor's using your son--and Mekel Jin. That explosion--what I did. He used them to fuel it. It's killing them."

"The Bezal bond." Yuthura's voice. "He's tapped into the bond?"

"What?" Carth's voice. Furious. "But they're swarming the Aleema --we've got to help--"

"We can't reach them in time, Admiral." Dar's voice.

"I'm trying to help." But this body was only half of a shell now, and the rest of her was there on that
shuttle, tapped into the Bezal triangle, still channeling Tenebrae's power through Dustil's fragile body--

--his skin was glowing white. Sun to Mekel's shadow. And Revan stood with her hands above, like a colossus in space, breathing in the strength of creation itself--

She extended a celestial limb and another five of their enemies exploded.

*Now you see. You were always mine, Starfire. Always. Come. Burn the babes and our enemies. It will buy you years in this body. Years to rule my Empire, years to save as many children as you like--*

Logically, he was right.

But somewhere Revan heard the sound of bells. Loud like a warning. A claxon call to sanity.

*And then she was--*

Revan felt her own lungs seize a breath, the weight of her own body. "*No, Imperial Command Mark Thiska-ziox. Execute Order Six-Four-Seven Two Nine, Mark Bisk Delta. On my mark. Five-Two-Two- Ten One Six. Executive override.*" The words bubbled up from a place somewhere beneath the depths of any conscious memory, spoken fast, even as she saw her duplicate's eyes widen with understanding a second before the rest. "*Mark! Jump points Rekkiad. Now.*"

The Imperial Fleet, slaved to its executive commander, jumped en masse, cutting out Carth's astonished squawk. What fighters it possessed with hyperdrive followed, leaving the *Hunt* alone with the remainder of their enemies on one side of the system; the *Aleema* alone upon the other.

"*Your memory, Fragment,* Dar's voice was acid. "*--shows a convenient time to recall one of my most final executive orders.*"

"*You programmed the Imperial fleet to move on your mark. Programmed the navcomps.* Revan's throat was dry. "*Because flesh and blood couldn't be trusted. You needed a way to stop--stop any rebellion. At any time.*" She took a deep breath. "*I didn't remember. The Emperor… he... knew of it.*"

Less memory than the intuition that such a command had to exist. In the moment, the fact had lain before her like a coin in the hand.

*Yes,* he murmured. *All that I am is yours. You wanted to send them away? I gave you the means. My gift. They are gone. Kinder, perhaps, for the husband not to see his son's end. We do not need ships to end our Sleepers, Revan. And what are two lives against ours? Against billions?*

Rensha was still barking protests. But Dar's voice was artificially serene--which meant she was furious. "*Will you sacrifice the Great Hunt to save the Mandalorian ships, now? Those children? We'll fail. We needed the Imperial forces--*

"*They're not children.* Revan swallowed, even as Tenebrae's power tugged at her, whispering promises of a quick end. Her eyes went to the *Aleema* and its besieged fellows. One Mandalorian capital burned, now leaving four. "*We can't save them. Not by staying.*" Her gaze turned to Rensha and she willed her heart to stone. "*They… everyone in this system has a have a better chance if we're--if I'm not in it.*"
The shuttle with Dustil and Mekel isn't the only small ship out there. Mandalorian fighters don't have hyperdrive--their squads are stuck. Some of our own are too damaged to make the jumps. Our ships, and all of the Imperial fighters who didn't make it back--we're leaving them behind, too.

And the other. The disc-shaped circle familiar as her own heart. She'd seen the Ebon Hawk through the port-side window of the shuttle. Through the Zabrak's eyes.

Knew you'd stay, Polla. Jasp and Zaalbar's squadron had made it back to the Hunt. Which meant that Revan was going to have to explain to Jasp how his daughter had not left Degriass. How they would leave her, instead.

"Jump, Admiral." Revan made her voice steady. "Now. Leave the stragglers behind. Follow the Imperial fleet."

**You would jump when you could save them?**

"You want to jump when we could save them?" Eerily, Dar's inflection sounded exactly like Tenebrae's.

**It's the only way to save them.**

The vectors pinwheeled like a map of probabilities. Surely her counterpart could see it too. There were nearly two hundred Sleepers bearing down on the Mandalorians. Whatever Tenebrae had done--that knot of power he'd made in the shuttle from Mekel and Dustil and Zepth--it sang like a beacon.

Revan called to the Sleepers again, but they ignored her, focusing instead on the morsel just out of their reach--that ball of energy that had destroyed so many of them already. Hate burned in their circuits and she felt it in her throat. They were a part of her even as Tenebrae was.

But if she left the system...it had always worked before--Revan had called them from a galaxy away before--

"You don't know if this will work, Red." Malak's voice.

"You could have directed the Imperials to go after our ships!" Rensha. Too slow and a credit short.

It wouldn't work. We can't reach them in time.

"Revan." She addressed Dar by name and saw the woman's head turn, those green eyes frost over, as her counterpart extended her own Force-sense.

"She's right. We can't reach them in time. Even if we still had the Imperial Fleet." Dar's voice, speaking what they both knew. "The only chance we have is in another system. We will have more of an advantage at Rekkiad. Certainly by Malachor. We can end it all on Malachor, if we must."

The gravity well. Revan closed her eyes. *All go down together.* "Then do it."

"Jump!" Dar snapped to Rensha. "You heard General Revan! Jump now!"

Xxx

*Tribunal Judge Qwerp Rii:* "We've covered the events at Degriass at length, Defendant Onasi. You commanded the Imperial and Mandalorian fleets to the best of your abilities. I think you'll find there's not a sentient here who blames you for the casualties."
Carth Onasi: "I was only following orders. General Revan's orders. And High Admiral Rensha's." (Pause.) "And... General Sheris, too. Of course."

Tribunal Judge Thikka Droll: "Orders that sacrificed fifty Mandalorian ships?"

Carth Onasi: (Pause.) "That's right. The... the entire Mandalorian fleet was destroyed."

Tribunal Judge Qwerp Rii: "We're all veterans of the Mandalorian War, Carth. Some even say you did the galaxy a favor. Their leader died too, didn't he? Canderous Ordo?"

Carth Onasi: "I... I don't... yes. All of them. Everyone we left... died."

Tribunal Judge Thikka Droll: "And the rumors of an increased Mandalorian presence around the planet Onderon?"

Carth Onasi: "I've never been to Onderon. I have no damned idea! What the hell does that have to do with anything--"

Arbiter Silka: "That line of questioning is irrelevant. Please get back to the point, Droll--"

--Transcript from Court Martial of Carth Onasi 3954 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

"Aemelie, we have to move closer to the other ships!"

Polla had only gotten into this fight to keep her da safe. Now, she had no idea where he was and most of her effort was put into keeping the swarm of turbo-charged snipers off that kripping shuttle while she tried to talk Aemelie Ordo out of taking on this entire blasted fleet of Machine Ships with just the Aleema and the remaining four--oops, now three Mandie--capitals. Something had crisped a lot of their enemy at once, and after that, the Machine Ships had shifted their attention from trying to get to the Great Hunt to trying to kill everything on this side of the asteroid belt.

"Polla Wen! I told you some day I would see your skill in battle. I was right. You're doing very well." Aemelie had no right to sound so fracking cheerful when they were losing. "These hu'tuun aruetii think they can use us for their trap, but we can defeat them easily, even without that dar'jett Emperor's magic--I am sending Cannock Squad to support you now."

"I don't need a squad, Aemelie. We all need to get the hell out of here!" Revan's ships were at the jump points--now halfway across the system where they'd put the asteroid belt between them and their enemy. To the right of her viewscreen the short-range chatter from the Shifty Drunken Diamond of Ceris cut out suddenly, as the entire ship lit up like a ruined parade.

The entire Mandalorian comm-band went silent for a second and then they all started singing, Aemelie's voice blasting out loud and clear.

Oya'cye!

Kyr'am!

Mare'cye!

Darasuum!
Two capitals left, Polla thought numbly. *Two, and the Aleema, and whatever fighters they've got* -

Her eyes went to the viewscreen, and the waiting fleet--their only hope.

But their sector was empty. The rest of Revan's fleet was gone. As Polla stared in horrified disbelief the remains of some fighter squads sparked out too, as those with working hyperdrives used them. As for the rest--

She had no more time to dwell on the rest because two more bogeys had attached to her bow.

*They left us?* It was nearly impossible for Polla to fly and shoot--something she should have realized sooner. The *Hawk* was designed for two people--at least--but Polla tapped in the autopilot to run another pass above the *Medix I*-- and then said a prayer to the Grass Priests. Then she leveled the targeting system and spammed the rapid-fire on the *Hawk*'s brand new plasma cannon, winging two of 'em. The autocannon took out another six single-engine drones who'd gotten close enough to die.

Below, the *Medix I* seemed to have lost one of its stabilizers, tilting alarmingly in its drift, careening on a slingshot maneuver that looked headed for Degriass's larger moon.

"That shuttle contains our future," Aemelie instructed Polla. "Protect it. We'll take care of the aruetii."

Polla was already angling in the direction of the moon, following the shuttle because she didn't want to fracking die.

*Da,* she thought. "Yeah. I'll get them down." She reached across the board to grab the gunner controls. It was nuts but the swarms seemed to be ignoring her and the *Aleema* and going after that blasted shuttle. If they hadn't been tucked under the lee of the dreadnought's shields, Polla thought they'd all be dead already. "You've got three big ships left, Aemelie. They've got like a hundred. You're going to draw them off... how?"

"You grasp the plan. I knew you were a warrior, Polla Wen." Aemelie's voice cut out--and then Polla was more concerned with shooting and maneuvering the *Hawk* around atmospheric debris than she was with how Aemelie planned on taking on a hundred fracking ships.

Xxx

Oya'cye!

Kyr'am!

Mare'cye!

Darasuum…

--Traditional Mandalorian Song, compiled by Fett KayTraviss Mand’alor

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx
"Get those stabilizers up!" Millifar yelled at Sinae, because the medix at least knew something about flying a shuttle. Mydia Blais was entirely useless, and Mekel Jin and Dustil Onasi were unconscious, sprawled on cots next to the softly chuckling Zabrak.

"I'm doing my best."

Above their heads another one of their allies was burning.

"The moon is close, Daughter." Aemelie Ordo sounded surprisingly cheerful. "Increase your vector by another ten degrees. Use thrusters on entry. Their ships will lose you in the clouds. We can provide cover."

"We could still come to you," Millifar muttered, but she knew better. Their one advantage over their pursuers was speed, and most of that was due to their slingshot descent into this moon's grasp.

The Munificent Rancor had stayed to defend them to its valiant end. The now-honorable ships of Wies were down to three.

"No," her Second Mother said. "You must not come to us, First Daughter."

Millifar glanced up then, and saw, in the lines of their foes, the shape of what was to come.

"Rheturcye mhi, Mai," she whispered, and slammed the nose of their ship down onto the clouds.

Xxx

Kote!

Kandosii sa ka'erta, Vode an.

Malachor a'den mhi, Vode an.

Bal kote, darasuum kote...

--The Vode An, A Traditional Mandalorian Song, transcribed by Fett KayTraviss Mand'alar.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

The bulk of the allied fleet was gone. An unexpected decision, but Canderous could not fault it. His people had made this battle their own. Perhaps Revan understood enough to let them find glory.

He gunned his own fighter faster to join the fray, but he could see the shape of the fight in the stars--the lights on his radar halfway across the system. It would be over before he reached them.

"Kandosii, mirdala cyare." Canderous was still out of comm range when the Aleema pivoted, heading straight toward the largest concentration of enemy ships, their cannons lighting fire on its forward shields until the ship resembled a bloody comet more than anything else, skimming the edges of the moon's atmosphere as the fighters above it began their assault.

The Aleema pivoted at a gee that would have left any in her hull pulverized without armor, and then levelled her bow--

"Aems." Canderous had never felt so old. Or so proud. Of his wife and his people.
[Those who stand before us light the night sky in flame.

Our vengeance burns brighter still.

Every last traitorous soul shall fall.

Forged like the saber in the fires of death, Brothers all!]

--The Vode An, Traditional Mandalorian Song, transcribed by Fett KayTraviss Mand’alor. Translation by Master Wook’ipedia.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.

XXX

The trock ships wanted their shuttle but could not have it. The Imperials were cowards who had run, and Revan (as Aemelie had always suspected) was useless. Whatever superweapon she’d had at her command had stopped at destroying merely half of their enemies.

Aemelie jerked her helm, feeling the joints creak and snap in their increased gravity, pressing down on her pressurized suit. Her blood felt pooled and thick, as oxygen hissed in her ears trying to compensate. Next to her, Dessa’s gauntleted hand bumped against hers as they both reached at once for the yoke, dragging it back together.

"Escape pods launched and clear," her friend said, voice crackling over their failing comms.

Aemelie had always had an intuitive gift for mapping hyperspace coordinates. Shameful in a woman, some said, and she had bruised them for saying it. Women’s math involved crop rotations, soil analysis, supply estimates, chromosome recombination. Even ship design, Aemelie’s specialty, was frowned upon in many circles. But her own mothers had been progressive and perhaps (as was whispered behind their backs) too ambitious for their only daughter.

Now, Aemelie’s left hand moved on the controls, tracing the symbols she knew were right as a part of her mind sang the Vode An.

The navcomputers beeped their disapproval, red lights flashing.

And Aemelie smiled, for the navcomputer registering the jump as impossible... meant she’d gotten her numbers right.

Zal’s Last Gambit, the move was called, but Aemelie would not be surprised if it was named after her after this day--

Xxx

[Glory, eternal glory.

The stars pale beside our might.]

--Kote Darasuum. Traditional Mandalorian Song, transcribed by Fett KayTraviss Mand’alor. Translated by Master Wook’ipedia.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so, University of Coruscant.
The Aleema burned like a comet with its shields afire, turning into their enemies, with unnatural speed, rolling like a purrgil to face them.

Canderous winced inwardly, thinking of the torque involved, the pressures of gravity and velocity, the stress on those mighty engines. Half the lights on Aleema's portside flickered and went black, even as a black swarm of enemy ships raced to capitalize on the damage.

They don't know, he thought. They think they've won. They have won. What she's doing us impossible.

Behind the Aleema, the other two Mandalorian capitals had turned, mimicking her flight. One was more than half already in pieces, the other not much better. Made from Star Forge stuff, the Aleema held its form. Canderous knew this move.

It was impossible.

"She's going to ram?" some troch pilot chatter over his radio from other survivors—even the bellow of a Wookiee as Zaalbar expressed his concern.

"No," Kirrg of Clan Rialis had always been quick. "She's going to jump."

"But that's… it's insane. The calculations alone--get it wrong and you're dead for nothing. You'll phase right through. And the shields--getting the enemy to lower their shields so you don't just break on them--it's impossi--"

Alarms sounded and suddenly Canderous's vessel was swamped by a solar wind. The sun flickered in his vision. The quadrant near the planet and its moons lit up, turning blue-white for milliseconds, before abruptly cutting to black.

"The Machine Ships don't have particle-based deflector shielding, only ray." Kirrg sounded subdued.

"Don't need particle-based with no life support," Canderous agreed. "The Undying were easy marks, once she got the calculations right." He didn't think any man of the clans could have done it. Not even close.

A ragged cheer went up on his comm and his warriors began the Vode An. The Machine Ships had been clustered close, really close. The few on the perimeter who'd emerged unscathed winked out. A dozen more burned, mostly in pieces, but some still fair game.

Kote, Aems, Canderous thought with a savage joy. You left some for me.

Xxx

Aemelie's Close is more legend than legitimate military maneuver. Modern warships of our time always carry double-deflector shielding, protection against energy attacks as well as physical incursion.

But the first rule of hyper-dimensional space is that two objects cannot occupy a hyperspace point simultaneously. Either one object exists—or none do.

And if none exist in a space that once held more than one object, is it possible that both objects still exist elsewhere? Theoreticians have pondered this question for centuries.
Mandalorians are more practical. They have an entire school of philosophy based upon Aemelie's Close. At its heart this philosophy states that sometimes the needs of the many are best served by saving the few.

--Saw Guerrera, "A Call to Arms," 10BBY (est.)

Note in margin: "To Jynny, on her tenth birthday. Love, Uncle Saw"

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

"Why the hell are we in hyperspace?" Carth turned on the new Voice, not waiting for an answer. "What just happened? We have to go back!"

"Can't reroute, sir--Rekkiad's twelve hours off, shiptime."

"All ships reporting in--"

"Casualty reports seven squads without hyperdrive to follow--"

"Wideband's up, Admiral, but spotty--"

The reports came in over his feed and in person. Across from him, Yuthura stood like a Sith statue, lekku twisted around her neck.

"What is it?" He barked at her, when the Voice did nothing. "Tell me what just happened!"

"A command… overrode our navcontroller, sir." His Ensign looked like he was about to faint.

"--nothing like it!"

"All the ships in our fleet?"

"Lord Revan's executive command?"

"I realize she sent us all to hyperspace! I'm not stars-touched! Yuthura!" Carth barked. "Tell me what's going on!"

"Ships lost… more lives… lost. I felt them." The Twi'lek blinked. "I'm afraid I don't know more than that."

"Dustil? My wife?"


"What the hell just happened?"

Instead of answering, Yuthura's lekku twitched in the direction of their new Voice.

"Admiral." Later, he was never sure if--some of it had to be her, but not all. Not everything. "You will proceed with your fleet to Rekkiad."

"Revan?"

The Sith pureblood stood there and stared back at him with blank, unseeing eyes. For too long a
pause. Long enough for his bridge officers to begin whispering, long enough for Carth to doubt himself.

"Yes, Carth." The timbre of the pureblood's voice didn't change. "Take your fleet to Rekkiad. Assemble our forces near the sun. Coordinates to follow."

"That's one hell of a hello. What just happened?"

"The Aleema destroyed one hundred and twenty-three of their ships."

"So... uh, that leaves... what, hundred and twenty for my guys? Two-to-five odds?" He laughed. "No problem."

"No. They have thirty ships left." Dead voice.

*Just the facts, ma'am.* "I was joking, but that's... that's a lot better than I thought." It was. "And the Aleema, it--"

"Gone." Was there emotion there? The pureblood's eyes were glowing red. Carth couldn't tell. "All the Mandalorian capital ships are gone."

"Gone? My... my son--" Yuthura said he was alive--

"Safe." Another pause. "On the moon. For now."

*For now.* "You're gonna need to give me more than that."

"I am with Dustil, Carth." No expression in her voice. *His* voice. Carth could be talking to the Emperor and he'd never know. "On a shuttle--landing on the surface of a moon. Our charts say it's called Oas. It has a breathable atmosphere."

"Talk to him! Tell him we'll come back for him!"

"I... of course, Carth." A pause. "Flyboy."

"Freckles." It didn't sound like her at all. Hell, when Polla and Sheris had pretended to be Revan they'd sounded more like her than this dead voice. But he knew the dead voice. He'd heard it before. "After this is all over, you gonna... you're gonna pin a medal on my chest, sister?"

"What?" Distracted. Of course, she wouldn't know--it hadn't been *her* that day in the Jaxus Cluster. Had been the other one. "Carth. Others require attention as well. I have to go."

"No problem, sister. I got this." He looked up to see Yuthura Ban watching him. When their eyes met, she looked away.

"Proceed to Rekkiad," the Voice repeated. "That's an order, Admiral. I'm sending coordinates for our opening salvos now."

Xxx

Arbiter Silka: "*The next section of the trial concerns the Battle of Rekkiad. Carth Onasi? Would you describe the events for the court?*"

*Carth Onasi:* "There's... there's not a lot to say. We... we fought them. For once we outnumbered the bastards. General Revan cloaked half our forces behind the ice planet. Then... she used the Hunt as bait. They were sitting targets. We... we blew them up."
Silka: "And then?"

Carth Onasi: "What do you want me to say?"

Silka: "We are still demanding an explanation for--"

Carth Onasi: "I'm done answering your damn questions! Either promote me or throw me in the brig. Hells, you let Rew and Cein off already with a slap on the wrist, and Rensha--"

Silka: "The High Admiral requested an early retirement."

--Transcript from Court Martial of Carth Onasi 3953 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

Oas was a moon in the Degriass System, orbiting a burning cinder of a world called Kanker. Maybe a few thousand years ago there'd been some civilization or another on Kanker, but its atmosphere had been strip-mined since. Now the place was known for being in the middle of nowhere, if it was known for anything at all.

Oas, at least, had a breathable atmosphere. After a bumpy ride, the med-bay of the Aleema had landed without incident on a snowy plateau, trailed by life-pods from the Mandalorian survivors--and the blue disc of the Ebon Hawk.

Millifar watched through her viewscreen as the dust that had been the Aleema, the Birthright, and the Tats dissolved over the horizon like a sprinkling of stars.

Her cheeks were wet and cold when she went outside, trailed by the dar'jett who kept shivering instead of putting on her envirosuit.

"Why couldn't we go with the Rancor?" Mydia whined.

"The Rancor went to dust with all hands," Millifar snapped. Hadn't the Blais girl been paying attention?

"Then w-why did the Imperial ships just leave us?" The girl sounded near-hysterical.

"Because they are fools," the Zabrak kid said in the Sith Emperor's voice, trailing behind them. "Superstitious fools who refused my assistance!"

Polla Organa, a woman Aemelie had admired, debarked from her ship. She stood halfway between the gangplank of the Ebon Hawk and the Medix. She looked as pale as the real Revan against the blowing winds and snow, huddled in a ragged black robe. "You guys okay?"

Millifar ignored her, looking to the sky where the lights of more ships glimmered. More survivors, but not their enemy, unfortunately. At that moment Milli would have liked to take the Ebon Hawk and its guns aloft and burn the Undying to ash--if Aemelie had left any for them to kill. Knowing her, she had not. Aemelie could be selfish.

Millifar wiped her eyes.

"Polla!" the Sith Emperor called out from behind her, voice high-pitched and squeaking. "You're alive!"
"Yeah. No thanks to you, Tenny-Bro." The Deralian walked closer, moving on the balls of her feet, hand on her blaster. "What the hell? You blew up half their fleet with some Force voodoo and then decided to let the Mandies die instead of taking the rest?"

"It was not that simple." The Zabrak's face suddenly went slack. Then, "Tut! Tut! Oh, my smuggler. It is good to see you again! And how is your ship? I hope not damaged!"

"Ship's fine. I'm more worried about my Da. I don't suppose you've seen him?"

"Oh, my! I suppose I can check--" the red glow abruptly faded, and Zepth fell down, like a droid with a pulled motivator.

"We should kill him," Sinae said.

"No!" Polla snapped. "No more fracking killing. Or dying." She wiped her eyes. "Damnit. I can't believe she actually did that. That was one jump in a billion--"

"My Second Mother was gifted," Millifar said. "First Mother always said she should have been born a man."

"Like women can't plot hyperspace jump points?" Polla Organa made a noise in her throat. "Seriously?" Her voice dropped. "But I don't think I could have done that. She was--"

"You cannot understand what she was." Millifar didn't feel like trying to explain.

Sinae coughed. "We need to set up our camp. I have tasks to assign you both--"

"Tasks?" The Deralian blinked.

"Chores," Millifar explained. This part was relentlessly familiar, rituals to overcome grief. "We will need tents and a fire if the air is thick enough to sustain one. A wideband transceiver should be erected. And a battle circle to honor the dead. A well-spout if we can find groundwater…"

"And we must collect the other survivors who are too injured to come to us," Sinae added.

"But it's cold here," Mydia Blais whined. "I don't like it."

"We don't have to stay." Polla gestured toward her ship. "Plenty of room on the Hawk...." Her voice trailed off, as if she'd just noticed the sparks of escape pods in the skies above.

"Not for everyone," Sinae announced. "I've set a beacon. More survivors will come. There will be injured."

"We'll come back for you," the Emperor said, chuckling. The Zabrak had scrambled to his feet again, eyes glowing with his hellish magic once more. "We will return, my friends. As soon as our victory is won. In the meantime..." he chuckled. "Do take care of Mekel Jin and Dustil Onasi for me. I need them fit as firaxin, hah hah!"

Xxx

I dreamed they will be happy, unlikely as it seems. The Jedi and the Beastrider Queen. But the ties that bind us, even betrayal cannot sever. He will always remember the altar and the agony, but given time, it will not matter.

Their daughter will have her father’s eyes as well as his loving heart.
"The hyperspace wake indicates a large fleet passed through here recently." Bao-Dur was like a placid nerf, Oerin had decided. Nothing rattled him--much like Meetra herself. "I'm seeing an ion trace to that moon. There may be a few survivors."

"I had a moon once. Above Rekkiad." Meetra paced slowly across the bridge. She'd found an intact Republic officer's uniform somewhere, and added enough bars to make herself an admiral. "Loser's Moon. It's a shame what they'll do to Rekkiad. Smoke half the surface to destroy all traces of the Sleeper wreckage. And it was so beautiful, once."

"You've been talking to your Seer again." Oerin cracked his right knee, holding the skin down again after as it agonizingly reknit.

"Thalia May predicted our mother's end." Meetra shrugged. "Correctly. I like her."

The Seer had been one of the last to join them on Malachor V before their departure. She had come, she claimed, to warn them not to go to Rekkiad, which was quite timely, as they both had decided to go there, supposedly of their own volitions.

*Mother's hooks ran deep.* Even now that they had both felt her die, Oerin wondered if they would ever be truly free.

"Our mother has yet another version," he reminded Surik. "Don't forget the story Brianna told us. Brianna's twin and the last holocron--"

"Mical Jorde. In the Telos Enclave." Meetra nodded slowly. "A problem for another time. We need to go to that planet. Oas."

"It's a moon."

"It doesn't matter. We need to go there."

"Are you sure this isn't something Mother wanted us to do?" It was so difficult to be sure.

"I am never sure." Meetra shrugged. "But there are those who need our aid on the moon. And I would hate to disappoint them."

"There is something about...." Oerin's voice trailed off. "Someone strong in the Force is down there--more than one strong in the Force--and--something else--someone familiar--"

"Yes." His sister smiled with broken teeth. "You sense the Mandalorian? Thalia mentioned her, too. Our mother did leave her marks, even on the nulls."

A/N

These Mando’ade would not exist if not for Karen Traviss. Mandalorian songs are Traviss.
Aphorisms are mine with one exception. (Also Traviss). I finished this right before the release of “the Mandalorian,” and was unreasonably happy it did not contradict my headcanon.

There are, in fact, two types of deflector shields in Star Wars. Ray and Particle. It's canon. RIP Aemelie and Dessa and Catrinex and the Aleema.

Thanks, Ether as always, for your patience and your beta powers. Yes, I did mean lung. It just seems more Mydia than dung. Lol.

Little Doctor: thanks for your kind words about Oblivion--I do have another chapter on that about ½ done, I just shelved it until this is. So close now. Two chapters, I think.

Next up... the war is over!!!

This is the version with fewer typos.
Chapter 78 / Follow You Into the Dark

Xxx

General Revan: "It's over. I'm... happy to report that the last of the Machine Ships were destroyed today at a classified location. Our allied casualties were minimal. Five snubfighters and one Imperial corvette were lost, but we recovered several survivors."

General Sheris: "All Imperial veterans of this combat are to be offered full Republic pensions, and their kin casualty-rights. With our own forces defending Republic skies, the final work was left to them."

General Revan: "Not just to them."

General Sheris (blinks): "Certainly, if there are any Mando'ade who wish Republic assistance, we would be more than happy to provide it. Just, traditionally... they do not... but we will never forget their sacrifice."

General Revan (hoarsely): "Never."

--Excerpt from the Seventh Speech.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

Aemelie was generous in death. She gave Canderous ample opportunity to slake his vengeance in stars upon the drone fighters that remained. With what was left of Gundark, Cannock, Krayt, and Wraid squadrons, Canderous and his blooded warriors destroyed the enemy ships, including the crippled capital that had turned toward the Degriass moon.

"Kote!

Kandosii sa ka'rite, Vode an.

Malachor a'den mhi, Vode an!"

Canderous’s voice was hoarse from singing and his cheeks were wet as the last light on the final aruetii hulk died. They pulverized its bones with a few well-placed plasma torpedoes. It was fitting that the dust of their foes and the dust of their family mixed in stars. One day, eons ahead, that dust would form new life in a sun’s heart.

“Life pods went to the moon,” Jakata noted when they had finished.

“And the Medix shuttle as well,” Canderous agreed. The Ordo beacon pulsed fiercely from the surface of Oas, beckoning them to rest.

But many of their ships had been damaged, and so it took the span of two sleep-cycles to nurse the crippled sublights along. In a few cases, they had to jettison a broken vessel and transfer its rider to
double up with another.

A scattering of Imperial and Republic survivors joined them and were taught the words of the Vode across their open channel.

They were just approaching the planet Degriass--the moon of Oas still on the far side--when a ship came out of a cloaking field so old that it flickered, making the vessel it had concealed shimmer like a rock underwater--or a ghost.

The ship was a Republic heavy capital: small for her class and heavily armored. The call-sign on his scanner registered the vessel as the *New Hope*, which made Canderous wonder if she were a ghost, for his ship's computer flagged the name as a capital destroyed at Malachor Five. Nor was she the first ghost-ship he had seen from that fateful day. Canderous remembered the *Harbinger* and Katarr all too well. And Oerin Lin, the arusuum'la son of Manda’lor who had nearly killed Milli.

His hand tightened on the controls, and for a sharp moment, Canderous considered attempting to perform the same maneuver that had brought his wife her glory. In that moment, his vision flickered and abruptly the ship was one of at least a dozen battered hulks, shifting in malevolent formation above the tiny moon, and then--

His eyes watered inside of his helm and the other ships vanished, leaving only the *New Hope*.

He tapped his oxygen meter to check the pressure.

"Did you see that, General?" Demain's voice was hushed with awe.

"Yeah." Not just him, then.

“A woman's voice blasted across their channel. “Our scans indicate several of your ships are too damaged for atmospheric re-entry.” The hangar bay of the *New Hope* slid open. “Perhaps we can be of assistance.” The speaker repeated her words in badly-accented Mandalorian. Then Standard again. Then badly-accented Sith.

The space surrounding them flickered again--until there could have been five ships. Or ten. Or fifty.

And then only one.

*There is only one ship,* Canderous thought. You're hallucinating, Ordo. *Only one ship. That blasted New Hope.* He had not forgotten Katarr, and the lessons his people had learned from the dar'jett of the Harbinger.

“Don’t need anything from you.” Canderous tapped his targeting reticule on. "Whoever you are--"

"I am the Deathbringer." Her voice was calm. Young, even. Assured. "Meetra Surik, the Deathbringer. Isn't that what you call me?"

"We don't bother with your name, dar'jett!" Milli's beacon rang from the moon, monitoring their conversation.

Canderous smiled with pride under his helm. "What my daughter says is true. We claim this system for Clan. And we have you outnumbered at least fifty to one--"

There was a familiar creaking sound as his instruments froze. The *Hope's* tractor beam had
activated. One of his fellow fighters--still free--made a run at the enemy vessel. Meters from the impact it froze, too, caught like a fly in a kinrath web.

"Outnumbered, perhaps. But with broken ships. We mean you no harm," Surik continued. "Please."

Please. For some reason that made Canderous think of Revan, and then he laughed. Not for humor, but because he was still alive.

Xxx

The best kind of god is one that keeps coming back so you can kill him again.

--Mandalorian Aphorisms for Everyday Seasons

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

The Mandalorians emerged like survivors from some sea-storm back home, scrabbling out of dented and blasted ships like cuttle-crabs, their armor hissing and steaming when it made contact with the New Hope's oxygenated air.

Thalia May had already seen them in her dreams, but dreams did not convey the stink of ozone and blood or the sheer presence of this lot. There were Imperial pilots, too--and even two Republic flyers--but it was the Mandalorians she watched--and not just because they all had their guns out and pointed at her.

"You." The man wasn't the tallest or the broadest, but his presence conveyed that effect, his voice gravel-metal through the voder of his helm. "You." He gestured with his blaster in Thalia's direction. "I know you."

She had been trained since childhood never to take her eyes off an enemy, but nonetheless, Thalia looked instinctively to her right, to the web of shadows and Force-weaves.

"He means you." Oerin Lin's chuckle was in her mind more than spoken. Hidden in shadow, she could not see if his dead lips moved--or not. "Don't mind me, pretend I'm not here."

"M-master Ordo--yes." Thalia was too nervous to get the title right. Strange to be nervous now, when her dreams had seen nothing amiss with this vision. The chance that the Mandalorians would turn on them was slight. "We met briefly. On Korriban."

"Yeah. One of Jin's friends. The kids from the cave."

"As you say. I saw you in the Jedi Temple as well."

"That was the day you killed me with a kiss, sweet Thalia." It was the first time Lord Sion had spoken of it. Thalia had been foolish to think he could have forgotten.

"Why are you here, Jedi? With Surik?" The man gestured with his heavy gun carelessly, but Thalia noted the other Mandalorians' stances sharpen.

"Master Surik left me to greet you. She has returned to Oas--to the moon below. We're establishing a refuge there. Your daughter is already--"
"I know where my daughter is." He waved his gun again. "You're gonna prep us a shuttle now to make it down there. Rest of our crew's gonna go to the bridge."

"They want the ship." Oerin sounded amused. "Give it to them."

"Master Surik asked me to provide escort." Thalia opened her hands in a gesture of peace. "We are merely here to help, Master Ordo. We are travelers who mean you no harm."

"Travelers with lightsabers." His helm was full and battered and her reflection a dark blur. "You think I don't know that the New Hope was the vessel that launched Revan's Mass Shadow Generator? She should've died at Malachor Five. And we've met 'travelers' from there before… Sith just as bad as that force-spawned Emperor." His eyes narrowed. "What is this, really? One of Lin's games?"

"No! Of course not--"

"Try to lie effectively." The dead man's sigh was a wheeze in her head. "Not admitting you know me would help."

"I-I don't know any 'Lin,' but Master Surik will give you this vessel, as a gesture of goodwill. A-a gift!" Meetra would not be pleased, perhaps, but Thalia had dreamed of this possibility.

"Not your gift to offer." Lord Sion corrected. "But I will ask Meetra to give it up. She cares nothing for ships and my people have lost so many--"

"We don't need gifts of what we can take." Suspicion darkened the Mandalorian's tone. Around him, the others murmured, buzz of whispers lost in the open space of the hangar, echoing like ghosts. "Just how many ships do you have up here, anyway?"

"Just the one." The others had retreated--still cloaked--to the far edge of the system. Most were barely manned and some, Thalia thought, would not survive another hyperspace jump.

"There is only one ship." Lin's voice turned silken and seemed to echo louder than the Mandalorian horde--to become a dozen voices--fifty--as they repeated his words.

"Huh." Canderous Ordo didn’t look convinced. But he holstered his weapon. "One ship... for now. We’ll sweep for others. Jakara, check the engines for sabotage. Lex--you're on systems. Make sure they haven't done something to air, or temp control. Rest of you--scan this ship for more life signs. Jettise hide their numbers to make themselves look small." He continued barking commands and his soldiers fanned out--even the Imperials and the two Republic pilots following his commands.

"We mean you no harm--" Thalia began again.

"Pacifists. Right." A chuckle emitted from the helm. "Let's see that shuttle of yours, kid. Got a name?"


The shuttle felt empty with just the two of him. In her dreams there had been more--in her dreams, Canderous Ordo had brought companions to the barren moon. But dreams and vision did not always jibe perfectly.

"He left the others to take this ship and lay claim to stars." Sion's voice said in her ear. "He knows there are hidden ships. They will find them. And take them. Meetra won't mind."
Thalia did not glance at the pool of shadows in the corner of the cockpit. Canderous Ordo had taken over piloting himself, leaving her nothing to do but wait.

"Master Surik no longer requires a ship—or ships," she told them both. "The Republic ship Great Hunt returns for us. They're on their way now."

The Mandalorian made a grunt that could have been surprised. "Wideband's up?"

"Yes," Thalia told him. "The war is over."

"At Rekkiad? Or Malachor V?" Canderous Ordo's voice was metallic, almost bored, but Oerin's amused chuckle in her head told Thalia the dead man thought the question anything but disinterested.

"Reports say the details are still classified," she demurred. "But I think Rekkiad. There hasn't been time to travel as far as the Malachor System."

"Depends on how you go." But the Mandalorian leaned back in his chair as if the answer pleased him.

"Malachor is ours," Lord Sion told her, almost smugly. "It belongs to the children of Mand'alor. He would not have it sullied again."

XXX

My First Grandfather met his glorious end above the skies of an unnamed planet, in battle against a foe who flew a ship made of stone. First Grandfather had tracked that asteroid-ship across the galaxy. In his fading years, after First Grandmother's death, it became his obsession.

My Second Grandfather was far more temperate, although he also was a great war hero to the barbarian Republics. Second Grandfather knew when to attack and when to retreat, but my favorite memories are from the times he taught me to fly in ships even faster than drexl, on worlds as distant as Telos and T'Rith.

Second Grandfather met his end in his bed, next to his Jettise wife. In Republic lands, dying old and asleep is honorable, too.

I was nine when I learned Second Grandfather and I had no blood-ties. Nine when I learned that my father was not my father by the laws of the Independent Collective of Onderon... but my mother's people were not bound by those laws and so I did not care.

--Queen Faene Starshine of Onderon, Recollections of My Girlhood. 75RRA

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

The New Hope's shuttle came down in a cluster of battered vessels. Grief and pride welled in Canderous's heart to see the Medix I unscathed and his daughter atop its roof, waving fiercely as his shuttle landed.

The air was thin and cold and in the space of ten heartbeats, Canderous was out of the hatch. He had just enough time to adjust his suit for the heavier gravity before Millifar hurtled into his arms.

"I saw," Canderous responded to her barrage of questions, whispering the words in her ear, his own
bare cheek resting against her shaven scalp. "She was magnificent."


"No. You showed spirit." He let the wind take his tears.

"Leskal is here. And Urex. She made them… made most of the boys take the escape pods."

"She saved me some warriors." Although his heart thought it would be a long time before his people met for a true war again.

Behind Millifar, that hu'tuun Emperor was in the Zabrak. Eyes red and glowing.

"What the hell're you lookin' at!" The wind made his voice harsh. "Get out!"

The eyes flashed once and then faded. The boy's body collapsed in the sand. A few other sents hustled over to the body, lifting Zepth and taking him away, back into the Medix.

"Huh."

"Oh." Milli had followed his gaze. "He's always doing that, Father."

"Was that the Emperor in there? Or her?" He wondered if Revan would try to apologize for their loss. Blame herself and insult them both. He did not think he could bear to hear Aemelie's sacrifice demeaned.

*You don't know what to say to her, old man,* his thoughts whispered. *Perhaps she doesn't know what to say to you, either.*

"Zepth never speaks when his eyes glow." Millifar paused. "The Jettai Surik just offered us ships, Father. We could be rid of this place." Her eyes were red-rimmed. "I want to go home."

*Home.* To a moon she had never seen.

"I do as well." Canderous looked at the sky. "They told me the war is over. The Republics will be coming back."

"We are done fighting their battles!" his daughter said fiercely.

Canderous nodded. "We are." *Jettise,* he thought. That old word meant Jedi and Republic both when both had been their foes. He wondered what Revan would make of the Deathbringer.

Xxx

*Moderator:* "Senators, we're not sure how long this wideband connection will last, so please keep your questions short."

(Thunderous applause.)

*High Admiral Rensha* (snarls): "The Senate floor is now open to questions. Senators?"

*Senator Pallas Rist of Alderaan* (over commlink): "I'm sure we all speak with one voice when we congratulate your victory over the Sith Empire. Of course, that is the Sith Empire that Darth Revan created in the first place--"

*General Revan* (laughs): "You're giving me way too much credit, Senator."
Senator Pallas Rist of Alderaan: "Am I? I'd also like to formally file charges against you for murder, and demand an investigation into the Organa family's death upon Deralia."

General Revan (laughs): "I... could you just get me a private channel with... uh, with your secretary? Uh, Secretary Boon Organa? I'm sure we could clear up any misunderstanding."

Senator: "You will face justice in an Alderaanian court of law! And that does not even scrape the surface of your war crimes against the Republic--am I the only sentient on this floor not bought and paid for by Racharn?"

General Sheris: "I have already submitted an application for a full Republic pardon for Revan Starfire D'Reev--"

General Revan (mutters): "You would."

General Sheris: "Please try and take this seriously, Revan. Senators, as you can see from my attached petition, it is imperative that Revan and I be allowed freedom of movement if we are to continue to protect and serve the Republic."

Admiral Rensha: "No. I have requested you both remain in custody until we have at least established there is no further Imperial or Mandalorian threat--"

General Revan: "The Mandalorians were never a threat!"

Senator Feezkit of Kuat: "Coming from the woman who commanded their largest warship, that is less than reassuring."

General Revan: "The Aleema? I didn't--"

General Sheris: "Gentlebeings, please listen to reason. My fellow Jedi General and I are the only ones capable of assessing and neutralizing the Imperial threat. You need Jedi to fight this war--"

Senator Tyg, of Byss: "Hah! And where have we heard language like that before?"

General Revan: "Gee. Let me guess. The Mandalorian Wars?"

General Sheris: "Feema la'kirt!"

General Revan: "Iksay bah. Go-to ak'namla seem!"

--A Memorandum of Events from Senate Council Meeting XxIXxxxxxIv, popularly known as 'The Seventh Speech."

['Not a Transcript' is hydro-marked on the flimsi, casting some doubt on its accuracy. In addition, a handwritten note across the bottom says, "I'm always happy to translate Rakatan for you, Lydie, but they're just telling each other to be quiet in crude, but descriptive terms." --AL.]

[Note: Although several scholars have tried to use these phrases as a sort of 'Taug Stone' to translate the Rakatan language, the mix of the colloquial idiom has confounded them. Whoever this 'AL' was, he must have been a formidable scholar indeed!]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

"You were gone again."
Dar had taken to holding a bulb of hull-scouring fluid under Revan's nose to bring her back from a
trance. It was as effective as the shock stick and a lot less painful.

"Yes--" Revan pushed her hand with the bulb away. "Canderous is alive. He made it to Oas."

"Good." But the frown between her counterpart's eyes said that was not her concern. "I feel it's less
good how much you are with Tenebrae."

"I didn't see the Emperor. I don't know where he is." His presence had faded to a whisper when the
last Machine Ship died. Perhaps the death of the Sleepers had weakened--or even killed him--
leaving Revan alone with everyone he possessed.

Was that victory? Victory felt brittle and hollow trapped in this room, on this ship when there were
so many lives elsewhere in the galaxy free and alive--

Like the feeling of pie crust beneath Revan's borrowed fingers on Deralia--

--the joy of catching a fish, seeing the skies of a new world--Ystred--where she’d never been--

--cold wind on her face on Oas watching Canderous hug his daughter--

--catching a glimpse of Korrie from a window on Nar Shaddaa--

All of those moments felt more real than this stifling room and the woman who was her reflection
staring back--usually with corrections about whatever Revan had said wrong last.

At least the headaches and nosebleeds had stopped with the death of the last Sleeper ship. But had
they won? Not exactly comforting that Meetra Surik had surfaced. Dar seemed less worried about
the woman Vima had called her true apprentice than Revan was. Be it on her head. From Zeph's
borrowed body Revan hadn't seen Meetra Surik or her padawans do anything more insidious than
roll their eyes with impatience.

"I'm not sure it's better that you're possessing his bodies instead of him." Dar raised an eyebrow.
"You need to eat something. In this body."

"I've more news of Korrie." Malak had filled in some details but Revan had so many unanswered
questions. The Weequay could only get so close. She wanted to ask Mission to comm, but what if
that spooked Lena Wee and the Twi'lek twins?

Korrie's face in the starboard windows. A profile, walking past. A glimpse and then gone.

"And?" Dar smiled. "Once this is finished we'll see him. You should have been more polite with
those senators. We need our freedom."

*Doesn't matter. They're never going to let us go.* For all her wisdom, Dar refused to see how far
they were from free. Cold comfort, that the Force would allow Revan to escape this cage so easily,
when it would mean permanent exile and the life of a fugitive--and not just for her. Rensha had
made that clear, too.

"Our son likes to be called Kore, now. The twins and Lena Wee have been staying on their ship,
The Blue Ghast. One of those luxury skycruisers, registered to a 'Go-To.'"

"Go-To? One of your twins has a sense of humor. Or both, I suppose."

That was funny. "If we're going by the theory the 'Go-To' is from the Rakatan, yes."
Dar raised an eyebrow. "What else could it be? How did you explain yourself to his guardians?"

Revan shook her head. "I haven't. I'm just watching. Korrie's even taller. As tall as us, I think."

"He'll grow more. Mal shot up between twelve and sixteen. I stopped growing at eleven--" A trace of a frown tugged at her lips. "Or--no. I was thirteen."

"You were tall for thirteen." Little slips. Sometimes Revan wondered if Dar noticed them. Discordant histories. If Revan hadn't experienced the feeling of being two people herself, she might never have noticed when Dar called herself a padawan or referred to events that had happened after the real Revan Starfire's death.

Once, Revan would have exploited Dar's weakness... but they were no longer at war. "Polla shot up six centimeters when she was seventeen. Surprised the hell out of everyone."

"Oh. Our mother was taller than we are," Dar shrugged, twisting her fingers in her lap. "Was Malak with our son?"

"He's not here, so I..." She had assumed so. "The Weequay doesn't have the Force. I couldn't see Malak from his body. Was... was our father tall, too?"

"Shorter than Mam." The personal endearment hung between them awkwardly. "And Radrik was kind. No matter what you've heard, he was always kind to me--"

"I haven't heard anything except he was Vrook's brother." Revan thought. "And... a Jedi, right?"

"He was always kind," Dar repeated, almost stubbornly.

"Oh." A whisper of memory tugged at Revan. "There was... there was a fire in the lab. Our mother was yelling--"

"You remember that?" Dar sounded startled.

Only the tone of voice and the brightness of the flames. "Just a little."

"I knocked over a burner. With my mind. They weren't expecting--"

"You made the flames spread." Revan could remember nothing but the expanse of them, dry crackling heat amongst all the cold. "They were... pretty."

"Yes." Dar fiddled with her cup of tea. Endless cups of tea. "Pretty. But it was fine. The maintenance droids took care of it. No one was injured."

"Oh. Good. We could find out what happened to our parents--when we get back--"

"There is nothing to find. Malachi erased all traces of my past on Hoth from the official records when I married his son." Dar sounded bored again. "Our parents are dead, Revan. Leave it alone."

"Fine."

The awkward silence yawned between them for an eon.

Revan slouched in Carth's battered jacket. She only wore it in their room. Everywhere else, she dressed in white robes, identical to Dar's. In the last day, there had been a lot of public appearances and broadcasts as the Hunt's team of relations demanded interviews and testimony. She wondered if Carth was getting the same treatment on the Arm. Revan had suggested going there, but then
everyone got very quiet. Malak's ghost had whispered in her ear that it was unlikely they would allow Revan Starfire on the command deck of a Sith war cruiser.

Ever again.

On the other hand, they didn't seem willing to let Carth off of his command deck. And that--

That was a surmountable problem. Revan smiled and closed her eyes, ready to go to him—to step through hyperspace to the Voice on his ship—when--

"What do you think of Surik?" Dar's voice pulled Revan back. She sounded careful and precise, which meant that her counterpart was more rattled than she was willing to admit.

"Meeutra Surik is spearheading the rescue mission on Oas. Doing a good job. Zepth's Force-sensitive, I'd sense darkness, if…." Revan paused. "She hasn't tried to kill Zepth."

"Does she know what he is?"

"I don't know. I'm doing my best to keep my distance." Although lately, it was harder and harder to find Zepth among the multitudes, especially when she preferred to watch Korrie, or retreat back to Sydax's head and all of those pies.

Polla's son was walking, now. Revan hoped she had the chance to tell her.

Dar gave her a flat glance. "Carth's son and our cousin?"

"Still unconscious." And Dustil looked bad, but there was nothing Revan could do. "Surik's healers have looked at them. I worry the Emperor could use them again--"

"That's why we have to stop him now. You said it's two jumps to Nar Shaddaa from Rekkiad. Two jumps and we could end this."

Revan wished she'd never admitted it was only two jumps. Dar was like a kath with a fracking bone. "And then what?" They were already speaking in Rakatan but Revan lowered her voice anyway. "You want to go get your box from Lena--" the coincidence made her suspicious already "--find a possessed sent and put Tenebrae in it? Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"And the armed guard outside this room? My friends three decks down? Where are we going to find a ship for all of us?"

Dar sighed. "Vima's corvette is in the officer's hangar. I know the release codes."

Revan would bet anything Rensha had changed them. "You think Rensha will let us go?"

"She can't stop you." Dar paused. "We will need an ally to pilot the ship--"

"No. But she can stop my friends." Revan tried not to roll her eyes. Dar's naivete had to be deliberate. "Jasp isn't well. And Zaalbar feels responsible for his people. He won't leave them. How do you think we'd get a dozen Wookiees and Phylus Blais down fifty levels from a private lift--"

"You escaped from me on the Leviathan, Red." Malak's voice appeared a millisecond before he did, glimmering blue, still with that face that she didn't recognize: the gentle smile, the mane of hair past his shoulders. "You escaped without even the Force to guide you. Shackled with neural
restraints. You rescued your friends then. Surely with our help--"

Dar glanced up. "See? Malak would help."

Revan felt a half-hysterical laugh bubble in her gut. “Oh? Would he?” *Two Jedi who sacrificed planets rescuing my friends. What could go wrong?"* "And then what? We'd be fugitives. If you want the damned Mind Prison so badly, my bounty hunter is on Nar Shaddaa now. I could possess his body, and obtain the box for you--"

"Without having harm come to Malachor?" Dar shook her head. “No, that plan is too risky.”

Revan bit back her impatience with some effort. "Wasn't planning on harming anyone. Mission says those twins are her, and Lena Wee is an innocent."

Dar'Revan picked up a nutrabar and unwrapped it slowly. "No one touched by the Rakatan computer is innocent."

“Whatever,” Revan snapped. “You’re the one who wants the box so badly. I’m just offering to help.”

Makak’s expression shifted as he glanced between them. His insubstantial hand brushed through Dar’s shoulder. "Perhaps she could try, Red. I can shield our son."

"No! It's not safe for her to get the box in that body. Tenebrae might know, Even now--he might still know that we’re plotting against him--” Dar sounded insane, babbling about the Sith Emperor. “I’ll go alone,” Dar continued, frowning. “Perhaps you could arrange a distraction, Fragment, and then I can make my escape.”

"But I don't sense Vitiate at all." Revan could walk across stars like a colossus, and see a thousand thoughts, a million tiny lives. The Sith Emperor was in none of them. "Maybe he died with the Sleepers."

"No." Dar's laughter was dark. "It can't be that easy."

"Well, what if it is? Then we don't need your Rakatan Mind Trap.."

"It can't be." Her counterpart was stubborn. "Do not return to the bounty hunter's body. Draw no attention to Malachor or the Twi'leks. I’ll go alone."

“*Not alone, Red.*” Malak’s hand brushed through Dar’s shoulder.

Dar smiled up at him.

“Get a room,” Revan snapped.

Dar'Revan and Makak didn’t answer her. Malak gazed down at Dar with an expression on his face that made Revan’s heart twist and her stomach churn.

Suddenly the room was stifling. "I'm going to check on Oas again. Have fun, you two." Revan closed her eyes and reached out again, across the stars--

"Wait! You fool!" she heard Dar say--but Revan was already gone.

XXX

*Ellis Pho: “This is E-Pho with CoruNet, a Racharn Broadcasting Corporation, coming to you*
viewers live from the middle of nowhere! My pilot tells me this is the Degriass System, the moon of Oas, and we're about to interview some of the survivors of the Machine Wars! Although the Senate has been in touch with High Admiral Rensha and our Fleet, the coordinates to Degriass came from an unexpected source--the Jedi Exile Meetra Surik! She's invited us to join her on a mission of mercy. Guiding our tour we have two of her apprentices, Mira the Hunter, and her Wookiee--

Hanharr (growls).

Mira: "He's not my Wookiee. And we're not apprentices. Master Surik says we're padawans now. Jedi-in-training.

Hanharr (in Shyriiwook): "Why must we suffer the idiocy of fools?"

Mira (in Shyriiwook): "Because the master says so. I don't think you want to challenge her again."

Hanharr (in Shyriiwook, whines): "I cannot."

Ellis Pho (nervous laugh): "So hard to believe they're really talkin when they go on like that, ain't it? Funny creatures, Wookiees. This one's not the one who went on the Star Forge jaunt, is he? Don't remember that many scars--"

Hanharr (in Shyriiwook): "Imbecile."

--Old Republic Broadcast, Holonovella, “Kashyyyk Passions”

[Note: Although fictional, this transcript seems accurate with what is known of Hanharr the Wookiee and Mira the Hunter.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

The port-side window revealed a flat white plain. Clusters of small ships were half-covered in stuff that had to be snow. There was a bonfire, half-ringed by Mandalorians. Mekel couldn't hear them through the thick layers of transparisteel, but it looked like the Mandalorians were singing.

He blinked hard and wondered if he were still dreaming. Or dead. This could be Mandie heaven. He glanced behind him, to the other cot, where Telos was still out like a comatose mark. Mekel had woke up a few moments ago to find tubes connecting them. He'd ripped the tubes out of their arms and then almost puked.

Dustil looked like he'd been through a war. Mekel felt like he'd just gotten back from one.

"Had one kriff of a nightmare," Mekel told the unconscious man. But Telos didn't even twitch. His skin was mottled and purplish. Shiny with kolto. Waxen, like a burn victim.

Memory was vague. Some kind of sick dream where they'd held skeins of power in their hands and burned ships from the sky. Couldn't be real. The Force was gone again. The galaxy was as flat and blank as it ever was--ever since that asshole Lin had taken Mekel's power away.

Mekel glanced outside again, trying to make sense of the scene at the bonfire. All of the Mandos had their armor on, but not one wore a helm. Most were bald--or nearly so. Milli had her hair shorn to the scalp. Someone else had died if she'd cut her hair again. Next to her and just as skin-domed was her father, Canderous Ordo. And, as Mekel watched, a group of fracking Jedi walked in front of his view, all in neat gray robes with lightsabers dangling at their belts.
Jedi? Maybe this wasn't Mandalorian heaven after all

One of the Jedi was a Wookiee, strolling next to a sassy red-headed piece. A HoloNet reporter trailed after the pair of them, remote cams bobbing. The reporter was a Zeltron who looked familiar, but Mekel couldn't remember the last time he'd watched CoruNet. The real thing was the Wookiee Jedi, even wearing a gray tabard like it was a robe--

Fracking unreal. Mekel rubbed his eyes. Definitely not Mandie heaven--

A small shuttle landed, blowing snow off the grounded fighters with its descent. The shuttle was stamped with the CoruNet logo. The sents crowding out with their floating remotes looked to be more reporters. They approached the Mandies with their broadcast antennae waving like a pack of corpse-worms.

Milli and a few others drew blasters--but then a dark-haired, brown-skinned Human Jedi in gray robes came between them. Held up her hand and said something.

She had a red star inked on her cheek.

Mekel didn't remember hearing there were Jedi in this war.

Whatever the Jedi said made the Mandies back down. Milli didn't shoot. Holocams flashed. Then the Mandalorians walked away, leaving just the Jedi to talk to the reporter.

The bonfire choked out black smoke, staining the sky. Wind blew gusts of snow off a few crashed escape pods. It looked cold out there.

"You're missing the show, fockda." Mekel looked back at Dustil. His old pal looked like one giant bruise. At least with the bond gone I don't have to feel it. That thought made his gut feel funny, with an emotion it would take Mekel another decade to recognize as guilt.

He sat back down and stared at Dustil, trying to make sense and coming up empty. They'd been so powerful, part of the Emperor and everything, but Mekel remembered he'd been scared, too. A blank spot in his brain circled like a vortex--the spot where he thought the Emperor's real face was supposed to be. But that had all been hallucination, right? Our ships were damaged. We both got hurt and Telos almost died, maybe--

Maybe it was all a dream. Or this is. This is the dream because Telos has to wake up--

Then the door slid open and the Emperor himself walked in, possessing Zepth with his eyes glowing red as blood. "Mekel. Good. You're awake."

"Master." Mekel ducked his head, trying to play it cool, like the sight of those red eyes didn't remind him of that fracking nightmare--and like another part of him wasn't so relieved to see His Luminance that he could've kissed him. "I'm glad to see you, my Lord."

There was a pause as the Zabrak froze, in which time Mekel realized his mistake.

"Master?" the Zabrak scoffed, eyebrows shooting up. "Really, Mekel? You call Tenebrae your 'master'?"

"He is the Emperor of the Sith." Mekel wasn't stupid. "Uh... hey, Cousin Revan. Good to see you… kind of see you. How's… how're things?"

"Hey, Mekel." Zepth's glowing eyes squinted. "You look like shit."
"Feel like it, too." He tried to laugh. "So… uh, where is Lord Valkorion?"

"Valkorion? You call him that?" She made Zepth's voice sound surprised.

"His Luminance asked me to. It's the name He has chosen for his next ascent--"

"The hell? His Luminance is not your master, Mekel. He's a body-stealing schutta who's killed billions."

Right. That's why he's the master. Didn't Revan get that? She did the same thing?

Cousin Revan had stopped in front of Telos's cot. "What happened to Dustil?"

"Dunno. Woke up and he was like that. Looks like he got burned. Maybe our ships got hit in the fight?"

"No. He's space-seared. From the vacuum. He wasn't wearing proper gear when Millifar pulled him out… knew that, but he's still not healing." Revan shook the Zabrak's head. "Dar will take a look when we get to you--looks bad if the kolto isn't making a dent. Are the burns why he's unconscious?"

Mekel shrugged. "Dunno. I woke up and he was like this."

"You can't tell why he won't wake up?"

"The Force bond broke, remember?"

"Hrmm…" She sounded like she didn't believe him. "At least you're awake. Third time I've checked on you. You were both out yesterday." She glanced toward the window lowering her voice slightly. "I'm trying to keep a low profile. Don't want to get Zepth locked up or shot if someone thinks I'm the Emperor."

Yesterday… how long had they been here? Mekel refused to panic. "Where are we?"

"Oas. It's a moon orbiting the Degriass planet. A lot of the survivors landed here, too. After the fighting."

"Oh. Hey, how's the war going?"

"It's done." Her voice was flat and disinterested. "For half a day, now. My real body is in the Rekkiad System--about to turn around and come back. I see Canderous is--" her words made the Zabrak's voice a whisper. "Must've made it here over the last cycle. Glad he's still alive. Glad to see so many made it off the Aleema. They evacuated everyone they could."

Mekel nodded. Evacuated? "Yeah, but somebody died. Milli shaved her head again."

His cousin turned and glared at him with her borrowed face. "A lot of people died, Mekel. Aleema was lost with all hands."

"Lost?" It didn't make sense. "How--"

"I felt them die. Little lights winking out. That's what it feels like." She walked to the window and looked out. "They took out more than half of the Sleeper fleet. You and Dustil… you were there when we took out a third more. Do you remember?"

"I remember we were linked to my--linked to the Emperor. And you were there." He swallowed.
"We could've finished the Sleepers off. The Aleema wasn't gone then."

"Don't you think I know that?" Her voice was too high-pitched to be in Zepth's throat. She made the words squeak in a way that should have been comical, but even without the Force Mekel could see how pissed off she was. "That power would have killed you--you and Dustil both."

"Oh." He didn't know what to say to that. It couldn't be true--His Luminance valued Mekel too much--but Revan didn't look like she wanted to argue, pacing back and forth on Zepth's muscular legs, and peering out that window from time to time, like she was hiding from all those Mandalorians and the Jedi that still lived.

"I don't know what to say to Canderous," she added, softer now. "Or his daughter. Rensha's established an official channel going through those Jedi so they'll know I'm coming... I just don't know what to say."

Zabrak's giant head blocked most of Mekel's view, so he looked at Telos again. The Aleema--gone. That ship had been too big to fracking die--and the closest thing to a place Mekel wanted to be since...

Since Korriban.

"I've been out of it." He tried to sound careless. "Did you send the Jedi down to help?"

"No." She shook the Zabrak's head, still staring at the window. "That lot was here when I checked in at sunrise yesterday. Recognize any of 'em?"

"No. But one's a Wookiee." Mekel had never heard of a Jedi Wookiee. "Maybe they're from another enclave. My dads said there were other Jedi in hiding, and everyone on Katarr scattered--"

"Maybe. But the nets say that one with the star on her cheek is Meetra Surik, the Jedi Exile. And... there's something off about all of this." She glanced at the window and then back to Mekel. "Something off with Tenebrae, too. Maybe he's weakened, but it feels like he's... hiding from me. You really haven't seen him?"

"Uh, no. Just you. I just woke up." The world felt flat and empty now. Hadn't been His Luminance using them. It had been her, Mekel thought, channeling all of their power. "You were there, too, Revan--before. When we wrecked those ships... we were a part of something."

"A part that Tenebrae was using." She made Zepth's handsome face look like it was sucking on a lemma. "You called him 'master' before. Mekel, you don't have to serve him. You're not his stars-kissed errand boy!"

"Frack you!" Later, Mekel would have time to think that maybe words had different meanings outside of the Underground, in places where not everyone was for sale. Maybe in some places 'errand boy' wasn't a fancy term for whore. But right then, his anger came fast as a mark renting by the minute. "I'm not anyone's errand boy, cousin." Came out mean, like words had the first time they'd met--when he thought she was just another prospie who'd starve to death because she was weak. "Not Valkorion's--and not yours."

"I know that." She didn't, though.

"Get the frack out." He felt like he was gonna be sick, facing down the former Dark Lord of the Sith. "Get out of Zepht and out of this ship. Get out!"

She made Zepth's body take a step back, toward the door that led to the ship's corridor. "Mekel. I
promise, we're coming to help. Watch those Jedi--something's wrong--."

"You possessing my fracking friend is what's wrong! You were there with us. You were the one burning those ships and you liked it! I saw you! I felt it--"

Those glowing red eyes narrowed. "Careful, Mekel." Scarcely more than a whisper. "I mean it."

"Get out!" He pointed to the door.

She blinked. And then the glow around Zepth's face faded and the Zabrak collapsed on the floor.

Typical. Wasn't that just like her, dropping Zepth like an old pair of shoes when she didn't need him anymore? Same way she'd dropped the Aleema--

"Guess I showed her, Telos, huh?" Mekel tried to laugh.

Dustil, being unconscious, said nothing. Mekel dragged the Zabrak onto the cot he had vacated, an effort that left him sweaty and sick.

"Move over, fockda." He climbed on top of Telos, rolling the man onto his side to make room, and then wrapped his arms around him. It was a tight fit but they'd slept on worse.

But it took a long time for Mekel to fall asleep, even next to Dustil's solid warmth. And when he woke up again, things were even more complicated.

Xxx

Dalia Yuvik: “This is Dalia from the Alderaan LiveWire, courtesy of Rist Broadcasting here on special assignment. I’ve been quite fortunate to snag the first interview with a woman who needs no introduction to most of the free galaxy--especially in the last Standard year.

Joining me now on the Oas moon is Jedi Meetra Surik, the former Exile. Exiled no more, she has returned to give aid to these refugees from the Machine Wars, many of whom are her former enemies! Meetra, in the time we’ve been setting this up, we’ve seen both Mandalorian and Sith uniforms walk by our booth. Is it strange giving succor to old foes?"

Meetra Surik: “Broadcaster Yuvik. If we don’t help the less fortunate we are no better than they were when they burned our planets and killed innocent civilians.”

Dalia: “Well… yes, but still. I’m sure this can’t be easy for you.”

Meetra: “Honestly, it’s not easy. But it’s the right thing to do. There are so few remaining Jedi, and the ones I’ve found need to be guided along the right path.”

Dalia: "And you think you should do the guiding?"

Meetra: (Sincerely) "I am the only one who can."

--Interview with Meetra Surik, Alderaan LiveWire, 3966 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

Millifar Ordo was Mekel’s next visitor, shaking him awake and looming over his head. She was pale-faced and red-eyed, smelling like smoke. There were scratches on her skull where the razor-
edge she'd used to cut her hair had scraped flesh.

"Mekel!" She looked startled when he jumped off the cot and scrambled to his feet, backing up before he could hug her. "Mydia will be pleased that you're conscious. Sinae and I told her your vitals were stable, but she was worried--" she frowned, glancing at Dustil. "Mydia keeps saying you're both going to die, but she has been hysterical ever since the Jedi came. I didn't take her seriously."

"That's Mydia." Mekel blinked, trying to sort out the dream he'd been having from reality.

Dream had been better. Telos had been there. They'd been together, part of a warmth that felt as powerful as the sun.

Milli indicated Zepth, still passed out in Mekel's old bed. "Did the Zabrak wake up? We had him in the isolation room down the hall before. The door was locked."

"Just for a sec," Mekel lied. He sat up on the edge of the bed. "He… uh, guess he got lonely in there."

"Hrm…" she frowned. "Father says we should put him out of his misery now that we don't need the arusuum'la Emperor."

"It's just Zepth," Mekel lied again. "And he's unconscious. You can't shoot him."

"I do not see the honor in it. But my father is heart-bitter and wishes to be gone from this place. We are leaving soon."

"Good." He reached for her hand. "That's snow outside, right? Frack this place. I hate snow. Where are we going?"

"Dxun." She squeezed his hand back. "I wasn't sure you would come."

"Nothing keeping me on this rock." He tried to make a joke of it. "What's with the HoloNet crews?"

"They came right after the Jedi did. I think Deathbringer Surik summoned them." Milli rolled her eyes. "She's giving us ships for her blood price. Father wants to leave before the rest of the Republics get here."

"Uh, when is that?" Revan had said something about tomorrow. But Mekel had to play dumb.

"Soon," Milli repeated. "We will leave this Medix shuttle. We've already relocated the genebanks. Sinae doesn't think Dustil should be moved." She glanced at the unconscious Zabruk. "The arusum'la can be the Jettise's problem."

"Right." Later, he would realize how stupid he'd been. But in that moment, it didn't occur to Mekel that making a choice meant leaving Telos. "You said Mydia was worried. You weren't? Not even a little?"

His game was off because she didn't smile back. "I knew your vitals were stable." Her stubborn chin jerked in Telos's direction. "His vacillate wildly. Sinae can't explain it."

"You had us hooked up, sharing each other's blood."

"He has internal injuries. You're a perfect match. You disconnected the feed--" for the first time
she seemed to noticed the tubes on the floor, the blood spatter on the sterile white floor. Her
disgusted expression made Mekel notice it too.

"Sorry…" he offered.

"He is stable, now." Milli pulled a sani out of the wall cabinet and started cleaning up the mess.
"How long ago did you disconnect the line?"

"I don't know." She kept scrubbing. Suddenly, Mekel felt that funny feeling in his gut again. "Milli,
I'm sorry. I... I heard about Aemelie."

"From who? You've been unconscious. You both almost died. I saved your lives. She saved us.
Everyone on the Aleema died to save us." She was on her knees, scrubbing at the floor. Even on
Korriban, they'd had mouse-droids for that crap.

"Uh... Revan. She was just here... possessing Zepth ... she said they're coming."

“You lied to me? You said it was only the Zabrak!”

“For a second it was her.” His girlfriend had her hand on her blaster. “Don’t shoot Zepth. It's not
his fault.”

“I would not. I am not my father.” Her face looked up at his. The shaved head made her nose too
big and her jaw too strong, but she was still beautiful. "Revan and the Emperor, back and forth in
that Zabrak's body. If it were honorable I would put him out of his misery!"

"But you can’t." Mekel had shivved more than one knocked-out sent in his time, but none that he’d
liked. Zepth was a good guy and he was Lydie’s brother.

"I know." She drew a ragged breath. "The Jettise brought a wideband receiver. It summoned the
reporters--and gave us news of the war. We won."

"Yeah. Revan told me." Didn't feel like victory, this empty flat feeling. "Uh, where did the Jettise
come from?"

His girlfriend spat on the ground. "The Deathbringer said they were all in hiding before. On
Malachor Five."

"Deathbringer? Who's that?"

Millifar gave him that look that said he was ignorant and then began to explain.

Xxx

Dalia: "You were just speaking about guiding the Jedi along the right path, Jedi Surik. Pardon my
informality, but you don’t look any older than some of your students! I guess we’re all used to
seeing Jedi Masters who are old and wizened... what makes you the leader of this group?"

Meetra: “Nothing, really. Except they asked me to be the leader. Most of my followers never had
proper training. They were passed over by the Order, or relegated to the Service Corps, or tempted
by the Sith. With the Purges, there aren’t very many Jedi left.”

Dalia: “We have all wondered where the Jedi went.”

Meetra: “Into hiding, or killed by the Emperor’s assassins, I’m afraid. Now my followers and I
stand in the footprints of behemoths, merely trying to find our humble way.”
Dalia: “And General Revan Starfire? General Sheris Darkstar? Have you spoken to them?”

Meetra: “General Sheris was a dear friend of mine during the war. I am looking forward to our reunion.”

Dalia: “Some say you and Revan had a less amicable relationship.”

Meetra: “My master always told me that gossip is the work of idle minds, Dalia. If you’ll excuse me, we still have so much work to do....”

--Interview with Meetra Surik, Alderaan LiveWire, 3966 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

It took a while before Mekel ran out of questions, mostly ones Millifar didn't have answers for. In that time he realized he hadn't wondered about Mydia Blais--even when Milli had mentioned her--except that he'd never thought she was dead. Somehow, even back then, he'd known that bint was too tough to die.

Turned out she hadn't been on the Aleema at all. And--

"We needed the tank space." Milli's voice was hoarse from all of the death hymns she'd been singing--all night she said. She brought him water, which made Mekel remember he was supposed to offer tea. When he did, she shook her head. "We needed the tank space so Sinae had to decant them early. The boy's fine, but some of the Jettise healers have been working on the girl--"

"The babies." Maybe Mekel had lost the thread of the conversation, somehow. "Dustil's babies are born?"

"That's what I just said." Her hand was cool on his forehead. "Are you fevered?"

Telos looked like a dead statue lying there on the cot. If it hadn't been for the monitors beeping green, Mekel might have thought he was already dead.

"I'm okay." Mekel tried to laugh, but it was more of a cough. "Can't wait to see them."

"You like children?" She sounded startled.

"Sure. Kids are okay." He tried to think of the last time he'd been around one. "Dustil and me hung out with Revan's kid, once. And that smuggler, she had that baby--I saw the baby at my moms's brothel--"

Millifar made a face.

"No! They were just hiding out there.. it wasn't like--"

"The smuggler is here, too. Polla Organa." She sighed like Mekel had disappointed her again. "Aemelie was very fond."

"Polla Organa's here?" That didn't make any sense. "But Revan's not--not either of the Revans--"

"They are coming." She reached for his hand. "I told you that already, Jin of Lin."

Maybe she had, but the way Milli told stories went too deep into space math for Mekel's taste. Her
version had their attack vectors, the rates of drift for his and Dustil's ships, the physics of what had actually happened to the Aleema--

*We coulda been on that ship.* Later, maybe Mekel would feel sad for Dessa and Aemelie and everyone who had died. Now he just felt… drained. Like that power the Emperor had put into him had all leaked out.

"--that's why I don't want to wait," Millifar continued. "Sinae has all the necessary components. She extracted them from you during your last physical. *When* you were still healthy."

"I'm healthy now." Did she think he wasn't? Mekel grabbed her arm and kissed her, just to prove the point. It wasn't a passionate kiss--not at first--but something stirred inside of him and it became one, open-mouthed and hot--maybe even hotter for Telos being there--even unconscious.

"Is that a yes?" Milli asked, when they broke apart. "You'll be a father to her?"

Babies. She was talking about babies. Mekel knew that--knew what she was asking. Later, he'd try and laugh it off, pretend that he didn't understand--say she'd tricked him. But there was no deceit in Milli. Her heart shone in her eyes. She asked him and he knew.

"Or him," he said. "Maybe twins. Or triplets. What's the word for four?"

"It is safer just to have one inside my body." She took his hand, then, and brought it to the hard place on her beskar, the place where her belly would grow. "I want to have a girl first."

"Can Sinae do that?" Later--later, he'd tell himself it was a joke. In the now, Mekel kissed her cheek. She tasted like salt.

"Sinae will select the best embryo. Now that we have your consent to make them."

"Good."

Later, he'd deny it. But in this now, Mekel wanted the kid--the kid and Millifar of Ordo. In this now, the idea that saying yes was making a choice didn’t occur to him.

It would take over a decade for him to realize what he’d done--and in the ensuing years, losing Millifar and her daughter would become just two of Mekel’s many regrets.

Xxx

*Dalia: “If Revan--or Sheris--are watching this broadcast now, do you have any words for them?”*

*Meetra: “I have been told that Revan has no memories of her past.”*

*Dalia: “That is the claim, but in light of her victory, I wonder. I suppose, knowing her as well as you once did, you will be able to tell.”*

*Meetra (shrugs modestly): “My words are for Sheris, for she was my friend, once. I look forward to seeing her again. We will have so much to discuss. And, I must admit, I am hoping… a mutual friend of ours suggested she might be up for a game of chess?”*

--Interview with Meetra Surik, Alderaan LiveWire, 3966 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx
Mekel’s third visitor scared the crap out of him. By that time, another half-day had passed and Mekel had tottered outside on legs that felt too stiff--had stumbled into another Mandalorian mourning circle, been poked and prodded at--first by Sinae and then by an earnest blonde Jedi who'd be hot if she wasn't so cold. He'd even met the one Milli called 'the Deathbringer,' and she seemed pretty fracking normal for someone with a title like that. The Balmorran Star was tattooed on her cheek. Her name was Meeta Surik and she was the Jedi Exile the newsvids had been gushing about when the real Jedi had all been dying on Katarr.

Holocams followed Master Meeta Surik everywhere. She was a healer. Did a bunch of work on the injured, always looking serious and sweet for the cams.

But when she came alone to see him and Telos--her face turned cold, almost angry.

"There is nothing wrong with his body," she said, staring through Mekel as if he were invisible. "Except dark side corruption. When it permeates the flesh like this there is nothing we can do. The most notable example of this phenomenon is Malak D'Reev and his rotting jaw. I assume you've heard the tale…"

"Yeah. Darth Malak was my sponsor," Mekel was trying to be polite because she could probably kill him. "And Revan's my cousin. Master Vrook was my dads. He's dead now."

The Last Jedi's eyes were dark brown--warm color--but nothing warm in them. She made prickles run up Mekel's spine. "I know who you are, Mekel Jin."

I'm famous. The Last Jedi knows my name. The thought made his mouth twist up, even if it wasn't much of a laugh.

"Your friend's suffering is something I cannot mend," Surik continued. "I am sorry."

"Don't worry about it." Mekel wanted to put himself between her and Dustil. He didn't like her stance, didn't like the way she kept turning and looking at an empty corner of the room, either, lips moving as if she were talking to someone who wasn't there.

The famous Jedi Exile, Mekel thought, might be fracking nuts.

"Odd, in the Force… yes." She was still talking--to thin air. "I had my connection severed in the same manner. But it did return. Perhaps Mekel's will, too, given time."

"Some fracking asshole stole it from me. Killed my father."

"Misfortune comes to everyone from time to time. It makes us stronger, for having endured."

Meeta was staring at the corner again. That empty corner, staring like someone was there. "Your father's death was a mistake."

"The asshole who killed him was already dead."

"The asshole is Oerin Lin. My brother." She raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah… really see the family resemblance." Her skin was a few shades darker than caff. Lin had been pale as sand, even before he died.

Later, Mekel would realize he'd entirely missed her use of the present tense.

The Last Jedi raised her eyebrows. "We had different fathers. But our mother was--"

"Telos." She nodded. "And they called you Coru, didn't they? Lashowe Devry was Taris. Kel Algwin, Alderaan. And Thalia May was Ziost."

"Are you in my head?" A weapon wouldn't do any good, but he reached for one anyway--coming up empty. "Get the frack out of my head!"

"No." The Last Jedi blinked. "I have no need to read your thoughts. They are as simple and predictable as your urges. But I am truly sorry I cannot help your friend." Her lips pursed in thought. "The Force is strong in him. And entirely gone from you. Curious. I have seen something almost like this before...."

"Yeah?"

Her head turned to the corner again. "This is the shatterpoint, then? These two--barely into manhood--"

Barely? "Frack you! Revan's gonna help Dustil! My cousin! She's on her way--"

"Revan?" The choked laugh could have been incredulous. "She has no healing talents."

"The other one does. That Sheris bint! She's Revan too."

Surik's amused expression faded. "I had... heard she possessed Sheris's abilities." She glanced at the corner again. "My Seer thinks she might help us, as well."

"Right. With Dustil." It was then that Mekel started to get it--what his fracked-up head hadn't let him see before. "Except... I'm gonna be gone. I'm going with the Mandalorians. They're cutting out at dusk. Can't you do something for him before that? Make him wake up so I can say goodbye-..."

"You will leave your bondmate behind?" She sounded surprised. "Willingly?"

"Sure. He's pissed at me... doesn't want me around anymore... he's got a new family, now...." Mekel barely knew this schutta, but something in her eyes made him start babbling like she'd hit him with truth serum.

Later, he was never sure exactly what he'd said--what he'd confessed--only that it ended with her sitting on the empty cot next to Dustil’s with her hand on her chin and her dark eyes wide and watchful.

(Mekel and Milli had moved Zepth’s unconscious body back to the secured room and resealed the lock. If the Exile sensed Zepth--or cared--she never brought it up with Mekel.)

"The Force is the only thing keeping your lover alive," Meetra Surik said. "Your Bezal-bond has been unbalanced, but not broken. Dustil Onasi is still your bondmate. My Seer did not think you would leave him."

"Frack your Seer," Mekel told her.

"She told me you tried." From anyone else that might have been a joke, but the Jedi Exile was deadly serious. "Thalia May she says you cannot leave Dustil, Mekel Jin. You will go down together. Thalia has told me that the fate of the galaxy depends upon it."
And that was how Mekel found out that Thalia Fracking May was one of Surik’s padawans.

"We go down together all the time," he snarled back at her. "Frack you!"

Xxx

My master never wanted a eulogy and this is not one. Meetra Surik rebuilt the Jedi Order and helped restore peace to the galaxy, but she was no saint. She was sometimes petty and always manipulative. She was, in more ways than one, her mother's daughter--righteous and self-aggrandizing, filled with a zealot's fire for a singular truth. By her very nature, her gift in the Force inspired others to bend to her will--whether she willed them to or not.

Imagine, if you can, being a child that no one could ever deny, being the ringleader of every mischief, the director of every adventure. And then imagine that child grown with a woman's strength, subjected to the horrors of war… and then severed from every bond she had ever known.

Imagine her being pulled from afar by the puppet-strings of a true Sith Master. Imagine her being forged to hunt Force-sensitives, to twist her former bonds of affection to make echoes of her own emptiness.

Imagine a Jedi so numbed by broken bonds that she came to the dark from a place of indifference.

Indifference is a crueler knife than hunger. A more brutal instrument than pain. My master was the Lord of Apathy before her mother's death shattered her chains--and, once free, she had to learn like a child all over again.

How to feel. What her purpose was for.

What the Order would be.

It goes without saying she made mistakes.

Upon her return to civilization, my master was starving, though she knew it not. We followers were the meat between her teeth, the plia-bread in her hands. Our love sustained and fed her, and in return, she strengthened our own gifts, gave us a cause, and formed ties of affection between us all.

The kindest thing she could do for her disciples was to send us away, far across the stars to form enclaves of our own--to train others away from her influence--and in doing so find our own agency. But that took time, and in the first days of the New Jedi Order if my master erred on the side of the autocrat who could blame her? She knew nothing else.

None of us were blameless in that time. I have my own smuggler's cache of lies to atone for.

--Thalia May, to her padawan, Personal Journal

[Note: unlike her prophecies, this document is undated. Her padawan is also unnamed.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

If there’d been any justice in the galaxy, the fourth visitor would have been Thalia May and Mekel could’ve told her what orifice she could shove her prophecies up… but instead, the fourth visitor was Mydia Blais, accompanied by a battered protocol droid carrying two bundles of joy.

One bundle was half the size of the other one.
For some reason, both bundles had green hair and started screaming the second they were carried into the room.

Later, when Mekel tried to remember what they'd looked like at that age, all he could see was that hair and those wide-open mouths. The wailing of them.

"This is Ganesh and Myleah," Mydia told Mekel, raising her voice over the screaming. She flopped down on his cot with an exaggerated sigh. "Do you think Dustil will live? He looks awful." She frowned, folding her arms. "I don't want him to die."

"He's not dying." He sat down beside her. The monitors around Telos were still green and steady.

Mekel was leaving soon. Because, seriously, frack this. Frack the Force. Frack Dustil. Frack fate. Dxun was a moon above Onderon and Mekel had always wanted to see the Iziz on Onderon, to see drexl. No Force? Fine. He could still be a Mandalorian. "Dustil's not dying. He's gonna be fine. I'm going to Dxun. You guys can be one happy fracking family without me."

Mydia Blais rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly! We can't be a family! I’m going to be a Jedi. Master Surik says I would be a very powerful force for good if I apply myself to her teachings. We’re going to Coruscant after this. I think Inse is there.” She smiled dreamily. "I’m going to have her killed."

“Yeah? You’re doing a great job with the Jedi thing.”

“Thank you.” She beamed at him, missing the sarcasm by a parsec. “Have you seen the blue-eyed Seer yet? She won’t speak to me. Peasants from Ziost always have such a superstitious fear about our family--we didn’t really grow up bathing in their blood, you know. Maybe Mother did, but she was so old-fashioned. Personally, I think it would be disgusting--”

Mekel only knew one way to shut her up--and maybe piss off Telos if he ever heard about it, too. “Myd.” He tugged at the buckle of his pants. “Come here.” With his other hand, he switched the privacy settings on the empty cot on. A field shimmered into existence around them, blocking out unconscious Telos and his crying kids and the droid--not to mention Thalia May and fate--along with the rest of the kriffing moon.

At least... in theory.

XXX

You possess the gift of Force-sight, Padawan, which is different from foresight, being as it denies wisdom and experience, showing only the cruelest of futures--the ones carved by error and mischance.

Sometimes the path to good does not come from good. This is the hardest lesson you must learn. It was easier for me, being raised on blood sacrifice, but even I nearly faltered the day I spoke to Mekel Jin on the cold moon of Oas....

--Thalia May, to her padawan, Personal Journal

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

XXX

The fifth visitor was Thalia May.
She came in about an hour after Mydia left after *not* coming... because it turned out Mekel wasn't in the mood after all. He'd kept thinking of Telos and those kids on the other side of the privacy screen and that distraction, as Master Uther used to say about being a Sith and grading term papers, had killed all the joy.

Thalia May came alone and was so serious that Mekel couldn't even make that phrase into a dirty joke.

“My Master says you’re going to Onderon, Coru.” Thalia's eyes were even bluer than Mekel remembered, like lakes in her brown face.

“Your Master gives me the creeps,” he told her. "How the hell are you even here, Ziest?"

“I came with the others.” She shrugged. “Master Surik and her brother Oerin Lin.”

Mekel’s blood froze. “Oerin? That asshole is *here? Now?*”

“You haven’t seen him. Of course.” She smiled. “He hides—and even when he does appear, he rarely chooses his real form.” She laughed. She’d always had a beautiful laugh, even on Korriban when there was nothing beautiful to laugh about. "If I'm not mistaken, he's doing interviews as Meetra Surik right now while our master meditates in her quarters."

“Lin *should* be dead.” For what he had done to Mekel’s father and Kex and Milli. For what he had taken from Mekel before that. "Did you come here to tell me how to fracking kill him?"

"Oerin *is* dead.” Her head tilted. “I thought you understood.” She looked at Dustil. “The Force is the only thing binding Oerin to this plane. Not so different from Telos, by the looks of things.”

“Banthashit! You’re saying Dustil’s gonna turn into a walking corpse?”

Thalia blinked. “If I said you were the only one who could save him, would you do it?”

In the now, Mekel was too pissed to notice she hasn't answered the question. “There's no way I could. I saved him tons already. Wasn’t for me, you’d both have died on Korriban.”

“Yes.” Thalia nodded. “I thanked you on Korriban, too. Remember?”

“Yeah. Before I’d even done it.” But back then, Thally hadn’t seemed so sure of herself. Back then she’d been weak.

The woman standing before him wearing gray robes had new scars on her face and hands. Her soft blue eyes were the only soft thing about her. She wasn't weak now--he was.

“I don’t have to listen to you!” Mekel snapped. That quiet stillness of hers used to infuriate challengers back on Dresh’d. Keep 'em raging 'til the last second, when she’d finally strike. Seeing all possible futures was fracking handy in combat. After the second week, everyone wanted Good Old Reliable on their team.

“You have never listened to anyone.” Her voice raised, and if Mekel had a saber on him he'd have drawn it. "I could say that you and Millifar would be happy until the end of your days. That you would find the peace you seek on the Dxun moon--peace without the Force--peace like Ulic sought in vain. I could tell you the names of six children born to Millifar and Clan Ordo--and it would still leave you wanting. Or, in another fate, I could recount the Jedi *hero* you could be--the noble and principled man, at ease with peace and battle. I could tell you tales of your half-Zabrak son, Ollivair Korr, and his mother--tales of your loyalty to one woman, or one man, or one cause--but it
would still never be enough for you…” Her voice had an edge now. "Would it, Coruscant?"

“Huh?” He could never tell when she was putting him on. Old Faithful, they used to call her--but sometimes, Thalia was wrong--or Thalia just flat-out lied. “Wait. Ollivair Korr? Zabrak? Like Lydie? You’re saying Lydie and me are gonna have a kid?”

Thalia sighed. “No.” She walked to Dustil’s cot and sat down, reaching for the unconscious man’s hand. It dwarfed her own. Mekel had a weird flash of memory--of the time he’d caught Thally in the sonic back on Dreshdae. Plan had been to kill her, split the prestige with Shaardan but she’d been so naked and then she’d looked at him and just shook her head.

“You won’t,” she’d said while he’d stared slack-jawed at her tits. And she’d been right. He’d cold-cocked Shaardan instead--was right after Selene died, thanks to Shaardan, (thanks to Mekel--who could have stopped it and hadn’t.. because he wanted Telos to need him and not Selene, who was gonna wash out anyway--)

“They will haunt you all of your days, those memories of Korriban.” Thalia looked up at him like she knew his thoughts, and patted the cot beside her. “You need to make peace with them in every future. So sit down, Mekel. Try.”

“Yeah, okay.” He did, while she peered at Dustil’s waxy hand like she was some kind of palm-scryer.

“You do love him,” she murmured, wrinkling her forehead and stroking the lines in Dustil’s hand with one of her delicate, breakable fingers. “You have always loved him, Mekel--as much as you are capable of loving anyone other than yourself.”

“I loved a lot of sents.” He leered at her. “Shame you’ll never know what you’ve missed out on.”

“Oh, I know.” Trace of a real smile there--something about it made him think that studied expression she was putting on before was fake. “I see futures in my dreams, Mekel. I’ve dreamed of you--of you and me.”

“Oh, yeah?” He leaned closer. “What were we like?”

“Damned.” Ziost raised an eyebrow. “Strung out on deathsticks and starving on a bombed-out planet. I’ve never been sure which planet. Perhaps one we destroyed.”

“Yeah, well…” Mekel looked down at Telos instead of meeting those blue pools she had for eyes. He tried to memorize the sharp curves of his bondmate's face: full lips, stubborn jaw, soft stubble on his cheeks and chin. “Never liked deathsticks, so that’s banthashit.”

Thalia May sighed. “What do you want, Coru?”

“Don’t you know?” He was trying to flirt, making his voice hoarse in the way that Telos had always dropped trou for, but the directness of her gaze blocked him--even when he wasn't looking at her. “Everything I can get, Zio. What else is there?”

"Is that why you're going to Dxun with the Mandalorians?"

"It's a start. It's something." Better than sitting here waiting for Telos to die.

Her voice softened. “You know… you won’t find the Force on Onderon. Or Dxun.”

“No shit. I'm not looking for the impossible--"
"Anything is possible with the Force."

Mekel looked up. Those blue eyes were staring directly into his. His heart clenched and seem to skip a beat. “Wait. You mean I can get it back? You’re serious?”


But suddenly all of his pipe-dreams about joining the Mandalorians and living without the Force seemed as appealing as living the rest of his days in the Underground.

Just as trapped. Just as dry and colorless.

“Dustil will help me get the Force back? How?”

“With trust. You need to trust, Mekel. Trust in Him, even when your heart warns you otherwise.”

“Are you nuts? Of course I trust Telos! He’s gonna be okay? He’s gonna wake up?”

“He will.” Her voice seemed sure of it. "But you need to trust Valkorion, Mekel--not Dustil. Dustil may not understand. Make him understand. Then trust His Luminance to guide you both." She paused and Mekel looked up at her. Those pools of eyes she had were liquid, now, and he thought she was about to cry. "The Emperor will save you both, Mekel Jin. He is the only one who can."

XXX

I spoke of lies before, but I never told you the cost.

The night before I spoke with Mekel, I dreamed of a future where the two Revans combined their strength and cleansed Dustil Onasi's body of the dark side taint.

With Valkorion's hold on Dustil and Mekel broken, their bond recovered.

They were happy.

Mekel regained the Force. They both became respected Jedi.

In that future, my friends were happy.

But in that future, Valkorion's rise was never checked, and his Empire returned in less than one lifetime. Dustil and Mekel's happiness brought fifty years of prosperity--but also--

A thousand years of war with the Sith, war that drenched the Core in blood--

--all for the fate of two men.

You must only lie for the greater good, my Padawan, but you will have to lie. Often.

--Thalia May, to her padawan, Personal Journal

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

The last visitor came in the middle of the night, but Mekel was ready for him.

Now that he knew what to expect it was obvious that the wide smile on Zepth's face was
Tenebrae's, not Revan's.

Valkorion, he reminded himself. *His Luminance likes to be called Valkorion.*

"Oh!" The Sith Emperor said, smiling. "I rather thought you'd be asleep."

"I was." Mekel untangled himself from Telos, who'd rolled over half-crushing him. Maybe it was good, that Telos was rolling over, even if he still didn't wake. "But you tripped the sensor alarm, my Lord."

He'd found it and set it just in case Mydia decided to come back for round two. Not that he didn't trust her… but he didn't trust her. Milli hadn't come back from the fire circle--which Mekel guessed meant she'd spent the night out there.

He hoped she had someone to keep her warm.

"Clever," the Sith Lord chuckled. "You're so clever."

"Yeah." Mekel shrugged. "Was expecting you, my Lord. Did you want to do another ceremony, now?"

"Oh, ho! Yes." The Emperor beamed. "But not here, my dear boy. No! Keep your shirt on! Not here, dear boy!"

"I'll follow you," Mekel vowed, snapping his shirt shut again. "Anywhere."

"Anywhere…" the Zabrak frowned. "I must say, I had expected I'd need to convince you. Forgive me, but a thousand years can make one a bit… mistrustful. You will truly follow me? Anywhere? Of your own free will?"

"Thalia May said that you'll get me the Force back. And save Dustil."

Later, there would be too much time to remember the order of those words, how eager he'd been, like a trained kath.

"Oh, ho! And who is Thalia May?"

"Thalia was trained on Zioist. She sees the future--"

"A Seer." The wide Zabrak mouth stretched open. "I lost so many at Zioist, you know. To the bombs. So many gone I hardly know the future myself! How fortuitous this Thalia survived! Thalia May… May… that seems almost familiar….

"We're friends from Korriban, my Lord. She was a student there."

"A rare gift indeed, friendship!" His Luminance lowered his voice theatrically. "Well, if Seer Thalia says you must follow, then follow you must! We'll need to bring Dustil, of course, if I am to heal him. And the *first* thing we'll need is a ship….

"I have an idea about that." *Always scout your escape routes.* Mekel had already spotted the best ship half-buried under a blanket of snow: disc-shaped, with the parts of its hull that peeked out as blue as Thalia's (or Lydie's) eyes.

Xxx

Wiskit Thy: "Exile, I'm hoping you can tell our viewers on Corulag more about the Sith Lords and
how you beat them.”

Meetra: "There is much I can't say and, of course, the Fleet were a great help destroying their Machine Ships."

Wiskit: "Of course! But these Sith lurk in the shadows? They could be among us now? They could be anyone at all?"

Meetra: "Fortunately for the Republic, I have an acute sense of Sith corruption."

Wisket: "Uh, okay. Let's try a different approach. There are Mandalorians on Oas. Do you hate them?"

Meetra: "Why would I? I'd sooner hate the sun itself. Or a flower. Mandalorians are free sentients who just want to return to their lands. They are a peaceful people, who mean us no harm."

Wisket: "The Mandalorians are a peaceful people who mean us no harm."

--Holovid interview, Mantellian Inquirer, by Wisket Lee, BBY 3966.

[Note: An analysis of Meetra Surik’s interviews from her time on Oas indicate a variation in idiom and expression that could indicate a split personality—or an imposter. One of the more half-cocked theories put forth by my colleagues is that half of her interviews were performed by an impersonator, perhaps a master of illusions…]

--Holovid clip Excerpted from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

Dustil woke up because someone was pounding on metal, right by his head. They'd been doing it for some time, because his dreams had been full of marching sents, and someone (probably Mekk) dropping rocks off cliffs as if for nonsence.

When he woke up he had no fricking idea where he was—at first.

The pounding continued, adding in some yelling. He stared at the wall, noting its familiar durasteel curve, the distinctive hexagonal grid in the plates as his brain connected the dots.

When it finished connecting, he flopped out of the bed like a newborn nerf, taking in the double bunk, the scattered crates, the random pieces of machinery and clothing strewn all over the room.

"What the... hell?"

He was in Dad and Revan's room. Aboard the Ebon Hawk. And, from the hum beneath his feet, they were in hyperspace.

The banging and the yelling went on from the other side of the wall. Dustil slammed his own arm into it. "Shut up!"

There was a pause like he'd scared whoever into silence. But then the banging began again. He thought he heard a few words, maybe cries for help.
"Stop it! I'm coming, okay?" But when he tried to walk, his legs buckled. He felt so weak. And funny, like parts of him had fallen asleep.

More banging.

"I'm coming!"

"Hey! Dustil." Mekel appeared in the doorway, out of breath like he'd run from the front of the ship. "You're awake?" His brows beetled together. "Sure you should be up? You look like hell."

"Frack you, too." Dustil flipped him off.

"I'm just worried." Mekel moved in with the instincts of a hunter-killer droid, managing to catch Dustil a few seconds before his knees buckled.

"This is my dad's room," Dustil objected. "You can tell me why we're here and who've you got locked up--but after you find us another bunk. We can't stay here."

"But it's the biggest room." Mekel frowned. "We're almost there anyway so it doesn't matter. Just relax." His mouth twitched and he shifted his hips with more grace than Mydia had ever shown, but Dustil wasn't amused. "Come on, Telos. Enjoy it. I'm really glad you're awake."

You're impossible. But Mekk couldn't hear him. "You're a pain in my ass, Jin."

Mekel snickered. "Seriously. I'm glad you're alright." He caught Dustil's arm and pulled him back down, half-sprawled on his own lap. The banging on the wall went on, and Dustil wondered if he was the only one hearing because Mekk didn't seem to notice.

"I feel like hell."

"Trust me when I say you shouldn't look in a mirror." Mekel rolled on his side and Dustil rolled to face him. "But ask… ask anything you want. His Luminance told me he could wake you up, but I thought he was just being an optimist."

"His Lum--" Oh, no. "Mekk, do you have the Sith Emperor locked in the bunk next door?"

"Of course not! He's flying the ship!" Mekel paused. "That's Polla Organa locked next door. Didn't know she was on Hawk til--well, we should've run checks before we stole this rig, but I didn't think--"

"What?" The Sith Emperor was flying the ship. Same Sith Emperor who'd been using them up like some kind of battery. Didn't Mekel remember that? "Mekk, why are we on the Hawk with the fracking Sith Emperor?"

"Because he can save you, Telos. He promised." Mekk's eyes glittered with sincerity. Something about his conviction made Dustil's hackles rise.

"Save me? From what?"

"You're dying, I think." His former bondmate swallowed. "Told you before not to look in a mirror. It's bad."

Mekk didn't look so hot himself. He was pale and sweaty, and the Force made Dustil too aware of how fast the man's heart was beating in his chest.

"What are you talking about? I feel fine--" Dustil's voice broke off when he waved his own hand in
front of his face and caught a glimpse of it.

White-purple, ringing to gray. All of the veins visible and black. And the skin looked like it was flaking in places.

He looked at his other hand, rolled up the sleeves to see his arms. The same. His skin felt too hard in places and too mushy in others. Bile welled in his throat and he felt like he was going to be sick. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

"I don't know. Milli said she had to pull you out of your Stinger in vacuum. You got burned, but that doesn't explain why you're not healing. You've been packed in kolto--Jedi healers came, even--but you just--nothing worked." his voice faltered. Mekk's dark eyes were suddenly enormous and in Dustil's face, blinking back tears as if Dustil was one of his marks. "I didn't want to lose you. I didn't think you'd ever wake up again--"

"But I feel fine." He did. Mostly. A little wobbly. And parts of his body seemed numb in a way that might not be good. He couldn't feel his guts at all. But it didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. "Cut the banthashit, Mekk. I'm fine. Don't tell me you trust that asshole--"

The ship jerked, hyperspace engines ticking down.

"We're coming out of hyperspace." Mekel blinked and turned paler like he always did coming out of hyperspace, and then an actual fracking tear snaked its way down his cheek. Later, Dustil would wonder at that tear--what it meant. "We have to get you better, fockda."

"Where are we?"

"Dromund Kaas." Mekk wiped his face with his sleeve. "His Luminance has a plan--"

"Stop calling him that!" Dustil had had enough. He pushed past the other man and stumbled into the corridor. He felt fine… just… just parts of him were numb. The banging to the right of him seemed to increase and he punched the lock open. Door slid open and there was Polla Organa, knuckles bloody and skull shaved bald, yelling. She barrelled into him like a bull bantha, still screaming, her hands scraping his belt like she was looking for a weapon. It took Dustil a second to remember he was bigger and stronger than her, and in that second she almost knocked him over.

In the next, he nearly backhanded her into the wall, the Force welling up inside him with a heady power that felt like a spice rush. In the last second, he managed to check it, and she only staggered back a few steps, eyes wide and shocked. Something wrong with her eyes. They'd been a bright, fake green before. Now the color looked like it was melting into brown--like the dye that'd made them green was wearing off.

"Get off me," she hissed, those twisted eyes narrowing into slits of pure hate.

"No thanks for letting you out?" Dustil scoffed. "I'm not the one who locked you up in the fracking first place. They kidnapped me, too!"

"Not kidnapped," Mekel said from behind them. "Rescued. I told you already, Meez Organa, I didn't know you were in here--"

"--Yeah, yeah. Just wanted the ship. I got that." The Hawk jerked again and her eyes widened. "If you're down here, who the hell is flying?"

"The Sith Emperor," Dustil told her. "Mekk says. He says we're going to Dromund Kaas."
"Great." She let out a sigh. "The old homestead. What the hell happened to you, Dustil? You look like the walking dead."

"I don't know--"

"Vacuum burns--" Mekk said at the same time.

"Don't look like vacuum burns to me. And how are we at Kaas already? Hasn't even been a day--"

"His Luminance knows the hyperspace routes--the new ones that the Machine Ships made."

"Really." Polla's skeptical tone didn't match that spark of sudden interest in her eyes. "Does he know all of them--"

"Attention Unknown Vessel," a voice broke in, blasting through the comm speakers. "This is the Acting Port Authority of the planet Dromund Kaas, under the guardianship of the Republic Fleet. State your business and your command code. Unauthorized deliveries are not accepted at this time. This world is interdicted. State your business and--"

"Shit," Polla muttered. "You mean high-and-mighty Tenny-Bro didn't bother to grab a simple freighter auth before you started this jaunt?"

"I don't know--" Mekk began, but Polla was already heading for the bridge, with Dustil right on her heels.

Xxx

Panning shot, establishing location.

Great Hunt in the sky above. Snow on the ground on a flat plain.

An assembly of robed Jedi watches a shuttle descend. The Ssyrian pan flute plays a march, increasing tempo until the shuttle doors open.

(music stops.)

Trandoshan Admiral Aridoma Rensha emerges from the shuttle, weak sunlight glinting from the medals on her chest. She is followed by two white-clad Human women.

From a distance, the only distinguishing feature the Revans possess is that one has a golden arm.

The Jedi Exile steps forward from the lines of robed Jedi. (Casting note: Meetra Surik needs to project an aura of emotional distance, mixed with vulnerability. NOT SEXY. Please don't send me Seriina Starr in another holomask!)

Meetra: "Welcome to Oas."

Admiral Rensha: "Knight Surik."

Sheris: "Meetra."

Meetra: "Thank you for saving the galaxy from the Sith machines. We Jedi have done our humble best to give succor to the injured--if you have more injured upon your ship, our healers can--"

Sheris: "I'm a healer, Meetra." (Giggles) "Have you forgotten?"
Meetra: "Of course you are. My friend Sheris. It's been too long. Truly."

Revan (interrupting): "Why the hell are you here?"

Meetra: "My padawans and I came to help--"

Revan: "Why?"

Sheris (hums): "Decorum, Revan!"

Revan: "Where's Canderous? I know he's alive. And the other Mandalorians? They were here yesterday--"

Meetra: "What Mandalorians remained after you used them to fight your war left at dawn. We gave them salvage ships and bid them farewell."

Rensha: "You gave them ships?"

Meetra: "Transport ships." (Pause.) "I have a message. For Revan."

Revan: "From Canderous?"

Meetra: "No. From another, who admires you both. The message is this. The Mandalorians are free. That was the bargain. It was broken once. Do not break it again."

Sheris: "Ah."

Revan (whispered, furious): "What?"

Sheris: "Later--"

Revan: "What bargain?"

Sheris: "Whikii heemtesh. Ayren Len, na dhesti?"

Revan: "Khaleen! Ni'istak! Agrusulk leem...."

(Note: since no translator has even been able to make sense of the language used, the actors should feel free to improvise during this sequence, adjusting for length with the percussion section, until the electro-harp begins.

"Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot," Starfire 2! The Mandalorian Cycle! written by Senator See'raa Wen, 3940 BBY.

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

"Unknown vessel," the broadcast began again. "Respond now or we will be forced to take hostile action."

After a quick, muttered exchange with the Emperor, which seemed to involve the smuggler bargaining with the immortal chivhole, Polla Organa just flat-out grabbed the comm from Zepth's hand. "This is Captain Desidirata Tran. Running Freighter Blue Ghost with relief supplies from Hakis Six. Got... vitamins from the charity op 'Blue Milk of Human Kindness.' You guys got a landing pad for me in Kaas City?"
She was good, Dustil noted, a little numbly because he'd just noticed his own reflection in the Hawk's mirrored cockpit door.

Mekk was right. He did look dead.

_But I feel fine._ Dustil had to keep telling himself that or he'd panic. When was the last time he'd eaten, or taken a piss? He couldn't feel anything in his core--like parts of his body had just switched off. And when he pressed his hand to his chest--

His heart was slow. Too slow.

The Emperor sat in Zepth's body in the co-pilot's chair, chuckling softly to himself. "We need to land near the Dark Temple," he told Polla Organa. "Even if they've rebuilt the landing pads in the spaceport, why waste half a day's journey?"

"When did the Republic come back to this system?" Polla waved the Sith asshole off. "I was just here like a week ago!"

"Only a few days. Their claim on my planet is tenuous. They have only the one capital ship--and I believe we have more loyalists incoming…"

The comm beeped. "**Request denied. We have reason to believe that the Blue Ghost is a smuggling ship.**"

"Of course she's a smuggling ship--! Who else would be insane enough to come into a warzone?" Polla made a face and leaned over the deck, unceremoniously shoving Mekk's new best friend the Emperor out of the way, and grabbing the yoke.

"We can run their gauntlet," she added, nodding at the gunner chair. "Probably. If one of you kidnapping schuttas wants to handle defense."

Mekk looked suspicious. "Still don't get why you're helping us."

"Do I have another choice? Hell if I'm going to die for you." She angled the yoke down hard.

"You'd better be right about saving Dustil's damn life."

"I feel fine--"

"You're not," Polla Organa snapped. "I've seen mummified remains smuggled out of dig sites in better shape than you."

"**Blue Ghost! Any further incursion into the atmosphere of this planet will be taken as a hostile measure. We are launching fighters now--**"

"Frack." Polla pointed at Mekel. "Aren't you supposed to be some kind of gunner? Get to it!"

"**I'm a better shot than he is--**" Dustil spoke before he thought. For a weird second, it was like arguing with Dustil's dad.

"Maybe. You're dying." Her expression was almost feral. "You'd better be dying. We'd better not be here just because Tenny-Bro got homesick!"

"Oh, ho," the Emperor murmured. "I will leave you all to your tasks. Do get us down in one piece. There is so much to prepare for the ceremony--I have most elements in place but assembling the sacrifices--" Zepth's head hit the command deck with a think, horns scraping a lever that made
them pitch wildly.

"@@@@@@-S2-1-$&&@&," Dustil said in Ancient Sith and then shoved the unconscious Zabrak out of the way. It was the gyros. He knew this one. His dad had shown him exactly what to do.

"Blue Ghost-- we will have no choice but to shoot--"

"They're not shooting, though," Mekk said. He'd stumbled to the turret chair, strapped himself in. "Why are they stalling?"

"They're not sure what to do with us," Polla answered. "I'd bet anything--"

"This is General Jiya Sand." A new voice, now. "I know exactly which ship this is. Tell me--immediately--who is on board and what your business is on Kaas. I'm launching three full squadrons to escort you to ground, and you're going to follow them. Are we clear?"

"--they recognize this ship," Polla finished smugly. She reached for the comm-switch.

"Oh, frack," Mekel whispered.

"Shhh." She waved him off and flipped it back on.

"We understand. Perfectly." Polla's voice shifted, developed a crisp edge. "This is Revan Onasi Starfire.... we can dispense with the rest of my surnames… this is Revan. I have returned. I have returned bringing three extremely dangerous and powerful Sith Lords with me that I have captured. I intend to lock them up in the Dark Temple… and... if you try and interfere they might escape, so… keep your distance!"

Mekel shouldn't be making that face because Dustil was gonna laugh and the comm was still open.

"Are we clear?" Polla growled into the mic.

There was a pause.

"Still giving you an escort," the general said. "If this is one of your tricks, Revan--"

"Don't be a fool." Polla rolled her eyes. "Proceeding to the Dark Temple. Recommend you don't try and stop me. Did you hear what I did to those ships above Rekkiad? I'll do it again."

Mekk was shaking his head. He didn't think this was gonna work.

On the floor, the Emperor of the Sith let out a snore and rolled over on his belly. It didn't occur to Dustil until later that the smart thing would've been to Force-fry the asshole and surrender to General Sand.

General Sand coughed. "Usually, you call me Jiya. I suppose you don't remember. I'm watching footage now from Degriass, General Revan. If you're here now... why are there two of you landing on Oas?"

"Holomask." Polla didn't blink, but her hands were white-knuckled on the yoke. "One of em's an imposter in a holomask. Just some grunt I paid off. Maybe arrest her. I don't care, okay?" She gunned the accelerator, dropping them a few thousand meters in a few seconds, causing Mekk, who'd already looked green, to gag and nearly lose his lunch.
For a null she was good at this, Dustil realized. Good at pretending to be Revan. Good at piloting. Their ship swerved past a loose squad of snubs, flipping between their blockade like it was nothing.

No one fired on them.

Mekk started retching. Dustil laughed.

"I'm watching you," the general warned.

"Good. Here." Polla back-jetted neatly, diving through the cross-winds like she was slicing through water, and setting the Hawk down flat on a landing pad. The Dark Temple loomed in front of them. Someone had blasted the front doors open since the last time Dustil had seen it.

Their escort lit up the sensors on every side of them. Snubs came down, ringing them in a circle, guns all aimed to the center. Dustil had seen this scenario on fighter sims. If they tried to take off they'd be blasted from all directions.

"Thanks for the escort, Jiya," the Deralian drawled. "Now tell your men to back off."

"We can't do that, General Revan," one of them said. "Sorry."

Polla made a disgusted face and switched the comm off. "We're here," she snapped. "Maybe one of you should lock up the Sith Emperor while I figure out how to get us out of this. Zaalbar told me before there's a tunnel to the lower level--if we run into the Temple, we might be able to make it out to the jungle--"

"Thought we were here to save me," Dustil said.

"You don't really look like Revan, Polla," Mekel said. "No offense, but you're not gonna fool them walking out of here."

"You want me to save your friend or not, Mekel Jin?" She made an exasperated noise.

"We're good from here," Mekel shrugged. "You can go."

"I feel fine," Dustil added. Better than fine, now. The energy coming off that Temple was really something.

"Fine. In that case… Tenny-Bro and I had a bargain." Polla was rummaging through drawers in the cabinet wall now, pulling out a half-dismantled blaster that Dustil was pretty sure didn't work. "I drop you off here, he gives me the ship with all the nav points programmed in. All the Sleeper hyper routes in the galaxy." Her voice sounded tired. "I got you here. Take your damn passed-out Sith Lord and get off my fracking ship."

"It's my father's ship, and if you try and lift off now, you'll get blown out of the sky."

"Maybe. But you're father's not here. He's getting court-martialed on Kuat… or, Coruscant or something. Last we heard anyway. Canderous thought it was just the Republic saving face. They're not gonna do anything to Carth. He's too popular. Same goes for her, I bet. The real Revan."

"My father's not with Revan?" He left me? He left both of us? So typical that Dustil wanted to laugh.

"Guess you were too unconscious to watch the news. Carth didn't have a choice. Brought as much
of the Sith Fleet as he could to surrender. But a bunch mutinied--jumped off to frack knows where. *Here*, probably. Bet that's why General Sand is so suspicious…" She toed the Emperor's unconscious body, frowning. "This Sand guy doesn't know if Revan's with the Republic or not. I can use that. Now, get your Sith Lord off my sh--"

The Zabrak groaned, eyes fluttering, sparking red. He sat up. "There," he chuckled softly. "Preparations are complete. Some of the guardians in Kaas City were suspicious before I removed their will."

"Try that with me," Polla planted the gun in his face. "You'll be sorry."

"Nonsense! I like the galaxy better with you in it. So much more fun with all of your vague threats." Vitiate batted the blaster away, almost playfully.

Polla shoved it back. "Whatever this crazy stunt is, you'd *better* save Carth's kid, or I'll get the real Revan back here and have her deal with you."

"Oh, ho." The madman chuckled as he stood up. "I quite believe you would." He smiled, like a serpent unraveling its coils. Like something ancient. His voice deepened, thickened, until it seemed to resonate within the Force. Echo in Dustil's head. "You would, wouldn't you? Fetch her for me? To save these two?"

It was really something, Dustil thought, the way evil assholes laughed exactly like holovillains in the vids.

"I-I…" something sparked in those half-dyed eyes, the irises twisting between green and brown. Polla's entire body shuddered. "I--will."

"Yes. My will." The Emperor lifted his arm and crooked his finger. "My will is that you do this one thing. Such a little thing, smuggler. Bring Revan to me. Then you may have your ship and go."

Polla Organa knelt, face growing wooden and cold. "Yes." Her jaw was clenched. Her lip was bleeding.

"Good." The Zabrak's head to Dustil. "Shall we begin?"

Dustil felt the Force rising like a fire inside of him, dark whispers echoing. His vision blurred until all he could see was the Deralian's face. And in that moment, his eyes weren't his own--he was looking out through the Zabrak's--through Mekk's, through a thousand others and somewhere--somewhere across the Force he felt a strand tug like a web.

He felt *Her* turn, Her power molten in their hands and She turned and She reached and She saw--She saw--

--*his own body, glowing, Mekk glowing next to him. And Polla kneeling, head bent, face blank and empty like she was already gone, like she was nothing, too--*

**No. No! What have you done, Vitiate?**

Revan's dismay was so comical that Dustil heard himself laugh.

"Dust?" A hand grabbed at his chest, a weight there, Mekel--trying to pull him--face right there--sour breath and stubble. Wide eyes. Frightened. "Are you okay?"

Even now, Mekk didn't get it.
"You're an idiot." Their foreheads touched and the Force expanded around them, amplified by the pulse of the Temple nearby. *You led us right into a trap, fockda.*

"Thalia--she said--"

"She's *Sith*, asshole! Just like Vitiate. You keep trusting fracking *Sith!* What the hell is wrong with you?"

Dustil was laughing because it didn't matter. The darkness surged between them and it didn't matter. Mekel was there, he wasn't alone and everything he felt--this passion was *power* --was theirs.

"You were dying." The bond flared between them as the world went white. Dustil couldn't tell if they were standing up or not. Somewhere, he thought he heard chanting and smelled incense. Heard flames crackling--and screams. Time spanned both centuries and seconds. Sparks flickered and went out. "I didn't want you to die. I just wanted the Force again."

"Which one is it Mekk? Me alive or the fracking Force?" But Dustil already knew. It was never one thing with Mekk. It never could be.

Elsewhere, *She* was running down a hall, shoving open a door, interrupting an impossible scene. Her own body. Revan's own face--

"*Something's wrong, Dar!* she said. "*Something's wrong! We have to go--""

Elsewhere, he saw the *Ebon Hawk* take off like a shot slung from hell, wobbling in the cross-winds like her pilot had the jitters, streaking past the burned-out wreckage of at least two squads of snubs. The damage around the Temple radiated out in a perfect circle, extending from the eldritch fire that flickered through their body--

*Which body? Where's my fracking body?*

Dustil glanced back.

His body and Mekk's floated, frozen like statues. Both of their mouths were open in screams, eyes closed, hands crossed over their chests. Dark energy licked out from their skin, leeching color away. Mekk was as gray as he was, now.

The Emperor was humming something under his breath. He turned Zepth’s body toward the blasted Temple doors.

--*and in the ruins of Kaas CIty a procession of red-robed supplicants began their journey to the Temple--*

--*thought we'd killed all of them, guess he found more--*

**My dear boy, there are always more.**

--*dust.* Mekk's voice. Just a whisper as their thoughts interwove, shrinking until there was almost nothing left. *i did want to to save you i love--*

yeah.

Dustil knew everything. They both did. They were everywhere, a conduit of power funneling directly into--
Come, the Emperor whispered, but not to them. **Come now, Starfire. Save them.**

His face. His true face. Deathless and infinite, beaming down upon them from on high.

Xxx

Judge Advocate Qwill: "In your own words, again, General Sand, what happened at the Dark Temple on Dromund Kaas?"

General Jiya Sand: "I was cloaked in orbit aboard the Grim Redoubt when a Corellian disc-freighter attempted to run our blockade. You've already heard my deposition."

Judge Advocate Qwill: "Why did you not immediately proceed to the Dark Temple when someone claiming to be Revan Starfire informed you she was escorting powerful Sith to that location?"

General Jiya Sand: "Because I was trying to figure out what the hells was going on! I pinged Rensha and Cein--even checked with Onasi. My shuttle was ten minutes behind those snubs, but by the time we landed--"

Judge Advocate Qwill: "The Dark Temple was sealed. Seems suspicious. Satellite images clearly show the main doorway had been smashed open."

General Jiya Sand: "When I got there with my shock troops it was closed. Sealed. I don't know what to tell you. All our men were dead and the entire structure was glowing. There was a... a strange hum. Some of my men complained they heard voices... saw things. I thought I saw...." (Inaudible.) "It doesn't matter. There was nothing we could do. And then the prox alarms sounded that the Imperial capitals were coming out of orbit--"

Judge Advocate Qwill: "We'll deal with those capital ships in a moment. Let's retrench. What did you think you saw, General Sand?"

General Jiya Sand: "It doesn't matter."

Judge Advocate Qwill: "Again, this is part of Carth Onasi's trial, not yours. This is a confidential transcript. Force illusion is well-documented. Your competence is not questioned."


Judge Advocate Qwill: "Did they say anything?"

General Jiya Sand: "Bastila Shan told me not to stop her."

Judge Advocate Qwill: "Not to... stop... her? That was all?"

General Jiya Sand: "I knew what she meant. She meant Revan. Don't ask me how I knew. Revan wasn't even there yet. But I just knew."

Judge Advocate Qwill: "And that's when you ordered the retreat? When you surrendered the system back to the Sith? When a corrupted Jedi ghost told you to do it?"

General Jiya Sand: "Yes, but--"

Judge Advocate Qwill: "I think we're done here."
General Jiya Sand: "Don't ask me how I knew. I don't know how I knew. The Jedi ghost wasn't corrupted. She was bright and shining with light. She told me to let Revan come because Revan could save us all."

--Fleet Judge Advocate Inquiry into the Actions of Carth Onasi at the End of the Machine Wars, as a Precursor to His Court-Martial

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

Whatever fracked-up thing the Emperor had done to Polla's head wore off just as the Hawk made the leap back into the Degriass System. Consciousness returned like a sledgehammer, to yet another patrol ship demanding her business. Polla heard herself whimper and forced it into a laugh. Her lip was swollen where she'd bitten it, trying to use the pain to keep those sickly fingers out of her mind.

"I'm here to see Revan," she snapped at the Republic scouts trailing her. "Either let me land or shoot me down. I don't give a damn."

That worked because they didn't bug her again. The massive bulk of the Great Hunt let her pass to the surface.

In the half-day she'd been gone, Oas had changed. The bonfire where Millifar and Freya had run the razor-knife over Polla's scalp and scalded her throat with their firewhiskey was naught but a blacked circle. Three lone shuttles were parked where the Mandalorian ships had been.

A red-headed figure cloaked in a banthahide jacket was a waving speck as she descended.

For a black second, Polla considered the turret gun--wondering if wiping Revan Starfire off the damned moon might work. Probably not. And she already felt sick, like she could still hear the explosions as all of those Republic ships had burst into flames around them, with a twist of Tenny-Bro's Zabrak hand.

I just stood and watched. He made me kneel to him and watch--

The Hawk's thrusters banked as she landed, landing gear slipping a little as exhaust slicked the snow beneath into ice. A creaking noise alerted Polla that someone was trying to drag the hatch open. Using the Force to break a perfectly good hinge.

Her bitten lip twinged. "Hold your hessi," she told the outer speakers and let down the landing ramp.

Revan appeared in the doorway of the cockpit three seconds later. The fracking Force.

"Your face." The other woman's eyes went wide.

"It's nothing." Polla had already admired the bitten lip and the bruise she didn't remember getting on her cheek. "What'd you do to your hair?"

"Cut the topknot off."

"Obviously." Polla drew a breath. Her knuckles were scabbed over from where she'd beaten them on the door and throat was raw from yelling. "Me too. Millifar Ordo did it for me. Mourning. Because my friends in the Aleema died."
"I know." Revan had shaved off the brown, but not the red. It made her look just like Bossypants.

"Did you do it? Did you kill them?"

"Destroy the Aleema?" The woman shook her head. "No. But I could have… stopped it. I had the power to destroy the entire Fleet myself, but I--"

"You had a good reason not to?"

"Yes." The woman's face was frozen. "The same reason I'm coming with you now. Dustil and Mekel. What did that asshole do to you?"

"Told me to come get you." Force compulsion was funny, Polla thought. Because she was pretty sure she'd have come anyway. But how could she know?

Maybe I'd have run. Navboard full of routes I could sell or just seize monopolies--

A hundred trade routes across the galaxy, suddenly obsolete.

"I don't want you to go back to Kaas." Revan paced to the nav-board, peering down at it. "Get off the ship."

"No." Polla didn't think it was Force compulsion. Just logic. "Someone needs to fly it, Revan."

Revan glanced up toward the sky. "Zaalbar will. Or Mission. They're on the Hunt. You don't have to do this--"

"She's right." The other one was slower, maybe because she'd thought to bring supplies with her. She had a pack of something strapped to her back, and two crates levitating behind her. "This is our battle, Polla Organa, not yours."

"Wrong. It's mine." The real Revan, the one Polla had gotten out of carbonite, practically growled the words. "My battle. My problem. You both can jet off now. Tenebrae wants me on that planet, I'm not going to hand him more hostages."

"You don't have that luxury," Bossypants said. "You can't keep us safe from him. You can't keep anyone we love safe from him."

"That's why I want to watch you kill him." Polla was still strapped in her seat. She put an end to their conversation by shifting the yoke straight up, sending the ship spinning off the planet and back up into the black. The Revans' protests fizzled out like dying embers on a bonfire as they both slammed against the bulkhead when the gees kicked into overdrive.

They didn't argue again. They knew she was right. Someone did have to fly the fracking ship.

Da, Polla thought as they shot by the Great Hunt. She didn't know if he was still alive. She turned to ask Revan, but the woman was turning green and running for the fresher, even before Polla punched them back into hyperspace.

Xxx

Judge Advocate Qwill: "High Admiral Rensha, by your own admission, the Ebon Hawk returned to Degriass and landed on the Oas moon, for a period of approximately five minutes before departing again. In that time, you did nothing."

High Admiral Aridoma Rensha: "There wasn't time."
Judge Advocate Qwill: "You had the sky above the moon blockaded. Yet you allowed the Mandalorians to leave. And the Hawk to leave and return--then leave again."

High Admiral Aridoma Rensha: "I cannot explain this." (Pause.) "I felt that the Mandalorians should be free. I cannot explain why."

Judge Advocate Qwill: "And Revan?"

(Silence)

Judge Advocate Qwill: "And Revan?"

High Admiral Aridoma Rensha: "I am submitting my resignation and my request for honorable retirement. I believe my will was compromised. And then the possessed Toydarian Lieutenant C'Tannis laughed and told me not to stop the Hawk--"

--Fleet Judge Advocate Inquiry into the Actions of Carth Onasi at the End of the Machine Wars, as a Precursor to His Court-Martial

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so, University of Coruscant.

Xxx

When Revan didn't come back from the fresher, Polla went to check. The woman was sprawled against the wall, glowing. Her eyes were staring at nothing.

"She is with him."

Polla did not jump out of her skin because, at this point, she was used to Force-users sneaking up on her. "Him?" Like Polla didn't already know.

"In one of Tenebrae's other bodies. They've grown closer."

"That's sweet." Polla willed her voice to sound normal. "Doesn't she have enough husbands already?"

"Amusing, but this isn't the time. You need to understand what it is she must do--and what we must do to help her." Bossypants grabbed Polla's arm and tugged her away, leading her down the hall to one of the smaller bunks. At least it wasn't the one Polla had just been locked in before.

The explaining took most of their sweet, single hyperspace jump. Polla didn't like one second of it. "You're just going to let her sacrifice herself? Become part of that monster? To save two kids you don't even like?"

The Jedi's eyes shifted away from hers and she looked uncomfortable. "Mekel Jin is my cousin. It is unfair to say I don't like him; I don't know him."

"Did you even try to know him?" Not that Polla could recall.

Bossypants's gaze shifted to the floor. "I thought we'd have more time."

"Everyone always thinks that." Da, Polla thought. She didn't even know if he was alive or if he was dead. "It's never true."

"After Kaas…" Bossypants's voice crisped again. Polla had a pretty good sense of her by that point. Bossypants sounded the most like a Coruscanti muckity-muck who didn't wipe her own piss was
when she was trying not to show any emotion—which meant the opposite. "After Kaas, I need you to take me to Nar Shaddaa. There is an obelisk there that can stop the Emperor--"

"I remember the box. We tore apart this ship looking for it." Right before freezing the other one in carbonite. Another one of Bossypants's stellar ideas. "Let me guess. We find the box and it'll free Revan from that tomb-thing?"

"That is possible." Again, classic Bossypants. That calm noncommittal tone meant, 'no, you moron.' "The device will stop Tenebrae. That is the objective."

"How?"

"The Rakatan mind prison will entrap his mind."

"And his bodies? They'll just go back to being regular people."

"Yes." The yes came too quick. That was another tell.

"You're not sure of that. You only know it's a prison. 'The Rakatan Mind Prison.' You only know it traps people."

"I know it was used to trap a Rakatan prince who rebelled against the established order, approximately twenty-five thousand years ago." After that mouthful, Bossypants took a breath. "The account of T'chrrrrnak'tahk'leânjśwrrrrnak'tahk'leânjsēw. I discovered said that he was a cruel, immortal tyrant who enslaved billions."

"Uh-huh. But isn't that, like, every Sith?"

"The Rakatan Empire predates the Sith. And no. Not at all. Some Sith Lords had policies that were almost… reasonable."

"Uh-huh."

"Immortality is extremely rare. Vitiate relies upon an endless stream of vessels to maintain his essence."

"Fine. But even if all of Tenny-Bro's bodies are connected, how do you know capturing one will take all of him?"

"Because he is one." Bossypants glanced toward the cockpit fresher. Maybe she sensed Revan stirring. "One essence. He cannot be divided."

"Once Revan joins with him neither can she?"

The Jedi exhaled. "It is possible they will be trapped in the mind-prison together."

"Is it also possible that every other sent he's possessed might stick to him and not their bodies? Like some kind of… Force-magnet?" The Grass Priests had a story about something like that. About following false prophets to hell and getting stuck there.

Green eyes blinked. The pointed chin that was almost like Polla's jerked in a nod. "I… have hypothesized that could be one of the possibilities."

"I see. So…" Polla held up a finger. "It's possible that your box might just trap one of him." She held up a second finger. "It's possible that it might trap Revan and him for all eternity." She held up a third finger. "And it's possible that your mind prison might trap everyone he's ever possessed."
You said there's billions. If their souls are in the box their bodies--"

"--would die. Yes." This time Bossypants wouldn't meet her eyes. "But it wouldn't be everyone he'd ever possessed. The ones who were already dead would still be dead."

"They'd all be dead," Polla pointed out. "So what's the difference?"

"I only meant his possession only extends to the physical plane. Ghosts, for example, are freed from his influence."

"So after the billions die, they might not be trapped in the box, they'd just be dead. Dead ghosts."

"This is all hypothetical."

"So is your space-damned box!" Polla had only meant to attempt to come up with a better plan than 'give the asshole Emperor exactly what he wants.' Now Bossypants was just giving her a headache. "If this mind prison is the one thing that can stop Tenny-Bro, how come he hasn't found it? Does he know about it?"

The Jedi looked uncomfortable. "I think he… he tried to find it."

"Or, maybe he knows what you don't. Maybe he knows it won't work."

"It must. I have to stop him."

"No, Bossypants." Polla shook her head. "Seems more to me like she does."

Xxx

Dear Jin of Lin,

I trust this missive finds you well. I waited for you until the last transport off Oas, at which time one of the Jettise informed me that the Ebon Hawk had departed and that you had been seen transporting an unconscious Dustil Onasi up its loading ramp shortly before its departure.

It has been clear to me for some time that your affection for him supersedes your affection for me. 

But I thought we had an agreement. I thought we were Clan.

I am on my way to Dxun. The matter we discussed was taken care of before your abandonment--I ran to Sinae immediately after leaving you and she prepared the materials. It took most of the night or I would have returned to you.

Now, as the most promising embryo splits and spins on her dish I am faced with a choice.

Should I add your genetic material to our clan, or should I cast her into the bio shredder?

It is sentimental and foolish of me, but I have already given her a name. Faene. Faene was a planet that Aemelie always wanted to sack. I wanted to bear this child for her as much as for us.

But I can always find her another father, Jin of Lin. That is the Way.

I am sending this correspondence to your mother's place of business, as you neglected to leave me a comm-link number, or a forwarding address.

[Scrawled across the top in a different hand: Goyle, hunny u can't show this 2 mekelkins they just
want credits. Hire agent 2 do DNA check. Use Minta she's on retainer.]

[Note: This datapad was found in a Coruscanti midden, along with an undated holostill of a dark-eyed blonde infant who some historians believe is Queen Faene Starshine of Dxun. If true, it sheds a very interesting light on Queen Faene’s parentage. Scholars have noted a six-year gap between the end of the Machine Wars and the time of Queen Faene’s birth, but Mandalorian science perfected embryo storage centuries before the Redeemed Age of Revan. --Tazikex Vizla, Manda’lor, BBY 1921.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T’so.

Xxx

In some ways, Revan thought, it was already done. She was already with the immortal Emperor. The power from the Temple on Kaas gave everything an unreal quality; even the connection to Dustil and Mekel that ran through Tenebrae, amplified and expanded every time she stretched her virtual hand. The faceted beams of more lives than she could count were reflected in the stars. They contained her. She was multitudes.

So many lives suspended in the Force and all of them so, so beautiful--

Yes, her enemy murmured. Our union is nearly complete. Merely one final step. Shed your mortal carapace and join me.

First promise, she thundered into the void. Let them go.

Free them yourself, dear one. The dark voice burned in her skull, through her bones. Dimly, she felt her flesh body twitch as power licked through her synapses. They lie on my altars in the Dark Temple's High Chamber. Free them, then come to your tomb below. Or… his nonchalance was amused. Or, leave them and enjoy your immortal shell. With prudence, those two might last us both another thirty years. It could have been longer, had you not been so profligate with their essence, but I can hardly blame you for that. You used them to destroy our enemies!

I'm coming. There was no other choice. Dar kept babbling about her Rakatan Mind Prison, but if Mekel and Dustil were linked when Valkorion went into the box--

They could be trapped, too.

Acceptable risk, a cold part of her brain murmured, while the rest of it told the cold part to frack off.

I'm coming, she promised Valkorion. They'd better be unharmed or I will use our power to crack Kaas in half.

I do enjoy your threats. The mental equivalent of a shrug. I have other planets. Other installations. Do you think it mattered to my essence when the mainframe on Nathema failed? I was already in the stars, my dear. As you soon will be. Once you leave your shell behind, it is gone forever. Nothing but dust.

I'm coming, she repeated. For you.

Best say your goodbyes. Another chuckle. Of course, they don't have to be goodbyes. You can
visit your loved ones as often as you like. I did. I watched children being born and grow. From time to time, I watched you--

You can go straight to hell!

Shall I show you how it can be? This is no time to be squeamish, Revan, not when I've watched you stroll through my collection of Blinds these last few days like a child lifting candy-samples at market. Did you think I wouldn't notice your stolen pleasures? Catching a fish? Baking a pie? Watching a child toddle across a floor....

I was only in them to keep them from you!

A lie, the cold voice inside whispered.

Tenebrae thundered in her head. Go to him. Go where you've wanted to be all along. There is no shame, Starfire. Not between us--

An ineffable wave enveloped her, shrinking the universe to a pin-point. It picked her up and rocked her and then shoved her--

And then Revan was--

--watching her husband sleep in a black and red room.

She gasped a breath and felt it fill unfamiliar lungs. Something moved when her head shook. Heavy weight of hair on the back of her neck. The murmur of sublights whispered they were drydocked. The decor told her Carth was still on the Captive Arm. The lack of guards indicated he hadn't been arrested. She wondered if that would last.

A faint buzz in her ears was irritating. Revan frowned and shook her head again. The Force collar around the body's neck cracked off, clattering across the floor.

Carth sat up at the noise, one hand already pulling out a blaster from the sheets.

"Don't panic, Flyboy." The body's voice was deeper than Revan expected. She'd been in this body before--on the bridge of the Arm--but its baritone startled her, still and deep in the silence of the room. "It's just me."

He gestured with the gun. "Tell me something to be sure."

"Carth. It's about Dustil."

"Oh." He drew his knees to his bare chest. He'd shaved again. It brought out the new hollows in his cheeks. "You're not... Yuthura told me that disruptor would hold."

"Were you trying to keep me out?" She wasn't sure any Force restraint would ever work on her again.

Flash of dark humor in his smile. "I was trying to keep Lord Nondik from murdering me in my sleep."

She stood up to walk to him--only to find her legs shackled as well as her hands. Revan blinked and the chains opened. Her body walked free. No mass of blubber like that last one. This was a man in the prime of health, strong in the Force. His mind seethed as she sank into it, fueling her own
"No closer! You've got my attention." Carth still had the gun. Revan was proud of him for that. "What… what about Dustil? Is he okay?"

"Dustil's going to be fine."

"But he's not fine now." It wasn't a question. "Where?"

"Dromund Kaas. I'm here, too." Almost.

His face shuttered up tight. "H-he went back to the Sith?"

"I don't… I don't think so. Not like you mean." If Revan let her concentration slip she could be there. She could know precisely what had transpired. At that moment, Dustil and Mekel were as much a part of her as the Emperor. As this body. Their minds would be just as open--

--she shied away from that.

"The Emperor doesn't want them, Carth. He took them as bait. He wants me."

Her husband shook his head. "You can't go. We stopped the Sleepers. We stopped him from making more bodies! Without you, he'll fade away and die. You said that's how this works! Yuthura said that's how this works!"

"Not fast enough. And now he has them. H-he took them--" right from under my nose. Should have noticed, but I was too busy walking in the lives of a hundred other sents, too busy on Nar Shaddaa, watching for a glimpse of my son--too greedy, too drunk with this power, this sweet power, even now--

Even now it called to her.

And she heard the Emperor's laughter echo in her head.

Now you see. Quickly! Say you will save his sons and then come to him again. In another body, if this one does not please you--

"You're going to have to kill this body, Carth."

Would you both prefer a female--

"What?" His voice cracked.

"Tenebrae can use it to get close to you. He'll use you like he did before. Anyone I care about."

I will not! I merely want to give you what you asked for, Starfire. Your husband. His child. More children, if that is your wish--I will locate a female. I must have a few close to his location--

Revan bit down so hard on the Sith's tongue she tasted blood. Shut. Up!

Carth's face was pale, but as she watched, that warm mouth twisted in a wry smile. "That bastard already has everything I love, Freckles. Let him do his worst. There's nothing more he can take."

"When I'm in him I can fight him. I think. Maybe I can stop him from… doing worse. Maybe I can
You can. You can use our power for your greater good all that you like! It makes no
difference to me. I spent generations helping my people. Freeing commoners from the Sith
aristocrats. An amusing time it was, too! Although... his amusement bubbled in her head. In a
few centuries, you will learn there is no difference between help and harm.

"Help?" Carth shook his head. "You can't ask me to choose between you and Dustil."

"I'm not. I wouldn't." It's not your choice to make. It's mine. Either I leave your son to be drained
by Tenebrae or I join him as an equal. I walk the stars.

Poor creature. So unlike your original. You hunger for what she took for granted, value what
she discarded. Those little lives, ones you never lived--

And then I will see all the lives that were always denied me--

Yes. Yes! Give me a conscience! A fair trade. I will give you life, Revan. Any one that you
choose. Even let you sleep in ignorance, grow as a child--

A part of her wanted it--

I never had a life. I have memories of someone I am not, a family that was never mine--

He lies, the cold voice inside whispered. Vitiate always lies.

"Revan." Carth's voice drew her back from the stars. "Are you... you still there?"

She nodded the Sith's head. "He's calling to me. He's promising me... things."

"Things like getting Dustil out safe." Her husband nodded as if that was the only thing she could
possibly mean.

"It's not all... it's not all bad." The deep voice of her vessel mocked her, made her words weaker.

"The tomb." Carth's jaw worked. "I saw what was in there. After all this, you're telling me he's
won. That's going to happen to you... that thing in the tomb is gonna be you."

"Yes." Something swung from Revan's chin when she moved her head to stare at Carth's face. Her
hand reached out and touched tendrils of flesh, hanging down like a beard.

Her husband laughed raggedly. "And you want me to shoot you goodbye."

She felt the strange mouth twist, even as the Sith in this body seethed. "You could kiss me first."

Carth choked. "No. No. " He got up, one hand still holding the gun. The other reached for her hand
and led Revan back to her chair like she was a kid being tucked into bed.

"I didn't mean it. About the kiss." She let him lead her. The body was taller than Carth. The hand
larger than his. His hand felt fragile in hers.

"Force collar." Carth dropped her hand and picked it up from the floor. "If I put this on Nondik are
you gonna disappear on me?"

"No." For some, it might. But she was sunk too deep into the man's mind for it to matter, too strong
in the Force now to be affected.

You make us both stronger, my Starfire--

The collar clicked around the Sith's neck. Her husband's hand reached out and touched her cheek. "

"Restraints too, Carth. When I leave, he will try and kill you."

"Restraints didn't stop you," he pointed out.

"Lord Nondik isn't me. He's much weaker. But he does want you dead."

The man's hatred invigorated her.

Yes. Delicious.

Carth clicked the chains around her ankles and then her wrists, fitting her hands back into the binders. "You... you can hear his thoughts."

She nodded. "I'm trying not to listen. Mostly, he just wants you dead. He's... imaginative."

"Yeah."

"Yeah." He straightened, staring at her. Hard planes of his body, the fur of his chest. Carth smiled again, that sharp smile she'd noticed first on Taris. Designed to charm. Once, she'd thought it was unconscious, but now she knew better. It was his public smile--the one he used to charm the pants off smugglers and wrangle command positions for his soldiers. That smile tightened as she watched, something underneath it brittle enough to crack.

One of his hands reached out and tugged at her chin-flesh. "Wattles."

She shook her head from side to side, felt the Sith's chin flaps flutter. "Doesn't quite have the same ring as Freckles."

"No."

"No." The smile faded. "Shame I'm not still possessed by the Emperor. Then I wouldn't have to tell you what I think. You could read my mind."

His eyes gave her a clue. They were less professional than that smile. Revan felt her breath whistle through the man's pierced teeth. "I can find another body, Carth. I can come back--"

"For what?" His jaw twitched. "You'd still be someone else. Someone who didn't want to be here."

"Right." Of course he was right. "But I can still--this doesn't have to be good-bye--we can still... talk. Like this."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry." He turned away, muscles of his back working, walking away from her. "Send Dustil back to me, Revan. Please. No matter what... give me that. But don't... I want to believe in you. I want to believe you're out there... somewhere... doing good." His voice faltered. "But if we fight Sith again, I don't want to know that they're you."

"They won't be." She felt the tug of the son's thoughts, even now, as if he knew where she was. His rage screamed across the void. "I'll get Dustil back. I promise."

"You'd better."

"You'd better."

"You'd better."

He walked back to the bed. "The investigation into my court-martial starts tomorrow. Gotta get my beauty sleep."

"They're going through with that?"
"A formality." His voice roughed, blurred as he turned away from her, pulled the covers back over his skin. "Can't promote me til they absolve me. Guess you see now why I can't be having affairs with Sith Lords. Would send the wrong message. Hell, the things they're already saying about Yuthura--"

"What about you and Yuthura?"

Her husband shook his head. He had something in his hand and she heard plasti crackle as he popped a seal. "Nothing, Wattles. It's nothing. Gossip for the vids. There's no one else for me… tried that already… after Morgana--none of it worked til I found you."

"I'm sorry we… I'm sorry we never had a chance."

Carth rubbed his chin, running his hand down his neck, resting it above his heart. "I'm not. You and me… we saved the galaxy. At least… at least twice. Save… Dustil… least twice." He rolled over and she spotted the derm he'd planted on his skin.

"Go… going back… sleep," he slurred. Her husband's eyes fluttered closed, his mouth gently opened. His breath hitched, became even and slow.

"Good-night, Carth. Sleep well."

He didn't answer her again.

Xxx

"Look, it's one hell of an honor--an honor I don't deserve, being promoted to Admiral. But I get it, you don't have anyone else who'll take the job."

(Crowd cheers.)

"What's that? Oh! Did you find someone else? Go ahead. Promote away. I bet there are some instructors from the Academy, or you could exhume Saul Karath…."(Crowd boos.)

"Just don't ask me how he died, folks. I don't want to spoil the vids. Or incriminate anyone… including me…. hey, did you hear I'm a grandpa? That's right. I come back to Coruscant and the first thing that happens is this woman calls me up and tells me someone dumped two kids off at her brothel. Then she says they're my son's kids. Said their mother packed it and ran off with some fly-by-night hotshot, gives me some story about how she thought they were her grandkids, but… turns out? They're mine."

(Beat.) "Put that in your hyperdrive and smoke it, huh? I run down to the Underground, pick them up, and… hell if she's not right. She's got the gene scans and everything."

"No, I'm serious. I'm a grandpa!" (Cheers.)

"Ganesh and Myleah. They're the best thing that's ever happened to me since… since Dustil…."

(Crowd goes silent. Then begins cheering.)

"But you're not here to hear about my son. Or my grandkids. Or even how I'm the handsomest admiral in the Republic Navy. Sorry, Denis. But you know it's true." (Cheers.)

Sents sacrifice themselves all the time in wartime, but one big send-off and suddenly, everyone wants a piece...."

(Breath.) "Sorry. Sorry. Right. This is supposed to be funny. You know, getting up before a crowd was never my thing. You want charm, you should've seen Malak." (Beat.) "Before my wife blew his ass off the Star Forge, that is. There's nothing charming about space dust."

(Cheers.) "Are we done yet? Rew, you said five minutes. Feel like I've been up here long enough to find at least one Star Map...."

(More cheers.)

--Recording of a Naval Speech given by Admiral Carth Onasi at the after-party of his promotion.

[Note: For centuries this was assumed to be a political satire. An analysis of voiceprints taken from other recordings of Carth Onasi indicates it may be genuine.]

--compiled by Archivist Lanna T'so.

Xxx

Polla brought the Hawk into atmosphere expertly while Revan stared down into a maelstrom of clouds and lightning. Miraculous, with the Machine Ships maps. They had crossed the galaxy in half a day, what would have once taken her fleet half a year.

This will change the nature of war, Revan thought, restlessly drumming her metal fingers on the communications board until Polla told her to stop.

You could have let the Deralian go, Malak chided. I could have shown you how to fly the Hawk.

"Because that worked so well when you were alive, my love?" Revan had to smile, thinking of how nervous her husband had been whenever she took the yoke.

"Huh?" Polla turned her head. "Oh, right. Talking to yourself again. Totally normal, Bossypants."

"I am speaking to Malak."

"Great. Tell him I said hi." The Deralian coasted in slowly, banking under the clouds. "Republic blockade seems to be gone...."

"He can hear you."

"Can he?" The smuggler pivoted in her seat and then made a crude gesture. "Can he see me, too? You didn't have to bomb all those planets, Malak. Or have your little war with Revan on top of my homeworld. And you both could've left Deralia out of it."

She isn't wrong. But the past is done. It's the future we can change, Red.

"He says you should look to the future."

Polla scoffed. "Which future? The one where my Da's still dying and we're giving Tenny-Bro everything he wants? The one where we won the war and we're handing it off? The Emperor wants Revan and you're just going with it! Oh, Polla, let's sacrifice the other Revan and then will you
take me to Nar Shaddaa? No! I won't! I'm not your kriffing livery cruiser, Revan!"

"I never claimed you were in my service. I am hoping Fragment is strong enough to make a
difference until my mind prison can work--"

Malak flickered before her eyes. Have faith, Red.

"Why?" Polla snarled. "Think the tenth time she fights him it'll be the charm?"

Revan exhaled. "No." Under the accusing eyes of the smuggler, her faith crumpled.

Have faith, Malak repeated, as stubborn in death as he always had been in life.

How can I? The Fragment failed, too. Every step we have taken is just another in a circular path.
Everything we've done has only added to Vitiate's power.

“No, my heart.” Malak enfolded her in his spectral embrace. “My Bright One.”

Revan realized that both her hands were knotted into fists--one metal and one flesh. The Force
surged weakly with her frustration, dulled to distraction by the Fragment’s pain and the Deralian’s
fear. I am not your Bright One! Sheris was your Bright One! Always in my shadow! If I had not
placed her in your bed you wouldn’t have noticed her--I nearly had to strip her myself because you
were so busy looking at me!

“No.” Malak’s voice was detached. Infuriatingly calm. “You were the sun, Red. I had to look at
you. You blinded me to everything else, cast your shadow over everyone else--”

My master died at Malachor, Sheris murmured But someone saved me. I thought they saved me for
you, my love. Saved me to heal you, Malak.

“You did your best, Bright One.” It was Revan’s skin that buzzed with his sepulchral touch, but it
was Sheris staring back into his ghostly eyes.

And then Revan saw what had been before her all along. “The shadow--”

“Huh?” Polla barely glanced in her direction. “Still talking to Darth Malak?” She sighed
unsteadily. “How’d I know if I’d been brainwashed? I’d be able to tell, right? Am I bringing you
here because Tenny-bro made me? We shouldn’t be within a million parsecs of this system!” Her
hand reached for the yoke. “We should go,” she mumbled, bringing them in closer to the planet
instead.

“Be quiet,” Revan told her. “I have to think.”

Words from the past echoed in her mind. “She is the shadow you hide behind. Her power deafens.
You, in your weakness, will hear as she cannot. Your weakness is your armor. She drowns out the
world’s whispers but you hear all.” Vima Sunrider’s speech--what the woman had said on the day
of Revan’s rebirth.

“She is the shadow you hide within.”

Revan’s breath froze in her lungs. Their ship hung in the sky and the galaxy rested on a precipice.

“She is the shadow you hide within. Your weakness is your armor, Padawan.”

Malak’s voice sounded more puzzled than hurt. “But you sent Sheris, Red. To me. Are you
claiming it was someone else?”
I wanted to go, Sheris murmured. To follow him into the Dark.

Yes. Revan closed her eyes.

I knew. I could not tell you before, Sheris whispered. You would not listen to me before.

I tried once to go already. But it didn't work--

There was no sun before.

Yes. The Fragment wasn't here before.

Revan opened her eyes. She laughed. The air in the ship was stale and stank of fear. But it was sweet, too. "Vima... she was right."

"Huh?" Polla Organa had activated the landing gear. "Dunno what you're going on about, but we're here." She had coasted the Hawk in, past a charred circle of rubble. Ahead of them, the doors of the Temple appeared to have been blasted open and then melted shut--the stone warped and cracked by the Force. The malevolent energy emanating from the building was unmistakable. "What happened to the doors?" Polla flicked their engines off. "Blasted 'em open the last time I was here. Give me a sec--I'll do it again--"

"Wait." Revan put her hand on the smuggler's arm. "They're Force-sealed."

"Then how can we get in?"

"There's another set of doors below, on the back of the Temple. Keyed to us. But Dustil and Mekel are here--on the main level." They had to be, that bright knot of power she sensed could be nothing else. "And the Imperial Fleet is cloaked in the sky." Revan felt their ships appear, like sparks of light coming out from a cloud. The power of the Fragment in the ship had blinded her sense of them before.

Then Revan laughed again. Vima was right! "We may have missed a very short war. I know you have no faith in my plans, Polla, but trust in the Force."

"Just the driver," the Deralian muttered. "Just came along to say good-bye. Because the Sith Emperor made me. And to keep you from wrecking my ship."

"You need to trust me--"

If you keep saying that, she won't, Sheris chided.

There wasn't much time. "When... I'll tell you when--"

"Tell me what?"

No time to answer, as the door to the cockpit slid open.

"I think we're in time for the main event." The Fragment stood in the doorway. She looked down at her own body, making a face. "Almost dusk now, local time. Teny-Bro's babbling in my head that we should wait for dawn. He's assembling survivors to send me off--"

"We can't wait," Revan interrupted.

"Eager to get rid of me?" Revan glanced in the direction of the Temple and then back. "Don't want to wait, either... but there's no reason I have to climb into an ancient tomb sober--is there?"
"No. No reason." Revan's mind was still stumbling; logistics unraveling like a skein of tangled wire. "I'm sure you'll have time for a drink. Has Tenebrae informed you how Dustil Onasi and Mekel Jin will be freed?"

"He says I can release them when I go into the Temple. After I free them I'm not sure I can stop myself." The Fragment bit her lip. "That thing in the Temple… it's happy I'm back. It's calling to me. And I… I want to go to it." Her voice cracked. “I’ve… I’ve wanted to go to it for a while now.”

*All those little lives…* Revan remembered her own brief experience with the tomb. "I understand," she said. "We'll go together, Revan. Polla… Polla will wait with the ship." Her mind worried at words, trying to find the right ones. "But the… the intensity of the Force inside might incapacitate me. I'm not as strong as you are.*

"Maybe you should wait with the ship, too." Her counterpart's nose was bleeding again. Her hands were white-knuckled. "Both of you. Wait with the ship. He says when I go in, they'll be free. I'll send them out."

"Just like that?" Polla scoffed. "They were passed out on Oas for two days--Dustil was barely awake on the ship. You think they'll be walking out of there?"

The Fragment's voice was even. "Guess we'll have to see."

"You go alone," Revan told her. "We'll be here. Come out if you need us."

Polla shot her a frown.

"It calls," Malak whispered. "You remember the temptation of the Dark, Revan. With all of our training, we were broken reeds before it. It takes all of her will to resist."

Then help her. *We need to finish this before the Emperor returns! There can no doubt--*

"You will need the smuggler. This ship will need to leave quickly, after--"

*I know that, Mal."

"A drink first." The Fragment took a ragged breath. "Polla?"

"Sure." The Deralian shrugged. "But if you go evil in that fracking tomb I'm going to haunt your conscience for eternity. You know that?"

"You'll haunt me anyway." The Fragment blinked too hard.

"Yeah." The Deralian was smiling. "Hey, look. It's a good thing you're doing, saving those kids."

"Would you do it?" The Fragment walked to the gunnery turret and popped open a cabinet there. She extracted a half-empty bottle of what looked like fermented krill-juice and uncorked it, making a face as she swigged some of it down before passing it to Polla.

"Well, no. But I spent more time with Dustil than you did. Sulkypants is a real brat. Probably do him good to spend a few centuries hooked up like a battery." The smuggler took a careless gulp and handed the bottle to Revan.

"Thank you," Revan said.

"Dustil won't last a century." The smile that had almost been on the Fragment's mouth faded. "And
I wanted to do it before. Now that I'm here....

"I remember the way it called to me." That curious feeling couldn't be envy. Perhaps it was relief. I would have sacrificed Dustil and Mekel without a thought, Revan realized. Bought another few decades and kept searching for victory.

Yes. She is not you, Red.

This still could be a trick--another one of Tenebrae's tricks. Hope. It was a dull ember in Revan's chest. She did not want to extinguish it. The drink was abominable. She handed the bottle back after one sip.

When she looked up, Malak's ghost smiled down at her with his eyes, the smooth curve of his prosthesis a graceful line against his muscular neck.

Our trick, this time, her lover said.

"Mekel said Dustil was dying. He looked like he was dying." The smuggler fidgeted, flipping open a blaster she'd had at her belt and adjusting the parts."They both looked pretty bad."

The Fragment took another gulp. "The Emperor's draining them. It's what he'll do to me, but I'll be... hardwired. Dustil and Mekel are just patched in. I can pull them out."

"And being his power source won't kill you, because you can't die?"

"Right." The Fragment grimaced, and drank still more of her concoction, finishing the bottle. "Lucky me." She wiped her bleeding nose again. "I'll be the Emperor's power source, but with luck, he'll be mine, too. I can do good, maybe. Save some sents."

"You will do some good," Revan ordered her.

She will, Malak said.

Can you see the future, my love?

Only you.

Polla Organa sighed. "Dustil Onasi's a good kid. He looked out for me and Zaalbar on Kaas. Guess Mekel's a good kid, too. Never really spent much time... but he is your family, right?"

"You're my family." The Fragment blinked too quickly, and then wiped her eyes.

"Even Bossypants?"

"Is that humor?" Revan tried to smile, to show she understood.


"You're gonna have to take care of Dar," the Fragment told Polla. "Hope you know that. I've done all I can."

"Yeah." Polla ducked her head and drank. "She's rich. Right?"

For some reason that made them both start laughing.

"Take care of them both for me, Malak." The Fragment's voice sharpened. "You didn't think I
couldn't see you--almost see you--hovering? Once I'm omnipotent, I'll have my eye on you, too."

"Once you're inside the tomb, you won't see me at all, I think," Malak spoke slowly.

Oh. There was no time for a reaction, and Revan could not give one, not under her counterpart's bright green gaze. She half-expected the Fragment to crack some jape at Malak, but the woman only blinked.

"Tell Korrie I love him." The Fragment wiped her eyes. "Tell him I'm watching over him, always."

"But not in a creepy way," Polla interjected. "Don't tell him you're in someone else's brain. That'll give your kid nightmares."

Revan forced a choked laugh at almost the exact same time as the Fragment.

_Courage, Bright One_, Malak whispered. _My brave Bright One._

Always, Sheris whispered, and for once Revan did not object.

XXX

_In conclusion, there is overwhelming evidence that Talonis Revan was a fictional character, and the real Revan Starfire’s life story was reduced to Apocrypha within four generations of her sacrifice._

_The question is why?_

_Why would a woman who was dead for nearly two hundred years need to be erased from the galactic record?_

_To protect her few descendants? Protect her cousin’s (numerous) descendants?_

_Perhaps. But could it be something else?_

_On the Sith world of Korriban, they have a springtime festival each year on the day of Revan's birth. A statue of a robed figure is constructed from flowers in the Dreshdae Central Square and all of the local courtesans wear red wigs. The tradition is that this disguise will give the real Starfire’s ghost cover to walk among the living for a night and a day._

--Excerpt from "An Historian's Introduction to the Machine Wars: Lecture by Kree Usam Racharn for the Revan: Fact or Fiction Symposium, SHWL," University of Coruscant Press. 3653 BBY

Xxx

"Goodbye," the Fragment said again. She turned and walked down the _Hawk_'s landing ramp, heading for the Dark Temple as if she owned it. She had taken off that battered flight jacket, was now dressed in a patched coverall from the ship. At the halfway point she turned to face them. "Tenny-Bro's pissed," she called out. "Wanted me to wait for his party--you're gonna want to clear out if here soon as you can. He's got a dropship of Thulian priests coming. And some kinda procession from Kaas City."

"Duly noted!" Revan called back.

"Be careful." The Fragment had kept walking, now backward, still staring at both of them. "Uh, goodbye. Again."
"Don't bump into the door!" Polla yelled.

"She won't." The Force led her. Revan had been twelve before she'd noticed that most sentients needed eyes to know what lay ahead of them, that they had to walk in a straight line facing forward to see.

"We really letting her do this?" Polla dropped her voice. "Sure it's a good idea? We could've tried the carbonite again--"

"No. This was always inevitable." *At the end of every path.* "You need to trust me, Polla."

*If you keep saying it like that she won't!* Sheris's tone was gentle for all of its chiding.

“You’re making it hard,” Polla noted. “Between letting Revan run off to kill herself and you going on about trust--”

“It isn’t death, going into the tomb.” Revan took another deep breath of clean sweet air. “Not for her.”

“Easy for you to say.” Polla wiped her eyes. “We’re never gonna see her again.”

The Fragment had lifted both her arms and turned her palms up. She'd started glowing again.

The doors of the Dark Temple cracked open. The Fragment was far enough away that her features blurred, lost in a haze of light that seemed to be coming from inside the Temple as well as from her. As they watched, the glow followed her, casting shadows from the shattered door.

The shadows looked like claws, chasing her inside.

"*Now, my heart,*" Malak whispered--just as Revan was already opening her mouth.

"Polla," she said. "I have to go help her."

"Huh?" The smuggler looked confused. "But she said she'd come back if she needed help--"

"She won't. Trust me--"

"The more you keep saying that, the worse this looks. You know that, right?"

*Told you.* Sheris's laughter sounded like bells.

Revan shook her head. "Listen to me. When I return we're going to leave. Quickly. You've got to get Dustil and Mekel on the ship, get the *Hawk* ready to go--before my return. Understand? But if the Fragment comes back before I do…"

"You just said she wouldn't."

*She might,* Sheris noted. *If those two Bezal-bonded men can’t walk.*

"If *she* comes back before I do, tell her I'm in the fresher." Pathetic excuse--a ten-year-old Padawan could have found one less flimsy--but there was no time.

“*The lower hidden entrance,*” Malak murmured. “*That seems the most logical approach.*”

*I know, Mal.*
"Tell her you're in the fresher," Polla repeated. She laughed. "Did I ever tell you your plans are all terrible, Bossypants? I don't know what you're up to, but…"

“I have to help her.” She patted the woman on the arm. “Tell her I’m in the fresher, Polla.”

Without further ado, Revan turned and ran for the hidden stairs along the side of the Temple’s wall; heading to the entrance carved into the side of the edifice by a clever T3.

A/N

This is penultimate. For serious. One more chapter to go! And that is mostly written, although some of the pieces need to be sorted.

Thanks as always, Ether, for beting another monster. I’ve probably added more typos trying to fix tings. This is the version with typos.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!